A CASE STUDY OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD MINORITY TEACHER AND HOW SHE FORMED HER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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This qualitative case study is an investigation of the role of race, school context, and personal and professional experiences in the formation of an early childhood teacher’s professional identity. Data sources included interviews, observations, conversations, field notes, and school artifacts. Member checking, triangulation, and extended observation supported the trustworthiness of the results. The findings of the research indicate that major themes related to identity formation included family influence, teaching values and beliefs, and identity shift. Main themes related to the minority status of the participant were emotions and feeling of alienation. Finally, major themes related to school context and personal and professional experiences included relationships with children and parents, relationships with teachers and staff members at the school, early learning experiences, and images of a good teacher. The study concludes with suggestions for early childhood education programs and future researchers.
I never thought that writing my acknowledgments would be one of the most daunting tasks in completing all parts of this dissertation. This is so perhaps because I cannot find the words to express my gratitude and deep appreciation to all those who supported me, believed in me, and were patient with me throughout this journey. Perhaps I am at a loss for words because I am incredulous that after nearly losing hope and feeling absolutely unable to complete this research, here I am today sitting in front of my laptop, reflecting on my journey, and listening to my heart pounding so hard and so fast as I realize that I did it. Oh, yes, I did it. My dream has come true, but it would have been impossible without the support, encouragement, and wisdom of those who knew how to push me and keep me focused.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

Studies of professional identity in the context of teaching and teacher education are plentiful (Anspal, Eisenschmidt, & Lofstrom, 2012; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Cohen, 2008; Cole & Knowles, 1993; Weber & Mitchell, 1999) as are those dealing with the self and how teachers can use self-image to describe themselves as teachers (Beauchamp, & Thomas, 2009; Clandinin, 1986; Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009; Elbaz, 1983; Fischer & Kiefer, 1994; Qu, 2008).

Beijaard (1995) stated that a teacher’s identity is part of his or her self-image, arguing that teachers’ identities are constructed in the communities where they teach and in relation to their subjects, their students, their professional roles, and their conceptions of their roles, which can change throughout their careers. A teacher’s identity is developed and achieved through self-identity and self-evaluation. One can also argue that teacher identity is the product of both the professional and personal identities that are influenced by teachers’ own understanding of themselves and their work in the context of the communities in which they live.

To understand the self as a teacher, teachers must engage in critical reflection about themselves, their values and beliefs about teaching, and the prior experiences that influenced who they are as teachers. Such reflection leads teachers to a better understanding of the self and a new consciousness and an awareness of their teaching
practices, behaviors, and interactions with others. By engaging in critical reflection, teachers develop what is called teacher identity (Dewey, 1910/1933).

Generally speaking, the roles early childhood education teachers take in a society reflect the conceptions of members of that society of what early childhood is and which people should work in settings serving young children. Oberhuemer (1999) stated that behind the various role typologies in early childhood education, teachers have “varied histories and varying ideas about how societies view the role of early childhood education institutions and the people who work in them” (p. 1). The images teachers have of themselves and the ways in which they understand themselves are, in return, influenced by society’s views and beliefs; yet teachers’ interpretations of their roles and identities also depend on their own experiences and ways in which they define and evaluate themselves within a particular social context (Oberhuemer, 1999). Thus, research focused on teachers’ teaching performances and behaviors has emphasized the importance of exploring and investigating teachers’ own thinking and beliefs about learning, teaching, and their professional roles (Korthagen, 2004). In other words, the way teachers think about themselves and their roles determines and influences their actions and the way they shape their professional identity.

Korthagen (2004) suggested that questions such as the following are essential for teachers to consider when developing their own identities: (a) Who am I as a teacher? (b) What kind of teacher do I want to be? and (c) How do I see my role as a teacher? He argued that a teacher’s professional identity is influenced and shaped by personal self-identity. The need and importance of studying teacher identity and its impact on teaching
performances and actions have been thus brought to light. Of greatest importance is the impact of the teacher’s personal characteristics, values, interests, social roles, beliefs, and personal histories (prior and present life experiences, major social events, and critical events) on professional development and perceptions of teaching (Korthagen, 2004).

Wright and Sherman (1963) found self-awareness of utmost importance in teaching: If teachers are unaware of the way they appear to students, they may be similarly unaware of their effect on students. Early authority figures (mother, father, best liked teacher, least liked teacher) have an impact on teachers and their teaching style and role in the classroom. Wright and Sherman found a correlation between the self-awareness of teachers and their perceptions of and relations with their own parents and former teachers. By reflecting upon experiences, they argued, teachers are able to better understand their own practices and how early role models impacted them as teachers.

Kogan (2000) discusses how teachers recognize and develop their professional identities according to their personal biographies, life histories, personal experiences, and values. Previous jobs and personal experiences can inform their professional identities (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Thus, the notion of self-image is grounded in individual experience (past and present) and can be used “as a structural framework through which [people] think about the world in which we [they] live and work and through which [they] construct the new ways of thinking about it and living in it” (Beattie 1995, p. 72).

The concept of self-image involves professional and personal experiences (Clandinin, 1986) and provides a framework upon which teachers construct their identities, comprising many aspects of their lives and social interactions with others in and out of
the workplace, all related to their values and actions. The sense of self develops over time as a result of interactions with the world; biography impacts professional identity and roles. Kogan (2000) noted, however, that the manner in which teachers construct their identities, in contrast to adopting them, remains in question.

Statement of the Problem

Merriam (1998) suggested that research problems can emanate from personal interest and curiosity directed at understanding a phenomenon. Furthermore, a research problem could derive from an unsatisfactory explanation or lack of evidence about a phenomenon. Thus, a research problem can come from a challenging issue about which a researcher seeks clarification or understanding. The current study originated with the researcher’s personal interest in the ongoing process by which a teacher forms a professional teaching identity and the current lack of evidence, explanation, and clarification of the process of forming an identity in the literature (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013).

Because research exploring how minority teachers construct their professional identities in early childhood settings is limited, this researcher focused on how Maria, an early childhood teacher, constructed and negotiated her professional teaching identity. The study was designed to examine aspects of her life (e.g., childhood, family, life experiences, race, cultural background, personal practical knowledge, and the educational landscape) that impacted the formation of her professional identity. The study was furthermore designed to explore how a minority teacher makes sense of her identity in multiple contexts, a topic absent from available educational literature on teacher identity.
Another aim of this study was to explicate the process of developing teacher identity in an effort to determine ways that a teacher’s personal practical knowledge, background, and life experiences impact the perception, meaning, understanding, and interpretation that a minority early childhood teacher gave to her identity. Such a study is crucial because available research suggests that teacher professional identity impacts values, teaching practices, behaviors, and interaction with others (Been, 2012; Anspal, Eisenschmidt, & Lofstrom, 2012; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004).

Teachers are still relatively voiceless, and their culture has long been characterized by silence and isolation (Been, 2012; Britzman, 1992; Carlson, 1992; Cole & Knowles, 2000; Diamond, 1991; Goodson & Walker, 1991; Lieberman & Miller, 1990). This study offered a teacher (the participant in this study) the opportunity to engage in critical reflection and a journey of self-discovery and awareness of how she thought of herself and her teaching. It provided an opportunity to a minority teacher to share stories about herself and her teaching. In this study the teacher was acknowledged as a powerful knowledgeable teacher and an individual who had valuable knowledge to share.

Instead of assigning a professional identity to a teacher and merely talking about the concept of and assuming the formation of teacher professional identity, the researcher sought to provide an understanding as well as examples and offer a description of how a teacher thinks about, forms, and negotiates her identity, addressing a crucial topic not yet been examined clearly in the field of early childhood education. In this study, Maria’s
voice was heard and her experiences were valued. Indeed, a teacher’s professional identity is an important topic to be studied and researched (Wenger, 1999).

A review of the literature resulted in scant material on the professional identity of early childhood educators. Almost nothing from the first-person perspective was available on professional identity, surprising in view of all that teachers witness in their lives: feelings, turning points, or major life events that influence the construction of teacher identity (Cohen, 2008; Upadhyay, 2009). This study is unique because the researcher looked at those numerous aspects of the life of a teacher, who was considered an emergent storyteller grappling to fashion an identity. The reflections of this teacher bore significant implications for identity and the formation of a professional identity, the focus of this study.

**Purpose of the Study**

Realizing the considerable impact of a teacher’s perceptions and life experiences upon the formation of personal and professional identity, the researcher set out to examine and explore how one teacher developed professional identity in terms of her understanding of self and prior experiences and within the social context where she taught. This study dealt with factors influencing the development and formation of the professional identity of an experienced Black preschool teacher, who had the opportunity to tell and share with educational communities her stories about her professional development. Thus, in this study Maria was recognized as a knowledgeable person with valuable information to share with other teachers and individuals interested in knowing
how she perceived her professional identity and what it meant for her to be called a professional.

Research shows that engaging in critical examination of the process in which teachers develop their professional identity helps teachers and teacher educators understand the ways in which they teach (Chong & Low, 2009; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012). Thus, many researchers have called for the use of narratives and stories as important methods for exploring how teachers come to recognize or realize who they are and what they do (Ayers, 1989; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Craig, 2003). Storytelling supports teachers’ understanding of the choices they make, and it helps them to better interpret and understand their actions and behaviors through their engagement in the process of self-examination and self-reflection. Such engagement helps teachers become self-aware, self-knowing, and reflective practitioners (Ayers 1989; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Dewey, 1910/1933; Korthagen, 2004).

Some researchers have argued that research topics grow out of or emerge from researchers’ personal experiences that leave them puzzled or frustrated (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The goal of this study was to explore the notion of the teacher’s professional identity and its formation; therefore, the researcher focused on investigating how one teacher developed and reshaped or negotiated her professional identity. Understanding a teacher’s perceptions of her “teaching self” and role translates into beliefs about teaching and teaching practices. Teachers’ beliefs are a major determinant of behavior, which influences perceptions and decisions (Vartuli, 2005).
Significance of the Study

Recent research on teaching has increasingly dealt with the notion of teachers’ professional identities and how they underlie professional development, actions, and beliefs on teaching and learning (Chong & Low, 2009; Urban et al., 2012; Wagner & French, 2010). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) pointed out that attention to teacher identity represents “a frame or an analytic lens through which to examine aspects of teaching, [and it can also be viewed as] an organizing element in teachers’ professional lives” (p. 175). Been (2012) noted that “focusing on the voice[s] of early childhood teachers may lead to new understanding about what it means to be an early childhood teacher in an age of accountability and increasing mandates” (p. 2). Van Veen, Sleegers, and van de Ven (2005) confirmed that a teacher’s perception of professional identity is an important variable in motivation and commitment to educational reform. Chong and Low (2009) reported that many studies have documented “the link between the development of teachers’ professional identity and their efficacy in the profession and ultimately their ability to effect change within the school setting and beyond” (p. 60). According to Urban et al. (2012), the quality of programs and services for young children and professionalism in the field of early childhood education are closely connected. Similarly, Beauchamp and Thomas asserted that an understanding of teacher identity may have important implications for effective teacher education. Wagner and French (2010) added that “interactions between early childhood teachers and the systems within which their work is embedded influence motivation for professional growth and change in teaching practice” (p. 152).
In order to understand how teachers’ themselves perceive their professional identity in relation to self-images and concepts about themselves, the researcher focused on how one teacher made sense of her professional identity and what particular events or critical incidents might have influenced her meaning making of such identity. Further importance in this study, a minority teacher was provided the opportunity to express and share her understanding of her professional identity. Although previous studies have included discussions of the way teachers’ professional identity develops in relation to others and to their understanding of the self, an insufficient number of studies have actually explored how a teacher constructs her or his professional identity in a preschool teaching setting and among minority teachers.

With regard to the many meanings given to the concept, a teacher cannot develop a professional identity without an interpretive system to support it (Hooley, 2007; Taylor, 1989); therefore, the researcher explored the way in which the teacher interpreted, perceived, and gave meaning to her professional identity. Built on this knowledge, the study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. How does a preschool teacher form her professional identity?
2. How does a minority teacher’s professional identity develop in a predominantly White school community?
3. How is professional identity developed in the school context in which the teacher works and in light of significant personal and professional experiences?
**Definition of Terms**

Teacher professional identity: In this study, *teacher professional identity* refers to the meaning and understanding teachers give to their professional work, roles, and themselves as teachers. Such meaning and understanding create and construct professional identity, reflecting how teachers feel and think of themselves professionally. Professional identity relates to teachers’ understanding of themselves and their professional work based on what they believe to be important for their professional development with regard to prior practical and personal experiences as well as social backgrounds (Knowles as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004; Nias as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004; Tickle, 2000).

Case study: A case study is “an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment” (Mish, 1998, p. 177).

Qualitative research: “Any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” is known as qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17).

Triangulation: Triangulation is “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomena or programs” (Patton, 1990, p. 187).

Self-image: Self-image is “a kind of embodied knowledge that is a coalescence of diverse experiences from which new experiences are undertaken and that therefore provides a connection between an individual’s past, present, and future” (Beattie 1995, p.72).
Identity: Who and what someone is and the meanings people give to themselves (Beijaard, 1995) constitutes identity.

Negotiated identity: The process in which teachers engage in interpreting and reinterpreting their experiences as they live them and try to give meaning to them. Negotiated identity indicates that teachers’ identity is repetitively reformed, reshaped, and reconstructed in connection with their experiences and interactions with others (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). This definition also applies to the meaning of identity formation.

School leaders: The center director and administrative supporting team at the school.

Assumptions Underlying the Study

The following were the assumptions underlying this study:

1. A teacher has the ability to recall significant events or incidents and identify prior experiences that have impacted perceptions of professional identity.

2. A teacher is willing to tell stories about work experiences that reflected beliefs on teaching and understanding of professional roles.

3. The use of qualitative case study methods for data collection will offer rich and detailed explanations about the topic studied.

4. The participant understands the research questions posed in the interviews and also that truthful responses to the questions reflect her realities.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focused on exploring and investigating one early childhood teacher’s knowledge and understanding of her professional identity and the formation of that identity. The study also covered the perceptions this teacher had about herself and her teaching. It identified factors (e.g., prior experiences, life stories, multiple social and cultural contexts) that contributed to these perceptions. Even though identity is not clearly defined as a concept in the literature (Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2000), exploring a teacher’s perceptions of her or his own professional identity is imperative because they affect self-efficacy and professional development as well as the ability to deal with educational change.

This chapter provides an overview of the issues and research related to teacher identity, teacher identity formation, context factors influencing teacher identity, teacher identity negotiation, social representations and teacher professional identity, and early childhood teachers' professional identities.

Theoretical Perspective

In this study, I drew on social constructivism to understand the formation of professional identity and to emphasize the critical importance of the influence of social and cultural factors on teaching and learning (Palincsar, 1998). The social constructivist approach is closely associated with the developmental theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner as well as Bandura’s social cognitive theory (Kim, 2001; Palincsar, 1998). Social constructivists have focused “on the interdependence of social and individual processes
in the co-construction of knowledge” (Palincsar, 1998). According to those who take this approach, learner construction of knowledge is the product of social interaction, interpretation, and understanding (Vygotsky as cited in Wagoner, 2011). Kim (2001) explained that social constructivism is based on the following three assumptions: (a) reality that is constructed through human activity, (b) knowledge that is also socially and culturally constructed, and (c) learning that occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

Social constructivists have asserted that people work together to construct meaning. Central assumptions are embedded in social constructivism regarding the ways in which humans interact with one another and the world to construct knowledge and meaning. Gergen (as cited in Wagoner, 2011), explained that according to the social constructivist approach all knowledge is created, the knowledge created has no meaning without social interactions to assign it meaning, and the construction of meaning and knowledge takes on significance through social interactions.

A core concept in the social constructivist approach is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined as the distance between the actual development of individuals as determined by their performance without help and their potential development as determined by what they can do with help. This concept describes social learning as a progression from what one is able to do currently to what one can master with help from adults or children who are more advanced (Chen, 2010). Another important concept in this approach is intersubjectivity, or a shared understanding that
provides the grounds for communication among individuals (Kim, 2001). Hence, construction of social meanings, involves intersubjectivity among individuals. Intersubjectivity also supports people as they extend their understanding of new information and activities among group members (Kim, 2001).

According to the social constructivist approach, teachers’ identities are dynamic and can change continuously on the basis of their experiences and reflections. The identities constitute a part of teachers’ aims to create meaning in their actions in the pedagogical practice (Ackesjo, 2010). The contribution of the social constructivist approach to this study was the understanding that a teacher’s identity is not found passively inside the teacher; instead it is created in a social context. Hence, the focus in this study was on what happened in the interactions between the participant teacher and others, and what was communicated and expressed in that communication (Ackesjo, 2010).

The Concept of Teacher Identity

The concept of “teacher identity” has recently garnered the attention of many teacher educators and researchers in education discourses (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Danielewicz, 2001; Liu & Xu, 2011; Marsh, 2002 a, 2000b; Moore, Edwards, Halpin, & George, 2002; Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Zembylas, 2005). Teacher identity has been addressed and examined in light of social and cultural changes (e.g., globalization, poststructuralism, and deconstruction). Teacher identity has been examined primarily by poststructuralists (Cornell, 2000; Nicholson & Seidman, 1995;
Thomas, 2012) who have played a major part in the deconstruction of some assumptions related to the construction of teacher identity.

According to poststructuralists, teacher identity is not a fixed set of attributes; it is not a certain something. Instead, it is contingent (changeable and conditional), meaning that somehow it can be reformed and open for reconstruction (Liu & Xu, 2011; Pavlenko, 2003; Watson, 2006). From the poststructuralists’ point of view, this dynamic, ongoing process of reconstructing teacher identity and the self is all about emotions, formed and controlled by “social conventions, community scrutiny, legal norms, familial obligations, and religious injunctions” (Rose, 1998, p. 1). Thus, examination of teacher identity should occur in light of the role of emotions, power, agency, and resistance in teaching, all of which influence the construction of a teacher’s identity.

With reference to Foucault’s work, Zembylas (2005) argued that for teacher educators to have a deep understanding of teacher identity, they must understand it in terms of the social and historical contexts in which meaning intersects with experiences, where teachers are subjects of and subjected to these experiences. In a sense, an understanding of the constitution of a teacher as a self and her or his experiences should focus on the discourse of experiences, not the experiences themselves. In other words, experiences do not constitute the self. Identities are influenced by and subjected to the social and historical contexts of practices and discourses in which these discourses do not simply reflect or describe reality, knowledge, experience, self, social relations, social institutions, and practices; instead, they play an integral
role in constituting (and being constituted by) them. . . . In and through these discourses [people] ascribe to [their] bodily feelings, emotions, intentions, and all the other psychological attributes that have for so long been attributed to a unified self. In this sense, subjects do their emotions; emotions do not just happen to them. (Zembylas, 2005, p. 938)

This means teacher self-identity, which Foucault referred to as subjectivity, is continually reconstructed, depending on the meaning conveyed and given to experiences. Thus, teacher identity is open to new forms of meanings constantly given to the self. Another way of putting it with reference to Foucault’s work is that self-identity is not unified but “multiple, contradictory, contextual, and regulated by social norms. Subjectivity is produced, negotiated, and reshaped through discursive practices. As such, the self is continuously constituted, never completed, never fully coherent, never completely centered securely in experience” (Zembylas, 2005, p. 938).

Defining identity is a challenging task. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) wrote:

A major hurdle to gaining an understanding of identity is resolving a definition of it, as a variety of issues surface in any attempt to reach a definition. One must struggle to comprehend the close connection between identity and the self, the role of emotion in shaping identity, the power of stories and discourse in understanding identity, the role of reflection in shaping identity, the link between identity and agency, the contextual factors that promote or hinder the construction of identity, and ultimately the responsibility of teacher education programs to
create opportunities for the exploration of new and developing teacher identities. (p. 176)

Thus, research on teacher identity is complex. According to Ritchie (2009) “what makes this research even more complex is the use of diverse theoretical perspectives and subconstructs of identity across studies” (p. 596). The concept of identity has been defined in various ways in the literature on teaching and teacher education. Professional identity has been related to teachers’ images of self in some studies, and the emphasis was placed on teachers’ role identity in other studies (Beijaard et al., 2004). Images of self “strongly determine the way teachers teach, the way they develop as teachers, and their attitudes toward educational changes” (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 108); furthermore, “teacher role identity includes teacher beliefs, values, and emotions about many aspects of teaching and being a teacher” (Farrell, 2011, p. 55).

Professional identity development was perceived as a static entity in early studies (Hong, 2010). In recent research, however, it has been viewed as an ongoing process of change influenced by both personal and social factors and consisting of multiple identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Sanne & Meijer, 2011; Watson, 2006). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) observed that identity is “both product (a result of influences on the teacher) and process (a form of ongoing interaction within teacher development)” (p. 177). Been (2012) added that identity is multifaceted and socially and culturally constructed by lived experiences throughout teachers’ lives. Volkmann and Anderson (1998) asserted that “professional identity is constituted by every aspect of teaching” (p. 307). It is also connected to teachers’
histories, the expectations of the school, their content knowledge, and their own vision of what it means to be a teacher.

Teachers’ sense of identity may be influenced by historical, sociological, psychological, and cultural factors (Chong & Low, 2009). In addition, professional identity entails the influence of the conceptions and expectations of other people as well as what teachers perceive as important in their professional work and lives (Beijaard et al., 2004). In their study of the identity of teachers, Beijaard et al. (2004) highlighted four common characteristics of professional identity: (a) it is not a fixed entity but an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences; (b) it implies both person and context (i.e., the interaction between the person and the context is important in forming a person’s identity); (c) it consists of a set of subidentities that later form a somewhat harmonious whole; and (d) agency is an important element of professional identity (i.e., teachers have to be active in the process of professional development).

Orr and Simmons (2010) concluded that “the identity of the teacher implies more than taking classes; it entails status and related salary” (p. 85). Because teachers do not live in vacuum but instead communicate with others and perform actions and realize their value within a certain social environment, their professional identities are determined by the objective world (Qu, 2008). Some researchers of teacher identity claim that teachers’ professional identity cannot be separated from their social identities. In this line of research, “it is argued that conflicts arising from gender or racial inequality and from cultural stereotypes constitute the realities of teachers’ lives both inside and outside the classroom and will, in turn, greatly influence how they perceive themselves as
professionals” (Liu & Xu, 2011, p. 508). Other studies focus on teachers’ experience with educational reform. The findings of these studies indicate that teachers need to reconstruct their identity to cope with new challenges in the workplace and that the process is very complex (Liu & Xu, 2011, p. 508).

Lasky (2005) argued that the manner in which teacher identity impacts teachers’ sense of professional roles and understanding of reform mandates is not clear, especially when these policies accompany new curriculum tools and expectations for teaching. At the same time, she suggested that political, social, and economical forces affect the formation of teacher identity. “Teacher professional identity is how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others. It is a construct of professional self that evolves over career stages and can be shaped by school, reform, and political contexts” (Lasky, 2005, p. 901). Teacher professional identity is an aspect of teacher capacity that refers to “what an individual brings with him or her to the school setting and instruction” (Lasky, 2005, p. 901). It includes teachers’ beliefs, identity, past experiences, emotional well-being, personal commitment, and view of learning, and substantive knowledge about reform ideas.

In the same manner, Chappell (2001) argued that when teachers are asked to acquire new knowledge and skills to perform their professional practices in alignment with the new demands of current social political norms, they actually construct new professional identities. In other words, because teachers have become the focus of policy discourses that have to do with quality and accountability in education, they are required to occupy themselves with new knowledge and new techniques to meet the new standards
of quality education and teaching that is assumed important. As a result, these political discourses have changed, and teachers have been forced to change their understanding of their professional roles and practices. Teachers have been asked to work in new ways and to undertake new professional roles; thus, as teachers are asked to do new things, to have new understandings of their roles, and to change their professional practices, they become new and different teachers (Chappell, 2001; Lasky, 2005; Zembylas, 2005). This marks a change in teachers’ identities.

Various scholars have also argued that an understanding of teacher professional identity must correspond with an understanding of the concepts of self and identity. For Erickson (as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004) identity is something one develops through his or her life; whereas for Mead (as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004) the concept of identity should be understood in relationship to the self, the self that develops only in a social setting where individuals learn about themselves and their practices. According to Beijaard et al. (2004), the self is a representation of individuals thinking, attitudes, and beliefs about themselves; yet although many meanings exist for the concept of the self in the literature, they all have a common shared the idea that identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon. Identity development occurs in an intersubjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context. (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 108)

In this sense, self-identity is about how people identify themselves in different situations and at different times.
Researchers have also suggested that the concept of professional identity is used in many ways to refer to different entities in teaching and teacher education. In some studies, researchers use professional identity in relation to teachers’ images and concepts of themselves (e.g., Knowles as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004; Nias as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004). Such images of the self influence and determine the way teachers develop as teachers and their reactions to educational changes; however, in other studies, professional identity is understood in light of teachers’ roles (e.g., Goodson & Cole, 1994; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). Nevertheless, concepts such as reflection and or self-understanding and self-evaluation are all very important for the development and construction of professional identity (e.g., Cooper & Olson, 1996; Kerby, 1991). In addition, professional identity refers not only to concepts or images about individuals as teachers in light of how the society and others see them as teachers and their our roles. Instead, the term professional identity also refers to what teachers themselves find and believe to be important in their professional work and lives based on their practical and personal experiences and backgrounds (Tickle, 2000).

According to Adams, Hean, Sturgis, and Clark (2006), professional identity is a form of social identity that develops over time at the workplace and through group interactions where a teacher differentiates and compares his or her self to that of others. These authors have suggested that professional identity involves gaining insight into professional practices and development of talents and mastery of skills in group interactions. They also wrote that professional identity is gained in relation to the professional role undertaken by the individual; therefore, professional identity is a matter
of the subjective self-conceptualization in association with one’s role. Most importantly, the authors expressed the need for a deeper understanding of professional identity and its influences on teachers.

Some have asserted that conceptions of identity are also related to notions of gender, class, race, and commitment to equality and sameness (Butler, 1993; Hooks, 1990; Pateman as cited in Chappell, 2001); others have argued that identity is subject to ongoing cultural and historical reformation (Hall & du Gay as cited in Chappell, 2001). However, the meaning that one develops to understand things is what constitutes the formation of identity, which is a process of self-construction. In this process, one interprets and understands particular events, incidents, and social situations in relation to the self; therefore, in this context an exploration and study of the construction of teachers’ identities necessitates a look at both the social historical and contemporary discourses that shape and create teachers’ identities and the kinds of teachers they become.

Bullough (2005) argued that teacher identity and character have been always a concern in teacher education. He explained that as students come to teacher education programs expecting worthwhile knowledge and instruction, they also expect to be treated and seen as whole persons, individuals who know who and what they are, what they need, know, and what they stand for. According to Bullough this is also true for teacher educators. When they teach, they tend to teach according to their beliefs, values, understandings, and feelings about what they teach.

Palmer (1998) stated:
Teaching like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. (p. 8)

In a sense, Bullough (2005) argued that teachers teach what they stand for and think is good. Thus, teacher identity is defined “by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose” (Taylor, 1989, p. 27).

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) argued that teachers’ professional identities are made from those teachers’ personal lives and experiences and that teachers’ identities are “an amalgam of children, curriculum, beliefs, values, and personal identities; but so too are these identities made up of parents, community, board of education, administration, and administrators” (p. 171). What is significant about this way of thinking about teacher identity is that it reshapes the professional story of the teacher, “a story that leads everywhere to imagined, often actual, splits between teacher aims, wants, and working conditions and the aims, wants, and working conditions of others on the landscape of teaching” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 172).

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) explained that teachers’ stories allow understanding of how teachers make sense of the changing world around them, how they feel when what they do no longer makes sense for them, and how they try to adjust to the school system where they work while trying to define who they are, what they do, and
how to retain their professional identity. They suggested that teachers’ identities should be studied against the backdrop of professional knowledge or in the context of the educational landscape where they work. The current researcher has followed their suggestion.

The notion of teacher identity in teacher education has been of growing interest to many teacher educators and researchers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Bullough, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Korthagen, 2004). Even though determining what constitutes good teaching and good teachers may be difficult, teacher identity entails exploring, understanding, and finding one’s own style in teaching. Reflections about what makes good teaching are very important to teacher professional development and identity formation; therefore, the current study aimed at exploring issues related to the construction of teacher identity (i.e., major life events, critical incidents, and experiences) and emphasizing the importance of studying teacher identity as a way of understanding a teacher’s beliefs about teaching and professional practices.

Understanding and studying teachers’ professional identities are difficult because the way teachers think of themselves determines the way they do things and what they do. Because professional identity and professional performance and development are related (Watson, 2006, p. 510), researchers like Connelly and Clandinin (1999) argued that teachers must continually strive to understand themselves and who they are as well as what they are doing and can do in different situations instead of thinking about what they know in specific situations.
In teacher education programs, professional identity is crucial for the preparation of student teachers. It provides teacher educators and school mentors with a framework for understanding and supporting students and their work (Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). Chiefly, a student teacher’s life history and biography are a major part of the formation of the professional identity, which “is of vital concern to teacher education; it is the basis for meaning making and decision making. Teacher education must begin, then, by exploring the teaching self” (Bullough, 1997, p. 21). Available literature also suggests that knowledge of the teacher as self provides a good understanding of professional identity, teaching practices, and feelings about teaching. In other words, the teacher as self and a teacher’s attitudes and beliefs are all related and part of professional identity.

Teacher identity is, then, the way one understands himself or herself in relation to others. It is a teacher’s framework of actions and practices. Teacher identity poses a persistent challenge to one’s sense of self. Self-knowledge is thus central to being and becoming a teacher and teacher educator and the issue is much greater than the challenges associated with induction, of assuming a teacher’s or teacher educator’s professional identity, but also of determining how one will be for and with others. (Bullough, 2005, p. 144)

Because issues like teacher identity have moral aspects, a careful attention and investigation of how teachers are made, understand, and identify themselves within their social contexts and in relation to others is warranted. For these reasons studying teacher identity and identity formation are significant; doing so is the ultimate goal of this study.
The Formation of Teacher Identity

The formation of teacher professional identity is a complex process, entailing not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also the development of new ways to define the self as professional (Sutherland & Markausaite, 2012). Although most rapid changes in the development of a professional identity occur when preservice teachers graduate and begin their work in schools and classrooms, the development of teachers’ professional identity begins with their preservice education (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). During the preservice period, a preteaching identity arises from images of teachers held by the students, their initial beliefs about what constitutes a good teacher, and their implicit theories of teaching (Sutherland et al., 2010) and continues to evolve. In making the transition from student to a full member of the professional community of teachers, preservice teachers need to refine their understanding of pedagogical practices and develop their professional knowledge and create and recreate their image of themselves as members of a community (Sutherland et al., 2010).

Timostsuk and Ugaste (2010), who carried out a qualitative interview study of the professional identity of 45 student teachers in Estonia, emphasized the importance of supporting teacher identity formation during initial training to develop the social aspects of learning to teach. Using the case-study method, Fletcher (2012) also reported that a preservice teacher education program helped teachers to develop their professional identities by challenging their prior assumptions of what teaching entailed and meant to them. In another study of professional development among student teachers, Anspal et al. (2012) found that the practice periods appeared to be highly relevant to identity
development. The findings indicated that student focus shifted from the self to teaching methods and skills and pupil learning. In another study of the development of preservice teachers’ professional identity at entry and exit points in a 4-year undergraduate teacher preparation program, Chong, Ling, and Chuan (2011) reported significant changes in their participants’ sense of identity.

According to Gee’s (2000) understanding of conceptualization and interpretation of teacher identity, teachers, like other human beings, have storied life-trajectories, past experiences, and personal backgrounds that they stand on to interpret and make sense of what happens to them in the classrooms and schools. Such sense of one’s being is at the core of the construction of teacher identity—I, or the self as a teacher—yet what is important about Gee’s conceptualization is his explanation that what matters is not one’s sense of self but instead the “kind of ‘person’ one is recognized as ‘being’ at a given time and place” (p. 99)—in a classroom, with children or with beginning teachers.

Thus, identity is not related to internal states of teachers but to their performances in society. As a result, identity formation is not “a passive but a dynamic affair, that involves a giving and a withholding which simultaneously alters oneself and one’s context, with the result that alternative identities may form” (James as cited in Bullough, 2005, p. 202).

Gee (2000) also described four ways of viewing identity, explaining that they are connected with one another in very complex and important ways. They raise questions about how identity works for teachers and people (children and adults) in different contexts. In the first view, the nature perspective (N-Identities), people are who and what
they are by nature (genes), which they do not control; identity unfolds outside control by them or society. This is similar to Plato’s argument that people are born with different qualities fixed by nature.

In Gee’s (2000) second perspective, the institutional perspective (I-Identities), identity connects to the life of individuals and what they do in it and the way in which they position themselves. It is not something that people have achieved or were given by nature; it is about who people are in relation to the position they occupy in society.

The third perspective on identity is the discursive perspective (or D-Identities), which concerns how others view and see the individual; it entails the idea of an individual trait or a matter of one’s individuality and is not merely something that someone is born with or creates and upholds (Gee, 2000). Discursive identity requires an individual trait that one cannot achieve but is determined by the power related to the discourse or dialogue of others. People “are what [they] are primarily because of . . . individual accomplishments as they are interactionally recognized by others” (Gee, 2000, p. 101).

Finally, the fourth perspective on identity is affinity identity (A-Identities), in which people “are what [they] are because of the experiences [they] have had within certain sorts of ‘affinity groups’” (Gee, 2000, p. 101).

The term identity has taken on so many different meanings in the literature, yet a person cannot have an identity of any kind without an interpretive system to support it (Taylor, 1989). This system could comprise every individual’s views of nature or sociocultural powers, norms, rules, and institutions that influence who they are being and
becoming; thus, identity can be understood differently on different occasions, depending on different interpretive systems.

People may take on the same identity trait in different ways, and they can even negotiate it, showing how these traits are to be understood by themselves and others (Gee, 2000; Taylor, 1989). For instance, Gee (2000) explained how African American children and students may fill positions in schools that equate being African American with being at risk for school failure. Such positions, in return, will constitute institutional identities for them, ones that they may live with or fight against. Thus, being African American can be seen as an N-Identity.

Many disagree, arguing that being African American can be connected to more positive attributes than those rooted in biology. In fact, institutional realities can create different positions from which people can be forced to act. Being an African American can be understood from the perspective of the D-Identity as well.

As an identity, being African American can be a result of people’s dialogue and talk with and to Black people. Likewise, being an African American can be seen as A-Identity, where people orient themselves to particular practices related to them as a category and not because of blood. Their practices are to give them an identity as a particular kind of African Americans with a certain lifestyle. In such a way, people accept, contest, and negotiate their identities. In other words identity can be approached in many ways; however, a growing body of work is available, which shows how children and adults identify themselves and construct their identities within what Gee (2000) called the N-I-D-A elements of identity.
Layder (2004) stated that examining personal or self-identity helps people understand themselves: their attitudes, their responses to others, and their values. In addition, he argued that understanding the self enables people to put their own identities in perspective and understand how their experiences influence them as well as why some experiences are negative while others are life-enhancing. Furthermore, providing an understanding of personal identity adds insight into the personal world and how people can derive maximum benefit from their experiences. Understanding personal identities also helps people experience their lives in unique ways, that is, differently from the way others do. According to Layder, every person is influenced by the society in which they live. Every individual is influenced by his or her family, friends, education, ethnicity, work, class, gender, history, and politics. People experience special events, turning points, feelings, and behavioral responses that are developed through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. These experiences make them who they are and determine how they react to events and relate to others. In this respect, to understand personal identities, people must consider and understand other facets of daily life and social interactions, such as power, justice, and control. The research conducted by van Veen et al. (2005) emphasized the centrality of human interaction in teachers’ practice. Teachers are often deeply and personally involved in their work. Although their sense of identity “is affected—positively and negatively—by classroom experiences, collegial relationships, organizational structures, and external situational pressures, the key role of teachers’ sense of professional and personal identity is almost completely ignored in reform strategies and educational innovation policy” (van Veen et al., 2005, p. 918).
Investigating and understanding personal identity in general is essential to understanding how one continuously constructs and reconstructs this identity, which is influenced by experiences of social existence. The current study offers an examination of some of the critical events and life problems of one teacher, the case participant, and how she attempted to shape her identity.

**Contextual Factors Influencing Teacher Identity**

Recent research has indicated that contextual factors may influence the shaping of teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Smagorinsky, Moore, Cook, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). According to Kelchtermans (2009), a teacher’s professional identity is perceived and shaped by interaction between person and context. Contextual factors include the school environment, the nature of the learner population, the impact of colleagues and of school administrators, and teachers’ own experiences as learners in schools; furthermore, “the emotion brought to the context and that generated by the context will affect this identity” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Much research has shown that teachers’ personal histories and professional experiences, including workplace contextual factors, have an effect on the formation of their professional identities. Flores and Day (2006) noted that teachers who work in collaborative school cultures develop and express positive attitudes towards teaching. Thus, personal biographies are very significant to how teachers make sense of their practices and their beliefs about themselves as teachers and also their teacher identity.

Teachers’ images about themselves and their perceptions of their identities can also be influenced by the way they are perceived or stereotyped in professional contexts,
especially when they are members of minority cultural groups (Milner & Hoy, 2003). When a group of people are stereotyped, they may have to bear or tolerate extra emotional and cognitive burdens that could undermine their work and impact their self-images. African American teachers may bear such burdens when they are compared to other teachers, particularly those from the dominant cultural group.

Samuel and Stephens (2000) argued that questions as Who are we? and What do I want to become? are important questions for individuals, particularly Black Americans who consider a career in teaching. They explained that the importance of such questions lies in their relationship to making sense of self and to developing professional identity. Samuel and Stephens also argued that teachers should engage in critical dialogue with themselves to attempt self-definition in relation to other competing selves, who may not share similar experiences and beliefs. And thus, a teacher’s professional identity and role are constructed through a “percolated understanding and acceptance of a series of competing and sometimes contradictory values, behaviors, and attitudes, all of which are grounded in the life experiences of the self in formation” (Samuel & Stephens, 2000, p. 477).

The argument here is that questions of identity are located or embedded not only within one’s self but also within one’s culture; hence, identity is influenced by external factors because it is influenced by one’s inner sense of the self (Erikson as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004). The professional identity of a teacher cannot be well comprehended without understanding or considering the cultural contexts from which she or he comes and in which professional educational environments she or he teaches.
In a case study Agee (2004) explored the struggles of Tina, a Black teacher, to construct a teaching identity and a multicultural literature curriculum. She had faced many problems in her early years of teaching because of all the educational changes taking place in the school where she worked. In particular, Tina struggled with the impact of mandated student and teachers assessments. Agee (2004) proposed that in addition to personal history, a teacher also brings a desire to construct “a unique identity as a teacher and that in the various contexts of her work; she negotiates and renegotiates that identity” (p. 749). As for Tina’s struggle to develop a teaching identity in a “White” school community, Agee (2004) cited DuBois, who said, “African Americans possess a dual consciousness: as Americans and as Blacks. . . . [This duality produced] a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment” (p. 221). Tina had to struggle with many ideological and ethical conflicts in developing her identity.

Other researchers have argued that a teacher’s identity is constructed in relation to others. For example, Shotter and Gergen (1989) stated the following about identity:

I act not simply ‘out of’ my own plans and desires, unrestricted by the social circumstances of my performances. . . . My action in being thus ‘situated’ takes on an ethical or moral quality. . . . [This ethical positioning accounts for] communally shared ways of . . . making-sense [that] are deeply constitutive of people’s social and psychological being in quite a deep way. (p. 144)

In one example, Ladson-Billings told of a White colleague who once claimed he could probably address or teach race, class, and gender more successfully than she [Ladson-Billings], a Black teacher,
because students would perceive his approach as scholarly; whereas they would see a Black teacher as self-interested, bitter, or having a political agenda. (as cited in Agee, 2004, p. 79)

The foregoing example shows the types of conflicts and issues that Black teachers encounter in their teaching and in developing their professional identities; however, such issues are not often addressed in research on teaching (Agee, 2004; Trueba & Bartolomé, 2000). More research is needed on Black American teachers in specific teaching contexts. For this reason, the present study offers insights into the life of a Black preschool teacher to promote understanding of the way she reshaped and developed her professional identity in a White school community and the way such an educational environment impacted her understanding and making sense of her professional identity. Most importantly, this study gave voice to one Black teacher sharing her stories and narratives about her professional identity.

**Negotiation of Teacher Identity**

Chong and Low (2009) stated that teachers’ professional identity is “negotiated through a rich and complex set of relations of practice” (p. 70). Assaf (2008) concluded that educational settings “can compromise a teacher’s professional identity and can influence teachers’ responsibility and ethical sense of what they should do for their students and who they need to be as teachers” (p. 239). Liu and Xu (2011), who used narrative inquiry to investigate how a teacher negotiated her identity in the context of a reform, concluded that teachers must shift their identities to adapt to different situations based on the meanings that they derive from a variety of narrative resources. The main
finding in this study was that “teachers shift their identities to adapt to different situations based on the meanings that they derive from a variety of narrative resources which include teachers’ professional knowledge, personal experience, the ‘micro-politics’ of the setting and wider socio-cultural contexts” (Liu & Xu, 2011, p. 594).

In a narrative qualitative study, Hsieh (2006) showed how international student teachers negotiate their identities, explaining that “direct interaction with a second language and its culture can trample one’s original identity and worldview” (p. 871). Because using an unfamiliar language may cause vulnerability and distress, using a second language may become a “deeply uprooting, self-transforming experience” (Roth & Harama, 2000, p. 763). Hsieh cited research revealing that Asian international students express the greatest difficulty in the use of the English language among international students. She attributed that to cultural traditions that differ widely from those of the dominant American culture, noting that “the more different international students’ cultural background is from American culture, the harder their adaptation can be and the more likely they can have emotional problems” (p. 872). Thus, they are forced to match the norms and expectations of the dominant American culture, and as a result they negotiate their identities.

The problem, however, is that “students who are not from the dominant culture may be victims of unspoken yet powerful stereotypes and messages about their development and personal identity” (Yeh & Drost, 2002, p. 2). Hence, “they must learn to negotiate and bridge multiple, and often competing, identities in the schools” (Hsieh, 2006, p. 872). In such a context, students and student teachers who are not from the
dominant culture may be more vulnerable in negotiating identities desirable to them in order to fulfill the expectations of the dominant society and develop a nonconfrontational relationship with members of the host society.

Hallman (2007) discussed the negotiating process that preservice teachers undertake when constructing an electronic teaching portfolio. She explained how the use of e-portfolios in teacher education programs supports the process of becoming a teacher, yet she questioned why these teachers tried to present coherent and competent identities as beginning professionals while also undertaking the notion of identity building as a fluid, ongoing process. She found that for student teachers, presenting an identity as a beginning teacher in the space of the e-portfolio means making important choices about how to write for multiple audiences.

Hallman (2007) argued that teacher educators should support beginning teachers’ use of e-portfolio as a tool to negotiate their teacher identity:

A starting point for teacher educators may be to engage their students in conversations about e-portfolios as tools rather than simply as sites in which to showcase good work, to encourage thinking about teaching practice and teacher identity. In an effort to engage in teaching for transformation and social change, teacher educators must recognize the difficulty many preservice teachers have in striving for a balance between being a knowledgeable teacher and an inquisitive student. (p. 485)
Social Representations and Teacher Professional Identity

Carignan, Sanders, and Pourdavood (2005) described social representations built from experiences and transmitted through heritage, tradition, education, and social communication. The functions of social representation include organizing practices, actions, and ways of communicating; establishing the vision of participating in a community; structuring the symbolic process in relation to a social interaction; and connecting to a collective representation (Carignan et al., 2005). Understanding the social representations of race and ethnocentrism of teachers is necessary because social representations influence the way individuals construct their social and professional identities (Pelini, 2011). According to Carignan et al., “future teachers’ social representations on race and ethnocentrism are present before their teacher education and remain in their professional activities” (p. 7).

According to G. Moloney and Walker (2007) it is impossible for people to develop identities without taking into consideration the impact of social representations, which enable people to know who they are, how they understand both themselves and others, and where to locate themselves and others. Thus, the construction of identity is a construction of meaning, a social process by which an understanding of the self emerges and one’s identity is created and constructed through interaction and communication. G. Moloney and Walker stated that such issues as identities and racism in schools and their impact on teachers and students are relatively underresearched, particularly in primary schools. They explained that an analysis of the way students and teachers themselves make sense of, debate, challenge, and negotiate their identities is missing from
educational research. Moreover, G. Moloney and Walker stated that “storytelling or vignettes can uncover both social and individual aspects of representations” (p. 138). Narratives enable sense making and communication, and they also promote many ways of connecting with one another and developing common understanding. In this study, my participant was positioned as a knowledgeable individual as opposed to an object of the research. She was encouraged to tell and share her own stories of her experiences as a teacher in multiple settings.

Joffe (1999) explained how the notion of the Other impacts ongoing identity construction, arguing that social representations of certain groups serve identity functions: “Subjective, internal forces interact with external forces in the construction of identity. Cultural, societal, institutional, environmental, and symbolic factors play a part in the sense of identity and identification that individuals experience” (p. 197). Arguing that identity is constructed not only by what people affiliate with but also by their comparisons with other groups in which they emerge as the superior party, Joffe stated, “Gaining a positive sense of identity through comparison with negatively valued groups is common in modern and earlier societies alike” (p. 198). Moloney and Walker (2007) added:

Social representations and others reflect the powerful division between the decorous, righteous ‘us’ and the disruptive, transgressive ‘them.’ Understanding the impacts of social representations on how we become who we are, better helps us to understand how the ‘other’ influences our identity construction. (p. 211)
Finally, Han, West-Olatunji, and Thomas (2010–2011) suggested considering racial identity development as an important element of teacher professional development because “teachers need to reflect on their own identity development and consider how their views could influence their teaching and interaction with students” (p. 1). Racial identity is a “sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms as cited in Han et al., 2010–2011, p. 2). The implications of racial identity development theory are as important in the field of teacher education as in other fields (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Han et al., 2010–2011). Irvine (as cited in Han et al. 2010–2011) studied African American teachers and found that they defined teaching from a more empathetic perspective that originated from their racial and cultural backgrounds.

**Early Childhood Teachers’ Professional Identities**

Research related to the professional identity of early childhood teachers is limited (Dalli, 2001; Thomas, 2012); however, professional identity in early childhood education has attracted an increasing amount of attention among researchers. Dalli (2001) reported that several recent writers have confirmed that early childhood work has retained the status of a poor relation in educational professions perhaps because of the perceived affinity of early childhood work with mothering and therefore also with women’s work.

In a recent study, Been (2012) used the phenomenological approach to investigate the professional identity of early childhood teachers. The participants were six prekindergarten or kindergarten teachers with five or more years of teaching experience, working in Midwest urban or surrounding suburban settings. Data were collected
through semistructured interviews, protocol writing, a focus group, and autobiographical writing. Been concluded that

early childhood teachers are at risk, through the exposure of marginalization of teachers, identity crisis, and the continual need to advocate in the work place.

With the early childhood teacher in crisis, young children are negatively impacted. The main red flags to note from this study are the unstable foundations with which children are beginning their lives, the total disconnect between policies and best practices for children, and the early childhood teacher fleeing the field. This is a warning for the future of children. (pp. 108–109)

Cabral (2012) examined the role of curriculum models in the formation of the professional identities, using qualitative case studies of three early childhood teachers, each of whom worked with different models, and concluded that although curriculum models play a crucial role, each teacher built her professional identity in a distinct way. Cabral stated that early childhood teachers’ professional identities are “built in the interaction of the reflections and questionings from the teachers about themselves and their practices, the relationships they establish with the professional communities they belong to, and the educational practices such relationships and affiliations bring forth” (p. 553).

In another study, M. Moloney (2010) investigated the perceptions of professional identity in the early childhood education and care in the Republic of Ireland. Using qualitative methodology, she addressed the status, salary, and conditions of those working in the early childhood education and care sector. Her findings indicated that
professional identity was contentious and problematic. The professional identity of teachers was compromised in individual school settings; the early childhood teachers in her study believed they did not get the same respect as teachers working with students in the higher grades in the school.

Nimmo and Park (2009) investigated the impact of participation in a research mentorship team on the professional identities of seven early childhood teachers. Data comprised interviews, meeting transcripts, and supporting documents. Findings showed that changing teacher identities impacted the culture of the early childhood center in which the study was carried out.

Thomas (2009) studied the construction of the professional identity of four early childhood educators in Queensland, Australia, reporting that they struggled to locate themselves as professionals. She suggested supporting early childhood teachers both to engage with and to resist normative processes and expectations of professional identity construction.

Using a qualitative case study approach, Dalli (2001) investigated how early childhood education teachers in New Zealand constructed their identities. Findings showed that teachers aligned their work alongside the role of mothers. Dalli concluded that early childhood teachers need to reflect on how dominant discourses about their work position them in their working relationships with mothers, and as members of a broader educational community where being a mother sits in opposition to the dominant view of teaching as a profession. (p. 13)
Han et al. (2010–2011) used racial identity development theory to investigate cultural competence among early childhood educators, they found that representative characteristics of racial identities influenced teachers’ conceptualizations of teaching and understanding culturally diverse young students.

**Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the literature related to the concept of teacher professional identity, teacher identity formation, and negotiation. The concept of teacher identity is not clearly defined in the literature (Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2000; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004) yet it has been examined in the light of social and cultural changes (Cornell, 2000; Nicholson & Seidman, 1995; Thomas, 2012; Zembylas, 2005). Teacher identity formation was seen as an ongoing process of change influenced by both personal and professional factors for which examination of teacher identity should occur in light of the role of emotions, power, agency, and resistance in teaching, all of which influence the construction of a teacher’s identity.

In addition, the concept of professional identity was perceived to be connected to every aspect of teaching. It was connected to teachers’ histories, the expectations of the school, their content knowledge, and their own vision of what it means to be a teacher. It entailed the influence of the conceptions and expectations of other people as well as what teachers perceive as important in their professional work and lives (Beijaard et al., 2004). Research on teacher professional identity indicated also that an understanding of teachers’ identities requires an examination of their personal self, their attitudes, and values (Layder, 2004). It was argued that an understanding of the self enables teachers to
put their own identities in perspective as well as to understand how their experiences influence them.

Recent research has also indicated that contextual factors may influence the shaping of teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Smagorinsky, Moore, Cook, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). Contextual factors include the school environment, the nature of the learner population, the impact of colleagues and of school administrators, and teachers’ own experiences as learners in schools. Thus, personal biographies are very significant to how teachers make sense of their practices and their beliefs about themselves as teachers and also their teacher identity.

Much of the work in the field of educational research has focused on teacher skills, methods, and characteristics with very little focus on teachers’ thoughts about professional identity. Research focused on teachers’ professional identity is very important because it brings life to the field and it improves understanding of the experience of the classroom. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) stated that very few researchers think of teachers as holders and producers of knowledge.

Most importantly, teachers’ thoughts and understanding of their professional identity can be seen in terms of the narratives and stories that teachers tell. Such stories reflect all teachers’ personal lives and their understanding of themselves, yet when speaking about teacher knowledge, teachers usually seem to speak about who they are. Thus, the current study focused on understanding and exploring the ways in which a minority early childhood teacher thought of herself in her own story of teaching. As indicated by this review of the literature, I was prepared to think about a variety of
questions. Who is this teacher in her own story of teaching? Who is she in the landscape where she works? How does this teacher make sense of her professional identity? How does this teacher think of herself as a teacher and a person? What does it mean to be a minority teacher and how does this status influence her perceptions of herself? What are some experiences that have shaped her identity? What are some beliefs and values this teacher has with regard to teaching and learning? Who are some influential figures in this teacher’s life? What kind of teacher is she, and what kind of teacher does she want to be? These questions and many others allowed me to elicit information and knowledge that contributed to an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. I looked at many aspects of the participant’s life in order to understand who this teacher is and how she constructed and negotiated her professional identity.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate how an early childhood teacher formed a professional identity and what factors impacted it (race, workplace, childhood, family, relationships with others, and personal and professional experiences). In addition, the purpose of this study was to examine, describe, and uncover the struggles and tensions a teacher encountered as she grappled to construct a professional teaching identity and reformed this identity as she made the transition from an urban Black school to a suburban laboratory school in a predominantly White school setting. A qualitative case study was used to understand the process by which a Black teacher formed a professional identity.

In this chapter, I have explained the research design, described the research participant and site, and discussed the researcher’s role. I have also discussed study procedures, data collection and analysis methods, trustworthiness, and limitations of the study.

Research Design and Rationale

I engaged in a qualitative case study because of my interest in gaining an in-depth understanding of the process by which an early childhood teacher formed a professional identity and how such an identity continued to develop. This study was designed to discover the uniqueness of a particular case. According to Stake (1995), “The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is,
what it does” (p. 8). This study might be called an instrumental case study because it was about understanding a particular phenomenon from the perspective of a particular person (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) and uncovering “the interactions of significant factors and characteristics of the phenomenon” (Merriam 1998, p. 29).

As the researcher, I chose to work with Maria because I wanted to determine whether unquestioned assumptions about who she was as a teacher of color and as a minority teacher had impacted the development of her professional identity. In particular, I wanted to look carefully at how Maria positioned herself as a minority teacher and shaped a professional identity in a school where the majority of teachers were White. Watching Maria teaching, listening to her stories, and reviewing some of her personal teaching journals and work, I did my utmost to elicit talk about some of the emotional and social struggles she encountered in her effort to establish a professional identity.

My goal was not only to provide insight into the development of her professional identity but also to make visible her problems and struggles as she constructed that identity. To achieve my goals, I conducted a case study to collect unique and valuable information needed to understand the development of Maria’s professional identity: how it developed and why it developed the way it did (Becker, 1968/1998; Yin, 2003). I listened to and collected stories from Maria about the way she made sense of herself, her world, and professional identity. The importance of stories is that they indicate who people are, and they hold the meanings they give to their experiences and the judgments they make in their lives (Claire, 2001; Moloney & Walker, 2007).
The stories emerging from this study provided insight into the meaning Maria attached to her professional identity (Miller & Salkind, 2002). They reflected the ways in which her identity, values, beliefs, and attitudes were formed and maintained. In addition to listening to Maria’s stories, I used in-depth interviews (formal conversations), unstructured conversational interviews and meetings, stimulated recall interviews, observations, and review of personal documents to examine and understand the development of Maria’s professional identity. Given its focus on professional identity formation and development, my research was guided by the following three questions:

1. How does a teacher form her professional identity?

2. How is a minority teacher’s professional identity developed in a dominant-culture community?

3. How is professional identity developed in the context of the school in which the teacher works and in light of significant personal and professional experiences?

Through stories and reflections, I examined how Maria’s relationships with family and others (colleagues, student teachers, parents, and children) contributed to the construction of her professional identity. My examination of those relationships through the theoretical lens of her race, ethnicity, and self-concept provided a complex understanding of the dynamics by which Maria crafted those relationships, gave them meaning, and related them to her life and teaching. Although scholars have reached no agreement about factors that most impact the process of forming and developing a teacher’s professional identity, consistent with previous research, Maria’s family
emerged as one of the most important in the construction of her teacher identity (Britzman, 1992; Bullough, 1989; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). “Teacher identity development and change is shaped by the interrelationship between personal biography and experience and professional knowledge linked to the teaching environment, students, subject matter, and culture of the school” (Proweller & Mitchener, 2004, p. 1044).

Working from this framework, I reported on how Maria saw her teaching in relation to others; and I reflected on how her professional experiences, personal life, teaching environment and the culture of the school shaped the kind of professional identity she crafted. In addition, I drew special attention to the struggles Maria encountered in forming such an identity. I explored how her moving from an urban to a suburban school, being a member of a minority race, and feeling like an outsider contributed to the formation of her professional identity. Teaching is a project informed by the choices that teachers make in how they respond to the lives of those they are teaching and the contexts in which they practice. The choices they make presage their own identities as teachers, an array of identity options for their students, and images of a more equitable and just society for the future. (Proweller & Mitchener, 2004, p. 1057)

**Research Participant**

The purpose of this study was to describe the process by which an early childhood teacher formed a professional identity and the way it developed. My goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors contributing to identity formation, so I chose to focus on a particular early childhood teacher. I was very interested in learning and
investigating how this teacher gave meaning to and developed her professional teaching identity.

The participant was selected based on convenience, prior relationship, and the likelihood of gaining permission from her and the research site where she worked. This teacher had a reputation for being very understanding, sensitive to the needs of others, caring, and kind. She granted her approval and agreed to participate in this study along with the approval of the university’s Institutional Research Board (IRB) (see Appendix A & B) and her school. Further information about the approval of the study appears later in this chapter.

Maria, who is referred to by the pseudonym she chose to be used in the text of this dissertation, was a Black early childhood teacher who had taught for 11 years. She held a baccalaureate degree in early childhood education and a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction (C & I); at the time of this study she was in the process of completing her doctoral course work in C & I with an emphasis on early childhood education. Maria’s teaching and professional experiences included working at an urban Black school and a suburban laboratory school.

At the time of this study, Maria was the full-time lead teacher in a preschool classroom. She taught about 20 children in her classroom and worked with five student teachers. She was also committed to researching children’s habits of mind. Her primary focus was on helping children to develop the good thinking habits that she perceived to be important to their success in school and in life. Like the other teachers in the school, Maria had supplemental training in first aid, communicable disease recognition, child
abuse recognition and prevention, and infant–child CPR. Further details about Maria appear in Chapter IV.

**Research Site**

Although Maria had taught in an urban public school for four years, this study took place at a university laboratory school, where she had taught for seven years. Thus, I drew on information gathered from Maria’s stories about her professional experiences in both settings as well as data collected through observations and interviews conducted and related to her work at a lab school located in the Midwest.

The university laboratory school served 135 children aged 18 months through kindergarten. This school, which provided a full- and part-time comprehensive program with high-quality childcare services to the children and their working families in a town in the Midwest, was part of a teacher education department at a university. The center was normally open on weekdays from 7:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. It also served as a laboratory for undergraduate and graduate students who were preparing for careers in early childhood and or in other related fields.

The school housed seven classrooms: two for toddlers (18 months to 3 years of age), four for preschoolers (3 to 5 years of age), and one kindergarten. The toddler and preschool classrooms had mixed-age groups; however, because school personnel acknowledged the importance of children developing a sense of belonging and feeling part of the school community, the same group of children usually stayed with the same lead teacher for two years.
A Reggio Emilia-inspired approach to early childhood education was in place at the school, and personnel had developed a philosophy, educational program, and curriculum that reflected the values promoted at the school and an understanding of developmentally appropriate practices and child development. The teachers in this school appreciated the individuality of all children, respected their families, valued their backgrounds and differences, and invited parents to work collaboratively with them in the best interests of their children.

The Researcher and Her Role

At the time of this writing I was an international student who had lived and studied in the United States for five years. I held a bachelor degree of arts in early childhood education from the University of Jordan, a master’s degree in child development from Michigan State University, and had recently worked on my Ph.D. in C & I with an emphasis on early childhood education at a university in the Midwest.

By summer 2007, I finished all of my coursework requirements, passed my comprehensive exams, and became a Ph.D. candidate. After fulfilling and completing the requirements for my doctoral degree, I was required to complete a dissertation on a research topic of interest to me. Although settling on a particular topic that would make a new and creative contribution to my field of study was difficult, I fortunately had access to the university laboratory school, which allowed me the opportunity to become acquainted with the teachers, work with them, establish rapport, conduct observations, and develop an interest in researching a particular issue related to teachers and their teaching.
I was introduced to the university laboratory school during my second semester, when I took a course taught by the director every Monday evening at the school. I was also required to conduct an action research in one of the school’s classrooms as part of the requirements of another course in which I was enrolled during the same semester with a different professor. I remember my excitement about visiting the school, conducting research, observing and working with children, and learning about the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education.

During the course of this semester, I had the opportunity to learn about the community of this school, the teachers, and the children; but most importantly, I had the opportunity to work closely with Maria, who taught preschool and allowed me to conduct action research in her classroom.

Almost a year after this semester has passed, I returned to the school as a graduate assistant (GA) and made connections while working at the school. Part of my responsibility as a GA was to work for 10 hours per week at the school under the supervision and guidance of the school director, who gave me different assignments every week.

Part of my GA assignment was to conduct classroom observations, look closely at children’s interactions with the student teachers, analyze the ways the student teachers played with children and conversed with them, and study and document their work. In addition, I was required at times to evaluate student responses, write admission letters, give feedback on the selective admissions process, and brainstorm ways to improve this experience for both the faculty and students.
Because research related to teaching and learning was valued at the school, I was also required to assist teachers who needed some support conducting their own research in their classrooms. For example, I helped a teacher document her work with the children, offering suggestions, sharing readings, and creating videos about her work with them and making them available for the teacher to use and watch as a way to improve her teaching.

Maria was one of the teachers with whom I worked most frequently as a GA at the school; however, I had known Maria for some time before I began working with her. She was a guest speaker in one of my classes, talking about the importance of documenting children’s work and how to study it; we also took a statistics course together. My first impression of Maria was that she seemed friendly and warm. She smiled at me, greeted me, and asked me how I was doing. We talked about the classes that we were taking and the assignments that we had to do. When Maria learned that my background was in early childhood education, she indicated an interest in learning and knowing about the status of teaching and early childhood in Jordan, my native country.

As we exchanged conversations about our teaching experiences, I asked Maria whether she would allow me to visit her classroom and conduct action research on how to build rapport with young children and how to communicate effectively with them. She welcomed me into her classroom and agreed to help me with my action research; I went to her classroom twice a week for about two and a half hours each time for 11 weeks during spring 2006. Working with Maria and watching her interactions with the children, I learned that effective communication is very important to working with young children.
I also learned that good communication is not only about the words I use but also my manner of speaking, body language, and ability to listen, respond to, and understand children.

Above all, Maria taught me the importance of taking account of the culture and the context of every individual child and person in the classroom, which made me realize that a key to building rapport with children is to develop trust and to demonstrate respect, understanding, and honesty in our relationships and interactions with others. As a teacher I came to realize the importance of spending time to learn about the people in my classroom—who they are, what they want, where they come from, and how I can help and reach out to them.

After I finished conducting my action research in Maria’s classroom, I was assigned to work at the school as a GA, specifically to help teachers with their own research. My assignment granted me another opportunity to work with Maria when I was required to help her with her classroom research. She was committed to researching the characteristics of what intelligent children use when confronting problems in the classroom. Maria wanted to learn about what habits of mind the children used and what each of them encompassed as well as how she could support the development of those habits as she worked with the children.

My role was to meet with Maria on a weekly basis to think about ways she could help children to develop the habit of using their minds well in their learning. We shared sources, outlined our ideas, and thought about the habits of mind that we wanted the
children to develop and employ, especially when they were challenged with problems to which they had no solution.

In our study of the habits of mind and in our efforts to make Maria’s research and work more visible and understandable to the student teachers in her classroom and the children’s families, the school director suggested that I create some videos of Maria’s classroom for further study and analysis. As a team, the school director, Maria, and I watched the videos and shared our notes about what we observed.

Then we made recommendations for further activities and ideas to try out with the children. The activities were documented and made available in the classroom for everyone to view (through daily reflections posted on the door or photos). I worked with other teachers at the school, but I developed a close relationship with Maria: We often socialized outside school hours, visiting, dining, and meeting each other’s friends or family members.

I developed a trusting relationship with Maria over the course of three years, and she influenced my views and understanding of children, teaching, and learning. I became very interested in learning more about who she was as a teacher and an individual mainly because I saw in her someone who was caring, sensitive to others, and appreciative of others regardless of who they were, how they looked, and where they came from.

Because the school supported students and faculty who desired to conduct research at their center as long as all research adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the university’s Institutional Research Board (IRB), I wanted to study and explore how Maria as a minority teacher formed a professional identity in relation to her
workplace and in view of her personal and professional experiences and interactions with others.

Maria became a role model who inspired me in many ways with her kindness, attention, and work as a teacher, and because I was very interested in examining and exploring the complexities and dynamics of the process by which she had formed her professional identity, my role as the researcher of this study was to interpret carefully how her professional and personal experiences and relationships with others shaped her teaching identity.

Given that I was the main instrument of data collection, my role was to gather data, describe them, and give them meaning as well as to protect the confidentiality of my participant while maintaining what Patton (1990) called empathetic neutrality. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) used the concept of the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher to refer to the personal quality of the researcher with which she or he acts as the vehicle through which data are collected. According to these scholars, the researcher must have the ability not only to collect data but also to give meaning to them, understand them, and be sensitive to what is being collected and interpreted.

I gathered information through multiple sources (see pages 58-59) and tried to interact with and respond to any situations as soon as they arose; furthermore, I requested verification of data and asked for further details about some situations and incidents when I perceived them to be very important to understanding the factors contributing to Maria’s professional identity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Subjects do not tell researchers what to look for or tell them what to research. . . . Subjects gain power because they are valued for themselves, when what they say and do is accorded status, when their voices [are] acknowledged. (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 110)

**Procedures**

In order to protect the rights and personal privacy of Maria and to protect the interests of the university and the school, I adhered to the ethical rules established by both the university’s Institutional Review Board and the school’s research review committee. Because I maintained a close relationship with Maria and the school, having worked there for several semesters as a GA, I was unconcerned about getting consent from both sides until I was confronted with serious issues about Maria’s participation in the study.

School leaders were very concerned about describing Maria as a minority teacher in the study. From their perspective, labeling Maria as a “minority teacher” would inaccurately and unfairly depict the way she was viewed as a teacher at the school and how she was identified in relation to other teachers in the school. This created tension among school personnel, my dissertation committee, Maria, and me. Acquiring approval of the study by the school was a challenging task because of mixed messages, fears, uncertainties, conflicting demands, significant pressure on Maria and me, and increasing disagreement on the extent to which the use of the term *minority* in the study would be appropriate and of no harm. The school did not want the reader of the study to be able to identify Maria because she was the only Black teacher in the school. Likewise, school leaders did not want the reader to have any misperceptions about how school personnel
viewed Maria, especially because her classroom happened to be located at the back of the school, making it appear to be hidden away.

Most importantly, the school leaders disliked the use of the term minority because they feared and were concerned that Maria’s race and ethnic background would become the main focus of the study, particularly that my research questions had been modified during my proposal defense to include a question about Maria’s race and its impact on the formation of her professional identity. In addition, the tension surrounding the study made Maria feel very uncomfortable as her race became an issue. She explained that even though she knew her race was going to be brought up in the study in any case because it was part of her professional and personal identity, she felt as if she were jolted by the truth of who she was as a Black teacher.

To be told that she would be identified and described as the minority teacher or a Black American teacher made Maria feel that being Black was a negative quality about which she should be embarrassed. Tension created an emotional conflict in Maria as she described it. As much as she desired to be part of this study and accepted the label minority teacher, she still felt the need to consider the interests and concerns of school leaders regarding her participation in the study.

Maria was conflicted, wanting to participate in the study and having consider concerns about her participation, her own fears, and mixed feelings about the study and whether or not she should participate in it; thus, my responsibility as the researcher of this study was to remind Maria that her participation was fully voluntary and that she was free from any obligation or commitment to the study. In addition, I was responsible for
negotiating access to the school, facing the tension encountered upon approval of the study, addressing the school leaders’ concerns, assuring no risks or harm were associated with Maria’s participation in the study, complying with school policy on research conducted at the center, and acting in accordance with the conditions for consent required by the research review board at the school. The study finally received school approval in early 2008.

**Data Collection**

The data gathering process took about five months. I gathered data for the purpose of this qualitative research through in-depth personal interviews and stimulated recall interviews, observations, formal and informal conversations, document analysis (participant’s personal teaching journals, videotapes of the participant teaching her lessons, and meetings), and field notes (see Table 1). Triangulation among sources was provided in order to support the trustworthiness of this case study.

I decided to employ multiple sources of evidence in order to acquire a comprehensive perspective in my study. To do so, I used interviews in conjunction with field observations, and other techniques. Interviews included open-ended questions (see Appendix C) and conversations that allowed me to focus attention on areas of particular importance, such as Maria’s family, childhood, education, and personal experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Observations used for descriptive purposes provided me with information about Maria’s teaching, classroom, and interactions with others, and most importantly the opportunity to observe critical incidents as they occurred in the classroom (Patton, 1990). I was aware that my presence in the classroom as an observer might act
as a distraction to others in the classroom, so I deliberately chose to maintain a passive presence; and my interactions with the student teachers and the children were limited to greeting the teachers and children in the morning, smiling, and offering help when needed (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Another source of information included the review of personal documents (videos, children’s work, and teaching journals) and the use of stimulated recall interviews, which provided new insights and perspectives on Maria’s personal life and professional experiences.

Table 1

*Data Collection Methods*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>To allow the participant to reflect and tell her story about her teacher identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To understand the participant’s teaching experiences and the ways she negotiated her teacher identity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To allow the participant to tell her story about the effect of her minority status on the construction of her teacher identity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To explore and understand the effect of school context on the construction of the participant’s identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>To explore the participant’s practices in the classroom and her relationships in the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversations</td>
<td>To understand how the participant perceived her professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>To collect evidence of the participant’s work for further analysis and triangulation of data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Notes</td>
<td>To identify emerging ideas and themes</td>
</tr>
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</table>
My initial visit to Maria’s classroom occurred during the first week of school in January 2008. At the time, I awaited school and IRB approval but had informal verbal permission from the school director to visit Maria’s classroom because part of my graduate assistantship assignment was to work with Maria and also because my study did not require consent from children’s families. Through those visits to Maria’s classroom, my plan was to become a person familiar to the children and the student teachers and also to gain a sense of the daily classroom routines, schedule, and activities. Most importantly, I wanted to acquire a good sense of how a day in the life of Maria at the school looked.

When I received IRB approval on January 30, 2008, data collection commenced. My plan was to visit Maria’s classroom twice a week and to conduct observations for about two to three hours per visit beginning early February 2008 and concluding in mid-May when spring semester ended for preschoolers. Sometimes, I could observe for more than three hours and at other times, I could only manage to observe for an hour or an hour and a half per visit, depending on the classroom conditions and the number of requirements I needed to do as part of my GA work at the school; yet on average most observations were about two hours in duration per visit. They provided me with the opportunity to watch Maria work and interact with children, student teachers, and parents in multiple settings and on different occasions. I spent approximately two hours per visit, twice a week in Maria’s classroom; I had the opportunity to document and collect invaluable information, jot down field notes, and observe critical events as they unfolded. My notes offered rich descriptions of settings, people, and activities.
Most usefully, field notes presented and revealed details of what Maria said and did and how she interacted with others and reflected on her daily teaching. They also served as a memory aids in helping me recall important and specific details used for further analysis and interpretation of findings (Hatch, 2006; Lofland & Lofland, 1984). In addition to field notes, I reviewed some of Maria’s personal teaching journals and viewed videotapes made of Maria and the children working together in small and large groups and in multiple settings to secure accuracy of what was observed and captured. To be specific, I reviewed three teaching journals and seven videotapes, and I also looked at some of the children’s work (paintings, drawings, and books), created with Maria’s support during work time.

Likewise, I met with Maria at least twice a month during the time of data collection. We met for lunch or dinner either at my residence, the school, or at a restaurant for the purpose of further data collection. Meetings varied from informal, unstructured conversational interviews (which most often took place at the research scene and recorded in handwritten notes), formal conversations, and in-depth interviews (set up for data collection), and stimulated recall interviews (open-ended conversations planned for additional exploration of certain topics) (Hatch, 2006; Patton, 1990). These meetings and interviews allowed acquisition of more detailed information about Maria’s personal life and professional experiences. They also allowed member checking as suggested by Merriam (1998) to ensure the credibility of the data. I periodically restated or summarized information and interpretations and then asked Maria to determine accuracy.
In-depth interviews were most often conducted at my residence to assure the privacy of the participant and information shared. Those interviews each lasted approximately three hours. They were conducted primarily to address the main research questions of the study, whereas the purpose of informal and unstructured conversational interviews was to gather details about what was observed and to address issues or other related topics as they arose at the research scene. Those conversations took place in the classroom booth, Maria’s office, teachers’ lounge, and in the classroom during work time; and on average, they lasted from 50 minutes to an hour and a half, depending on where they occurred. Moreover, stimulated recall interviews were most often held at my residence or at a restaurant, depending on what we planned to do. Typically, those interviews were used for member checking as described above, follow-ups on unclear issues, and further exploration of certain topics. On average those meetings lasted for two to three hours per interview. In addition to using different types of interviews, observation of the participant and review of personal documents helped me obtain data from the natural setting and create rich records for analysis and interpretation.

Because observations can lead to deeper understandings than interviews alone, I conducted observations of the participant in multiple settings. I observed Maria in the classroom, on the playground, during parent–teacher conferences, at staff meetings, in the hallway, and at the goodbye party toward the end of the school semester. I also observed Maria with the children out at the meadows. The meadow is the outdoor grass land and space of the school where the teachers of the school took the children in small and large
groups to walk, explore, connect with nature, and play. Going on field trips was a frequent outing activity that benefited the children.

These observational data not only provided knowledge about the context in which events occurred but also enabled me to see what the participant might have overlooked and to grasp the meaning of what was observed from her perspective (Patton, 1990).

**Interviews**

Interviewing is one of the most common ways to collect data; therefore, this study involved interviewing the participant. The purpose of interviewing Maria was to “obtain a special kind of information” (Merriam, 1998, p. 73). In particular, interviewing is important because it provides information on teacher professional identity that could not be concretely observed. Using open-ended questions and less-structured interviews enabled me to ask questions as well as interact with the interviewee, respond to the situation at hand, and to follow up on any new ideas or themes that emerged; yet to assure the acquisition of data relevant to the topic, I worded interviews questions in a very direct and clear way, which the participant understood.

I attempted to be neutral with regard to the interviewee’s responses and the knowledge she shared. To assure neutrality, I did not engage in arguments or debates with her in order to avoid revealing my own views and beliefs (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). I used the interviews not only to gather information but also to create narratives of what Maria said and shared, making the ultimate goal of the interviews sufficient knowledge about what was studied. Interviews allow researchers to “attain rich, personalized information” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).
To assure successful, productive interviews, I attempted to be respectful of the participant at all times. I tried not to be judgmental or threatening to her in any way; having a trusting relationship with Maria was very crucial to the success and fruitfulness of this study. Having a connection with her allowed me additional opportunities to acquire information and details. Perhaps this was why Maria felt comfortable sharing with me all the stories that she did; however, interview–respondent interaction is a complex phenomenon. Both parties bring biases, predispositions, attitudes, and physical characteristics that color the interaction and the data elicited. A skilled interviewer accounts for these factors in order to evaluate the data being obtained. Taking a stance that is nonjudgmental, sensitive, and respectful of the respondent is but a beginning point in the process. (Merriam, 1998, p. 87)

I was aware of the biases that I might bring with me to the interview, and so I tried not to show any reservations or disagreements or even thoughts that I had about what she said.

Interviews were recorded with a recording device to assure that I did not miss any valuable information needed to enrich the study, but this is not to suggest that every piece of information was recorded. To assure obtaining valuable information, I tried to ask well-conceived questions to lead to good and meaningful responses that would contribute to the study. I also understood that good responses were those relevant to understanding the phenomenon under study. Thus, while deciding what interview questions to ask the participant, I tried to keep in mind that all interview questions and conversations should address the problem of this research and provide the information needed to address it.
All interviews were conducted in person in order to engage in direct conversation with the participant and to find out about Maria’s thoughts about her professional identity; interviews were also very helpful in gaining knowledge about factors impossible to observe directly. Interviewing allowed me to enter into the participant’s perspective (Merriam, 1998). In this study, interviews were conversational, and questions were flexibly worded and related to relevant issues. As the researcher, I tried to respond to and interact in the situation at hand, learning more about any emerging issues or themes important to understanding Maria’s professional identity. I tried to ask good questions that were not confusing, difficult, unclear, or required rewording.

The interviewer can ask various types of questions in order to stimulate the participant’s responses (Merriam, 1998). In this study, I asked (a) hypothetical questions (e.g., suppose you had a student teacher whose teaching practices and beliefs were radically different from yours and of concern to you. What would you do?), (b) devil’s advocate questions (e.g., some parents would say that because the teacher of their children is a Black teacher, their children must be getting a different kind of education. What would you say to them?), (c) ideal position questions (who is the ideal teacher or what do you think good teaching looks like?), and (d) interpretive questions (e.g., would you say that teaching in a dominant-culture community is more difficult than you pictured or expected?).

Given that the interviews were unstructured, instead of preparing and listing very specific questions for each interview, I created an interview guide containing topics and issues to be discussed in no particular order. The interview questions were open-ended
and allowed for follow-up when necessary. I tried to remain open and to respond to issues at hand without feeling the need to ask specific predetermined questions that could have limited what I could learn as a researcher. At the beginning of each interview, I asked basic descriptive questions before asking more sensitive questions about Maria’s emotions, opinions, values, and perceptions. I tried to ask different types of questions and avoid questions with yes–no answers. Probes were used to obtain additional information, and although specifying how many interviews or observations should be conducted is difficult, I stopped data collection when I felt I had enough information to analyze and interpret.

Finally, I reminded the participant of the purpose of the study, my motives, my intentions in conducting this research, the protection of her identity, and the maintenance of confidentiality. I also confirmed that Maria had the power to make the final decision about the content of this study (Merriam, 1998). Thus, full transcriptions of interviews were given to the participant, and I used member checking to verify the information with her.

Observations

Observations allowed me to collect data about Maria in the natural setting where she worked and taught and to acquire a “firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam, 1998, p. 94). Conducting observations in the field required me to write descriptive information and notes about what I observed, but the importance of
observations lay in the opportunity they provided me to grow closer to the participant and better understand her teaching.

Through observations I was able to use my knowledge and expertise to analyze and interpret what I observed in the field. When combined with interviews, observations allow “for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 111). Such observations offer opportunities to include direct quotations, in action behaviors, and observer comments. These are all reasons for which observations were very important for this study. Conducting observations is important because they provide the case study researcher with “objective information related to the research topic” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 46). Observations helped me to identify what I should discuss further and what possible answers I might find in response to my research questions.

In this study, I used observation as a research tool especially because it served the following research purposes (Merriam, 1998): to gather data in natural field settings and to notice and look for material that may lead to deep understanding of the topic. Observations allowed me to check on the validity and reliability of the study and to triangulate emerging findings. I could see issues firsthand, and I used what I observed to interpret the data collected from observation and interviews and other documents without having to rely on only one tool. Through observations I observed behaviors and incidents about the phenomenon under examination and asked the participant questions about the behaviors observed.
I had no need to obtain permission from the children’s families to conduct observations because they were intended to focus only on Maria and her behaviors and interactions with others. Observations contained information about the physical setting or context, the participant, and what Maria did with the children. Even though deciding on an ideal amount of time to spend on observing was difficult, I tried to observe the participant at different times and in different situations.

I observed Maria in her classroom and during her work with children, outdoors, indoors, during parent–teacher conferences, at staff meetings, and in public. I tried not to disrupt the daily routine of the classroom, thus some observations were made from the classroom booth. Observations helped me to a sense of what was happening Maria’s life, which helped me to gain insight into her teaching. During observations I also took field notes and memos, which later helped me formulate some interview questions.

**Artifacts**

As I observed Maria’s classroom, I developed a series of field notes and memos to facilitate my memory of factors that I felt important to understanding Maria’s teaching. These notes resembled self-journals that I used to develop follow-up questions and to check on the cohesiveness of the data I collected. “Journals are personal and private accounts of what the ethnographer makes of what is happening, including positive and negative reactions to people, places, and events encountered” (Lecompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 226).

Incorporating journals and field notes into this study allowed for increased reflection and sensitivity to the participant. I was able to sort through data and to find
meaning. Maria’s personal documents (e.g., teaching journals and videos), and videotapes of her classroom and teaching served the same purpose as my own field notes: to find meaning in what I heard and observed.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I first organized them into emerging trends and recurring themes. I looked for data that matched the themes I developed through a review of relevant literature. After reading the text I also searched for themes emerging from the data. I studied the data recursively, moving back and forth, as I coded it. I analyzed the data collected by reading and rereading interview transcripts, the teacher’s personal documents, field notes, and the researchers' self-reflection memos. While studying the data, I wrote down my initial impressions and developed a preliminary list of coding and emerging themes. First, I coded data related to the formation of the participant’s identity. Then I coded data related to the effect of the participant’s minority status on the formation of her teacher identity. I looked for instances in which the participant uncovered information on her racial identity and considered only those related to her teacher identity. Finally, I coded data related to the effect of the school context and personal and professional experiences on the formation of the participant’s teacher identity. I coded for recurrent themes. Initially, I generated codes based on key events identified in relation to the school context and the personal and professional experiences that influenced Maria’s teaching practice. Then I organized the data and identified recurring themes. Next I analyzed the context and selected quotations supporting those themes. I used member checking to support the coding process. Following topical
coding, I moved to interpreting the data, which I reviewed multiple times to generate ideas and questions, refine thinking, and identify new themes.

To make sense of the data, I tried to consolidate, reduce, and interpret what my participant shared with me and what I saw and thought to be valuable to the process of making meaning of the participant’s stories. The meanings or understandings that researchers have of what they observed should represent the findings of their studies, yet because the purpose of this case study was to provide an intensive, holistic description of the topic investigated, conveying an understanding of the topic was the paramount consideration in analyzing the data (Merriam, 1998). In this case study, the goal was to develop an understanding of the data collected.

To analyze the data, I compiled all the information I gathered from observations, interviews, field notes, and any other documents. All materials were organized to accommodate easy retrieval of information. The process of creating the “case study data base” (Yin, 2003) made the data readily accessible at any time after they were edited and sorted or fitted together (Merriam, 1998).

Analysis requires an identification of relevant and main themes or issues that are visible and or become apparent when data are coded and used in developing and facilitating an understanding of the case under study. Thus, I treated the uniqueness of the individual case and Maria’s experiences as essential to such an understanding. Particularization was an important aim, and knowing the particularity of this case and developing an understanding of the life experiences of this case were not simply matters of cause and effect (Stake, 1995).
Analysis lent meaning to first impressions, separating elements and giving meaning to those parts that were important to the case and to me as the researcher. I used analysis to make sense of things. As I analyzed the data, I continuously asked myself the following question: What thoughts come to mind as I read the data I collected? What gives meaning, what seems to be of importance, and what remains vague?

Reading and rereading the data I gathered and thinking deeply, I developed understandings and wrote my findings. I tried not to draw hasty conclusions about my case: Of particular help was the opportunity to conduct observations that allowed me to piece together information, aggregate instances of meaningfulness and puzzlement, and perhaps locate some issues that required further investigation. My primary task was to come to understand the case and then to give meaning to what I observed; make connections here and there between what I knew, what I saw, and what I was told; and with questions probe additional issues to study in my search for significant meaning.

As I revisited the data and highlighted what I thought appeared to be important, I searched for patterns, issues, and themes that would serve as the template for the analysis. I took considerable time looking at the data over and over again, reflecting, triangulating, and interpreting. I selected a portion of the observations that I thought most worthy of study and revisited them several times. Likewise, after transcribing data collected through formal and informal interviews and conversations with the participant, I coded them and discovered certain dominant themes. To be certain that I missed nothing of value and importance, I went through the data line by line, trying to identify topics and
pondered which statements and observations or notes would best illustrate my findings and conclusions.

Stake (1995) recommended plentiful observations followed by identifying the best material and eliminating the dross. By the same token Wolcott (1990) explained that “the critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can but [to] ‘can’ (i.e., get rid of) most of the data you accumulate” (p. 35). Taking this into account, I realized that full coverage of everything is impossible and the key is to remain focused on what is important to understanding the case. Organizing the data soon after each observation and interview allowed time for revisiting what I had gathered and for identifying topics necessary to understanding the case for further discussion. Ultimately, my aim was to offer a rich description and to give meaning to the phenomenon under investigation.

In Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation, Wolcott (1990) explained that analysis is about drawing essential features and relationships from gathered data. In the very act of doing that, the researcher makes choices about what to look at and what requires further examination and inquiry. In this study, analysis became a selective process in which certain information was highlighted and used to present a finer level of detail, understanding, and meaning about the case study.

To analyze the data, I took Wolcott’s (1990) advice and my advisor’s suggestion to use a graphic presentation or a sort of think display to present my thoughts and make them more visible, but most importantly, to orient my findings and emphasize particular
aspects of the study and the case. Displaying my findings helped in the process of analysis, enabling me to become my own critic and guiding me to keep my goals in focus. Thus, my research became a means of organizing my thoughts to reach understandings, not an end in itself (Wolcott 1990). Data analysis took place according to the following steps:

1. Transcribing the data into text and reading it in an effort to comprehend it without trying to describe it or explain it;
2. Revisiting and rereading the text to search for a way to organize it in terms of meaning;
3. Comparing data obtained from different sources and looking for similarities, consistencies, themes, patterns, and emerging perspectives;
4. Reflecting upon the emerging themes and categories in an attempt to define and refine them and become aware of any new issues or instances of nonsupport;
5. Writing and rewriting my findings and supporting them with direct quotations from transcripts to illustrate meanings as understood; and
6. Asking Maria to read the text of her stories for verification and comment on them.

At times, I felt overwhelmed and lost having to read and reread recursively all the data I had gathered; I could not decide where to begin and where to end, so at some points I needed to pause to rethink my process. Although I felt guilty, doing so proved beneficial because it gave me time to think about what I needed to do next without
pushing myself toward interpretation when I was not ready. I tried to comply with the
demands put upon me but with integrity because my goal was not merely to complete this
study but also to take the time to enjoy the work involved in researching, studying, and
learning about others.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness of data (as opposed to reliability and
validity in quantitative research) is a main issue (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).
Guba (1981) suggested four criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of a qualitative
explained the four criteria as follows:

1. Credibility (analogous to internal validity in quantitative research) involves
demonstrating that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny is being
presented.

2. Transferability (analogous to external validity in quantitative research) refers to
the degree to which the study findings can justifiably be applied to another
setting.

3. Dependability (analogous to reliability in quantitative research) emphasizes the
need for the researcher to report the processes within the study in detail.

4. Confirmability (analogous to objectivity in quantitative research) refers to the
degree to which findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the
informants instead of the characteristics and preferences of the researcher.
Because qualitative research is frequently subject to concerns about its trustworthiness, I attempted to establish it in two ways. First, I used member checking to ensure the credibility of this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Stake (1995) stated that study participants “regularly provide critical observations and interpretations, sometimes making suggestions as to sources of data” (p. 115). In the process of member checking my data, I asked my participant to examine rough drafts of writings and notes I gave her; and I encouraged her to check them for me and provide me with alternatives, changes, and modifications.

I also used triangulation, which is common in many qualitative studies as a process of combining and comparing study results and findings to determine whether data gathered from different sources led to coherent results (Gliner, 1994). In this study, I used triangulation to combine all data in a meaningful way to develop a comprehensive view and understanding of teacher professional identity as it was constructed and developed according to the teacher’s understanding. Patton (1990) stated, “One important way to strengthen a study design is through triangulation, or the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon or programs” (p. 187). In this study, data was triangulated using in-depth interviews, observations in multiple contexts, reviewing teaching documents, and member checking.

Although qualitative research has its place in research on teaching, many are still concerned with the way this type of research can secure objectivity, reliability, and validity (Silverman as cited by Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2002). With regard to the current study, internal validity entailed questions about whether or not the findings would
make sense in terms of the study quest itself and to the participant as well as the degree to which the findings of the study reflected what I had sought. Triangulation, important in determining the internal validity necessary to this study (Gliner, 1994), helped me verify my findings by assuring that they complemented one another without contradiction.

Miles and Huberman (1994) identified five types of triangulation in qualitative research. I carried out three kinds of triangulation in this study: (a) triangulation by data collected from the participant at different times, (b) triangulation by observations, interviews, field notes, (c) and triangulation by theory found in the literature to explain and interpret results. Triangulation completed in these ways was vital in analyzing and interpreting data.

As a case study researcher, I had an ethical obligation to minimize misunderstandings and to interpret accurately. My role was not merely to tell the story of my participant or simply to repeat what she said but to put effort into finding the validity of data observed and gathered. Triangulating data helped me to determine whether what I observed, heard, and wrote notes about was similar in meaning to what I interpreted, especially when compared under different circumstances.

In qualitative studies like the current study, reliability is an issue of achieving “dependability” or “consistency” of the results obtained from the data. That is, rather than demanding that outsiders get the same results, a researcher wishes outsiders to concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense—they are consistent and dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 206).
I was concerned with providing findings (results) consistent with the data gathered in order to ensure its reliability. I did so by explaining the assumptions and theory behind this study, using multiple tools of data collection, explaining the rationale for selecting my participant, and describing who she was as well as the social context in which she worked.

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) argued that qualitative researchers cannot completely eliminate their effects on their participants, and they cannot obtain a perfect correspondence to what they wish to know and hear. Consequently, for qualitative researchers, validity is seen more as “a fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study, rather than the literal consistency across different observations” (p. 36). In light of this knowledge, the extent to which findings of this study can be generalized is an issue related to the external validity of this research.

In the context of this study, external validity involves the extent to which the findings of this study can be of use to other teachers reading about how my participant negotiated and developed her professional identity. The ultimate goal of this study was not to generalize information but to achieve an understanding of the topic under investigation; therefore, in order to enhance the possibility of applying the results of this qualitative study in other situations, I hope I have provided a rich, comprehensive description of my findings.

Limitations of the Study

Every study has its own limitations. As the only researcher of this study, it is possible that although I focused on documenting, observing, and recording certain
narratives and events occurring in the classroom, I might have missed some events or stories that could have been salient to the study. Merriam (1998) argued that case studies can be too limited because the researcher is the “primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (p. 42), yet having the ability to revisit data with the participant increased the likelihood of highlighting important events and happenings in Maria’s life and teaching important to understanding the image she had of herself as a teacher and the way she identified her professional identity. In addition, the use of different data tools, such as in-depth interviews, informal conversations, observations, and review of teaching journals and video tapes of Maria in the classroom, gave me a strong grasp of what her life as a teacher looked like, what went on in her life, and what emerged as the most important factors influencing the formation of her professional identity. In addition, spending extended time at the site helped minimize the limitation noted above.

The study was also limited to one classroom and one teacher because I conducted a single case study. Even though the use of the case study methodology “does not lend itself well to generalization or prediction” (Dooley, 2002, p. 336), case studies are very useful when a researcher is interested in studying a particular issue or phenomenon. In this study, the use of a case study provided me with a holistic means to approaching my research. It helped me to employ a choice of data collection methods that yielded rich descriptions and information. Even though case studies may seem to be a poor basis for generalization, I believe that much that is general can be learned from single cases (Stake, 1995); and I argue that this qualitative study was not intended to be transferred or generalized to other teachers or classrooms. I intended to explore how a minority early
childhood teacher formed a professional identity in a predominantly White school culture. I aimed to provide an example and an explanation of the process by which a teacher negotiated, interpreted, and understood her identity in relation to others in a social context. Thus, external validity or transferability was an inappropriate goal for this study (Merriam 1998; Stake, 1995). In other words, my study provides readers with an example of what could possibly occur in the life of an early childhood teacher, and they can determine whether the study is transferable to their situations, look for patterns, find similarities that may be applied to them, and relate to certain events and experiences.

Throughout this dissertation, however, my role as the researcher was to provide a convincing argument for the importance of this study and how it contributes to the literature available on professional identity in the field of early childhood and minority teachers.

Another possible limitation could relate to the fact that this study relied on the honesty, openness, and forthcoming nature of the teacher, all of which influenced the richness and depth of the study. Evident in this research, Maria, particularly at the beginning of the study, was very concerned and worried with what and how much she should share with me, especially because she did not want to be misunderstood by others at the school. She did not want to be seen in a negative light, and she worried about the confidentiality of what she shared and the protection of the identity of the people (staff, teachers, parents, children, colleagues) that might be part of some of her stories or narratives. At times Maria hesitated or withdrew, particularly when some of her narratives included negative experiences with others, which made her feel guilty
discussing. Because she and I trusted each other, Maria was able to overcome the fears and worries that she had; and she was able to share some very sensitive and even painful stories.

Associated with the foregoing limitation, another issue related to the credibility of the study and people’s tendency to say what they think is socially desirable, where their responses might become more idealistic than realistic or more vague than clear. Maria had her moments of hesitation and concern with regard to what she should and should not say because she did not want others to have an inappropriate impression of her. In addition, even when she shared certain stories and how she felt about them, she asked me not to include them in this study or not to recount them exactly as she had shared them in order to avoid any misunderstandings if her colleagues read this dissertation. I think that our close relationship and patience, the time and space I allowed her to tell and share what she wanted when she felt ready without pushing or forcing her to do so, helped me gain Maria’s trust. What’s more, with the measures I took, she understood that I was sincere and truly there to listen to what she wanted to tell me, not merely to gather information for personal purposes. Furthermore, the tension occurring at the time of the study and her feeling humiliated, belittled, and as if she were “slapped in the face” because she is Black, Maria felt angry, lost, and suppressed. Once she realized that she had somehow denied herself and who she was, she was forthcoming and shared previously unspoken stories that had remained in her heart and mind for years. Likewise, member checking and following up with Maria after the study and her subsequent resignation from the school afforded the opportunity to revisit what she shared and to
gain the strength and power. She asked me to tell her stories as they truly happened without casting them in an excessively positive light because she recognized that it was important that others hear her stories and learn from them.

My role as a researcher was to be available and to show Maria that I valued everything she had to share with me; I did not try to rush her or push her to share stories with me. I tried not to oversimplify or exaggerate a situation with Maria; at the same time, I was patient with her because she needed time to open up to me. At all times, I worked with integrity and honesty because I believed that a worthy case study is one that serves justice to its owners by offering a comprehensive description of the meaning they gave to their lives; thus, I did not want to underestimate or minimize anything that Maria felt or experienced at the time of the study. Instead, I devoted my time to understanding how she felt about her teaching, perceived her relationships with others, and viewed herself in light of how others saw her as a teacher. This study was about giving voice and opportunity to Maria to be acknowledged as a valuable person worthy to tell her stories instead of merely to report on her professional identity.

In spite of all these possible limitations, I argue that this study was conducted in an ethical manner and that it contributes to collective knowledge of teacher professional identity and its formation in the field of early education; it provides an actual example of what a minority teacher experienced while teaching and working with others and how those experiences affected the way the teacher saw herself and her teaching abilities and roles. Having a trusting relationship with Maria brought us closer together as we engaged in uncovering how certain personal and professional experiences impacted her
life and teaching identity. The close connection that we had allowed Maria to trust me and to tell her stories freely to me; I tried my best to protect her identity, take her concerns into consideration, ask her to verify my interpretations and findings, and listen carefully to what she told me. With this study, I hope to inspire other researchers to investigate the topic presented in this study in an effort to improve understanding of how early childhood teachers form their professional identities and what educators can do to assure that they develop healthy identities and positive images of themselves.

Summary

“The goal [of transforming qualitative data] is to make sense of what goes on, to reach out for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis” (Wolcott, 1990, p. 11). Using multiple sources for data collection was essential in this study. Doing so provided opportunities to find coherence and cohesiveness or discontinuities in emergent themes and patterns (Burgess, 1984). In this study, data were collected through three major modes: (a) interview (inquiry), (b) participant observation (experience), and (c) study and review of personal documents (examination).

Interviews gave Maria the opportunity to tell stories that served as a primary resource for developing a rich, deep understanding. Douglass and Moustakas (1985) explained that interviews and dialogues stimulate participants to seek deep understanding of the kind of person they are or want to be. Likewise, Gee (1985) supported the use of narratives and stories: “One of the ways—perhaps the primary way human beings make sense of their experience—is by casting it in a narrative form” (p. 81). Schools, teachers,
and children operate in oral cultures, but research has shown that although teachers’
culture is one of salience, the voices of teachers are rarely heard.

This study provided Maria with the opportunity to voice her concerns and tell her
stories, hoping that they would make sense to her and others. It also allowed her to
self-select events, experiences, people, and emotions to talk about when relating specific
memories. To assess the trustworthiness of the study findings, complete transcriptions of
the data were available and used for analysis.

Through open-ended interviews, I encouraged Maria to tell her stories and to let
their meanings come through as she conversed. In general, the purpose of the interviews
was to obtain information and insight about how she felt about being a teacher, that is,
what attitudes, dispositions, values, and beliefs she held about teaching and working with
children and most importantly about herself as a teacher. Obtaining such information, I
intended to capture meaning and identify significant themes related to understanding
Maria’s professional identity.

Another source of data was Maria’s personal teaching documents. I asked Maria
whether I would be allowed to take a look at some of her documentation materials: By
searching them I hoped to find what Plummer (1983) called expression and a person’s
perspective on events. I was successful in finding them, and I had also found much
meaning in Maria’s verbal and nonverbal communication. Her gestures, tone of voice,
rate of speech, and general speech patterns told me much about who she was and about
the meaning she gave to her words and the ways in which she behaved, all of which have
been discussed in Chapter IV.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In this study I investigated the process by which Maria (pseudonym), an early childhood teacher of color, established her professional identity. As I attempted to comprehend how she did so, I sought to discover what she perceived to be important to her own understanding of her teaching self and her role as a professional. Engaging in in-depth conversations and reflections about Maria’s teaching experiences provided me with insight into how she identified herself as a teacher and how she defined her professional identity in light of experiences that seemed to have considerable influence on her thoughts and beliefs about teaching and working with young children. In this chapter, I have reported and analyzed the findings of this qualitative case study. The primary goal of this study was to answer the following three research questions:

1. How does a preschool teacher form her professional identity?

2. How does a minority teacher’s professional identity develop in a predominantly White school community?

3. How is professional identity developed in the school context in which the teacher works and in light of significant personal and professional experiences?

I have structured my findings around themes emerging from the data, relating them to the three research questions above. Data were analyzed using themes that emerged in the research literature as well as in the results: family influence, teaching values and beliefs, identity shift, emotions, feeling of alienation, early learning
experiences, images of a good teacher, relationships with children, relationships with parents, relationships with teachers and staff members at the school, and relationships with student teachers (see Table 2).

Table 2

Themes Identified to Sort Responses to the Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1: How does a preschool teacher form her professional identity?</td>
<td>Family influence, teaching values and beliefs, identity shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2: How does a minority teacher’s professional identity developed in a predominantly White school community?</td>
<td>Emotions, feeling of alienation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3: How is professional identity developed in the school context in which the teacher worked and in light of significant personal and professional experiences?</td>
<td>Early learning experiences, images of a good teacher, relationships with children, relationships with parents, relationships with teachers and staff members, and relationships with student teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An Overview

This chapter includes results obtained from the content analysis of themes expressed by the participant in her descriptions of the development of her professional identity. I used illustrative responses relating to themes found in the content analysis to present the themes, and I have presented these results in four sections. The first section includes the participant's responses related to the formation of her professional identity. The second section highlights the participant's identity development in a predominantly
White school community. The third section comprises the participant's responses related to the school context, and the fourth section illustrates the participant's descriptions of her personal and professional experiences.

Specifically, this chapter includes an examination and analysis of the meanings Maria attached to her identity in relation to her professional and personal experiences and in terms of how her professional identity was presented and represented in her own evaluation of herself, her teaching, and reflection on her work as well as through the stories she chose to tell about herself. Data analysis in this study yielded three major findings relevant to understanding Maria’s professional identity and its formation: (a) the significance of family and its impact on Maria’s personal and professional life, (b) Maria’s personal and professional experiences and how they influenced her perception of herself, her teaching, and her identity, and (c) the tension arising at the time of the study with regard to Maria’s participation—with all its attendant issues—and how it impacted her career and motivation to work, caused major shifts in her priorities, and changed the way she saw her professional identity and teaching self.

These findings have been presented as they emerged throughout the process of data collection and analysis. With each major finding, significant themes surfaced and were examined and discussed with Maria to clarify the impact of certain factors, events, and incidents on how she formed and negotiated her professional identity. Instead of assigning or proposing an identity to Maria throughout the duration of this study, she was provided with the opportunity to tell stories and engage in in-depth reflections and conversations about her teaching; these provided me with an understanding of how she
perceived her work, formed an identity, developed a concept of her teaching self, and
determined what was important about her teaching and work with children.

In Chapter 3 I introduced a series of in-depth personal interviews (II), stimulated
recall interviews (SRI), formal and informal conversations (FIC), observations (O), and
personal documents (PD) that I used to develop an understanding of Maria’s professional
identity, professional self-image, and the ongoing process by which her identity was
conceived, established, and maintained (Table 3). I used these abbreviations when
identifying the sources of quotations by Maria that appear later in this chapter. For
example, II2, February 2008 indicates that the quoted material came from the second in-
depth personal interview, which occurred in February 2008.

Table 3

Data Sources Used in This Study

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-depth personal interviews (II)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulated recall interviews (SRI)</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal and informal conversations at school (FIC)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School observations (O)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of personal documents (PD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 teaching journals 5 video clips 2 reviews of some children’s sketch books, drawings, and profiles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this five-month study I explored and examined the kind of teacher that Maria
was. I gained insight into what occurred in her life as a teacher and an understanding of
what pertained to her professional identity. In what follows in this chapter, I have
discussed the findings of the study and the underlying critical issues related to each one.
My consideration of the first finding about the significance of Maria’s family in her life
opens with an insight into her personal life followed by an explanation of the influence of
her family on her values and beliefs about teaching and working with children. I have
also shown how her family and particularly her mother influenced and shaped the kind of
person that she became.

In addition, I shed light on how Maria’s racial identity and background as a Black
person affected the way she was reared and taught to behave and speak in the society in
which she lived. Then, I discussed how Maria’s perspectives on early education, parent
involvement, good teaching, and good teachers related to what she experienced in her
personal life and childhood with her family and her childhood teachers and how these
factors played a role in who she became and what she believed in as a teacher of young
children.

With the second finding related to Maria’s personal and professional experiences
as contextualized by issues related to race, social representations, and stereotyping, I have
continued the discussion of what Maria shared about her personal experiences as a child
and as a student with her own teachers, growing up in and attending urban schools. I
have shared examples of specific interactions and incidents that Maria had with her
teachers and how they influenced her perception of good teachers and good schools. In
doing so, I have provided insight into how she perceived urban schools and urban
children. I have also discussed how Maria related to her school experiences as an urban
child, showing how her school experiences as a child and a student with her own teachers affected the kind of teacher she became and what she believed was her role as a teacher. Then, I proceeded to elucidate Maria’s professional experiences as an urban teacher (prior to working at the school site of this research) in comparison to those as a preschool minority teacher. I then presented issues related to the shift from being in the majority to being in the minority and the only Black lead teacher at the school where this study took place. In doing so, I have depicted the impact this shift had on how she renegotiated and reformed her professional identity.

In my examination of Maria’s teaching and professional experiences at work, first I have presented the relationships she had with children, followed by student teachers, parents, and staff members at the school. I have shown how these interactions and relationships affected how she identified herself as a teacher in relation to others. I have also addressed the emotions, concerns, and fears Maria felt at work and with others. In this part of the study, I discussed how Maria identified herself as a preschool teacher, the minority teacher, the Black teacher, the Other, and the Reggio Emilia-inspired teacher.

Then, I turned my attention to an explication of the third finding related to the tension arising at the time of the study and summarized what happened during the time of Maria’s participation in the study. I have described the tension and what created it and as Maria shared, the concerns school administrators had about her participation and her resulting emotions that she began to feel during that time. I have shown how Maria’s participation in this research became a turning point in her life and how it greatly impacted her, changed her priorities and beliefs about her work, caused a shift in the way
she understood her identity, and ultimately caused her to leave teaching. I also discussed Maria’s feeling lost and how the tension led to an explosion of emotions, resulting in her experiencing a true moment of awakening and a long process of questioning and wondering.

Although this result was by no means sought in the study, it came to be one of the seminal aspects of the study because it freed Maria from her fears, allowed her to break her silence, and pushed her finally to speak up and speak loudly about what she had buried inside her—emotions and feelings that at the beginning of the study she hesitated to talk about, worrying that she would be misunderstood, rejected, hated, and or seen as the betrayer who betrayed others at the school by telling stories that included them.

Confronted with her skin color and hearing so many concerns voiced to her about her participation in the study, Maria felt belittled, inferior, and disempowered. After being called to the Center director's office and asked whether she accepted the label of “the minority teacher” in this study, Maria felt outraged, believing that an issue with her being called a minority ultimately equated with an issue with her being Black, which left her feeling humiliated and hurt. That was the breakthrough moment when Maria put aside all her fears, relinquished her worries and reservations, and decided truly and openly to engage in storytelling and reflections of her work, relationships with others, and what it meant to be a Black preschool teacher in a predominantly White school.

In the discussion that follows, I have shared how Maria felt about being the only Black lead teacher in a school with all White lead teachers. I have conveyed how she saw this study as an opportunity to revisit events that occurred at work, and their impact
upon her, which deepened the insight I obtained into how Maria situated herself in the school and the process by which she continued to renegotiate and reform her professional identity.

The results of this study were interpreted within the boundaries of the context of this research, and themes were identified based on my understanding and interpretation of the data. The use of observations, in-depth interviews, conversations, and the review of personal teaching documents informed my interpretations. As data were collected, initial themes were compared, reflected upon, negotiated, and analyzed as I tried to parse the meanings they held and determine how strongly they related to the phenomenon under examination. I combed these themes, looking for those useful and meaningful ones that helped me analyze data, searching for relevant text and trying to organize it into emerging patterns, important patterns, and most repeated patterns that emerged more into general and broader themes. Revisiting data, reading the transcripts over and over, comparing data from all sources, I found that noticing certain patterns became easier as they rose to the surface. Thus, I created codes and assigned them to the patterns; I continued to read the text again and again, until I could identify emerging themes in the material associated with each research question. Next, I discussed these findings, beginning with the influence Maria’s family had on her life as a person and a teacher.

When Maria was asked to share her understanding of her professional identity, she chose to do so by telling me first about who she was as a person and where she came from, factors that explained so much about how she carried herself as a teacher and how she saw her role. Maria shared her understanding of her teaching self in social terms of
who she was as a person and how she was situated in her social context. She described her inability to negotiate an identity in school exclusive of her real identity as a human being; thus, she wanted to begin sharing her professional identity by relating it to the daughter, the sister, and the mother that she was. She explained how she could not define herself as a professional before defining herself as a person.

Later in this chapter, I illuminated the influence of Maria’s family on her thinking as well as the value she placed on teaching and family involvement, also bringing into focus her early school experiences. In particular, I turned my attention to a discussion of the stories Maria told and shared about her school experiences as a child because these helped me understand the relationship between such experiences and how with all its attendant issues she perceived good teaching and good teachers, and how the experiences helped her at a later stage in her life, when she became a teacher, to form a professional identity in alignment with what she considered her role and responsibility as a good teacher of young children. As I proceeded through the next section, I uncovered how Maria’s personal and professional experiences throughout her life influenced the formation of her professional identity as a preschool teacher.

**Development of Maria’s Professional Identity**

Listening to the stories Maria shared and told about herself and her life offered me the opportunity to see how certain events, incidents, people, and experiences impacted the way she felt about who she was and the person that she became as a preschool teacher. Initial coding and analysis (see Appendix D) from this case study resulted in
identifying Maria’s family as crucial to understanding the kind of teacher that she was and the values and beliefs that she held about teaching and working with children.

Further analysis of data, however, revealed how Maria’s relationships with others, particularly those at work, had influenced the way she situated herself in the school where this study took place. At the outset of this research, some staff members of the school had difficulty accepting my reference to Maria as “the minority teacher in the study.” Maria stated that she felt like “the Other, the outsider, and the one who did not fit in there.” To Maria, being a member of a minority was not about being the Black teacher in the school: It was about feeling lonely, different, the Other, and the only. Working and teaching in a predominantly White school setting seemed to create a tension, causing Maria to feel the need to work hard and to try hard to be seen as competent, good, and professional as the White teachers at the school. Feeling this tension, Maria confronted the challenge to overcome those road blocks that in the end and to some extent played a role in her decision to resign from the school and to reconsider her priorities and her next steps in life.

Recognizing the significant impact of work relationships and interactions on the image that Maria developed about her teaching and her professional identity, I relied on a Vygotskian perspective in this study to understand how the social context of the school where this research took place influenced Maria’s understanding and perception of herself and the process by which she negotiated and formed a professional identity. Taking this perspective led me to believe that when teachers are provided the support they need to develop a professional identity, they learn how their personal self relates to
their professional self without experiencing a tension between them. The Vygotskian perspective also benefited me as a researcher, allowing me to understand how Maria’s personal and professional experiences and relationships with others in her life impacted the way she personalized her professional identity, how she expressed it and talked about it professionally and personally. Bringing a Vygotskian perspective to this study helped me grasp the connection between Maria the person and Maria the professional and see how they were joined in a complicated dialectical relationship that allowed her to develop and reach a truth, a meaning, an understanding, and a harmony between herself and her professional teaching self.

**Family Influence**

One theme running through most of Maria’s stories about herself was the importance of family in her life. Maria was one of three siblings; her mother and father were married for 42 years until the death of her father. Maria lived with her parents, and at the age of 18, she moved to another city to pursue an undergraduate degree in nursing. She described her family as a working-class family. Her mother was a high school graduate, and her father attended a barber school after graduating from high school. They had to work hard in order to provide for their children.

Maria consistently emphasized family matters. Without a doubt, Maria’s family played a major role in her life and the kind of person she became. The stories she told clearly indicated that she valued and cared for her family very deeply. She stated that her family contributed to who she was, how she was, and the person that she grew up to be. Maria valued the strong relationships that she shared with her siblings and her mother,
and she expressed how close she was with all of them. In particular, Maria spoke extensively about her mother and her influence on her.

Throughout her life, Maria’s family supported and loved her. She believed that the family relationship resembled the marital relationship: Both involved commitment for better or for worse, support, cohesiveness, and endless and unconditional love. Although no one can have absolutely perfect relationships with family members, Maria felt the obligation always to find the time to spend with hers because they meant so much to her. Maria spent Sundays with her family, attended church with them, ate dinner together, went shopping, watched movies, played cards, and communicated with them frequently. Holidays were also special to Maria because they brought her family together to celebrate and enjoy one another’s company.

From the outset of this study, I noticed that many of Maria’s conversations involved stories about her relationship with her mother and how their relationship influenced who she was as a daughter, a mother, a teacher, and a person. Maria’s relationship with her mother was a strong and exceptional. Even though she had her own life and family to care for, Maria was strongly and deeply attached to her mother. She told stories about how her mother was her first and most important teacher of all times. According to Maria, her mother reared her, took good care of her, loved her, looked after her, and taught her what she needed to know about life and how to live as a Black woman and a human being.

Maria stated that she admired her mother and saw her as her role model. She explained how she always sought her advice because she had a special way of helping her
to organize her thoughts, sort out her problems, control her feelings, look at any given situation from several perspectives, and because she always encouraged her to think wisely and positively. Maria once even suggested that I seek her mother’s advice when I experienced some difficulties of my own. She encouraged me to call her mother, pay her a visit, and talk to her about my issue of concern, assuring me that her mother had the warmest and kindest heart and that she was a strong, powerful woman who had experienced much hardship in her own life and who always knew how to remain strong throughout life’s most difficult challenges.

According to the stories Maria told, her mother assumed many roles in her life. In her role as mother, she was also the one person whom Maria trusted completely. In her stories, Maria portrayed her mother as her therapist, teacher, guide, and caregiver but most importantly her inspirational and spiritual partner. About her mother, Maria shared the following:

My family did not have much, but they worked hard to provide for us, mainly my mother. She is my role model because she worked so hard to keep her family together. While my father had drinking issues, it was my mom who took care of the family and worked several jobs to get us everything we needed. (II2, February 2008)

In another story that she told about her mother, Maria explained how she had tried to be part of Maria’s life as a student by attending parent–teacher conferences whenever she could and how her mother bought a musical instrument when Maria wanted to play in a band. Her mother told her that if playing in a band was what she wanted to do, then she
should do it. Maria stated that when she was in high school, her mother tried her best to make herself available to provide transportation to the practice site even when weather conditions were poor. Maria described her mother’s efforts to work hard to buy her things she wanted so that she would not feel that she had less or was less than the other students at school. In one particular example, Maria described how her mother worked an extra job to buy her a dress to wear to the high school prom.

These stories reflected the values and important lessons that Maria learned from her mother. As we conversed, Maria emphasized how much she learned about life itself and dealing with its challenges by watching the way her own mother dealt with difficult situations. She explained that she learned from her mother to persevere when encountering a problem and always to have faith that situations will improve as long as she believed in what she did and knew what she wanted. Maria also talked about the importance of fairness and justice and dealing with others. She emphasized her mother’s availability in meaningful, helpful, and supportive ways in all of her children’s lives; she said, “My mom never made us feel that she favored someone over another” (II3, February 2008).

I was also very interested to see how Maria’s relationship with her mother affected the way she as a mother and a teacher, perceived the importance of parental involvement in children’s lives as a mother and a teacher. From her personal experience with her mother, Maria recognized a difference between quality and quantity of parental involvement and support for children. She stated:
My mom did a lot for all of us. People think that parents need to be there at everything and every function, but I think with my mom, it is about how as a parent she supported her children. She was there for all of us when she was more available. She attempted as much as she could in a meaningful way. She wanted us to be successful and to be happy. She taught me to do what I had to do. She taught me to show strength at all times no matter what. She never cried in front of us. She wanted all of us to be strong, stick together, and love our family. And this is something that I always tell her that she needs to be proud of because we always stick to each other, support each other, and love each other. (II₄, February 2008)

Despite all the difficulties that Maria’s family experienced, Maria expressed her happiness and gratitude to her mother for the stable adults she and her other siblings grew to be. Of her mother Maria said:

I want her to understand that she shouldn’t feel guilty for the things she couldn’t do for us. I told her not to feel guilty for the things she couldn’t control. I also told her to be damn proud. . . . Look at us—we are not dead or alcoholic or in jail. We have families, and we are happy and successful. She taught us to always love our family and to always stick together. We support each other in ways that I think some families would wish they have. (II₄, February 2008)

I was somewhat puzzled by Maria’s choices in her storytelling about her upbringing and family, especially her pride in not being “dead or alcoholic or in jail.” Maria’s statement left me with a desire to know more. For instance, why did Maria not
say that she was happy to have come from a happy family with a loving mother who supported her in school? Of all the things that she could have said, why had she chosen to thank her mother for not being a criminal, in danger, or an alcoholic? Thus, I felt the need to ask Maria to tell me more about her choice.

As we met and conversed, I asked Maria to tell me more about what she meant. Maria told me that when she was young, her mother used to tell her that Black people need to be extra cautious of how they behave, talk, and interact with one another because the society surrounding them tends to stereotype them in ways that could be hurtful, inaccurate, and wrong. Growing up in a Black neighborhood, Maria had difficulty accepting certain misconceptions about Black people. She argued that not all Black people are hateful, drug dealers, angry people, sexual prowlers, gangsters, disturbed, and dangerous. Maria explained that it means a great deal to her to be able to tell the world about the strong Black mother who reared her and her siblings, all strong-willed, proud, confident, and loving individuals. Maria said, “My mom taught us how to love and show love. She did not raise Black monsters: She raised very well-disciplined, loving children” (II5, February 2008).

Although Maria admired her mother for everything she had taught her and for being such a great influence in her life, she expressed her anger with how easily others formed and believed in certain misconceptions that could be hurtful and false. She stated:

My mother was my idol. She did a great job raising us [Maria and her siblings], and taking care of us. She did not fail in raising us to be successful. She was
great, especially [seeing] that her own life with my dad was far from easy. (II5, February 2008)

Conversations with Maria about her family and upbringing clarified that at an early age her racial background was a major aspect of her identity and understanding of who she was as a Black person.

Maria’s mother was central to the stories she shared about her family; however, Maria’s stories rarely included her father, nor did she talk much about him. As a matter of fact, Maria took quite some time to speak of her father, and when she did, she began thus:

Enough about my mother. I have to tell you about my father, too. They both went through great challenges. They both had cancer. At some points, my father struggled with illnesses. While my mom was very soft spoken and soft-tempered, very kind, and loving, my dad on the other hand was very strict. I know he loved us, but he was just very hard. That was [during] a time when we were growing up, and purple [corporal] punishment was okay, where children got punished. But I would tell you that I was a very hard child. I cried a lot, and I always wanted to be next to her [her mother]. When I was younger, I would always be attached to my mom’s leg. I was a difficult child. I could have been unhappy. I think our childhood was hard. My mom worked at night, and she was home during the day, and my dad had issues that made our life hard. This is something that I do not really talk about. But my dad’s life wasn’t the best. (II6, March 2008)
Part of connecting with her own identity was Maria’s realization of how greatly her past experiences and family relationships impacted who she was. Through her stories and reflections Maria revealed that she could not separate talking about herself from talking about her family and her parents. On one hand Maria valued her family, and on the other she knew that no family is perfect and that each family struggles. One of the struggles that Maria and her family dealt with was their relationship with her father.

Sitting on my sofa next to Maria and listening to her talk about her relationship with her father was very emotional for me. They seemed to have a complicated relationship. Maria experienced so much pain talking about him; in fact, she seemed to hold onto unspoken pain that had not been released. As she told me about her father, she expressed how much she missed him and wished they had some extra time to bond before he passed away. Maria’s father passed away after a long battle with cancer. He struggled with illnesses and had drinking problems, which according to Maria made living with him difficult.

As Maria talked about her father, she mentioned that he did not know how to be a parent or how to parent his children. She explained how he had issues with his own parents, and she believed that his drinking problems probably extended back to his childhood. He had not received good parenting from his own parents, and therefore, he did not know how to provide it to his own children, resulting in problems for him and her family. In comparing the lives of both of her parents, Maria pointed out that even though her mother did not know and had never met her own parents, she still knew how to love and how to show love and give it to her children. Maria said, “She [her mother] really
didn’t know what it means to have a mother. That is why she put that extra love into us, and she still does that today. She did the best she could with what she had” (II, March 2008).

Conducting in-depth interviews and carrying on conversations with Maria allowed me to delve into her personal life and to learn more about who she was on a personal level and to acquire an understanding of how her personal life and family relationships influenced who she was as a teacher and a professional. Research suggests that teachers’ professional identities are inseparable from their personal identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). A teacher’s sense of who she is and what she is not as a teacher is related to who she is as a person. In this study, Maria’s sense of identity as a Black person was very much related to her understanding of who she was as a preschool teacher. Her racial identity as a Black person seemed to affect very strongly the way she felt about herself, her work with children, her teaching, and her relationships with others at school (further discussion appears later in this chapter). According to Harris identity is defined as follows:

An abstract word [that] refers simply to an individual’s sense of uniqueness, of knowing who one is, and who one is not. The development of a stable sense of identity is one of the central processes of childhood and adolescence. Maintaining the integrity of one’s identity is an ongoing struggle throughout adulthood. (as cited in Akbar, Chamber, & Thompson, 2001, p. 1)

Talking to Maria, I learned that her mother had taught her valuable lessons about family, relationships, and living as a Black person. Maria learned the value of family and
family bonds from her mother, who did not have a family of her own but was nevertheless able to show love to her own children. This personal value became one of the main values she practiced as a teacher, valuing each and every child she had in the classroom and their families. Maria wanted everyone at school to see her, her students, and her classroom personnel as “one big family” she consistently stated.

As a child, Maria learned from her mother that people in the society they lived in held certain images of Black people and that some of these images were false. Thus, Maria’s mother taught her to have self-confidence, to be strong, and to stand for what she wanted, and most importantly to love herself the way her mother loved her, that is, unconditionally. Akbar et al. (2001) suggested that for Black people to maintain their racial identity in a society that devalues Blacks, they must develop and maintain positive feelings about themselves. Enduring some challenging and difficult times with her family, Maria was brought up in a warm and loving family that loved, accepted, respected, tolerated, and supported one another. Unconditional love was another value and belief reflected in Maria’s work with children. Maria accepted and loved all the children she taught in her classroom; she was sensitive to their needs, she appreciated their differences, and she respected and took interest in their families of various racial backgrounds.

Although Maria learned to be proud of who she was and not to be ashamed of her Blackness, she also learned that other people might judge her by her skin color without looking deeply enough to see what was underneath that Blackness. This affected the kind of teacher Maria became at work. As a teacher, Maria believed that she was a good
teacher, a competent teacher, a sensitive teacher, and a teacher who knew what it meant and how it felt to be different; consequently, she was very understanding of the children and their differences. In this study, I tried to understand how Maria formed a professional identity within the social contexts in which she worked, taught, and lived and with regard to her interactions with others around her at the school, which have been further discussed later in this chapter.

In addition to the difficulties that Maria and her family encountered together, one other struggle for Maria was knowing and deciding what she really wanted to be and do in her life. After graduating from high school, Maria enrolled in the nursing program at a state university in the Midwest. She remained there for a year, studying nursing; however, it took Maria four years to realize that nursing was not for her. At this time Maria became pregnant and gave birth to a healthy baby girl and decided to move back home with her family because her parents’ health had declined over time and she needed to look after her newborn child.

In a very unique, perhaps strange, painful, and beautiful way, with the birth of Maria’s daughter, life seemed to improve for Maria and her family, especially for the relationship between her and her father. In her own words, Maria described how her daughter seemed to help her take stock of her life, to make a change, and to think about the future. As for her relationship with her father, Maria believed that he felt very guilty about having missed much of Maria’s childhood and wanted to make up for it by participating in his grand-daughter’s life.

Maria stated:
My dad knew that my daughter’s father was not in her life, and so he wanted to do something about that. I think he wanted to right the wrong. He cared for that baby in a way that I cannot describe. He really helped me. She was always clean. She was always with him. That child did not cry. He wouldn’t let her cry. He wouldn’t let anyone get near her or touch her. I think he found the love that he felt for us and he put it into her, and that is how it was for 12 years. That was his child, and he wouldn’t allow me to punish her, and before he died, he told my mom to take care of her. (II, April 2008)

Babies can change lives and make a difference in the lives of those around them; they can fill people with love, forgiveness, and the ability to find themselves and have a purpose in life.

Maria seemed to need to talk to someone about her father and her feelings about him. Although she appeared to require a considerable amount of courage and time to talk about him freely, she may have felt comforted by the opportunity to talk about her relationship with him, to release some unresolved issues that she had with him, and to experience closure. Maria was happy that she and her father had grown closer, yet she wished they had had more time to enjoy one another’s company before his death. As she talked about her father, Maria explained how her issues with her father stemmed from his harshness at times and his lack of ability to communicate with her. She said,

I remember two days before he died, when he was still trying to talk. I told him,

“Thank you for everything that you have done for me and my daughter,” and I
told him how much I loved him, and he told me that he loved me, and I think that
that’s when things were okay. . . . So we are okay now. (FIC\textsubscript{18}, April 2008)
She remained silent for few seconds and proceeded to say: “He [her father] would tell me
that I am nothing, and that I will be nothing. However, I think that that is what his
parents used to tell him. And I used to tell him back that I am not nothing” (II\textsubscript{7}, April
2008).

Through it all, Maria told me that in her opinion family was all about love, giving,
and being together. She believed that being close to one another and supporting one
another is what allowed her and her family to survive all obstacles and challenges
encountered. She said,

We know how to be close, and how to say I love you. And we know how to
support each other. And we can’t stand not seeing each other. Sunday is our
holiday. Every Sunday we all have to see each other. It’s just our tradition.
(FIC\textsubscript{20}, April 2008)

Family relationships were very significant to Maria, and so was her relationship
with her daughter. Being blessed with a baby girl was perhaps one of the most important
events in Maria’s life. The child brought Maria closer with her family and gifted her with
a beautiful life that gave hers more meaning and purpose. Having a daughter helped
Maria to think about her future and what she wanted to be and do in her life. Despite all
the concerns and worries that Maria had as a single mother, her family helped her to raise
her child in a very loving, nurturing, peaceful, and caring environment. As she reflected
on her motherhood, she stated:
My daughter got an excellent start from infancy. She had family. And you know, it is hard for her to see me in a social life. It is like a threat for her. She always sees me as a worker, a teacher, a mother, but it is difficult for her to see me live and have a social life. This is something that we both have to work on. So one time, she made me cry because she was telling me a thing or two about me, and I told her, “You are not my mom.” So we had an argument, but I try to understand her and talk to her about everything. She is an adolescent now, and I am trying to learn how to be a mother of an adolescent. When she was little, I was blessed to have the support I got from my family. And I always try to do the right thing with her. My daughter told me once that I am her best friend, and I told her, “No, I am not your best friend. I am your mother.” I said this because I wanted to be there for her as a mother first because that is my job and my role. But that does not mean that she can’t talk to me about whatever she wants. We are always together, and I think we need not to be together so much, but I don’t know—I love my daughter. She is my life, but I also think we both need to have our own lives, too. And we need to figure how to do that in a way in which she would be able to accept the fact that I have a social life of my own as well. (FIC13, March 2008)

To this point in this chapter, I have shown how important Maria’s family was in her life; and I have shared some stories and narratives that Maria told about the special bond she felt with her family and the role her family played in her life. Within the stories and reflections shared about Maria’s childhood and upbringing, Maria showed that her family had a tremendous impact on who she grew to be. As a child, Maria was told to be
aware of how others might perceive her because she was Black. She learned that part of her identity was her skin color, and people might misjudge her because of it; and that is why she learned from her mother to speak softly and with a calm voice and always to stand strong and keep her feelings under control. Maria, who was also taught the importance of being with her family and siblings, learned to value the importance of supporting one another as a family; and in being together she learned that closeness with her family gave her the power and strength to survive and face the difficulties in her life. Maria knew that whenever she encountered a problem, she could rely on her family to support her; she also learned the importance of feeling loved, respected, and cared for by her family. Learning to show love and care, Maria was able to experience some sort of closure with her father before his death.

The stories Maria chose to share about her family showed that she identified family influence for its impact on the type of adult she became. Just like her mother, Maria showed strength at all times. She wanted to be seen as the strong teacher, the one with power and in control of herself and her classroom. Maria, the teacher, cared very much about how she looked, talked, and behaved in the classroom (see Appendix E). She refused to let anything affect the image she had of herself as a strong-willed person and self-regulated teacher. As a teacher, she hated feeling inferior or belittled because of her Blackness. Thus, she believed that by working with the children, caring for them, and being with them, everyone in her classroom was seen as one big, happy family, just like her own family.
Maria learned lessons as a member of her family and applied them in her classroom and in her work with young children. Maria learned that no matter what arose in life, she must stay strong and do what she wanted to do. Observations of Maria at work, as shown in this chapter, validated her ability to control herself, put herself together, and be consistent in the way she presented herself in the classroom—the way her mother taught her to be—in the face of any challenges and problematic situations that arose in her teaching.

**Teaching Values and Beliefs**

Reflecting on Maria’s professional self and identity, I concluded that the values and beliefs Maria held about teaching and her role as a teacher were connected to the way she identified her professional self and the way she understood her professional identity and professional role. In our conversations Maria emphasized that she valued and believed in respecting and accepting differences. She believed that every child deserved to have equal opportunities to work and learn and that all children needed to learn about accepting and loving one another no matter their differences. As I observed Maria in the classroom, I witnessed the special relationship she had with a transitional student who brought milk to the classroom and picked up the dishes after the children finished eating lunch. Over the course of this study, I observed Maria welcome this student every time she walked into the classroom, making her feel comfortable and part of the classroom (O5,8,14,19,23,30). Maria invited her to work with the children; they celebrated her birthday with her and presented her with a painting they had done as a birthday gift from everyone in their classroom. As we talked about the relationship that she shared with this
transitional student, Maria stated that she did not want that student to feel alone or left out in the school. She wanted her to feel that she belonged there, and the best way to do so, according to Maria, was to welcome her into her classroom and to ask her about home. Maria explained how she wanted to teach the children and the student teachers the importance of being sensitive and respectful of others. She wanted them to value differences and appreciate others for who they were (FIC9, March 2008).

Maria stated her belief that by accepting others regardless of their differences, people become more sensitive and aware of how others might feel. She described how transitioning from a school context where she was in the majority to a school context where she was in the minority made her feel lonely and left out. She stated:

It feels lonely to be minority and to be different. Others don’t see things the way I do because they don’t have my experience. Sometimes, others might laugh at something I don’t think is funny or clearly I don’t get. Sometimes, you might be very sensitive to an issue that others aren’t. But I have to tell you that before working in this lab school I wasn’t considered minority. (II8, April 2008)

Experiencing feelings of being different or alone played a major role in what she came to see as important to her identity as a teacher. Maria believed that part of her professional role was the ethical and moral responsibility of teaching children that differences are part of being and uniqueness and that people who are different have rights just as everyone else does (SRI2, March 2008)

Maria’s statements reflected her belief that her personal and professional experiences as a Black teacher and a member of a minority helped form her professional
identity and who she perceived herself to be as a teacher and a professional (see Appendix F). Repeatedly in this study, Maria discussed many occasions at the lab school when she felt that her capabilities as a teacher were in question. As a Black teacher, she wanted others in the school to believe in her, support her, and understand that she was capable of doing whatever the other teachers did. On one occasion (O20, March 2008), Maria felt insulted when one of the other teachers made a comment about her being a single mother. She stated that she was particularly offended because the other teacher made an insensitive remark without knowing much about her. Maria stated that she enjoyed her freedom and mobility and that she did not want someone in her life to manage it for her. She felt no embarrassment about being the single mother she chose to be.

However, Maria pointed out that her sensitivity to the comments of others did not mean that she was uncomfortable talking about herself as a member of a minority or a Black person or feeling less than others. Instead, she explained that she was upset and frustrated trying to understand the racism she saw and was told it existed in the school. She struggled with knowing how to empower Black student teachers at the school every time she heard that a Black student teacher received a comment on her or his behavior with children or in the classroom. In a formal conversation, Maria told me that a staff assistant from the administrative office of the school told her that while observing all classrooms from their booths, she concluded that racism existed behind the doors of some of these classrooms and in practices carried on with the Black student teachers. This made Maria feel very upset and overwhelmed: She was left with so many questions about
racial issues that she saw and heard of at the school. She constantly wondered about what she could do, yet she did not seem to have the courage and strength that she needed to deal with what she believed to be unintentional racism.

On one occasion, Maria wondered why a lead teacher chose to tell her in particular about two Black student teachers who she believed had behaved too aggressively with the children in her classroom. Maria explained how hurt and offended she felt when this lead teacher commented that she believed these two Black student teachers treated children the way they had been brought up in their own families. In situations like these, Maria was always left puzzled and confused about why teachers and other staff members came to her with stories about Black students. Their doing so made her feel as if she were less than or different from them. As we talked about her feelings and why would she assume that the other teachers may have thought less of her, she said:

It is my view, but it is also a view of a long-standing history. Some people think what they have is better than us, the minority. I think with the history of the country and with its culture, you will realize that the closer you look in appearance and values to the mainstream of this culture, the better you fit and do. Like even with immigrants, when they come over and make a life, maybe the first generation had it hard because it is obvious it is not their home, but when they have children who are more into this culture, they fit better. So for us we will never look like the mainstream, so we will never be in this culture, unlike Asians. This really happens, and if you look closer you will see it. (II7, April 2008)
She made a powerful point. No wonder Maria was upset with those parents who were unhappy or uncomfortable that their child’s teacher was a Black teacher. Maria did not give excuses, nor did she blame others for who she was; instead, she provided insight into what it meant to be a Black teacher and a minority teacher in a school context that made her feel that she stood out as the different one, the one who did not fit, and the one who was not as good as the others. Maria valued the importance of being culturally sensitive to others because she encountered her own feelings of Otherness and being the different one every time someone told her that she was giving children a different type of education. When she began teaching at this lab school, Maria experienced a culture shock because her status had changed from being a member of the majority in an urban public school setting to the minority in this suburban lab school.

When parents looked askance at Maria, she said she wondered whether they were looking at her because she looked young or because she was Black. Regardless, young or Black, Maria feared that they might think she did not know anything because she looked different. Such experiences taught Maria that passing judgment on others merely because they looked different was unacceptable. Thus, Maria believed that part of her mission as a teacher was to try to make a difference and to change the way others, including her students, tend to think of differences.

In the same manner, Maria discussed the importance of all parents feeling appreciated, respected, and welcome in her classroom. In one particular incident, Maria shared how hurt she felt when a parent commented on feeling unwelcome in her joyless classroom. Outraged, Maria wondered how this parent could have felt this way,
especially when Maria valued her relationships with all families and believed that the children in her classroom enjoyed playing together, working together, and being together. Furthermore, she stated that the parent’s comment literally “took the life out of her” because she did not feel that her classroom was different from the other classrooms. Maria argued:

You cannot be part of a community if you are not there in the community. I see it differently than those parents who don’t feel we are a community or that we enjoy what we do. Sometimes, I wonder to myself, could it be my personality that parents think we are not a community since I am real quiet? Or is it something else that they see, and I can’t see? I just don’t know. (FIC11, March 2008)

Experiencing difficulties as a teacher and facing many challenges and ups and downs, Maria questioned her abilities and proficiency as a teacher at times, ultimately changing the way she viewed herself as a teacher. Sometimes, she said, she felt as if she “sucked” as a teacher; but at other times she felt that she was a good teacher, able to set high expectations and motivate the children to meet those expectations. Through it all, the stories she shared about herself and teaching remained consistent. She was a loving, caring teacher who wanted the children to have different ways of knowing and thinking because she believed that teaching involved more than problem solving and reading.

Along with the importance of valuing differences and being sensitive to others, Maria believed that good, professional teachers should not compare children to one another. She believed that each and every child should be appreciated for who she or he was. Thus, she could not see how some might have labeled her whole classroom a
special education classroom because she had perhaps a child or two with a behavioral problem or one who exhibited some signs of a behavioral issue. Maria explained that even when she sensed that something might be wrong with one of the children, she made no judgments and leapt to no conclusions about that particular child.

Likewise, Maria talked about the importance of accountability with regard to what teachers and children are supposed to do. She believed that even when children and student teachers might perform at different levels of capability, they needed to be held accountable, follow the classroom rules, and attend school meetings. Maria valued knowing about the children, believing that part of her job was to know about their lives outside school. In doing so, she tried to reach out to the children’s families, asking them to give her material to read about their children, especially if they had been diagnosed with an illness or disability. She also encouraged parents to share any other information they saw fit, making sure to tell them that she cared for their children.

Maria said:

A good teacher is one that takes her job seriously. Good teaching is all about dedicating oneself to the children and their learning. It is about being committed to doing and providing the best that a teacher could for the children. (FIC27, May 2008)

In her narratives, Maria also discussed her belief that student teachers’ failure to give sufficient time to the children was a bad sign. She explained the importance of the children’s feeling and knowing that their teachers were ready for them and that they
wanted to be with them. Maria also talked about the importance of seriousness in a teacher. She noted:

I see our field to be professional, and I am professional. This is a profession that we don’t get enough credit for. So you have to embody your teaching. You can learn how to do it, the skills and strategies, but it has to ultimately be part of you, and if you don’t let that happen, you won’t be successful. (FIC\textsubscript{26}, May 2008)

Based on data obtained from the observations, teaching records, and conversations in the study, I found that Maria appeared not to see herself as the only one in charge of children’s learning experiences in the classroom. Although she was the lead teacher, she also saw herself as the learner. She allowed the children to tell her and teach her about themselves and the things they could do, resulting in her belief in the importance of seeing the children and herself in a way that allowed her students to be seen as the best thinkers they could be. She noted:

I want all of us to see each other as the best possible thinkers that we can be. Thinking is more than just ideas moving in the mind. The mind and emotions are tied together. They should be allowed to express those ideas. I think the teacher has a lot to do with it. Sometimes the children say things that you know they learned from you as a teacher. For example, they were playing the other day this new treasure hunt game; and I just had to walk away for something. And when I came back, I heard a child saying to another child, “Come on! You got to focus. Focus and look.” And this is something that I tell them all the time: “You have to stop and focus.” I tell them they have to stop, look closely. You have to have
your eyes and ears open and sometimes stand still. So those are models that I give to the children so they know that this is expected of them, and I truly believe that that is what good teaching is all about. It’s not about telling them what to do: It is about handing them the tools they need to learn and discover for themselves.

(FICs, February 2008)

In talking to Maria about her professional identity, I learned that the way she saw and evaluated her teaching was closely related to the way she understood her professional identity. Working in two different school settings, Maria came to believe that good teachers and quality teachers are those who can go into any school, understand the children, and offer them the best that they can. She stated that she never understood why some teachers were intimidated by working at urban schools; she said she wanted to believe that she was a quality and professional teacher because she was able to teach in different settings and under different—and at times—challenging kinds of circumstances. She stated:

A good teacher in my opinion is a teacher who brings [out] the best of the children, who tries to understand the children, not someone who hides themselves in districts who have the best scores or best communities. A good teacher and good teaching is not about proving yourself: It is about your teaching. It is about finding out what your children need and figuring out how to reach to them. It is not about what district you are in. And as a teacher, I feel I could go anywhere and do my job. Even if I can’t do it when I get there, I will learn because otherwise it is a disservice. When I came to this school, I came from an urban
school, and I even went to an urban university, and I can say that they did a very
good job with me. They did what they were supposed to do, and now I learned to
adjust at this lab school. (FIC9, February 2008)

In reflecting on and evaluating her teaching identity, Maria credited everything
that she learned about good teaching to her own urban teachers who taught her that
teaching conditions did not dictate how well teachers did; instead, the expectations that
teachers set up for themselves, learning how to deal with difficulties, and helping
themselves to do what was needed were the keys to successful teaching. Maria did not
suggest that she believed that every teacher should experience teaching in an urban
school, but her comments pointed out that good teachers are those who can work in any
settings and under any circumstances. In summary, Maria believed that a good teacher is
one who is thoughtful, respectful of others, and conscious of who she is as a teacher,
what she does, and why she chooses to do the things she does with children. Maria
stated:

A good teacher is one that is willing to learn and not settle. We [teachers] have to
want more of what we teach; we have to have morals and values and live by those
values and be able to change when we feel the need for changing and trying
something new. We need to be personable. We have to understand each other,
find meaning, get along with each other, have and respect our differences, but
always share an understanding of what we have to do. We need to have a sense of
responsibility and advocacy. I try to be one in the way I teach without having to
be political or a protester. When I say that all children have a right to a way of

thinking or learning that is advocacy because I am trying to give them that right. With student teachers, we need to advocate a way of learning and a way of teaching. We need to be respectful to them and collaborate with them. I have been called stubborn—my way or no way—not able to negotiate, but the matter of the fact is that they are not going to do what they want to do without thinking about it and trying to make meaning of it. (FIC 10, March 2008)

Maria also related her understanding of her professional identity to the responsibilities she believed she had as a teacher. She described how becoming a teacher put on her shoulders considerable responsibilities that she needed to fulfill. As a teacher, Maria believed that it was important for her to spend time with the children, sit next to them, talk to them, make sure they were safe, and help them to develop the ability to think about things around them in different ways and from different perspectives. She also argued that she opposed the notion that many have of children as innocent. She explained that children live in the same world as adults; however, the difference between adults and children lies in how the latter can think of things, see things, and experience them without fearing others’ harshness or having to listen to their criticism.

Connecting her personal identity and personal values with her professional identity and teaching beliefs, data from this study showed how the values Maria had in her personal life resembled the ones she held with regard to school and working with children. For example, family was very important to Maria, and spending time with her family provided her with the power and strength she needed to overcome difficulties in her life. As a teacher, Maria believed in the importance of building a community in
which everyone in the classroom felt a sense of belonging, cared for one another, and worked together. In working together and coming together as a classroom community, Maria believed, children were able to enjoy one another’s company, initiate friendships, and build strong bonds with one another. Family bonds provided Maria with the strength she needed the same way that she believed that building a classroom community helped the children to deal with whatever problems they encountered in the classroom.

Maria provided her thoughts about building a community of learners:

If you have to solve a problem, the community will be there to support you. Small things come together to help each other. When things go wrong, it is the community that helps you and not the individual. It is hard for me to tell you about my class community. I am part of it, so I can’t see what you see. But I would tell you that I want us to look like we are a family because that is healthy. I want us to be happy and look happy. I want people to be able to know what is going on in my classroom. I don’t like secrets. They make you feel like an outsider, and this is why I don’t allow children to have secrets from each other because this would take them out of the group. For example with birthday invitations, I don’t like it when children or their families invite some children and not the rest. I ask them to find other ways of inviting who they want without hurting the rest of the children in the class. Sometimes it can be crushing for children to feel that they are being left out. (SRI3, April 2008)

Reporting on her professional identity, Maria saw herself as an advocate for young children. She said she believed that her role was not merely to teach children but
also to stand up for what she thought to be the right thing to do. In doing what was right, she believed that children had the right to their childhood and to live their lives as children. Maria did not appreciate those who tried to force young children to act and behave as adults do. She explained that holding children to higher expectations and pushing them to do their best was not about forcing them to be what she wanted them to be, but instead doing so was to motivate them to become the best they could be for themselves. Even though children are not little adults, Maria still believed that they have creative minds, are good thinkers and very intelligent individuals.

In one observation, a child sat next to Maria completing a painting for his mother. As I observed and took field notes, I recalled the conversation that took place between that child and Maria. As he drew red hearts, pink flowers, and smiley faces, the boy looked at Maria and told her that he usually drew what he felt and thought. Desiring to know more about what he meant, Maria asked the child to tell her more about what it meant to draw something that you felt or thought about. As she gave him the opportunity to elaborate on his ideas, the child explained how he believed that his thoughts started from his heart and then traveled to his brain, which later told him what to do and how to think. During the time of that observation, I remember how impressed I was by that child and his thinking process. Later that day, as I sat with Maria and had a conversation about it, she emphasized that in situations like that, she always wondered about who was to decide what children could and could not do. In situations like the one above, she said she could not merely tap the child on his shoulder and tell him how cute or beautiful his
idea or thought was. That is more than cute, she said. Children are smart, and sometimes they can be smarter than many others.

Maria said she believed that the way teachers viewed children and their work with them was very important to the kind of teachers they became and the identities they formed. Reflecting on her own teaching professional identity, Maria believed that listening to what children had to say was very important to her work with children. She explained that sometimes teachers thought they knew everything about children and what they could do in ways that prevented them from allowing the children to tell them about what they could and wanted to do. Maria valued the importance of working together with the children, and she believed in the importance of learning from the children just as much as teaching them. At the time of my observation, an incident took place in which a child asked Maria whether she could draw her portrait with paint, not crayons. When asked why, the child explained that she felt she could produce a better product with paint. Reflecting on this incident, Maria explained that children should be given the freedom of choosing what materials they wanted to use and how they wanted to draw their portraits. She also stated that a good and a professional teacher is one that knows her children’s capabilities and skills and encourages them to work to the best of their potential. She asserted that adults did not necessarily always know what was good for children. Maria emphasized the importance of teachers’ providing children with opportunities to tell about themselves, who they were, and what they could do.

Maria believed that standardized tests were harmful to children. She argued that tests labeled children and put them in a place where they might have felt incapable or not
good enough. Maria furthermore believed that early childhood teachers needed to find better ways of assessing young children. Inspired by Reggio Emilia methodology in using documentation to record children’s progress and learning, Maria believed that knowing and understanding how to assess children was what mattered most. Although she agreed that documentation was important, she emphasized that what matters more was for teachers to find a way to learn about children, to know how they developed, and to figure out a concrete way to assist them. She noted:

   We [teachers and educators] got to open up. This year it hit me, and I realized that there is a lot more to teaching and working with children than Reggio Emilia. Documentation is very valuable, but documentation is nothing more than a qualitative method. So what really matters is to understand and study what you document. You need to know what you are looking for. You need to have a purpose for documenting, and you need to make it relevant to your classroom, come back to it, and know why you are revisiting it. (FIC10, March 2008)

Identity Shift

   Another theme emerging from this study was the shift in Maria’s identity. Beijaard et al. (2004) noted that teachers’ identities may change, and such change is often accompanied by tensions and dilemmas. Maria’s involvement in the current research seemed to set her free, to give her the opportunity she needed to tell stories about her teaching, and to reflect on some of the most important events in her life as a person and a teacher. She told me that my research benefited her because it gave her the opportunity to think about numerous events that had occurred in her life. Her involvement signaled
an awakening to her; the blindfold that she had worn for seven years was removed as her participation challenged her to think deeply about who she really was and why she ultimately discovered that she had lost herself for a very long time. With everything that she experienced, Maria underwent an identity transformation of which she might not even have been aware. Questioning was a major aspect of transforming her identity, and during a transitional period Maria’s identity was continuously shifting and changing.

Maria shared the following:

My identity is who I am, my beliefs and my values, and it comes out in my actions. My professional identity is continuously overturning and changing as I grow as a person and as I grow in knowledge and understanding. It changes, but it always goes on the side of what is good and what is right based on my values and beliefs; and this is the only way I know how to do it, and I don’t know any other way to understanding it. Yes, there is a bigger set of beliefs and values, but my professional identity is tied up in me; and for me to tell you about it, we could write a book for years and tell stories for years and years. I am what I am not yet, so don’t hold me to something because I always hope to change it and develop it; and I know that I will be different tomorrow. Change is good if it is rooted in the right thing. For seven years all I wanted was for my knowledge to be valued and seen as real knowledge. I never felt like I fit in, and it was almost like I felt I could do whatever in that classroom because I was able to hide in the corner. I felt like I hid for seven years. Teaching will always be part of me, but it is time to
move on. Your research was a turning point in my life as a teacher. I was very
tired before, and now I am set free. (II_{10}, May 2008)

With all the controversy that surrounded this research, Maria reported on how
demeaned and belittled she felt when she realized that she was working in a place that
valued her mind and work as a teacher but ignored her ethnicity as a Black individual.
She described a time when her priorities in life shifted as well. After the loss of her
father before this research commenced, she thought about herself, her daughter, and her
mother and how she could support them and herself. Losing someone she loved and
realizing that life was too short made Maria think about the things that she would like to
do and have in her life. She stated that teaching was her career and that she always
wanted to be a classroom teacher; but with her father’s death, she realized that other
options, heretofore unconsidered, were available to her. She discussed how she might
enjoy becoming a professor, a consultant, or even an administrator perhaps in an urban
school.

With everything that Maria experienced in her personal and professional life, she
decided that by the time this research ended, she would resign from her position as a
preschool teacher. Maria believed that if she ever awakened in the morning, feeling that
she did not want to teach or that she would be a disservice for the children, then that was
the time to stop teaching. This was how she felt about herself during the time of this
research. She talked about how hard she worked to be the same, just like the other
teachers in the school, and how she realized that no matter how hard she worked on
herself, she would never be seen like the White teachers. For seven years, Maria
emphasized how she wanted to feel accepted and part of the school community. She thought that by working on being the teacher and not the Black teacher, she would fit better in the school; yet she realized that she can never be White, and she did not want to be. She also realized that what she was doing was in reality to ignore who she really was in order to fit in and feel the same. She wanted to be White in the sense that she did not want to be looked at differently. She wanted to be seen just as valuable and worthy as the other teachers, and she wanted to be part of that school’s community. She stated:

I worked hard to be the teacher and not the Black teacher or the minority teacher. You know me, and I have told you about my values as a teacher and a person. For me, it is always about the community, and I wanted to be part of the community, and I hope that I really was. But you see, the problem is that the community acts a certain way and looks a certain way; and I felt like for seven years, all I did was to hide myself. And with your research, I experienced an awakening moment in which I realized that all what I was doing was to hide. I know it is your study and your research, but your research hit me in the face. And I am glad it did because I need to find a way to deal with what I have discovered about myself. This is scary to me, and just the other day in my class, we were talking about the Other; and I thought to myself that I was that Other, and I just don’t know how could I have ignored this for seven years. I put so much time into that school and into the work I was doing, and I don’t know what else am I not aware of still. I now realize that I lost my relationships with friends, my family, and my daughter because I was so busy trying to fit in. Now I wonder
what else did I miss with my daughter and myself. I am who I am, no matter what; and I am proud of myself as a Black person, but with your research, I realized that I have lost myself for seven years. (II9, May 2008)

During the time of this research, Maria’s life was in turmoil. She was in a car accident, suffered back problems, missed her father, was concerned about her mother’s health, and worried about her classroom. Unfortunately, Maria had no one to lean on at work. Her life seemed devoid of friends. Her relationships with her colleagues seemed only formal and professional. The lack of support and the stress she felt about her work and her life made continuing to work as a preschool teacher extremely difficult for her. She needed respite and time to reflect on her life, feeling confused, scared, exhausted, and lost. Maria shared the following:

I know I am saying that I lost seven years of trying to be something that wasn’t me. But I really can’t say that I lost these years for nothing because without going through all of what I had to go through, I wouldn’t be the person that I am today. No matter how things got done, they got done; and I have realized that it is time to move on. I have to move on. And now that I am set free, and on the other side—let me tell you—it is beautiful, really beautiful. A big part of me got freed. Maybe I lounge around, but my mind is doing something different, and I love it. I just feel like I am happy, and my spirit is telling me that I needed this change. Before it felt like spinning wheels, always worried, always questioned what I did and what others think of me, and always felt lost and not knowing what to do. But now, I feel like I am ready to do something different. There is a lot out there
in the world, and I am glad that I don’t have to keep referring to the same things as I had to do working in a place that was so Reggio Emilia-inspired. Each school needs to have its own identity, and we [the school personnel] need to have one. It can’t be all repeated from someone else like Reggio Emilia. Why is the meadow so important to us? Is it because Italian teachers think it’s important or because we think it’s important to us. We are a lab school, and that is a unique identity; but what we do in this lab school is what makes us be special. Who we are and who are these people in our school is what should matter to us. That is what we need to think about. We have different issues and are different, and that is what we need to find fast and before it’s too late. (II10, May 2008)

Around 6:00 a.m. on May 9, 2008, I received a text message from Maria in which she stated that she needed to talk to me about something important. When I reached the school early that morning, I noticed how emotional and upset Maria seemed to be. She looked nervous and worried, and as we talked, she explained how she did not expect that telling everyone else at the school that she was not returning the following fall would be so difficult for her. She said:

This is very hard on me, harder than I expected. Some of the teachers did not know that I won’t be coming back, and some knew. However, it is hard. At the beginning, I thought about going around to each classroom and tell the teachers, but then some started to get so emotional and cry, and that’s when I realized that I can’t do it. I was getting very emotional, too, and so I emailed everyone a letter yesterday night to tell them all that I’m not coming back. (FIC25, May 2008)
“Are you going to talk about this with the children?” I asked. Maria responded firmly:

No, I just can’t do that, not now I can’t. I find it so hard telling the teachers, so how if I decide to tell the children. That will break my heart. Maybe I can plan to do something with them like plan a family picnic or some kind of event in the summer. I’m just not ready for this now. (FIC25, May 2008)

At that point in time Maria grew very emotional and could hardly maintain her composure. She preferred to avoid any further conversations about her decision with the families or the school staff.

As for the children, she wanted to tell them she was not returning, but she could not. Maria also believed that telling the children about her leaving the school at the end of the semester was not a good idea. She explained that they had to say their goodbyes to four of their student teachers, which it was difficult enough. She shifted her thinking about how and when to say her goodbyes to the student teachers, whom she had encouraged to think about how they would say their goodbyes to the children. She gave them the freedom of choice to think and to decide how they would bid farewell and told them that all she wanted was for all of them to celebrate together the time and joy they had shared.

About her decision to resign, Maria explained that with everything that took place at the beginning of this research and the awakening she had experienced, her life priorities had shifted. She stated that for years all that she had cared about was her teaching. She believed that now it is time to focus more on her family, her daughter, and
herself. She wanted to do more with her life, and she wanted to explore new things in life. She stated, “I thought I’ll always be a classroom teacher, but now I think I want to explore other careers like being a professor, higher education, or consulting” (SRI, May 2008).

She also discussed how concerned she was with the quality of the teachers in urban schools. She worried that these schools did not receive enough support nor had enough money to create better classroom environments. She also expressed her concern that urban teachers were always stereotyped and that their students were typically seen as inferior and disadvantaged. Through her stories, Maria wanted to share a message with others, one that dealt with her own thoughts about teaching and good teachers. Maria wanted people to avoid making judgments about teachers based on where they taught; she wanted others to hear about her experiences in urban schools, and she wanted them to know that a good teacher is one who does the best in whatever environment she or he is in. That is how she saw herself as a teacher. Regardless of what school context she was in, Maria believed that she always tried her best and gave her best for children. She also emphasized that no matter what others thought of her or how they viewed her, children did not care whether their teacher was Black. They cared only about what she did with them, how much she played with, and how good she made them feel. Maria said:

With your research, I realized that I spent so much time trying to be something that I really never was. I wanted others to respect me for whom I was. I wanted to be seen as the good and quality teacher, but I realize now that I was only seen as the Black teacher. I am not ashamed by who I am. I am proud to be Black,
and I will never choose to be something else but Black. However, I can do so much with my life than trying to fit in here [at the lab school]. Good teachers are not those in perfect settings. It wasn’t the conditions I was in—it was about the expectations they [urban teachers] had for me that I excelled. No excuses accepted. Life is or can be hard; you learn how to deal with it. Not every teacher can be an urban teacher, but every teacher needs to be able to reach out to all children. Good teachers are those who are respectful of the children and can see them differently. They are those who have morals and values that they can live by. Good teachers are ones that can be reasonable, responsible. They are ones who advocate for children and their right to learning. (FIC28, May 2008)

In a follow-up interview with Maria after she resigned from her position, she shared her focus on her doctoral courses and her dream that one day she would be able to make a change in how schools work. She also stated that she still wanted to take time to figure out what she wanted in life. She enjoyed her social responsibility toward her family and her daughter, and she was determined to continue to advocate for children and the student staff. She explained that even though she did not know how she could do that, she still wanted to be able to do it; and she believed that a good starting point could be with teaching others the importance of not having a prejudice mentality. Fearing what others might think of her and wanting to feel the same and to fit into the place where she worked, Maria realized that she was not being true to herself. Gradually, she felt empowered by her absence from the lab school, and she enjoyed seeing life differently from the way she once did.
Reflecting upon her teaching experiences, Maria told me that if she could go back in time, one thing about her teaching that she would change would be making her study of her work and teaching with children more visible to others. “Teachers’ study is as valuable as children’s work, and it is quite underrepresented in our schools,” she said (SRI, May 2008). In reflecting on the findings of this study, Maria concluded that the most striking finding for her was the realization of what was missing about herself that made her feel lost. She explained that she recognized that for seven years she had tried to hide her identity as a Black teacher because she worried that she would not be seen as good and as qualified as the other teachers in the school. In talking about her professional identity, Maria said she realized that she was in a transitional period. She enjoyed being a full-time doctoral student and enjoyed the learning in which she was engaged.

**Maria’s Identity Development in a Predominantly White School Community**

Maria was aware that some might stereotype her in ways that she disliked, and that was why she wanted others to see her for what and who she really was, not for what they thought she was based on assumptions they had of people of her skin color. She puzzled many at school with how calmly and softly she spoke, and she worked hard to be seen as the teacher and not the Black teacher in the school. Throughout her reflections, Maria raised the issues of social injustice, fairness, and issues of racism and inequality. It was evident in the stories she shared about her life experiences that so many of them were related to her skin color and what that meant and represented in her life and in the way that she thought others viewed her. Being Black was very central to her identity as a
teacher, and at times it made her feel as if she were “the Other teacher” or “the outsider one.” Working in a predominantly White school, Maria felt lonely but still realized that she needed to be strong and maintain positive thoughts about herself and work.

Maria’s fear of others’ rejection and thinking poorly of her were very evident in most—if not all—of the stories she told about herself. As a child, she did not want others to think of her and her family in ways that were untrue. As an urban student and an urban teacher, she hated the misconceptions that some held of what urban youth could and could not learn or how well they could do in school. Working in a predominantly White school with White teachers, Maria felt different and alone. Being a member of a minority group, Maria felt that her abilities as a teacher were in questioned and that she had to prove herself to others at work.

Maria believed that Black teachers brought something extra to their teaching and interactions with children: caring, understanding, and sensitivity to others and their feelings in ways that perhaps others did not know. Maria truly believed that caring and the ability to relate to others who felt different seemed to be the essence of her identity as a Black teacher. Once she walked into the classroom and assumed the role of teacher, she gave her all to the children. She believed that it was her responsibility to impart the best possible learning to all children from all backgrounds whether they were Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, or Middle Eastern. In one observation, while Maria was in charge of a group of preschoolers and kindergartners playing outside, she described how she heard a boy call to a Black girl: “Hey, nappy head.” Maria found that comment to be very inappropriate, and she felt the need to address what the boy said with his family.
She explained that Black people found such a phrase unacceptable as a means to address a Black child. Although the parents of the boy apologized to Maria and insisted their child’s comment was innocent and without malice, Maria still felt that they should have apologized to the girl. She explained that she did not represent her whole race, and her Blackness did not make her an appropriate recipient of the apology on behalf of the girl and her family. Ultimately, the family decided to remove their son from the school because they did not like the way Maria handled the situation.

At the time of this encounter Maria was happy with her handling of the situation, but later as we talked about it, she wondered whether she had done the right thing; she even questioned the reasons behind her involvement in the situation and her talking to the family. Maria said:

I’m not sure why I did that. I know what he [the boy] said could have been innocent, but I don’t know. Was it because I represented the Black race in that school, or was it something else that made me talk to that family? I don’t know the answer. (SRI1, March 2008)

This is an example of the daily challenge that Maria had to face as a Black teacher in a predominantly White school. She always had to think about what she did and why she did it. In this example, Maria wondered whether she did what she did because she truly believed that as the teacher she had to interfere or whether it was her racial identity in her that had to speak up and defend the Black girl.

Emotions seemed to exert strong impact on Maria’s interpretation of happenings around her and on her behavior at school. The only Black head teacher at the school,
Maria seemed to be on the defensive, feeling lonely and alone. Such emotions seemed to influence how Maria portrayed herself and her professional identity in the context of the school.

To say that Maria was very conscious of her racial identity was an understatement. To a large extent, Maria’s Black identity seemed to affect heavily the way she interpreted, believed, and understood other people’s behaviors and attitudes toward her. This is not to suggest that Maria was ashamed of who she was as a Black person, nor is it to suggest that Maria had no confidence in herself and her abilities as a teacher; but instead it is to say that Maria seemed to be highly sensitive to what and how other people at work thought of her as a teacher and a person.

**Emotions**

Another theme that merged from this study was Maria’s emotions and her workplace conditions. Teachers’ emotions, influenced by the contexts in which they work, constitute an essential element of their identity (van Veen et al., 2005). At the beginning of this research, Maria was shocked by all the attention it attracted because she was asked to be part of it. She expected that her race would eventually come up in this research, even if it were not its focus; but she did not expect to be, as she put it, “slapped hard in the face by it”. That is precisely how Maria described her feelings when she was called into the administrative office and told to be aware that if she agreed to be part of this research, she would be described as the Black teacher, the Black teacher, or the minority teacher, labels with which the administrators were uncomfortable. Maria noted that the administrator shared with her their perspectives that using such terms as these
labeled and limited who Maria was and how they saw her as a teacher. According to her, Maria felt that being called to the office and told to be prepared for labels such as the Black or minority teacher made her feel that she should be ashamed of or belittled by her identity. Maria stated:

I knew once I agreed to be part of this research that my race will be an issue, and I had to think hard if I wanted to be part of it or not. I knew that I wanted to be. I wanted others to hear my voice and listen to my stories. I felt honored that someone thought about dedicating an entire study about my teaching. But it just hurts to realize that others could only see my color. This is sad. It is actually very sad, and it is a mess. This made me wonder and ask myself: Would this study be good if I am only represented as a Black teacher? Is my voice important? Are others intimidated by what I might say? Many thoughts were in my head, and one thing that I knew all along is that I am proud of being Black. But with everything that happened with your research, it was really hard for me not to break down. I tried not to cry, and I don’t want to cry; but the way the school handled your research and the possibility of me being part of it just blind-sided me. It was like where did this come from? I wished it was something I didn’t have to think about. It just shocked me. I am not going to cry. I am not crying. I know I am a Black teacher, and I know my race will come up in this research. But when I got called to the office, it was strange because the whole situation seemed uncomfortable. As we started talking, I knew there was something going on, a Black thing. I wished it didn’t have to do with my race. I don’t know how it
happened or why it happened, and I cannot make sense of it; but to be told to be
careful that they’re calling you the Black teacher, I still can’t even—it almost
made me think about the other side and what is going on the other side of my life.
(II, February 2008)

Maria was confused with what she called “the drama” that took place when she
agreed to participate in this study. She believed that what she said or how she was going
to be described in this study was something for her to worry about, not others. She did
not know whether the school leaders were afraid of what she was going to say and share,
but she knew that no one wanted to be called prejudiced. With this research, she believed
that the school authorities worried because I would be hearing a Black perspective and
not a White perspective. Still, with everything that occurred, Maria was shocked and on
the verge of breaking down. She never hesitated in her decision to participate in the
study, but she did not know exactly how to go about it. For her to stand up for herself
and to tell the school administration and staff about how she felt regarding their opinions
and responses about her participation in this study. On one hand, Maria did not want the
school personnel to feel that she would betray them by participating in this research. On
the other hand, according to Maria, the school administrators respected her decision to
participate in this research, but they had concerns and worries about her doing so, what
might come out of it, and the issues related to the representation of the school and the
people in it. As we all sat together and discussed the issues related to the confidentiality
of the children and the parents, all discussions were conducted within the protocols and
ethics suggested in the literature and under the supervision of my research committee.
Feeling of Alienation

I argue that Maria’s feeling of alienation represented a significant theme in this study. Mau (as cited in Upadhyay, 2009) defined alienation as a feeling of social estrangement, absence of social support, and lack of meaningful social connection. Maria’s feeling of alienation was linked to her minority status in a predominantly White school. Maria wanted others around her to see past her skin color; she wanted to be respected, to be seen as good as the White teachers at the school, and to be taken seriously. Maria did not want other people to judge her for her Blackness. In talking to Maria she told me that she wished that others at school and outside it would understand that as a Black person she did not represent all people of her race. Maria explained:

Black is not a bad thing. It is how we use it and refer to it. When people want to say that they are good, they say they have pure intentions, a pure white heart. And when people want to describe a bad thing, they say this person was blacklisted or has a black dot on his record or has a dark, black history of something. That is the problem that others have with us. Being Black is never a bad thing or a thing that I need to be ashamed of, but what hurts is how others see Blackness. (FIC16, April 2008)

Maria also shared:

Being a Black teacher at that school made me feel like I was an alien. I remember a child saying, “Look, look there is a Black teacher here,” and another asking me why my hands are dirty. So it was hard to talk to parents about their children. When I tried to talk to that mother [the complaining parent] about her child, she
said that she thought her child would be getting a different type of education. And as hurtful and upsetting that was to digest, all I did was to just say, “Okay, I see,” and walk away. It was really hard. It made me wonder about how I am going to interact with her child, who happened to be also identified with some special education. But still, I continued to ask about him after he left my class, and I was happy to receive letters from him. I don’t know if it is his mom who asked him to write me letters maybe because she felt a bit guilty about it. Who knows? But whatever it was, I don’t want her to feel bad about it. I understand that media represents us [Black people] in a way that is not too accurate. And it is hard because this always made me feel less. I am always thinking about myself as the Other, and yet I always try to be stronger. (FIC17, April 2008)

Feeling that she did not share the same cultural background and understanding with others at the school was deemed a major influence on how Maria situated herself in the school and the kind of relationships she had with others. Feeling different or as the Other caused Maria difficulties in bonding with her colleagues and developing a sense of belonging because she felt isolated. She seemed mired in emotions, worries, and concerns about lacking some essential qualities because she happened to be the only Black head teacher at the lab school. Even when she thought she was a good teacher, Maria feared that parents of her students did not like her and questioned her abilities as a teacher. She explained how when she began working at this predominantly White school, she felt different from the other teachers because she looked different and was the only Black lead teacher on the faculty.
Maria’s identity as a Black person seemed always central to whatever she did and talked about. As an urban child attending an urban school, Maria emphasized that urban children and Black children were not at-risk children and that with love, care, and appropriate learning environments, urban students could succeed the way other children could. These narratives clarified the way other people in the society might perceive Black people and was something that occupied Maria’s mind and worried her considerably.

This research was more like a turning point in Maria’s life. With all the issues that accompanied this research, Maria stated that it challenged her and forced her to look at things differently. She said:

Now I look at things differently across the school, and I also look at children differently now. Now I am more sensitive, and I am more on a defense side. I was reading somewhere the other day about the importance of having a sense of belonging, and when I thought about it, you know, I realized that when you are the only one who is different than the group, you might be there, they might love you; but you don’t really fit there. Now with this research and what happened with the school, I feel that way. Now I know that I never really quite fit in here [at the school]. Imagine if you were the only boy in a group of girls. You will feel that you are different. That is how I have always felt, but I tried not to allow that thought to control me because I didn’t want it to affect my teaching. (II9, May 2008)
Maria’s Personal Experiences

Provided the opportunity to reflect on her personal experiences, childhood memories, and present reality as a teacher, Maria admitted feeling scattered and torn in all directions. She pointed out the many important things in her life and how they were all connected in all different ways. Talking about her professional identity, Maria stated that her identity was embodied in all those stories that she shared about herself and that who she was as a person and a teacher were inseparable. She perceived her identity to be like a process that continued to form, and as it did, it was interrupted by life occurrences and by how she reacted to those happenings and events. As a person, Maria saw herself as a quiet, stubborn person who always tried to show strength, had a lot of worries, was spiritual, enjoyed having fun, wanted happiness for everyone, and was a little too firm at times and unforgiving at others. But at all times Maria stated, she was someone who loved being with a group of children, playing and working together. She said:

I am all these stories I share with you. I am that child I told you about, that daughter I was, the proud mom I am, and the teacher that you observed and the one that I told you about. I don’t know to what degree these experiences influenced me, but I know that they had their effect on my professional identity, whether consciously or unconsciously. (II10, May 2008)

Thinking about who she was and what she wanted were major considerations in the way Maria related to her professional identity. Working in various settings, dealing with challenges, and making the transition from a member of the majority to the minority exerted a tremendous impact on how she formed her professional teaching identity.
These experiences taught Maria the importance of being strong at all times and in all circumstances. When she spoke of strength, Maria did not refer to being physically strong; she meant feeling in power and in control of her emotions and her interactions with others. She saw her role as a professional teacher to be very similar to that of a counselor who could not listen to his clients and ask them to be calm and focus without being able to do so himself or herself first. She pointed out the difficulty she had curtailing her anger or desire to speak up with regard to certain events at school about which she disagreed but still allowed to take place without doing or saying what she felt she could have said or done. She argued that as a role model to her children, she needed to find a way to control her emotions, facial expressions, and body language at all times. Observations of her work with children showed how regularly she asked the children to think about what they said and what they did and to control their bodies, movements, feelings, and even thoughts. She described how controlling her emotions made her feel that she was ready to be with the children and to join them in work and play together. She also emphasized learning to control her mood and feelings; doing so helped her with guiding and running the classroom and motivating the children to listen to her. She believed these factors were significant parts of her teaching.

Maria could not discuss her professional self without talking first about her personal self. Maria’s family had strong impact on her identity. In this section, I have discussed how Maria’s personal experiences as a child and a student influenced her, and I shed light on how these school experiences and relationships with her own teachers as a child influenced the kind of teacher and professional that she had become. It was
interesting to see how Maria chose to begin her journey of self-reflection and understanding of her professional identity with telling stories about her family, her upbringing, her parents, and the close relationships she shared with her family and her daughter. By revisiting her past experiences with her family and discussing some intimate details of her life, I concluded that for Maria family mattered. This speaks volumes to Maria’s inability to talk about herself as a professional without first discussing who she was as a person and where she came from. After providing this in-depth insight into Maria’s personal life and family relationships, I have concluded that Maria’s upbringing and relationships with her family influenced the way she identified herself and her professional identity. Researchers on professional identity have argued that the way teachers understand their professional identities relates to the way they see themselves as teachers and individuals. It involves the uniqueness of the teacher’s individual self as well as a teacher’s history, values, and beliefs; and it includes the personal stories of teachers and what they choose to reveal and not to reveal about who they are.

**Early Learning Experiences**

Maria’s parents valued the importance of education and going to school, but according to Maria, they did not do much about it. She explained that she did not recall anyone in her family telling her to do her homework or to study hard for her tests because she was taught that as a student, she needed to do what was expected of her without expecting to be rewarded for it. Maria said, “School was school for me. All throughout I
just had to do what I had to do to succeed in school, and that meant that I needed to be responsible for my actions” (FIC₃, February 2008).

About her early school experiences, Maria did not remember much from her preschool and kindergarten. One of the few things that she remembered was losing control of her bladder while she lay on the sofa, upsetting her preschool teacher and caused her to refuse to change Maria’s undergarments. She also remembered an unpleasant experience at kindergarten when she was about five years old. She said:

I remember having this teacher who was a black American teacher. She would say things like some of you won’t pass kindergarten, and she would look at me. So one time, I was on my way to go get a drink of water, and I didn’t clean up those toys she told me to clean up. So she told me that if I don’t clean up, she will knock my ribs inside out. So I went back home, and I was mad; and I told my mom, and she did nothing about it. But I remember being confused because I didn’t understand, and she [the teacher] didn’t tell me or explain to me why I was supposed to clean the toys when I didn’t play with them. (FIC₄, February 2008)

Maria’s family was not involved in Maria’s life as a student in the traditional manner expected of contemporary parents. For instance, her parents did not attend many of her parent–teacher conferences, and they were not involved in the incident that Maria had with the teacher who threatened to knock her ribs inside out; yet their involvement in her life as a student was apparent. They wanted her to learn how to be independent, make her own decisions, and defend herself. They also wanted their daughter to learn the importance of working hard and taking responsibility for her actions.
Her parents’ expectations were reflected in Maria’s work with children and as a teacher. Maria believed that children must learn how to be independent and how to think for themselves, solve their problems, and cope with challenges without relying on others to do their work for them. For instance, observations showed how Maria encouraged the children in her classroom to talk about their problems together and try to work them out together without her involvement. Maria wanted the children to learn how to work together and learn from one another.

With regard to her kindergarten and preschool experiences, Maria did not seem to enjoy school as a child. “Kindergarten was very odd for me,” Maria said (FIC1, February 2008). She did not feel that she belonged there, and she did not like the teachers she had. She noted:

I think the teachers didn’t like me. I remember I had a teacher who would be just sitting in there. She would write weird things about me in my report. She would call me differently than what my family calls me, which made me upset. But I had to learn that my name in school is different than my name in my home. Oh, this is why I just felt like I didn’t belong there, and that school wasn’t the place for me. (FIC1, February 2008)

This example shows the importance of learning children’s names and knowing what they like to be called. Without a doubt, part of one’s self-identity is the name by which one identifies oneself. For Maria, being called by a name other than the one her family used was very upsetting. Maria’s kindergarten teacher did not take the time to learn about Maria’s life outside school; therefore, she did not know that Maria had a
nickname. Consequently, Maria felt that her teacher had no interest in learning and knowing about her. The teacher’s failure to use her nickname at school caused Maria to feel as if she had lost part of her identity and who she was and that she did not belong in her classroom.

This experience weighed heavily on Maria, and it influenced her beliefs and values about good teachers. Maria believed that a good teacher was one who invested time in knowing the children in her or his classroom. Knowing about the children and learning about their lives, what they like to do, and what they like to be called was very important to Maria as a teacher of young children. She believed that learning about the children and their lives was germane to building close and trusting relationships with them and their families. Maria stated:

With my preschoolers, I try to learn their names and also the names or nicknames that their families call them, so that once in a while I call them in that name. I also allow them to tell me about their lives, and I give the chance to share stories with the rest of us in the classroom. You know, this is very important because I think it is part of their identity and who they are. (FIC2, February 2008)

The foregoing details illustrate how Maria’s own experience as a child with her teachers influenced what she valued as a teacher of young children and what she perceived to be part of her professional role and responsibility. According to her, learning about the children in their classrooms was crucial for teachers. As an early childhood teacher, Maria believed that knowing the children was important in helping children to develop a feeling of security and a sense of belonging.
Images of a Good Teacher

In fourth grade Maria found a teacher who changed the way she felt about school. Maria admired and loved her fourth-grade teacher, whom she described as fun, loving, caring, and interesting. Maria described how her fourth-grade teacher made learning interesting and different. Maria loved attending this teacher’s class because she made her feel special. This teacher cared so much about Maria that she visited her at home. Maria stated:

I loved going to my fourth-grade teacher’s class. She was the only teacher that came to my home. I was afraid for her to come to my home and what she would see. I didn’t want to be embarrassed. She knew my life at home, but she didn’t care. She still helped me, and she gave me rides home. (FIC3, February 2008)

Every child deserves to feel special and to be treated so. Maria’s fourth-grade teacher made her feel special, and she showed interest in knowing about Maria’s life outside her classroom. In a particular instance, Maria talked about how her teacher visited her at home just to drop off a sweater that she had forgotten at school. She described how happy she felt that her teacher would find the time to spend with her and to visit her at home. Not only did this teacher make a difference in Maria’s life as a child and a student, but this teacher also gave Maria the attention, love, and care that she needed but felt missing with the other teachers. About her fourth-grade teacher, Maria stated:

She could’ve given it [her sweater] to me at school, but she didn’t. So why did she bring it to my home? I think she loved me just as much as I loved her. When
she had a surgery, we had this teacher that looked like a witch for half a year. We really missed her and wanted her back. I think she really cared about me and not just my grades. She believed in me, and she even told my parents one time that she thought I needed to check my sight. I didn’t only love her; I loved her style and teaching, too. I really can’t tell you how much I loved that woman. And you know what? I found her when it was time for me to student teach. She was my mentor teacher. It was a blast! She said that I did an outstanding job and for her to tell me that it was just a blast and an honor, especially that she was my supervisor, too! I remember she would just leave me in there with the kids, so she must have had trust in me. She trusted me. I learned from her that every teacher should love her students because that will make their learning more meaningful. A teacher should love her students no matter where they come from. She loved us. She made the best of us no matter where we [children] come from. We [teachers] should accept all children with all of their complex personalities. You don’t have to love every child, but you should respect them, support their learning—no matter what—and hold them to your best expectations. (FIC6, March 2008)

Reflecting on her work and understanding of her professional teaching identity as an early childhood teacher, Maria described the inspiration she took from her fourth-grade teacher and her decision to seek her out as a mentor because she wanted to be like her. Being a teacher of young children, Maria believed that part of her role was to find ways to engage the children in their own learning experiences, trust them, give them roles
and responsibilities, hold them up to high expectations, and treat them equally and appropriately, regardless of who they were or where they came from. This is how Maria’s fourth-grade teacher treated her students, this is what Maria learned from her fourth-grade teacher about being a good teacher, and this is what Maria perceived to be her own role as a professional teacher.

Maria also talked about what other people believed about urban children, suspecting that they are all at-risk children. Maria was one of these urban children and “how dare anyone say what urban children can and cannot do,” she said (FIC9, March 2008). Maria stated that her appreciation and admiration for her fourth-grade teacher derived from the assistance the teacher gave her to succeed and the way she made learning fun for all students in her classroom. According to Maria, her fourth-grade teacher held her students up to high standards. She took time out of her personal life to help children and support their learning. She believed in them, trusted them, and never underestimated their abilities. She conveyed no negative attitude toward children the way Maria suggested many other teachers did. This was Maria’s image of good teachers: They were interested in learning about children, cared for them, respected them, loved them, and made learning fun for them. This was the kind of teacher Maria wanted to be.

School Context and Professional Development

This study took place at a developmental laboratory school where Maria worked as a preschool teacher for seven years. Before that, Maria taught at a predominantly Black urban school for four years. Given that most data discussed in here related to Maria’s teaching experiences at the developmental laboratory school, findings shared in
this study were understood within the context of a predominantly White school where Maria worked at the time of this study. In this section, I have discussed Maria’s professional experiences as a teacher who had worked in urban schools and who worked in a predominantly White school at the time of this study. I have shared knowledge about Maria’s teaching experiences and the way she perceived herself, the relationships she formed with others at the school, and the way she identified her professional identity.

Every year of teaching seemed to be like her first year of teaching and first time being with children, Maria told me (FIC9, March 2008). Describing herself as a teacher was very difficult for Maria. She was afraid that she might convey an image of herself that did not represent accurately who she was or perhaps did not reflect the way others at school viewed her. Maria worried so much that she might be too hard on her children or that parents might not like her or that she did not expect enough of the children. Repeatedly, Maria stated that a major concern of hers at school was that children’s parents might not accept her as their child’s teacher or might not believe enough in her or trust that she was capable of being a good teacher for their children.

In a formal conversation that I had with her, Maria recalled her first year of teaching in the school, when a parent repeatedly went to the director to complain about her. “She was good at it,” Maria said. She believed that the parent was not happy with a Black teacher in her child's classroom. Maria stated:

They [parents and school administrative staff] didn’t understand that I was trying to figure out these children. It was a culture shock to me. I was teaching in an urban Black school. So from that to a Caucasian school, I had to learn how I
should talk to these children, how to talk to their parents, and I also had to think about whether they would listen to me and understand me or not. It was very hard to be in such place. (FIC12, March 2008)

**Relationships With Children**

Maria valued her work with children. She wanted others at the school to see her classroom as a family, and she wanted to be there for each and every student in the classroom the way her mother was a part of her life and her siblings’ lives. Maria, the teacher, also believed in the importance of parent involvement; yet she believed that parents could be involved in their children’s lives at school in many ways beyond attending parent–teacher conferences. She saw how her mother was very involved in her life even without her pushing her to study or asking her about school or even attending all of her school meetings.

Maria absolutely enjoyed being with children. She loved them, cared for them, and nurtured them. Every morning as they walked into her classroom, Maria greeted the children with a smile, hugged them and invited them to play together and read stories with her, talked to them about their work, and showed interest in listening to their stories and what they had to share about their lives. Maria cared very much for the children; she made sure they were all well fed, and she took it upon herself to prepare healthy snacks for them and have extra food for those who were hungry.

Maria also tried to give all the children in her classroom the attention they needed. She worked with them in a large group, in small groups, and individually. Children were always her first priority. Once she walked into the classroom, Maria put aside anything
that was going on in her life and focused on her work with the children. At times when she felt tired, sick, or was upset, she used to ask me and the other student teachers whether whatever she felt on that day showed on her face and the way she interacted with children. She explained that as a professional she always wanted to be consistent with children. She did not want them to worry about how she was going to comport herself with them. She wanted the children to feel comfortable in her classroom, and she wanted them always to know how happy she was to be with them.

Maria also wanted her values and beliefs to be reflected in her work with children. She wanted them to learn these values and apply them to their work and interactions with one another. For instance, she valued the importance of mutual respect and forbade children and anyone else to act or speak disrespectfully. In terms of respect, she wanted them to learn the importance of showing one another patience and understanding. For example, on one occasion after children had chosen what they wanted to do, Maria asked them to wait and allow one of their peers to think about what she wanted to do. As children sat waiting for the child to make a decision, one child asked Maria why they had to wait to play. She answered, “That’s called patience. You need to have patience and wait till your friend decides just as you took your time and turn” (O18, March 2008).

Maria’s values about teaching and working with children were evident in her classroom rules. Because she wanted children to be respectful of one another, she explained to them how they could show respect to each other by greeting one another every morning, speaking calmly to one another, and cleaning up together after they finished their work. Children were regularly reminded of these rules as well as their
responsibilities. For example, at the beginning of the semester, Maria explained to the children how cleaning up was their responsibility; it was not something that they were asked to do as a favor to her or anyone else. She also explained to them how important it was that they had an idea about what they wanted to do in the classroom in relation to their work choices. Observations of Maria’s work with children showed how she talked to them and asked about their work plans each and every day. She provided them with different work choices and materials that they could use and offered guidance and direction when needed. For instance, whenever she noticed that some children could not focus on what they were supposed to do, did not have a plan, or were merely wasting time, she walked up to them, encouraged them, and asked them to think about what they could do to be more productive during work time. As we conversed about this, Maria explained how she believed that a good teacher is one that can help children to focus. They need to have a plan for their day, and they need to think about what they’ll do, just like we teachers do. When I ask them if they have an idea about what they want to do, I am helping them to get focused and keep them on task. (FIC9, March 2008)

Maria believed that her role as a teacher was to help children think about what they wanted to do and what they wanted to learn. She did not believe that her role was to make decisions for them. She wanted them to have input with regard to what they learned. She thought that by encouraging them to think about what they wanted to do, she could keep them interested and focused. In one example and while a group of children played with blocks that were scattered everywhere, Maria told them that she did
not see a plan, nor could she understand what they were trying to build. She later asked them to think about what they could build, and she told them that she would help them if they so desired. In another example, Maria taught the children how to make their own Play-Doh and showed them how to read the measurements on the cup, but still she reminded them of how important it was that they had an idea about how they were going to use it. Maria seemed never to “spoon feed” the children, but instead she encouraged them to think and decide for themselves. As she worked with them, she always tried to engage them in the learning that was taking place. In the previous example Maria did not simply make Play-Doh for them and ask them to play with it. She talked to them about its texture, the various colors it could be, the ingredients included in the recipe, and the measurements needed to make it. She believed that teaching should be fun and enjoyable. She did not want children to feel bored or lose interest in what they did, and that was why she allowed them to make decisions about what they were doing in her classroom.

Maria also valued the importance of allowing children to concentrate on their work without interrupting them. She did not appreciate others’ interrupting her work with children. She valued so much the time she spent with them, and she believed they deserved to be respected and not interrupted. In several instances I observed that Maria was disturbed whenever a staff member or a teacher walked into her classroom to tell her something while she was sitting with a child, trying to draw a picture or read a story. In the same manner, Maria wanted the children to allow one another the opportunity to focus on their work. On several occasions, she talked to them about the importance of
watching how loud they became or how noisy they were or how they needed to bring their voices down so everyone else could focus. At times like these she said, “Please be respectful of the children who are trying to focus and concentrate on their work” or “You need to put your thoughts and ideas together. Control yourself, focus on what you are doing, show me that you are serious,” or “You’re maybe too loud. Calm your voices. You’re too close to each other, so there’s no need for loud voices. Let others focus please.”

I observed that Maria wanted the children to take time to think about their behaviors in the classroom. Often, she asked the children to take a deep breath, calm themselves, pull themselves together, shake off the stress, and think about what they did and its influence on others around them. She provided them with proper guidance, and at times she restrained a child, removed a child, verbally addressed a problematic situation with a child, and always asked children to think about their actions. For example, one of the children asked another child if she could help her and get the scissors for her while she glued some papers together. The other child responded: “That’s your problem, and you need to pick them [the scissors] up.”

When Maria heard this exchange, she immediately looked at the other child and said,

She asked you nicely to help her, and I don’t think that saying, “That’s your problem” was a good response. Helping and respecting others is a nice thing to do. So think about a nicer thing to say or do. (O24, March 2008)
Furthermore, observations showed that Maria believed in the importance of discussing children’s work with them. She returned their sketches, revisited their drawings with them, asked them to think about what they remembered about their trip to the meadow, allowed them to reflect on their drawings, read for them what they had her write down on their portraits of the meadow, and asked them to look closely at what they drew in their pictures. As she revisited children’s work with them, Maria used to ask them about what they liked the most about their drawings, and she drew their attention to certain parts of these drawings that she wanted them to discuss or work on.

Being professional and taking her work seriously did not stop Maria from putting herself on the children’s level and showing interest in learning about their personal lives. Lunchtime was one of Maria’s favorite times to talk to the children about their lives and families and everything else that they wanted to share with her. She sat close to them, socialized with them, and showed interest in what they said. In other situations, I observed how Maria took advantage of certain happenings and turned them into teachable moments. In one instance, I recall Maria’s having a conversation with a child who was not convinced that she was the one in the picture in the meadow, but Maria insisted that the child in the photo was indeed she. As they argued back and forth about who the child was, Maria explained to the child that it was fine to disagree and that having different opinions was a good thing: People did not have to always share same ones.

In another incident, Maria noticed two girls talking to one another, distracting others while they continued talking and unable to focus on finishing their work. As they continued to talk, Maria walked over to them and told them that she thought they were
finished with what they were doing and that perhaps they needed to take a break before they started another task. Although one of the children stubbornly disagreed with her, Maria calmly explained to the child that her intention was not to hurt her feelings or make her feel uncomfortable; but instead she wanted her to gather her thoughts in order to focus and think about what she wanted to do. As we discussed Maria’s dealing with this situation, she explained to me that as a teacher she always thought about when to pull back, when to push a child to do more, and when to give children their space. That was a situation where Maria felt she needed the children to think about what they were doing, but at the same time she backed off and gave the child some space to think about her behavior without arguing with her or making her feel uncomfortable. All of these examples demonstrated and reflected the way Maria perceived her work as a teacher and the image she had of the children, herself, and their work together.

Despite what took place in the classroom, Maria wanted the children to know that she cared for them and was there for them to help them and talk to them. She wanted everyone to see her classroom as one big, happy family, she said. She did not allow her personal life to affect her teaching, interactions, and work with children. She challenged herself to find ways of making learning exciting to children the way her fourth-grade teacher had made it for her. She laughed with the children, shared jokes, and acted silly but also took her job seriously. She critiqued her work, revisited the things she did with children, reflected on them, and thought about what she could do to make learning more engaging and more meaningful to children.
In short, Maria cared so much about who she was in the eyes of her children, their families, and the school. She assumed many roles in the school: She was a preschool teacher, mentor to student teachers, partner, supervisor, guide, caregiver, and learner. Frequently, Maria assumed the role of researcher more than teacher. She observed children playing together, watched their interactions with one another, took notes on what she saw, revisited children’s work, reflected on it, analyzed it, and reported on what she saw with the student teachers. She also provided children with proper feedback about their work, believing in the importance of revisiting children’s work with them and talking about it with them and their parents.

On several occasions, observations revealed the way Maria encouraged the children to critique their own work and think about how they could make it better. In doing so, she offered suggestions and provided alternatives. For example, she asked the following questions: Do you think we need to put in more color? How about some green? What if we squeeze it? Do you want to experiment and see? Take a closer look at what you drew, and edit it.” On other occasions, Maria discussed children’s work by simply asking them about it: “Tell me about your work. How did you do that? Oh, look at this! It is so sparkly. Did you roll it first? Can you tell me how did you do it?” Maria gave children ownership of their own work. She allowed them to be the teacher and to teach her how to do things. She was able to see herself not only as the teacher but also as the learner. She valued what she learned from children and about them.

In addition to the examples noted above, Maria saw the importance of having children work together and listen to one another. She valued, admired, and appreciated
the good things they did together. For example, she thanked children for cleaning up and helping one another and told them how impressed she was with how they collaborated. One of the most interesting things about Maria’s work with children was the way she challenged them to do the best they could together as a group. She did not accept poor work from them. She pushed them to be creative thinkers, and she always asked them to tell her about their work. Maria also told the children that she believed in their abilities and what they could do. She wanted them to understand that doing their best did not mean being fast or doing haphazard work that was not well thought out. She encouraged them to take their time, think about what they did, and to think about how they could work together as a team. She wanted them to develop a sense of belonging together, and she wanted them to value one another’s ideas. Sometimes, she challenged them to work together and to think about what makes their work together so important to them. Maria did not accept poorly thought out answers or haphazard work from the children. She always held them to high standards, and she always reminded them of the importance of working as a team.

Maria wanted the children in her classroom to appreciate the time they spent together. She wanted them to work closely together and to find joy in working and playing together and being in one another’s company. In so many situations, Maria encouraged children to do activities together. The following short quotations noted on various occasions demonstrate her concern for cohesiveness among her students: Let’s add the colors together. Let’s make space for one another. Let’s hold hands, and stick together. You do not need my help; you two can work it out together. Go back to the
block area and discuss together how you will use the blocks and still play together. Go sit together and talk about any conflicts you have together. Show me how you can be together. Let’s all sing “The More We Get Together, the Happier We’ll Be.”

Maria believed that

when children learn to appreciate working together and being together, everything else becomes easier. Cleaning time becomes easier, working at the blocks becomes more fun, and the classroom runs more smoothly. Everyone benefits as everyone feels that they belong together. (II₄, February 2008)

Watching Maria in action with children, I saw that she had a distinct image of them. For her, children were not innocent. She believed that this notion of children’s innocence implied that they were naïve, could not think for themselves, were not good thinkers, and could not make good decisions—all notions that Maria soundly rejected. According to her, children lived in the same world that adults lived in, but they had their own ways of seeing, expressing, thinking, and doing. Maria believed that children were good and creative thinkers. They are full of life; they enjoy playing, having fun, and exploring the world around them in ways that she believed adults could not. For this, Maria believed that adults should not decide on what children could and could not do. She believed that children’s abilities should not be underestimated and that when they were held to high expectations, they were capable of doing more than what adults thought they could do. For this, Maria challenged children to do their best and give their best. She held them to high standards, and she always pushed them to do better, as illustrated above.
In some observations, I noticed how constantly Maria drew children’s attention to the small details of their work. She asked them to look closely at what they did, and she did not accept hastily done or haphazard work from them. Even when they painted or drew pictures, she asked them to think about what they drew and why they had done so. She also shared her expectations with them, provided them with the tools they needed to do their jobs in better ways, and offered direction. For example, as children drew pictures of the animals they had seen outside in the meadow, Maria provided the children with photographs of these animals and asked them to look at the details of their bodies. In other examples, she helped the children to mix watercolors to make them look more like the real colors they saw out in the meadow and in the photos she shared with them. She even pointed out to the children the differences she saw in the shapes and colors of the animals they drew in comparison with the way they looked and the direction of their gaze in the photos she shared.

As she worked with the children, Maria sat close to them and encouraged them to focus and concentrate on their work. In one example, Maria told a child that she would paint her canvas in her own way to give the child an idea of how her teacher. She explained to the child that she was not dictating to her what to do or how to do it but that she simply wanted to share her ideas with her. In another example, Maria demonstrated to a child how to draw a deer by drawing her own on a piece of paper. As she drew it, I heard her describing how excited she was about this activity. In all observations I was convinced that Maria valued children’s work and enjoyed working with them and sharing her ideas. She was so proud of them and took the time to tell them how much she
appreciated the hard work they put into what they did. This was the kind of teacher that I observed over the course of this study. Maria was very passionate about her work. She respected the children and worked with them as part of their team. She saw herself as a learner just as much as a teacher. She valued what children had to say and offer and she always wanted them to feel special. She was serious, and she took her job seriously. She worked closely with the children, and she pushed them to think about ways to improve their work. At all times, Maria expected good work from the children and asked them to have a plan and an understanding of what they wanted to do.

Findings from this study indicated that as a teacher and a professional, Maria perceived her role in a particular way. She did not believe that it was her role to provide children with easy and quick answers to their questions or problems, but instead she believed her job was to help them develop their abilities to think and solve problems by finding appropriate solutions. As I observed Maria, I noticed that she never merely offered an answer: She always encouraged children to think and work together on solving a problem or reaching an answer. Furthermore, in several situations, I noticed that Maria gathered the children together and discussed her concerns with them. She always helped them to think about the consequences of their behaviors and not to rely on her to always solve their problems for them. That was her vision for her classroom. She wanted others to see her classroom as a big, happy family and a strong community whose members worked together, played together, and supported one another.

In one informal conversation with me, Maria stated that she wanted the children to appreciate the time they spent with one another. She told me that she did not have
many friends at preschool or kindergarten, so she wanted the children in her classroom to treasure the opportunity they had to make friendships that could last forever. Maria did not want the children to take one another for granted but to learn how to be together, play together, and accept one another even at times when they have their own disagreements to settle.

Maria’s journals contained her perceptions of her teaching and work with children. They reflected her values and beliefs about teaching, and they showed how she understood her work with them and what she thought to be most important about it. Repeatedly, Maria wrote and talked about the importance of a clear vision and plan of what she should do with children. She discussed the importance of sharing experiences with children and developing respectful and positive relationships with them and their families. The way Maria understood her professional identity related to the way she understood being a teacher. She believed that she was a very caring teacher who loved children, cared for them and about them, and respected them. She described how she viewed her classroom as one large family in which everyone was welcomed, accepted, respected, and acknowledged. She wanted her classroom to be seen as a place where children belonged together, shared responsibility, and played together and where their interests, needs, and individuality were recognized and valued. In her own words, Maria said: “I see my teaching and work with children as a way of being together, minds working together, souls coming together, people loving each other, and a community that supports one another” (IIs, February 2008).
Perusing Maria’s teaching journals, I noticed that on several pages she had documented the importance of clear classroom rules frequently reviewed with the children as well as her questioning the number of children who could comfortably work in each learning center, which aligned with what I observed of her work in the classroom. On many occasions, Maria sat with children, gathering them for an urgent meeting or a get-together to discuss some behaviors and issues in the classroom; during such meetings she reminded them what was acceptable and what was not. In her journals, Maria also wrote questions about what it meant to have personal space, teacher space, and child space. In one particular journal entry she wrote about teachers’ areas in the classroom, and the importance of everyone in the classroom respecting them. As we talked about these issues, Maria explained the need for children to know about their personal spaces as well as the personal spaces of others, including their teachers, and what they meant.

Maria wanted the children to respect and be kind to one another. The contents of videos of her classroom and work with children aligned with all other data collected in this study. In one particular video, I watched Maria hold a group discussion with children about personal space. They discussed what such space looked like when they played, sat next to one another, and napped. In another video, I watched Maria ask them to remind her of the rules of their classroom community. As they repeated them, she wrote the rules on a large piece of paper hung on a wooden board. They discussed what each one meant and how they should be observed in their work together.

Maria wrote journal entries about who she believed needed introductions to certain materials and tools, and in most of the entries, she wondered about what changes
or additions needed to be made in the classroom to stimulate productive experiences. I also noticed how—with particular experiences and activities in progress in the classroom—Maria posed questions for children to think about because she wanted them to be creative thinkers. She wrote notes like the following: “What is light? What is it for?” “The mail carrier sends the mail”. “I wonder if there is confusion for some children between sending (mailing) and delivering” (PD, Teaching Journal3, 2008).

Maria also took note of the progress that children made. She observed the changes that took place in their learning abilities and commented about them. For example, in one entry, she wrote:

I was quite interested in the construction that took place in the blocks area today. I’ve noticed that Karly [pseudonym] is becoming a strong block builder, and her interests have grown in this area. I wonder what has occurred in her development that has prompted her interest in construction. And I wonder what provocations can I offer to extend the child’s interest in construction and how can I integrate other areas into her construction. Karly has such a creativity and imagination.
(PD, Teaching Journal2, 2008)

On a different page, Maria wrote: “I haven’t seen them in two days and I feel they grew taller, I wonder if they grow mentally this fast too” (PD, Teaching Journal2, 2008). Maria also wrote about how she perceived the children to be very smart, creative, eager to learn, and strong thinkers. She wrote notes to herself asking about how she could best present her ideas to them, wondering also about what materials to offer the children and how to provide them in ways that they would find interesting.
In one entry Maria wrote about the importance of collaboration. In her writing she referred to the importance of children supporting and helping one another. She also wrote that everyone had the right to be heard, to use materials, and not to be verbally abused. She jotted down the following phrases: “intense engagement, working together, and building meaning through relationships.” I was interested to see that in one of her journal entries, Maria described in her own words the importance she associated with children working together. She wrote: “Children discover together, take bigger risks, build relationships, are able to make close observations, pay better attention to details. Being together as a group is important for the children to practice and do” (PD, Teaching Journal 4, 2008).

Maria also wrote of the importance of greeting the children, especially those reluctant to come to school, making them feel welcomed and loved. On some pages, she wrote about how she had to rephrase her questions when she thought that the children did not understand what she had said. She was challenged by devising ways that she could make her work with the children more visible within the community. She wrote about how important it was for her to think about different ways to be with the children. In a journal entry she wrote: “I need to pay attention to what the children say, do, and think about. I need to pay close attention to the areas of children’s play that need support like the drama area” (PD, Teaching Journal 1, 2008).

In her journals, Maria also wrote about the importance of making connections to parents’ lives and children’s personal activities outside school. In one entry, she wrote about how she needed to learn more about children’s interests, the stories they told, and
who they were. She wrote: “I need to know what the children are all about, who they are, the symbols they use to express themselves, and why they share the stories they say” (Teaching Journal, 2008). As a professional, Maria wrote about how she needs to reflect on what the children learned in order to try to understand them and to think about what she learned as the teacher and how this learning would impact the future work of the children and her work as a professional.

Notably, Maria’s teaching journals included her thoughts about how to involve parents in their children’s lives. For instance, in one entry, she wrote about her meetings with them. She discussed what she should and should not share with parents. She wrote some ideas, for example, share photos of her work with the children or talk to them about the class trip to the university campus. In addition, Maria wrote about children’s relationships with the student teachers. She pondered ways that the student teachers could develop closer relationships with the children, and she also wondered about how sharing materials and working together could support the relationships children had with their student teachers, especially in small groups. Maria’s teaching journals highlighted what she viewed as important about her work with children, how she viewed her work with them; furthermore, they offered an insight into what occurred in her classroom. They allowed her to evaluate and assess herself and the children’s progress and her way in scaffolding their learning. How to involve parents, how to work together, how to understand the work she did with children, and how to be with them were issues that seemed to occupy Maria’s thoughts. Occasionally, Maria posed questions about her work with children. For instance, she asked,
How can I turn a story into an inquiry? What are we communicating as a classroom and large group? Who is our audience and who are we? How can we develop an identity and what would it be? How do we study together? How do children, teachers and families come together as researchers? What is the role of the teacher? How to bring the walls to life and how do we want to communicate our work and research? How do children communicate who they are and how do I communicate who I am to them? How do we learn to value one another and how do some experiences bring us together as a community? How do the children and the teachers communicate meaning making with others? Are the children’s voices heard in this classroom and is mine heard too? (Teaching Journal, 2008)

Maria told me that as a professional she always questioned what school should be about and how school personnel should respect children, their ideas, and what they do. Although she did not display much of the children’s work on her classroom walls, Maria emphasized the importance of making children’s work and thinking visible. She believed that could be done in numerous ways, not merely by putting children’s drawings on the walls. She believed that allowing children to tell stories about their lives, asking questions about what interested them, reflecting on what they did, and documenting what they said and did were ways of showing them that they were important and that what they said mattered.
Relationships with Parents

For Maria, building strong and open relationships with parents was quite difficult. She struggled with honesty and informative communication, especially when she was in a position where she needed to share with parents any negative information about children and their misbehavior or learning difficulties. On one hand, she worried that parents disliked her or failed to accept her, and on the other hand, Maria admitted a shortcoming in involving parents in meaningful ways in her classroom. Although she realized the importance of parent involvement, she believed that sometimes too much parent involvement was problematic. She stated:

We [teachers] are trained to do a certain job. Yes, we are not perfect; but parents need to let us as professionals do our job. It is just like when you have too many cooks in the kitchen. Maybe what I am saying is a bad thing, but I invite them to come in to my classroom. I actually prefer that they come in and sit in the classroom because what they will see will be totally different than what they see in the booth. I have nothing to hide, and I am not afraid if they come in because we are there to learn and teach and work; and we do work very hard, and I am proud of that. Even when things fall apart, we don’t hide things; but we learn how to deal with what we encounter, and I would love for parents to see and experience that. (II7, April 2008)

One of Maria’s greatest challenges, as she described it, was to learn how to deal with parents who asked her whether she knew what she was doing in the classroom and whether their child was truly learning there. Maria expressed how their reactions to her
and their questions implied certain assumptions that forced her to believe that she might have been judged on the basis of her status as the Black teacher in the school. She said, “Everyone has a cultural background that they bring in to their classroom, and maybe they feared that that’s what I am going to teach their children, a different education” (FIC19, April 2008).

Maria said that parents’ suspicious looks wore on her. She wished she could tell them that no matter what her color was, she was there for their child and that she loved their child and every other child in her classroom. She explained that all she wanted was for the children in her classroom to be happy and successful:

I want them [parents] to know that if my African American child was with these parents, I wonder if they would give the same love and care to my child as I do to their children. When I sit there with those children and kiss them on their forehead or rub their backs, all I want is for these children to know that I care for them. But I have to wonder if those parents would do the same for my child. Would they do that? Would they accept to hold a Black baby in their arms? Would they rub the back of a very dark Black child because he is crying? I hope they think about that before they judge me and give me these weird looks. (FIC20, April 2008)

Maria was concerned that parents may have been worried that their children were receiving a different kind of education because she was a teacher of color. She expressed the following:
Maybe they [parents] don’t understand enough of my culture, and maybe this is just my own perception; but a lot of guidance comes from experience and knowledge of the field and an understanding of young children, but also it comes from others’ experiences and cultures. So maybe sometimes they wonder about how I handle certain situations, which might be different than the way they do in their own culture. In that regards of such situations, I always feel less capable. (FIC21, March 2008)

As a Black teacher, Maria saw herself in a very difficult position vis-à-vis parents. She could not always understand their responses to her. Maria shared an incident involving a parent who came to her and told her that she thought her classroom was a classroom for children with behavioral issues. Maria wondered about the reasons that would cause a parent to draw such a conclusion. Upon reflection, she felt that making such assumptions was very unfair to her and to the children in her classroom, and she wondered whether her being a Black teacher and having a Black child with challenging behaviors were the reasons that her classroom had acquired that reputation. Maria mentioned that she was puzzled because the children from the local community and the children newly accepted at the school were always placed in her classroom instead of some of those who required transition from the toddler classroom to the preschool room. Her fear that parents did not want her to be their child’s preschool teacher hurt her feelings and pride as a teacher. Maria said, “It is sad because I would give these children all my best. I always talked myself into it that I can be these other people’s children’s teacher, too; but they just won’t let me or want me” (FIC18, April 2008).
Maria argued that holding certain conceptions and stereotypes of Black teachers and Black children was very unfair and wrong. She believed that no one was perfect and that children were human beings like everyone else. Everyone faced issues, but such a fact did not give some people the right to judge others or make them feel less, the way some of her children’s parents made her feel. Maria spoke about difficulties she experienced at the beginning of every school year when she had to meet new parents and their children. She described the facial expressions of some parents when they initially saw her. To Maria their expressions conveyed surprise as if to say, “Oh, so this is my child's teacher!” Such looks left Maria wondering whether parents thought she looked young or whether they thought, “Oh, my God! I didn’t know that my child’s teacher for this year was a Black teacher.” Maria discussed the importance of parents being a part of their children’s lives both in and out of school. She explained how families had their own ways of participating in their children’s lives. No one should tell parents how to participate in their child’s life or question the way they behaved with their children, yet she stressed the salience of talking to parents in order to learn about children’s lives and how best to support them. She did not judge the quality of parenting by the number of times they attended her classroom meetings or sat in the booth to observe their children in the classroom. She believed it was not her place to tell parents how to be part of their children’s lives, and she also believed that every family had its own way of caring for their children, the way her family had cared for her as a child.
Relationships with Teachers and Staff Members

At the outset of this study, Maria avoided telling and sharing much about her relationship with the other head teachers and staff members at the school. I noticed that Maria was more comfortable sharing stories about her family and work with children than telling stories about her relationship with the other workers at the school. Her concern and fear was that others school personnel might find out about what she shared and told about them, possibly resulting in their anger or negative response to her, particularly if they felt that what she shared might hurt their images as teachers.

Maria explained the she did not want to be misunderstood nor did she want to be perceived as a “back stabber” or a disloyal person. She stated:

You’re asking me to tell you about my experiences, and so you’re listening to my perspective, and my perspective is a Black perspective and not a White one. Since I’m Black, issues related to my race might come up, and you know, no one likes to be called prejudiced. That scares others, and maybe this is what I have been sensing from others in the school ever since I agreed to be in your study. I feel like they’re talking about me, maybe they wonder about what this Black teacher has to say and will say. This is why I say I don’t want to be seen as the back stabber or betrayer in your research. (II7, April 2008)

In talking to Maria, she explained how much she worried that by her participation in the study and sharing stories about her experiences with others at the school, she might be misunderstood or misperceived as someone that she was not. She made it very clear that not everything she had to say was positive, making her feel uncomfortable about
deciding what she could and could not share. Although she shared experiences about her work with others at the school, Maria wanted them to understand that her intention was not to portray them in a negative light but instead to convey the way she felt about certain situations.

Observations revealed that Maria maintained formal and professional relationships with other staff members at the school. She attended school and staff meetings, participated at school events, had conversations with teachers about their and her work with the children, and talked about her research questions and interests with the other teachers while she also listened to theirs. On many occasions Maria spent time with some of the other teachers and staff members (e.g., the studio teacher, administrator) to discuss and study together children’s work and progress.

Although she kept her relationships with others at the school professional, Maria shared the lack of deep connections and close friendships with any of the teachers and other staff members at the school. She rarely spoke about her personal life, and she did not allow anyone inside her personal life. Maria stated: “I focused so much on being the teacher in that school. I wanted everyone to see me just as qualified and competent as the other teachers. I knew I was different, but I never wanted to be seen different.” (II7, April, 2008).

As she shared stories about her relationships with the other teachers at the school, Maria discussed her difficulty at times communicating with some of these teachers, especially in situations in which they handled children’s work differently. As she explained it, Maria saw herself to be the type of teacher who valued the importance of
trusting children with their choices and with giving them the opportunity to think about what they did and how to improve it. Thus, Maria was deeply disturbed whenever a teacher walked into her classroom or stopped by the art studio while she was working with a group of children and took it upon herself to interrupt children’s work and ignore Maria’s presence, proceeding to make statements to the children about what they were doing wrong and how they should correct it.

Maria did not believe that she must always correct children or interrupt their work and tell them what they were supposed to do as other teachers. In a particular encounter that occurred in the art studio, a group of children were at work painting a large picture. When they wanted to add more color to it, they mistakenly added more water to the paint than was necessary. As they did so, Maria did not stop them from adding more water. She watched them add more, and later when the children realized on their own that the paint had been diluted by too much water, she asked them to think about what they could do to make the colors look richer, better, and less watery.

When one of the staff members walked into the art studio and noticed how the children added extra water, she immediately told them that they should not have added so much water and explained to them how all that extra water could ruin the richness of the colors and the painting itself. In situations like this, Maria told me how she felt upset and belittled by others at the school whenever they interfered with her work with children. She believed that children should be given opportunities to learn from their own mistakes, and in situations like the one above, she felt that she was being judged and perceived as lacking skills or incapable of teaching children.
In another example, Maria was very upset when she was called into the director’s office on several occasions to discuss her work with the director and some other staff members during a period of preparation for an important visit by a group of outstanding teachers and early childhood educators from a different state. At the time, Maria felt that she was the only teacher called to the director’s office numerous times to be told that she must display more of the children’s work on the walls of her classroom. Having to attend all these closed meetings in the director’s office upset Maria and made her think she had been targeted. She stated that she was very angry about these meetings because she was not asked to talk about her work with children but instead critiqued for it and told to improve it. At this time Maria questioned her abilities as a teacher, feeling that she had been treated unfairly by others in the school.

As Maria explained it, being told to display more representations of children’s work in the classroom was not what bothered her: It was the timing. Maria told me she felt that the school leaders did not like her work, but it was acceptable as long as no one saw it. When important outside visitors were expected, however, suddenly they needed to ask Maria to make some changes to her work and classroom, especially because it was going to be seen by others. This caused Maria to feel bad about herself, believing that school leaders were unhappy with her work as a teacher yet had chosen to remain silent until this visit.

Maria also wondered why she was the only person told so many times that she needed to improve and make more visible her work and art skills. She argued that if the school personnel truly cared about helping her, they would have supported her from the
beginning of the school year. The director’s waiting to address issues until the time of a visit by outsiders seemed to correspond with concern about the quality of Maria’s work, as the only Black teacher, in light of the way it might be interpreted by outsiders. Maria stated:

I don’t know what I did. Maybe I am doing something wrong; she [the director of the school] doesn’t like me or something. And in situations like these, I feel like I am not good enough or right about being in this school. If you don’t like my work, you should support me, not just judge me. If you think my classroom doesn’t look too colorful or interesting, why you would wait so long before you tell me this. Why now? (FIC\textsubscript{23}, April 2008)

Such examples showed Maria’s difficulty with sharing her feelings with others at school. Observations revealed that Maria’s relationship with the other teachers and staff at the school forestalled her open and honest communication with the teachers, staff members, and center director; consequently, her relationship with others at the school was strongly influenced by her feelings about being with them and feeling different from them.

Similarly, in an informal conversation, I learned how uncomfortable Maria also felt about one of her doctoral classes in which all students were required to present and share their research ideas and questions at roundtable sessions that faculty members were invited to attend. When it was her turn to present and speak, many of the faculty attendees walked to her table and wanted to hear what she had to say. This caused Maria to wonder whether these faculty members were truly interested in what she had to say or
whether they were merely curious about what if anything of value would come out of her mouth as the Black student. She said:

Maybe they [faculty members] were just there because they wanted to see what this Black girl would say. Or maybe they’ll wait to see if I knew what I was talking about or whether I would fall on my face or maybe they thought damn, she knew what she was talking about. Who knows what they thought? (FIC23, April 2008)

**Relationships With Student Teachers**

Maria’s feelings about working with student teachers resembled the way she felt about communicating with parents. Maria feared that her student teachers might not have liked her and that she might have lacked the capability to do everything that she was expected to do with them in her classroom. She explained how she knew child development but did not know much about adult development, which caused her difficulty in understanding these student teachers. In addition, she talked about how some of the student teachers in her classroom had commented on her and on the way she spoke and interacted with children. Apparently, Maria did not fit the image they had of Black women and how loudly they talked. Maria said:

Some student teachers think I was very noticeably quiet, and yes, I am quiet in nature. Because I am Black that doesn’t mean I’m loud. The children know that when I am loud, that means something is not right. So I don’t have to talk loud all the time. There is no reason for that. I don’t want someone to bark at me or yell at me, and this is why I am not loud with the children. (FIC9, March 2008)
Despite what they thought of her, Maria argued that her disposition in the classroom was all about being herself. She emphasized that she never pretended to be what she was not. The student teachers were surprised that she was not a loud, Black person, but Maria argued that as a professional, a sense of calm and control of herself were essential because many of the children had “big personalities” that could not have been controlled had she been loud and out of control herself. In talking to her about her relationship with student teachers, I learned that some of these teachers made Maria feel as if she were untrue to who she was as a Black person. This bothered Maria because once again she felt judged not for who she really was but for who others assumed she must be and for the way they thought she should act as a Black person.

Maria explained that every semester she welcomed and accepted new student teachers into her classroom. In her reflections on her relationships with the student teachers, Maria talked about the challenges she encountered with them. She described her experiences at the school with both good and less competent student teachers. She talked about how some of these student teachers thought that she was too intimidating and how some thought she was too insistent on “her way or no way” in the classroom. Maria believed that weaker student teachers harbored negative feelings about her. She argued that she never wanted to control them and that every time she guided them or advised them, she did so because she was the professional and the more experienced teacher in the classroom.

As Maria told stories about the student teachers that she had, she admitted handling some of them sternly, justifying her actions by explaining her high expectations.
She did not accept or tolerate unjustified excuses for failure to do their best at work. Specifically, she wanted them to practice thoughtfulness and to provide meaningful answers and explanations for their actions in the classroom and with the children. As a teacher of young children, Maria believed that student teachers should think critically about what they did and why they did it. She said:

The way we work and communicate is very important because it influences the whole classroom. So I try to always tell them [the student teachers] that they need to think about their work and be thoughtful and always to ask me questions whenever they need help. (FIC5, February 2008)

Observations showed how much Maria cared for and about the student teachers in her classroom. She regularly asked them whether they had questions, walked around the room, observed what they were doing with the children, took some of them aside to discuss issues as they occurred, and always made herself available for them. She also encouraged them to reflect upon their work, and at times she revisited their work with them and talked about it in ways that were helpful to them. Maria was very respectful of her student teachers; she was kind to every one of them. She saw their work as important to the children and to their own professional development, yet she believed that having too many student teachers at times, interfered with her idea of the ideal teaching that could have taken place in her classroom.

Observations during her teaching further revealed that occasionally Maria walked out of the classroom and into the booth to observe the student teachers in action with the children. I happened to be there with Maria in the booth during one of her observations,
and she stated that she believed her job was always to remind her student teachers of the importance of their awareness of the way they presented themselves and behaved around the children. She said:

Sometimes student teachers forget that the children will do what they do [i.e., imitate student teachers], so in a sense we [teachers] are their models. But yet we can’t do all the talking, and so sometimes we need to stop and listen to the children. And we need to listen to ourselves and watch our body language and what messages we send to these children before we are able to understand the children and why they behave the way they do around us. (FIC4, February 2008)

Repeatedly, Maria discussed the importance of presenting herself in a consistent manner in the classroom. Who she was and how she presented herself as a teacher and a professional seemed essential for Maria. Data showed that Maria cared deeply about her teaching image, which she wanted the student teachers to think about as well. Maria believed that children needed consistency in the classroom, and to achieve it, she believed that part of her professional role was to be consistent with how she worked, behaved, interacted, and talked with children.

In an informal conversation, Maria noted:

I have hard days, and those are the days that I have to work harder to be consistent. My mood will affect my work. Like today, it was hard. I was feeling horrible. It is like I couldn’t even think, but still I provided leadership in the classroom, even though I don’t know if I made it or not. It is just that as a teacher, it is my role to be consistent. Children are the same way. Sometimes
they are not themselves. Sometimes, they come in the morning crying or not feeling well, so we need to maintain consistency. Each child has to know how I will be with them and for them every day. They also need to know what they are expected to do every time they walk in the classroom. (FIC8, March 2008)

Maria valued the time she had with children, and she wanted the student teachers to feel the same way about being with children. She wanted them to engage with children to provide them with the support, care, and attention they needed. Maria also cared deeply about providing the student teachers with the guidance they needed in their work with children. She met with them in small groups and large groups to talk to them about their work and progress.

Maria said she wanted to believe that she could trust the student teachers with the children. Data from this research showed that the way Maria understood her professional identity related to the way she understood her professional role in the classroom and with the children and the student teachers. As a professional, Maria felt obligated to assist the student teachers with their work in the classroom. She wanted them to understand the difference between being playful with children and being disrespected by them. She believed that although the student teachers could be playful with children, clear boundaries must still remain intact. As a professional, Maria believed that she and the student teachers must achieve a balance between, on one hand, playing with the children and having fun and, on the other, being taken seriously by them when they were not playing. This was one of the challenges that Maria had to work on with the student teachers as she guided them. She wanted them to understand their role as teachers just as
she wanted them to understand that helping children with their work did not mean doing the work for them; she thought that doing so was entirely inappropriate. On several occasions, Maria discussed feeling the need to “choose her battles” to prevent certain situations with the student teachers from escalating. She expressed her disappointment when some student teachers sat next to the children and simply did the work for them instead of helping them do it themselves. As a professional, Maria wanted these student teachers to understand that their role was not to do the work for children but instead to provide them with ideas and suggestions about how they could do what they were expected to do. Maria believed that her role was to provide student teachers with direction, and to show them ways to support children and give them suggestions without doing their work for them.

On a regular basis, observations showed one aspect of Maria’s role in the classroom: to discuss with the student teachers their daily plans for working with children. Her main concern was that some of the students in her classroom were there only because they wanted to fulfill as quickly as possible their university requirements and assignments as student teachers and undergraduates majoring in early childhood. As a professional and an early childhood teacher, Maria believed that part of her ethical and professional responsibilities and obligations with regard to student teachers was to motivate them to reflect critically upon and think about why they were in the classroom with children, why they wanted to become teachers, and what did with children. On occasion, I noticed that she sat down with some of the student teachers, asked them questions about their work and thoughts behind doing and preparing certain activities for
the children, and pushed them to explain their choices and the importance they saw in what they did with children.

Maria wanted the student teachers to understand their responsibilities and roles as teachers in her classroom. Attending some of her meetings with the student teachers and listening to their conversations, I learned that Maria wanted them to think about how best they could assist the children and scaffold their learning. She wanted them to put their hearts, minds, and all they had into their work with children. If they were more aware of the nature of their jobs as teachers, they would better know where they needed to be and what they needed to do, Maria said. In one particular incident I observed, Maria asked me to follow her into her office. As I did so, I noticed the troubled look on her face, and so I asked her what had happened. In response Maria described what she thought had been a serious incident at her classroom door. Apparently, as children lined up and prepared to go outside, one of the student teachers became frustrated as two children fought about who should stand before the other in the line. As she tried to solve the problem, this student teacher decided to pull hard one of the children and ask him to proceed to the back of the line.

In talking to Maria about this incident, I learned how unhappy she was to have witnessed this incident. She was particularly distressed because the child who was removed from the line accidently hit another child because of the way the teacher had pulled him. The incident distressed Maria, and as she talked to the student teacher about it, she explained to her that she did not want to dictate how she was supposed to interact with children; but she wanted to let her know that what she did was unacceptable and that
she had never seen an occurrence like this before. On the same day, Maria told the student teachers that she wanted to meet with them. She gathered them to talk about the importance of knowing and learning about children and how to interact with them in positive and safe ways.

Guiding student teachers and attending to children’s needs were quite challenging. In several conversations with me Maria discussed constantly needing to remind student teachers to avoid side conversation or social talk while in the midst of working with the children. She also shared her constant reminders that professional teachers must remain in control of themselves while they were with children. Observations showed how working with children in small groups and sharing the responsibility of their learning with student teachers did not stop Maria from visiting all groups, watching what happened, offered support if needed, and reminded the student teachers that she was available for them if they needed her help.

Observations also showed how Maria valued the importance of respecting the student teachers and collaborating with them. She provided them with many opportunities to practice what they knew and had learned about being a teacher. For instance, she did not interfere with student teachers when leading the class at morning or afternoon meetings. She did not critique them, nor did she try to correct them in front of the children. Instead, she focused on supporting them and helping them to run the classroom smoothly; furthermore, she had no problem sharing with them partnership of her own classroom. She sat aside and watched them in action, tidied the classroom, and prepared tables for lunch time, allowing them to work with children. As they did so,
observations showed how Maria talked to student teachers about children’s progress and additional measures they could take to help them.

On countless occasions, I heard Maria speak with the student teachers about the importance of understanding the nature and personality of the children with whom they worked. Influenced by her own experience as a child, Maria believed that when teachers took time to learn about the children, they discovered how to assist them and work with them. This was something she valued and wanted the student teachers to value as well. Observations revealed Maria’s encouragement when problems arose: She urged student teachers to talk to children and try to understand why they behaved the way they did. She discussed with them strategies that they could try out with children to learn how to deal with problematic situations. In one example I observed Maria and the student teachers sit together, reflect on a problem taking place in their classroom, make suggestions, and decide possible solutions for it. Learning how to deal with individual differences in children could be very challenging. Maria had children operating on different developmental and ability levels. Some knew how to be part of a group, but others struggled with acceptance in a group. Some were able to form friendships and create their group of close friends, and others had some behavioral problems that impacted their interactions with the other children and their ability to fit into a group of children trying to focus on their work.

Maria and the student teachers needed to find a way to help children learn to accept those who were different, had behavioral problems, or were rejected. In the classroom, children repeatedly used hurtful words with classmates with behavioral issues
(e.g., I hate you. I don’t like you. I am not your friend. I don’t want to be your friend. I don’t want to play with you. You are bad, you are very bad.). The targets of these words felt rejected, and hearing how bad they were caused further behavior issues. For instance in one observation, as a group of children played with blocks, one of the children with behavioral problems walked over to them and instead of telling them he wanted to join their group, he simply knocked over their construction and then wanted to build a new one with them. The children in the group grew very upset and angry, refusing to play with that child.

Teachers realized that they had to intervene when they noticed how such behaviors affected children’s interactions with one another. They decided to implement a technique known as a Kind Jar. The idea behind it was to ask the children to think about the good and nice things that they liked about one another and to ask a teacher to help them write down their words of kindness on a piece of paper that they could put in the jar. Later, at the afternoon meeting children could choose a few of them to read and share with everyone else in the classroom. Maria told me that the impetus behind the activity was to help the student teachers and the children to see the good in one another and to focus on it. She wanted to make visible to the children what was good about themselves and their peers, and she wanted the student teachers to learn how to help children to work together without judging one another or labeling some classmates as bad children or troublesome children. Instead of complaining about supposedly bad children and negative behaviors, Maria wanted everyone in the classroom to think more positively about spending time and working together. A review of a videotape made in Maria’s
classroom showed Maria using puppets to demonstrate to the children how they could improve their interaction with one another. She role-played the situation that occurred when the child knocking down the blocks, and she asked them to think about how they thought being told they were bad would make them feel; she also asked them for suggestions on good alternatives to persuade someone not to topple their constructions. Hearing what the children thought and the ideas they had was gratifying for me as was seeing how the puppet show helped everyone in the classroom learn to improve their actions in a group.

Maria’s relationship with the student teachers reflected the way she perceived her own job and role as a teacher. She took her job very seriously, and she wanted her student teachers to take it just as seriously. Maria held student teachers to certain standards: She did not accept their excuses for not doing what they needed to do, and she did not accept tardiness or disrespect directed at the children. In one case, Maria became upset with a student teacher who arrived for work late without apology and took too long to settle into the classroom and begin her work with the small group of children who were waiting for her. Maria believed that student teachers should respect children’s time.

It was also interesting to watch how Maria guided student teachers while they were in action. She was very professional in her mentoring, giving them latitude but also providing guidance and direction when needed. For example, on one occasion, she told a student teacher who led the morning meeting to ask the children to “sit down on their bottoms” and show her that they were ready to listen. She did not take it upon herself to do that for the student teacher because she wanted the children to respect her and take her
seriously the way they did with Maria. In another example, I observed Maria ask a student teacher to draw the children’s attention to the details of their work and not merely to accept whatever they painted or drew. Maria continually reminded student teachers that they needed to hold children to higher expectations and the belief that children could do better than what they actually did. When student teachers did well in solving a problem in the classroom, Maria praised them but also reminded them to resist judging children because of their problematic behaviors. Maria stated:

It’s refreshing to see how children get over their struggles. I feel happy when student teachers help children getting over their struggles. Sometimes we tend to forget who the real children are because of their struggle with some behaviors. So it’s good to hear and know that they are improving, and that we’re not so stuck on labeling them in certain ways. (FIC24, April 2008)

Finally, Maria highlighted the school curriculum used at school. She was worried that her teaching was too much infused with the philosophy practiced in Reggio Emilia. Despite all the wonderful things she learned about teaching from this approach, Maria believed that the Reggio Emilia curriculum should not be her goal as a professional teacher. She commented that American teachers needed to embrace their own culture and who they were in their work with the children in their classrooms. As a professional, Maria believed her role was to search for the best techniques and use them in her teaching. Instead of mimicking others and following what some said teachers should and should not do, Maria argued that teachers should not hold themselves to specific ways of teaching. She stated:
Teachers need to have wider perspectives. It’s OK to hold onto what is important, but we also need to learn new things, too. As a teacher I have to take the best of what I like and make it work for my classroom. You just have to take the best of everything. But when you allow yourself to be so influenced by a certain perspective, you become stagnated and can’t see past things but what is in front of you. I just believe that we [teachers] shouldn’t stick to one specific approach as we do in here [at the lab school]. (II₈, April 2008)

Reflecting on her professional identity, Maria believed that part of it was her understanding of her identity as a teacher and her role as a professional. While she learned so much from the Reggio Emilia approach and benefited from it, she believed that working at a place that was so much influenced by that approach took away from who she was as a teacher. She said:

I felt it was either Reggio Emilia or die. I felt like I had to convert. I had to give up, and I converted; but still it felt like a closed environment. We [teachers at the school] need to study other things. We really need to. If we understand what we do and can find an answer to why we do what we do and why what we do is important, only then we can reach a state of satisfaction with our work; and only then, our work and what we do becomes more meaningful. My mind always wonders what it is about a certain thing that makes it so important, and this is why I constantly question myself, my ability, and what I do. (II₈, April 2008)

**Conclusions**
Putting it all together—observations, formal and informal conversations, in-depth interviews, teaching documents, and field notes—helped me identify how Maria understood and formed a professional identity that related to and reflected the way she performed as a teacher. The way Maria understood her professional identity aligned with the way she envisioned her role, viewed herself as a professional, and understood her role and responsibility in the lives of the children in her classroom. This identity, which derived from the many carefully thought-out details that Maria shared about her work, entailed the way she presented herself to children, parents, student teachers, and school staff as well as the way she believed they saw her. It included Maria’s values and beliefs about teaching and working with children and incorporated the many roles that she played in her work with children. This identity was about who she was as a person, preschool teacher, caregiver, advocate, professional, researcher, learner, mentor, supporter, guide, role model, Black teacher, and minority teacher. Her identity also included the emotions she felt throughout her teaching, all the positive and negative about teaching, and the conflicts she experienced. For Maria, when children played together, respected and accepted one another, knew their boundaries, understood their classroom rules, and saw themselves as a family, working on their problems and knowing how to deal with them as a team became easier for them and their teachers.

In this chapter, I have discussed Maria’s view of her teaching and her thoughts about what makes good teachers and good teaching. I also shared knowledge about her relationships with children, parents, and student teachers at the school. In addition, I tried to show in my discussions what Maria considered to be significant in her professional
identity and professional role as a teacher by shedding light on the relationships she had with parents, student teachers, and children.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As shown in this research, being a teacher is about far more than appointment to a teaching position, which could be translated merely into acquiring certain teaching skills and practices; in reality being a teacher is also about developing a sense of identity, uniqueness, and purpose (Mayer, 1999; Wilson & Deaney, 2010). One of the primary attributes of the study was the opportunity it afforded Maria for critical reflection and storytelling. In this research, a teacher’s stories were heard, personal beliefs and perspectives on schooling and teaching were explored, personal and professional experiences were shared, and the value attached to certain issues or situations were identified. According to Farnsworth (2010), evidence of identity formation and negotiation can be found in teachers’ reflections and narratives, revealing the meanings they give to experiences that play a major role in the formation of teacher identity. Identity formation should be understood as a practice in which teachers must engage throughout their careers as they develop their own teaching cultures within the cultures of the schools where they work (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986).

Recognizing that teacher identity is formed and negotiated with respect to one’s lived experiences and reflections of those experiences (Wenger, 1999), I took a social constructivist approach for the discussion and analysis of this research study on the formation of teacher professional identity. This approach focuses on how a teacher constructs and negotiates meaning and forms an identity through social interactions with others (Charon, 2007; Sutherland et al., 2010). Drawing on a constructivist view of
teacher identity shows that teachers play an active role in the formation of their own professional identity. In this study, Maria was actively engaged in reflections on and storytelling about her teaching, through which her professional identity was examined and found to be formed in relation to others and the social context in which she operated. Coldron and Smith stated that forming an identity becomes “a matter of acquiring and re-acquiring an identity which is socially legitimated” (as cited in Sutherland et al., 2010, p. 456).

An examination of the experiences of the participant Maria and their role in the development of her professional identity provides not only an example but also a means to understand and explain what the formation of teacher professional identity entails. The process by which a Black early childhood teacher formed and reformed her professional identity in a predominantly White school has been explored in this research. This gave her the opportunity to tell stories about herself and her life, family, teaching, and beliefs. It also gave the researcher the opportunity to discover what factors, experiences, and events came to bear the most influence on the way this teacher saw herself and her teaching. In addition, this study has been contextualized in the existing literature on the formation of teacher identity and makes a contribution to the literature and to general understanding of the topic.

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the findings and implications of this study, which was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How does a preschool teacher form her professional identity?
2. How does a minority teacher’s professional identity develop in a predominantly White school community?

3. How is professional identity developed in the school context in which the teacher works and in light of significant personal and professional experiences?

The data included in this study was collected in spring and part of summer 2008; data sources included in-depth interviews, formal and informal conversations, observations, and a review of Maria’s personal teaching journals, and videotapes made in her classroom. In this case study, I used content analysis performed through coding that helped me recognize emerging themes. In my analysis, I looked for data that matched the themes I developed through a review of relevant research literature. After reading the text I also searched for themes that emerged from the data. I read and reread the material until I felt I could develop potential codes. Then I generated initial codes after moving recursively between phases of data analysis. Next, I developed a list of themes and combined coded data with proposed themes. Finally, I refined, reviewed, and presented themes identified in this analysis in Chapter 4.

This chapter contains a discussion of the findings of the study illuminated in Chapter 4, which have been placed in the context of the current literature available on teacher professional identity. The discussion opens with the significance of family and early authority figures in Maria’s life and the formation of professional identity followed by a description of Maria’s personal and professional experiences as well as a brief summary of emotions and the role of all in the formation of her professional identity. I
have also shed light on Maria’s attempts to fix her identity, denying herself and race in order to fit into the dominant-culture group. The next section contains an examination of the importance of reflection, teacher narratives, and observation in understanding Maria’s identity. An important aspect of the study is what has been noted as the tension occurring at the time of the study. I have described the tension as a painful process in Maria’s life, which resulted in major changes in her understanding of her professional teacher identity. Implications of the study appear next and include a discussion of identity as addressed in teacher education training programs and in relation to the discipline of early education as well as the direction of future research. Final points cover the limitations of the study and a summary of conclusions drawn from it.

**Significance of Family and Early Authority Figures**

Research suggests that investigating teacher professional identity should explore personal biography (Farnsworth, 2010). In addition, researchers on teacher identity have argued that early authority figures, such as parents, caregivers, childhood teachers, and personal characteristics, have an impact on the kind of teachers that people become and on teaching attitudes and styles (Korthagen, 2004; Oberhuemer 1999; Wright & Sherman, 1963). My findings confirm the research noted above. In this study early authority figures, such as family and childhood teachers, played a major role in shaping Maria’s teaching values and beliefs; however, Maria’s family played the most basic role of all in providing Maria with a sense of support, belonging, uniqueness, and an identity of who she was. Maria’s mother had the greatest impact on her. In her narratives, Maria talked about what she had learned from her mother. She described how she saw in her
mother a wonderful example of a strong-willed, wise, hard-working, and compromising 
woman, and she emphasized the role that her mother played in teaching her and her 
siblings the importance of family relationships in good and hard times.

In this study, family was one of the most important aspects of Maria’s life, in fact, 
crucial to her sense of self. It defined who she was, where she came from, who she 
belonged to, who she turned to in need of emotional support and advice, and what she 
valued and found most significant in life. Strong connection to her family meant so much 
to Maria, not only as a person, a daughter, a sister, and a mother of her own child but also 
as a teacher of young children. She saw that by teaching children to work together, they 
become empowered both as a group and as individuals. In her view, endorsing a sense of 
belonging in a community and functioning as a family helped the children to remain 
strongly connected with one another in the classroom. As she saw it, the importance of 
teaching young children the value of being and working together as a family in the 
classroom lay not only in teaching them the importance of collaboration or turn-taking 
but also in teaching them the value of respecting, supporting, and accepting one another 
no matter how different they looked, performed, or behaved. The notion of togetherness 
and its importance in Maria’s life may have stemmed from her own upbringing and 
childhood memories about her family and her experiences with her family throughout her 
life. My conclusion supports research suggesting that caring teachers are those who were 
cared for as children (Noddings, 1984) and that teachers come to resemble the significant 
people in their own childhoods (Wright & Tuska, 1968).
As a teacher Maria engaged in continuous evaluation of her teaching actions in the classroom. In stories about her family, Maria revealed that she had been taught always to think about her actions. Observations showed how Maria often encouraged the children to evaluate their work and their actions. Instead of punishing them, Maria believed in teaching the children how to learn from their mistakes by allowing them to explain why they did what they did and by asking them to think of better ways to behave. To conclude, exploring the significance of Maria’s family in her life was essential to understanding the formation of her teacher identity (Layder, 2004) and what she found important about her work and her life based on her personal experiences and background (Beijaard et al., 2004; Tickle, 2000). Maria’s lived and shared experiences with others and in her world indicate that her professional identity was socially constructed. The way she viewed herself as a teacher was related to her view of herself as a person in relation to her family and others at school, confirming research suggesting that understanding the identity requires an understanding of the self.

Understanding that the teachers construct and develop professional identities with meanings they attach to themselves and their roles as teachers, I assumed a social constructivist perspective in this research. For a better understanding of professional identity and its formation, I listened to Maria’s voice and examined the narratives with which she articulated her professional identity; and the process of identity formation came into focus. Listening to the stories Maria told and seeing how she made sense of her experiences provided me with deep insights into her life as a teacher. In the
following section, I have discussed the way Maria’s personal and professional experiences helped shape her professional identity.

**Maria’s Personal and Professional Experiences and Their Role in Forming Her Professional Identity**

I found Maria’s personal and professional experiences to play a major role in the formation of her professional identity. Her professional identity was shaped in part by her professional experiences in public and private schools as well as by her personal life experiences in and out of school. Recognizing that professional identity is one of the components of a person’s identity (Gee, 2000; Geijsel & Meijers, 2005; Sutherland et al., 2010), I explored Maria’s personal and professional experiences and discovered they were essential to her professional identity.

Clearly, part of Maria’s conception of her professional identity related to what she valued and found significant in her personal life and to what she considered her responsibility to be in her professional life. Maria seemed to view the teacher–student relationship in terms of the mother–child relationship, where the teacher created a bond connecting the members of the classroom community as a mother created a bond connecting family members. In her narratives, Maria repeatedly emphasized that caring for students should always be at the heart of every teacher’s relationship with them and that a teacher’s goal is to build a classroom community that supports children’s learning and growth and helps them develop a sense of belonging. The way Maria viewed her role as a teacher was greatly impacted by the way she saw the role of her mother, who had dedicated her life to loving and caring for her family and who compromised so much
in her life in order to protect her family and her children, provide for them, and ensure that they succeeded and had what they needed in life, especially during the extremely difficult times the family faced because of the alcohol addiction of Maria’s father and the hard approach he took to his children and wife.

I have thus argued that Maria’s professional identity could be characterized as self-sense and awareness of who she was and what she considered to be significant for her professional life, development, and credibility as a teacher. Not only did Maria take her job seriously, but she also kept herself current with knowledge about her field and profession by participating in professional development workshops and educational conferences as well as pursuing a graduate degree in the field of education. According to Robinson and McMillan (2006), to understand how teachers form their teaching identities, investigation of the kind of teacher preparation experiences that those teachers have is vital. Even though Maria did not share much about her early teacher preparation, I recognized her as a very knowledgeable teacher who held a bachelor’s degree in child development and a master’s degree in education and who was soon to earn a doctorate in education as well.

Studies on professional identity have suggested that it is related to teachers’ concepts and images of the self with an emphasis placed on teachers’ roles (Beijaard et al., 2004). Maria saw that her experiences in practice offered her opportunities to explore what it means to work with children and to be a professional educator. Although some might not see teachers’ work with young children as professional, Maria saw that it required a great deal of understanding of her craft and her work with the children for one
to understand how teachers functioned and what they did. Maria saw her work and her role as a teacher to be much more than that of a childcare worker or a babysitter. Such experiences in the field influenced Maria’s sense of her teacher identity: She saw that her role was educational and her responsibility was ethical, requiring her to learn about the children and how they developed in order to know how to move them to the next level.

Understanding how our experiences impact who we are helps to explain and justify what people do and why they do it. In the literature available on teacher identity, researchers have noted the considerable interest in the development of teacher identity; but very little empirical research is available on the experiences of teachers and the formation of their identity. In the current study the teacher’s personal and professional experiences emerged as a most important finding in this study: They showed and provided by example how Maria’s professional identity was socially constructed, validated, and verified through her interpretations and reinterpretations of them and the meanings she constructed of them. Through her narratives, reflections, and observations as well as my documentation of certain events and experiences, I gained insight into Maria’s professional identity—what it looked like, what it was made of, and what forces affected its formation and change.

Building this study of teacher professional identity on knowledge available from the literature and on data collected in this research allowed me the opportunity to enter Maria’s life and be part of it. I spent most of our time together observing her in action, listening to her stories, taking note of the details of her personal and professional life, documenting major events in her life, and engaging in reflections on her teaching
experiences. Thus, I was able to understand how a day in the life of this teacher looked, what happened in it, and how it affected her as a teacher. But most importantly, I was able to observe Maria’s interactions with other faculty members, children, parents, and student teachers. In some ways, Maria seemed distant from other faculty members; her relationship with school personnel seemed to be formal and related only to her teaching life, not her social life. Ironically, Maria believed that teachers should not work in isolation, and she highly valued the building of a community and coming together as a family; but other considerations affected the way she saw her own relationship with the school staff and administration.

Maria wanted to be seen as competent and as professional as the other teachers were, and she also wanted her work to be perceived as good. She was very concerned that others underestimated her work and thought less of who she was as a teacher because she was Black. Her concern could help explain why Maria felt distant from others and why she felt the need to compete and to prove herself professionally to others, demonstrating that the way Maria identified herself as a teacher and interpreted her work experiences involved her relationships with others in the school and how she thought they perceived her work and who she was. As the only Black lead teacher in a school where all the other teachers were White, Maria felt the need to work hard on being seen as the teacher and not the Black or minority teacher, labels that demeaned her. As a result Maria was careful with the way she presented herself in school and interacted with others: She felt that she was different and more like the Other, or the outsider, who looked different and had a darker skin color. Working hard on being seen as professional
and fearing the influence of popular culture on how others might see her as a Black teacher not only impacted her self-image and identity as a teacher but also colored and added mixed emotions to her experiences and to the way they were interpreted and given meanings. Thus, as much as making a difference in a child’s life and instilling curiosity and growth in children were rewarding to Maria, the realization that her work was not perceived as good as the work of the other teachers was frustrating and stressful. Maria’s experience was, therefore, both positive and negative—the best and the worst of teaching. For example, although Maria considered critique to be important for teacher development, she admitted that true to human nature, she did not like to receive it or to hear someone judging and evaluating her work, especially when it was not perceived to be all that good. Maria commented on frustration resulting from receiving critique in ways more damaging than helpful. Exposure to negative and positive experiences on a personal and professional level could explain the changes that occurred in Maria’s professional identity and evaluation of the self as a teacher.

In this study, I have argued that Maria had multiple interdependent identities that were reevaluated and reformed based on what she experienced and the meaning she gave to them. For example, although Maria had much to offer the children, she seemed to struggle with somewhat low efficacy-based self-esteem whenever she thought that her work was not perceived to be good enough or as good as the work of her colleagues at school. She did not fully feel that she was part of her colleagues’ community, and at times she felt isolated, left to fight her battles alone. I have argued that through social comparisons, Maria assessed, judged, and evaluated herself and her work with regard to
her colleagues at school. As a result, she drew conclusions about herself and her work based on how she felt she was perceived by others there, ultimately affecting her self-image as a teacher.

Apparently, Maria’s experiences and the emotions associated with them—both positive and negative—had impact on her life. I must point out, however, that without the use of data collected from Maria’s narratives, observations, and personal teaching journals, reaching these findings would have been impossible. A discussion of the findings of the study could not be completed or achieved in isolation of a discussion of other concepts, such as emotions, race, and reflection that were found central to my attempts to understand teacher professional identity and its formation. In this chapter, I have provided some insight into how these concepts related to shaping Maria’s professional identity as noted in the study. First, I have discussed how emotions help in understanding Maria’s professional identity.

**Emotions and Professional Identity**

Emotions are very important in understanding professional identity (Hargreaves, 1998; Shapiro, 2009). Teachers’ emotions are seen as responses to human connections and relationships with other members in the profession, parents, and children (Lasky, 2005; Shapiro, 2009). Zymbelas (2003) argued the significance of teachers’ emotions in the formation of teacher identity: “Teacher identity is constantly becoming in a context embedded in power relations, ideology, and culture” (p. 213). Zymbelas (2003) added that the formation of teacher identity is at bottom affective and that teacher self is understood by investigating the emotional components of teacher identity. Maria
conducted a “continuing inner debate between the personal and the professional, the emotional and the cognitive” (Shapiro, 2009, p. 617). Her emotions played a major role in the formation of her professional identity, affecting how she interpreted and reinterpreted certain experiences in her life. Interestingly, emotions seemed to be present very early in the study, ranging from excitement and happiness about participating in the study to hesitation and fear about it.

During the time of the study, I saw that Maria experienced mixed emotions. For example, she did not want to be misunderstood by others for participating in the study; and at the same time she wanted to believe that she could freely and openly voice her opinions and tell stories about her teaching even if some of these would involve negative experiences. Often, Maria felt a need to suppress negative emotions about certain aspects of her work, feeling that doing so was expected of her; however, her unspoken need and her participation in the study soon turned into frustration as she experienced some issues with others at work and received comments about her classroom that eventually motivated her to open up and speak. Generally, the way teachers feel about themselves and their work relates deeply to the way they think they relate to one another and to the way they think teachers should act and be. Despite Maria’s own struggle as she wondered about how to share her untold stories about teaching, she feared opening up because she was worried about how the other teachers and staff members would perceive her and react to what she said.

Hargreaves (2001) asserted that teachers who tend to maintain social distance from other teachers in their work in order to uphold a certain image deny themselves the
opportunity to experience emotional closeness with one other. When teachers remain detached, they “feel that they must choose between two identities—the competent professional or the caring pal. Professional autonomy and independence along with bureaucratic regulation often help make the job of masking and maintaining emotional distance easier” (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 618). Similarly, Grumet (1988) stated that teachers try to maintain professional status at work by de-emphasizing their emotions in order to be seen as higher in status than other professionals in other fields. Thus, emotions in the field of education are often equated with vulnerability, which according to some educators stems from admission of imperfections and problems that create tension between and among teachers.

As noted in the study, Maria found sharing and speaking about emotions in regard to certain experiences or situations difficult. She had grown accustomed to suppressing emotions and burying them deep inside her, perhaps explaining her reason to maintain social distance at work—to be seen as professional and competent and as good as the other teachers at the school. In holding a certain image of a teacher, Maria tried to detach her emotional self from her professional self. Her difficulty in sharing with others her feelings about certain events in her life could also explain her inability to sustain open and direct communication and close relationships with her fellow professionals at school. For this reason, I believe that providing Maria with the opportunity to reflect on her teaching and to revisit certain experiences must have been a good and refreshing emotional experience because she learned more about herself and her identity. Shapiro (2009) asserted that “teacher identity must . . . encompass realities of human existence”
In the end, teachers are human beings who experience many emotions in their lives, and therefore, instead of ignoring them, teachers must use them to grow stronger as professionals.

Fixing Identity, Denial of Self, and Attempts to Fit in With the Dominant Group

In this section, I discuss Maria’s racial background and the role it played in the formation of her professional identity and self-image as a teacher. When people enroll in a program designed to prepare them for a particular profession, they create a certain image of themselves and the kind of professional they want to be. Although some might think doing so is a positive step, others have argued that it could be very limiting and even damaging because the individual might disregard and ignore the richness and uniqueness of her or his own identity (Kaiser, 2002).

Hall (1992) argued that identity is not fixed; therefore, he believed that people should not attempt to fix the identities of certain groups like Black people because doing so tends to make others form a certain image of each fixed group, resulting in the exclusion of those who do not share the same characteristics as the rest of the group. In this study, Maria revealed that she did not want to be seen only as the Black teacher: She wanted others to see past her skin color in order for them to see who she really was and to acknowledge her for her capabilities and skills as a teacher. According to Maria seeing past her skin color would help her to fit into the group of teachers at school, explaining why she had throughout all the seven years of working at the school struggled throughout her seven years at the school to be perceived as professional as the other teachers.
Although Maria was very proud of who she was as a Black person and very comfortable with her own skin color, she still feared that by working at a predominantly White school, she was going to be judged by no quality other than her skin color. Aware of the preconceptions and images of Black teachers that people might have held, Maria did not want to be denied her right to be seen as a good teacher simply because she was Black.

In an interview, Maria talked about an experience with a parent who seemed to be a little taken back by her child’s placement in her classroom. Maria stated that this mother told her at some point that she was worried that her child must be receiving a different kind of education in her classroom. Experiences such as this seemed to make Maria feel like the Other, and that she could never completely fit into the workplace context of the school. I have argued that the issue of power (being valued for herself) was at the core of Maria’s attempts to fit into the school community. Working at a predominantly White school made Maria feel as if she was not in power and that the other teachers superseded her in the teacher hierarchy status. Although children and student teachers who were Black and from other ethnic backgrounds as well were part of the school community, being the only Black lead or mentor teacher, Maria could have felt inferior at times and alone at other times; thus some might have seen her as a member of a minority in the specific context in which she worked. Furthermore, her position as the only Black lead teacher could be another reason that Maria might have felt somewhat inferior at school, making her feel belittled or beneath or lower in standards, status, and expectations. The formation of teachers’ professional identity should not be based on
assumed superiority or inferiority (Tatum, 1997). Whiteness and Blackness are only colors; they do not determine or shape identities, but when given meanings, they influence the way people think of themselves and their identities. The meanings that they associate with skin color, race, social class, and ethnic background impact the images they form about themselves and their self-confidence and self-esteem and play a role in shaping their identities. This was particularly true for Maria because she believed that some individuals tended to base their interactions with her on the conceptions that they held of all Black people.

In That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Like A Teacher! Weber and Mitchell (1995) highlighted the importance of recognizing the ways that certain teacher images have persisted over time and the power of these popular cultural images in molding people’s views of teachers. The power of social representations and popular cultural images of teachers lies in their role in determining and setting forth the characteristics and expectations of what teachers are supposed to look like and do and what is considered good or quality teaching. Maria was aware of how Black teachers were represented in popular culture. She believed that social misrepresentations of Black teachers caused their denigration. For example, although she believed that mentoring student teachers, guiding them, and helping them develop professionally were essential for their future teaching, Maria wondered at times whether part of the reason why that Black student teachers received dispositional statements or write ups “more often than others was unintentional misinterpretation of certain student teacher behaviors caused by preconceptions of how Black teachers were assumed to behave. Concepts like race,
ethnic background, and emotions were all found important in understanding Maria’s professional identity, and they deserved illumination in this study; however, before discussing the third finding of the study, the importance of teachers’ reflections and observations requires attention.

In this study I have recognized the importance of Maria’s lived experiences in terms of culture and ethnicity and acknowledged the impact they have on her professional identity. Although many teachers are fearful of discussing issues related to racism and discrimination, confronting hidden racial biases and prejudices and providing opportunities for open and honest racial dialogues between individuals and among groups are very important in establishing an understanding and an awareness of what it means to be a member of a minority group and in facilitating understanding of different worldviews (Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010). Lack of honest and open conversations on race can lead to upsetting and damaging consequences in the formation of teachers’ identities. In general, some people seem to feel threatened and uncomfortable talking about issues related to racism because these conversations could reveal hidden biases and prejudices, appear offensive to others, and evoke strong emotional reactions. At the beginning of the study and throughout it, where there were many questions and concerns arose with regard to Maria’s selection and participation in this study because of her ethnic background and what she represented as a teacher of color. For example, prior to the implementation of the study, I had to obtain not only Maria’s consent to participate but also the permission of the school authorities to allow me to collect data; many questions were raised about the intentions motivating the study
and the people behind it, the choice of participant, and the role that Maria’s skin color played in her selection for the study.

Similarly, many concerns arose in Maria’s mind as she questioned whether or not the school authorities would have reacted the same and been as concerned and fearful of a teacher’s participation in a research study if the teacher happened to be white. Maria wished that her race had not become the center of discussions about her participation, but as she expected, it did. Maria was hurt as a result because she did not want other members in the school community to see her only for her skin color. She believed that who she was as a person and as a teacher derived from much more than her color, yet with all the attention to her racial background and her participation in the study, I saw how this experience affected who Maria was and what she valued and how it changed her path in life while everything else, including her teacher identity, seemed to change. Understanding exactly what happened and how it impacted her professional identity was essential.

According to Maria, the school’s administration staff was very worried concerned for many reasons with my choice of Maria for the study. First, Maria was the only mentor or lead teacher of color at the school; thus, the school administrator was worried that part of the reason she was chosen was her race. The administrator explained that they did not want Maria to be perceived as the minority teacher or the Other in the school. They argued that they did not see Maria as a minority teacher. Although they acknowledged the fact that she was Black, they reasoned that describing Maria as the Black teacher or the minority teacher may label who and what she was as a teacher.
Second, they were concerned that given the fact that Maria was the only Black teacher at the school, to protect Maria’s identity and the identity of those who might be part of her stories would be challenging. Third, the school administrators were concerned about what might emerge from the study and how others might interpret what Maria would say in the study. For example, they were concerned that some might misinterpret the location of Maria’s classroom in the rear corner of the school as an attempt to hide or isolate her from the rest of the school because she was Black. They feared that discussions about Maria’s racial background might create misconceptions about the school.

Generally speaking, the school conveyed the idea that they did not see skin color but instead saw everyone as equal and the same. This was one of the main reasons that obtaining permission of the administrators was complicated: The study created a conflict in perspectives and disagreement in personal values and beliefs among the school leaders, Maria, and myself. We had our own perspectives on the issue of race and how Maria’s should be presented in the study. Maria, who had to deal with all the issues related to her race and participation in the study, felt that the school authorities may have claimed to see her as they saw all the other teachers at the school, but they still “threw her race in her face” and made her think that she should be ashamed of it.

The social distance Maria experienced at the school might have been the result of her feeling less important and less capable than the other teachers. While emphasizing togetherness in her classroom, Maria did not seek out togetherness in the learning community comprising other teachers at the laboratory school because when issues like race arose, she indirectly showed that her race, a vital part of who she was, had to remain
invisible. People’s interpretations of certain individuals or events, although possibly mistaken, could be very damaging and painful when they did not allow healing to take place as they continued to be silent and dishonest with others about how they felt and thought.

Changes occurred in Maria’s identity as a teacher when she felt “slapped in the face by her race,” and she looked at things differently. The tension surrounding her race made her realize that she never quite fit in at the school despite the years she had spent trying to be perceived as a professional and a good teacher like the others. This research coincided with a turning point in Maria’s life when she felt lost at the school. The problem with race in Maria’s case lay in the way she believed that the school personnel applied race to her status as a teacher. Although the school leaders encouraged researchers and graduate students to conduct research in their lab school, recognizing that race and ethnicity were part of who Maria was, the administrators may have worried that race would be the primary focus of the study. School personnel were also concerned with maintaining the confidentiality of the teachers, the families, and the children who were viewed in the study through the lens of a researcher but more importantly through the lens of Maria.

What I found to be very interesting in this study was that although others were highly focused on voicing their own opinions about whether Maria should be described as a Black teacher or an African American teacher or a minority teacher, less focus was placed on Maria and learning about what she thought and how she wanted to be represented in the study. Maria was upset that she was taken aside and warned that she
might be called this or that as if it were shameful to be called as a Black teacher or an African-American teacher. Hence, confronted with her skin color, Maria felt that she was not given her right to comfortably and openly share what she wanted and to be part of the study in the way that she wanted. Although Maria acknowledged that the school leaders’ intentions were to defend the way they saw her and that they refused to see her as a minority, she believed that they failed to realize who she was and that part of her identity was her background as a Black person, which could neither be denied nor ignored. She thought the issue of her race should not have become the center of attention, believing that an understanding of her teacher identity required an understanding of her as a whole person and not as isolated parts.

Maria felt as if the school leaders may have wanted her to refuse to allow herself to be described as a Black person, when in actuality she was very proud of being Black and very comfortable with being described and referred to as the Black teacher and even the minority teacher in the study. Even when the school authorities did not see her as the minority teacher, Maria argued that she still was considered one through the eyes of those in society who thought of all Blacks as minority. She refused to be called the African American teacher because, as she explained it, she did not hail from Africa. A tentative interpretation is that although it seemed to be impossible to avoid the tension created prior to the study, the social desirability of being seen as non-prejudiced was at the heart of this tension even when the school leaders’ way of showing non-prejudice was disapproved and misunderstood by Maria.
The Importance of Reflections, Teacher Narratives, and Observations in Understanding Identity

Through self-reflection and storytelling about lives and experiences, people are able to generate and develop an image or a sense of who they are as teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Korthagen, 2004; Luttenberg & Bergen, 2008; Nias as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004). Self-reflections play a vital role in the process of constructing teachers’ professional identity, and the stories that they tell communicate the meanings these identities. In the current study, the teacher’s professional identity appeared to be strongly influenced by the presence of others in her life and her interactions with them. The use of reflections, teacher narratives, and observations in the study allowed the opportunity for an understanding of the way Maria interpreted her experiences, interrogated them, expressed her emotions about them, and the way they infiltrated her professional teaching identity.

Likewise, these three methods allowed exploration of Maria’s values and beliefs about teaching and supported my understanding of the influence of the workplace context on the changes occurring in her identity as well as the emotions she brought to this context, ones and that are generated by that context, and their effects on her teaching identity. From a narrative viewpoint, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) believed that teachers’ identities are constructed in teachers’ stories about themselves and that such stories show more who the teachers are and how they are seen than what they know. Furthermore, Maria’s personal teaching journals and documents provided me with information about what she noticed, thought about, and was concerned with while she
was with the children. They provided me with information about what went through her mind while she talked and sat with the children and how she perceived her role and responsibility.

The stories that Maria shared about her life and teaching reflected her feelings about selective aspects of her life and work that shaped the type of identity she had formed. In a sense, her stories lent insights into what she cared about the most and what struggles or tensions she faced at work. At some point in the study a question arose about the necessity of conducting as many observations as I did, but the significance of these observations during the process of analysis: They offered opportunities for informal reflections and conversations, and they enriched the study with firsthand evidence of particular incidents that later came forth as major turning points or transitional points in Maria’s life as a person and as a teacher. Needless to say, the tools used for data collection in the study helped understand how Maria’s identity was socially constructed and validated in relation to others.

Also very helpful to me was exploring Maria’s use of metaphor in her description of her professional identity. The importance of exploring teachers’ metaphors lies in the expression they give to professional identity. Metaphors used by teachers show how they understand their teaching and identities and provide an insight into the difficulties they experience when matching their self-images with their school context (Hunt, 2006). Above all, the power of metaphors lies in their reflection of how teachers understand their identities. Maria saw herself to be disciplined with love, not in the sense that she had to discipline the children but in the sense that she wanted to be seen as a very
thoughtful, disciplined teacher, in whose classroom all that occurred had a meaningful reason and a thoughtful explanation behind it. Maria also stated that she wanted her teaching to be full of love and to be spirited “just like a tree, grounded, like roots. Maybe the branches are not stable, but the roots are always stable, and the roots feed those learners, and it’s all connected” (IL4, February 2008).

The use of metaphor supported my understanding of the teacher’s professional identity. I found Maria’s values and beliefs central to her teacher identity and the practices that guided her actions in and outside the classroom. Likewise, Maria’s use of metaphor reflected her perception of her professional identity; she believed it related to her ability to explain and justify her and the children’s actions and experiences to themselves and others. Nevertheless, in the following section I have addressed the third and final finding of the study, which related to the tension associated with this study. Discussion of this finding includes an explanation of the tension and the difference it made in Maria’s life and perspectives as well as its initiating a painful transitional period and a major turning point in Maria’s life, priorities, and identity, followed by insight into the richness and value of Maria’s participation in the study. In addition, I have addressed professional identity in teacher education and implications for future research. The study ends with a concluding statement.

**How Teacher Identity Changes**

Teacher identities shift based on the meanings that they derive from a variety of resources: “personal experience, the ‘micro-politics’ of the setting, and wider
socio-cultural contexts” (Liu & Xu, 2011, p. 594). “A teacher’s identity shifts over time under the influence of a range of factors both internal to the individual, such as emotion, . . . and external to the individual, such as job and life experiences in particular contexts” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 177). “Fundamental changes in teacher identity do not take place easily: Identity change is a difficult and sometimes painful process, and often there seems to be little change at all in how teachers view themselves” (Korthagen, 2004, p. 85). Maria wanted to be seen as the professional good teacher, but she felt alienated at the school; and she saw that the strengths and uniqueness that she brought to the classroom were insufficiently acknowledged. Maria wanted to feel that she was seen as valuable and worthy in the workplace. She thought that she would never fit and that she had had quite enough stressful experiences over the seven years of service at the school; thus, she wanted to terminate her employment at the lab school because she knew that she could no longer continue. Feelings of loss and confusion seemed to have beaten Maria down. As she reevaluated her work experiences at the school, she realized that she needed to do something new and different in her life. When Maria lost her sense of self as a teacher and her sense of belonging, she felt the need to stop teaching, to move on, and to look for new things to do because her perspective on life had changed. She told me that she felt as if she had missed out on many important things in her life for seven years and that it was time to make up for lost time. She wanted to focus on being herself and not trying to become someone who she thought she should be or have to be in order to be accepted by others.
Maria’s professional identity entailed not only her skills and abilities as a teacher but also the behavior of everyone in her classroom and the way they looked to others. In a 1995 study by Delpit (as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2000) teachers of color were found to have different perspectives on teaching than those of White teachers. She found that teachers of color may be in jeopardy of experiencing racial bias on many levels. Such bias, she explained, may result in a Black teacher, for example, feeling like an outsider with no sense of belonging to the place where she teaches. In this study Maria felt bias and so maintained a distance from others because she did not feel that she could fit into the dominant culture of the school; however, the problem of trying to fit in the dominant culture, according to Yeh and Drost (as cited in Hsieh, 2006), is that the teachers might become victims of unspoken yet powerful stereotypes and messages about their development and personal identity.

Yeh and Drost (as cited in Hsieh, 2006) showed how crucial it is for teachers of color to try to reposition themselves and redevelop or renegotiate their professional identities so that they can feel similar or equal to others in the mainstream. Seeing how Maria evaluated her attempts to be seen the same as the others, I disagree with their argument: I believe all teachers and not only those of color should be who they really are. Instead of trying to be like others, they should be themselves; and they should show what is special about them and how they can add to the diversity of the teaching context. In doing so, teachers would find more joy in teaching; they would have more self-esteem and confidence if they did not feel they must compete to be as good as others, if they could simply do their best.
As noted, in the mainstream of the lab school, Maria felt vulnerable because she was trying to fulfill the expectations of the dominant culture without feeling that she was losing herself. In her stories, she expressed her defensiveness at times because she was sensitive to the way others saw her as a teacher. She hoped that others saw her not only as the Black teacher but also as the capable teacher. She talked about how she came to realize that she worked so hard to be the same that she was blinded and did not realize that for seven years she could not be the same and she would never be the same. She said:

I will never be White, but I was trying to feel that I belong there. And I came to realize that I was trying to be the same, which means to not be looked at different, to be looked at as valuable and worthy and to be part of that community. . . . I worked hard to be the teacher and not the lack teacher or the minority teacher. . . . It’s like just it is always about the community, and I wanted to be part of the community and I hope I was, . . . but the community acts a certain way and looks a certain way, and I felt like I hid myself; and with your research I realized that that is what I was doing. . . . It is hitting me in the face. (II₃, March 2008)

I concur with Palmer (1998) who believed that what matters the most about teaching is the “who” of the teaching workforce. Who a person is and what a person brings to the teaching context lies at the very heart of what it means to be a teacher. Taking into account that teachers’ identities are best understood when their personal identities are connected with their professional identities, I attempted to look at the
multiple aspects of Maria’s teaching life and personal experiences in order to understand how they shaped and formed her professional identity as a teacher; yet what ultimately contributed most to my understanding of professional identity was Maria, her participation in this research, and the role she played in the study. Maria’s participation in this research allowed me to learn more about her through the research itself: I witnessed the change in her identity as a result of the tension that emerged and became a main thread in the study. That tension resulted in new perspectives and changes in Maria’s life.

Studying teacher learning by participating in research inquiry and engaging a participant in investigations of the self with the researcher can generate valuable learning opportunities for both teachers and researchers. Postmodernists have viewed teachers’ examination of their teaching practices as essential to teachers’ professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The value of engaging teachers in critical reflections and conversations with researchers is located in its occurrence in diverse (formal and informal) settings and environments that allow both teachers and researchers to interact openly during retrospective reflection on how teachers position themselves in different social contexts. Jurasaite-Harbison and Rex (2010) stated that the concept of identity embraces both the postmodern notion of the authentic, discursive, embedded, collective self, and the critical modernist conception of the self as reflective agent.

When teachers assume the role of the researcher of their own practice and engage in critical reflection of their teaching, they develop new understanding of their identities (Jurasaite-Harbison & Rex, 2010). Participating in the study was helpful for Maria
because she took a new look at her life and what she was doing, which led her to new learning about herself, who she was, and what she wanted to be. Since joining the study, Maria faced many critical and emotional moments. She had to come face to face with those feelings and emotions that she had about being a teacher, one of color, and what that meant to her and to her developed identity. As discussed throughout this chapter, while some of these emotional moments were painful, others were empowering and uplifting. Most important was that moment of realization and of powerful reflective breakthrough, when Maria recognized the bitter truth that for years, all what she wanted and was concerned with was that others saw past her skin color to the person she truly was as a human being. Thus, the power of reflection in intensifying teachers’ self-awareness and in shaping their identities was certainly acknowledged.

A few months after the study was completed, Maria admitted to me that although she had her own fears about participating in the study—and one of them was raising her race as an issue in the study—she still valued her participation and saw it as a major turning point in her life as a teacher. It seemed that participation in the study and examination of her teaching life with all that it brought with it from emotions and awareness in general to tensions and disappointments in particular, played a role in developing a sense of new selfhood or identity. Even though Maria was not teaching or working with young children at the time of this writing, she still continued to develop professionally. She was on her way to making her dream of becoming a college professor come true, having dedicated time to completing her doctoral degree. Aside from pursuing her degree, she continued to follow several paths as a graduate assistant
and an active researcher. In a case study of her own, Maria examined professional development for part-time employees at a childcare center to understand the possibility of creating inclusive teaching and learning communities. On a personal level, Maria enjoys being a mother, a sister, a daughter, and friend to all those in her life who are very important to her.

Implications for Practice

Identity in Teacher Education Training Programs

Although recent literature in teacher education has shown the importance of identity development, how recognition of this importance translates into actual action in the form and design of teacher education programs remains unclear (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2005) noted:

Developing an identity as a teacher is an important part of securing teachers’ commitment to their work and adherence to professional norms. . . . The identities teachers develop shape their dispositions, where they place their effort, whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities, and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role. (pp. 383–384)

These scholars have asserted that exploration of teacher identity in teacher preparation programs is not always guaranteed or intended; therefore, identity may not always be a part of teacher development. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) demonstrated that in many cases students applying for teaching positions following graduation must still attend to their teacher identities. Clearly, as student teachers make their way through teacher education and into practice, they face the many challenges inherent in shifting identities
as they enter teaching and examine their own ideas about what and how they teach and should be teaching in relation to others in context. Student teachers should choose a pathway for themselves as they begin teaching because they will be expected or forced to acquire an identity or develop an identity, represent an institutional idea of an identity, or even construct and negotiate an identity within a context.

The construction of the real, the necessary, and the imaginary are constantly shifting as student teachers set about to accentuate the identities of their teaching selves in contexts that are already overpopulated with the identities and discursive practices of others. . . . Within such contexts, where desires are assigned and fashioned, student teachers strive to make sense and act as agents in the teacher’s world. Indeed, much of their time is taken up with negotiating, constructing, and consenting to their identity as a teacher. (Britzman as cited in Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 186)

Several scholars and educators emphasized engaging student teachers in discussions and reflections of their identities and placing them in teaching contexts where they can discover their teacher selves, question themselves and their beliefs, and also challenge their identities (Freese, 2006; Korthagen, 2004). In addition, discussions and reflections of identities in teacher education allow teachers to understand the impact of pedagogical practices adopted in teacher education programs on the identities these teachers develop. Thus, teacher education programs should support the development of the individual identity in the education of a teacher (Vanhulle, 2005), where a deep
consideration should be given to the self with respect to educational contexts. I agree with Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) who stated:

In order to anticipate the reshaping of professional identity that will come, we must continue to consider the situation of teachers in the early years of practice, where the influence of their surrounding context—the nature of the educational institution, teacher colleagues, school administrators, their own students and the wider school community—is strongly felt. We must then try to incorporate what we know about the contexts and communities and their influence on the shaping of teacher identities into our teacher education programmes to prepare new teachers for the challenges of developing strong professional identities in positive ways. (p. 186)

In addition, teacher education programs should allow more space for discussions and dialogues on race issues in the profession. Facilitating dialogues among teachers themselves and with their students can help them understand and relate to one another openly without fearing perception as prejudiced or privileged. Teachers and educators must set the tone for discussions on race and provide a safe place for teachers to talk about race and stereotypes and their own biases and fears. In doing so, teachers become culturally competent and sensitive to others as they understand themselves as racial-cultural beings and increase their understanding of the influence of cultural conditioning on fears and biases and its link to race.
Identity in Relation to the Discipline of Early Education

Teacher professional identity cannot be viewed only in relation to others in a social context and in relation to the personal dimension of the self; it should also be viewed in relation to the profession or discipline itself (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). To obtain a better understanding of teacher professional identity, one must focus on examining the professional aspects and roles of a teacher. This study combined a view of identity where both the personal and professional dimensions of teaching seemed to be important in developing an understanding of Maria’s professional teaching identity.

According to Rodgers and Scott (2008), teacher identity can best be understood when the personal and professional aspects of identity are explored. Examining external aspects (contexts and relationships) and internal aspects (stories and emotions) of the formation of teacher identity facilitates understanding of the connections between the self and identity—“with ‘awareness and voice’ being a place ‘where the normative demands of the external encounter the internal meaning making and desires of the teacher’” (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, p. 733).

Self, then, might be thought of as the meaning maker and identity as the meaning made, even as the self and identity evolve and transform over time. The self in its completeness, however, remains unknowable. Still, despite the inevitable discontinuities and change and the intangible nature of self, there is a belief that there exists over time a “Self” that is recognizable and a coherence that allows one to move in the world with a certain confidence. (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, p. 739)
Therefore,

the self will subsume identity(ies) and will be understood as an evolving yet coherent being, that consciously and unconsciously constructs and is constructed, reconstructs and is reconstructed, in interaction with the cultural contexts, institutions, and people with which the self lives, learns, and functions. (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, p. 739)

Similarly, Wenger (1998) believed that teacher identity is the negotiated experience of the self, which involves a teacher’s participation in a community of professionals and a sense of embodiment related to identity, where teachers adopt and express their sense of a professional identity through their own personal self.

The inextricable link between the personal and professional selves of a teacher must be taken into account in understanding teacher identity. Some of the complex factors involved in this link are the interplay of emotion as a part of the self and identity, the narrative and discourse aspects of the self and the shaping of identity, the role of reflection in understanding the self and identity, and the connection between identity and agency. (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 180)

Furthermore, in the discussion of teacher professional identity, recent literature highlighted teachers’ visions and perceptions of themselves, their experiences and those of others as elements that constitute their professional identities. Thus, teachers who value caring for students want to show that caring is something that they perceive to be very important to their teaching and therefore their professional identity. Teachers’ stories are important because they provide a way to express identity, suggesting that
teachers’ identities are collections of stories they tell about themselves and others. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) noted that the importance of stories or teacher narratives lies in the idea that stories include not only the person telling the story but also others who are told the story and who in return tell the story, drawing these others into this process of forming the storyteller’s identity.

More attention must be given to the professional identity of the early childhood teacher. This study revealed that as an early childhood teacher Maria was more concerned about who she was than about what she knew. My analysis aligns with several other studies (e.g., Brooke, 1994; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Likewise, teacher concerns need to be identified and support should be provided to teachers for those areas of concerns. This study revealed some concerns of a minority early childhood teacher in the context of a predominantly White school. Thus, understanding the effect of the perceptions of the school environment on various aspects of a teacher’s personal and professional identity is vital. Furthermore, teachers’ emotions (feeling of alienation, anxiety, anger) should be considered. Although one’s concept of self may appear to be a subjective state to the outsider, it has a feeling of absolute reality for the person experiencing it (Beijaard et al., 2004).

It is important to pay attention to the personal part of teachers’ professional identity. What is found relevant to the profession . . . may conflict with what teachers personally desire and experience as good. Such a conflict can lead to friction in teachers’ professional identity in cases in which the “personal” and the “professional” are too far removed from each other. (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 109)
Rhodes and Huston (2012) argued that the lack of shared identity among early childhood educators and care providers is one of the main factors that hamper high quality programs and services for young children. Been (2012) stated that “without an embraced professional identity, the professional decision making of the early childhood teacher has been compromised” (p. 6). Those in the field should also recognize the importance of teachers’ sense of agency (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009); because agency is linked to self-efficacy and self-concept, it must be reconsidered. Another important factor that plays a powerful role in shaping teacher identity and that requires more attention is reflection. According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), “reflection is recognized as a key means by which teachers can become more in tune with their sense of self and with a deep understanding of how this self fits into a larger context” (p. 182). Specifically, reflection in the ethical domain, which draws on teacher values about what is good, has an impact on teacher identity (Luttenberg & Bergen, 2008).

Finally, early childhood teachers’ involvement in curriculum development and implementation must be considered. In the case of the early childhood teacher in this study, the analysis of her perceptions with regard to the implementation of a specific approach (i.e., Reggio Emilia approach) was noteworthy. She felt pressured to conform to school policies even though she wanted to implement other curricula for her children. Moore, Edwards, Haplin, and George (2002) investigated how teachers reposition themselves and their identities in light of current rapid educational changes, finding that the way they do so depends on how they think of their roles and freedom of choice as teachers in the discourse of educational changes.
Directions for Future Research

The formation and shift in the professional identity of minority teachers in early childhood settings are rarely discussed, addressed, and researched (Agee, 2004). G. Moloney and Walker (2007) argued that issues like identities and racism and their impact on teachers’ and students’ identities are relatively under researched, particularly in primary schools. What is missing from educational research is an analysis of how these teachers and students make sense of their teaching, debate their ideas, challenge their thinking, and position their identities. They have called for more research focusing on studying teachers, especially those of color, in their teaching contexts.

I believe that researchers must focus on the issue of involvement of teachers in research investigations of themselves; through interactions with researchers, they can shape or constrain the development of their identities and understandings of their teaching practices. Indeed, teachers’ participation in research projects raises issues related to the validity and trustworthiness of the results of a study. Thus, exploring the influence of one’s research on the participating teachers has very serious implications for teachers (Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2005). More research is needed on teacher professional identity in situational contexts and on the role of schools in nurturing social justice, especially where teachers’ cultural backgrounds and knowledge are valued and supported, are essential where teachers’ cultural backgrounds and knowledge are valued and supported within the contexts of the schools.

With regard to future development of the content of this study, I have considered following up on some of the completed analysis by asking Maria for additional input.
For example, she emphasized togetherness in her classroom, but she herself did not seek out togetherness with other members of the learning community at the laboratory school where the research took place. An informal conversation at the lab school a year after Maria had left the school showed that one teacher keenly felt the absence of Maria, her ally in social justice. Thus, I wonder whether Maria’s perception of her teacher identity would be influenced by this knowledge. Another possibility could involve group discussions with some of the teachers and the administrative staff. Doing so might promote honest dialogues about how Maria thought she was perceived by them in the school and reveal additional input and perspectives from them to change, reinforce, and or validate some of Maria’s self-perceptions and identity formation.

Finally, as a scholar from another country researching a minority preschool teacher in the US, I can see the value of teacher identity and its relevance in many parts of the world. Teacher identity is a complex issue in itself, and adding to it variables of culture and race and minority status informs not only teacher identity for minorities but also interfaces with dominant-culture teacher identity. Thus, conducting a study like the one in this research can be invaluable in many settings throughout the US and abroad to improve understanding of identity formation in the preschool teacher. I believe the methodology used in this study could be replicated in various settings, nationally and internationally, and provide a rich description and knowledge of preschool teacher identity, its formation, and its features. Although teachers’ professional identity has emerged as a separate research area, a need to understand and investigate professional
identity still exists because what it entails in teaching and teacher education remains unclear. Finally, future research must focus on studying the professional identity of in-service teachers because most of the studies available dealt with student teachers.

**Conclusions Drawn From the Study**

This study on teacher professional identity contributed to understanding and acknowledgment of what being a teacher feels like. It has drawn attention to the challenges that teachers might experience on both personal and professional levels. It has provided insight into the life of an early childhood teacher of color and the struggles she encountered at work. Exploring the life of Maria as a teacher and examining the influence of such struggles on her own identity allowed me to conclude that conflicts in teachers’ lives, especially when the personal does not meet the professional, can lead to conflict in professional identity, which is not something that teachers have but something they use to make sense of who they are and explain why they are who they are in relation to others and contexts. Research on teacher professional identity suggests that teachers form their identities in relation to others and what they expect from a teacher. In this study, Maria’s professional identity was constructed and shaped in the social contexts in which she lived and worked and in relation to others and how she thought she was perceived by others. In addition, Maria’s professional identity was found also to be shaped by her family, teachers, childhood memories, and racial background. Likewise, Maria’s reflections and narratives were very important as they revealed who she was. A story about identity surfaced in Maria’s narratives—a story about struggle, resistance, and hope.
Clearly, understanding teacher professional identity can be a very challenging task. As a concept, teacher professional identity has drawn much attention in recent years; however, no clear definition of the concept has emerged. How one positions the self within this identity and how important the role of reflection, emotion, and contextual factors are in the formation of teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) are also absent from the literature. Nevertheless, understanding that teachers undergo many shifts in their teacher identity and the reasons for these shifts is essential to teacher development (Liu & Xu, 2011). Furthermore, current researchers on teacher identity have argued that studying and understanding how teachers form their identities can lead to understanding of certain aspects of teaching and of the tensions they experience. In particular, teacher identity can be used as a reference for teachers to explain why they act the way they do and how they make sense of themselves in relation to others (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Olsen, 2008).

To sum it up, if teachers are to believe that they teach to make a difference and schools could provide very enriching environments for students and that they choose to teach to act as agents for social change, then I strongly recommend that teachers actively engage in what happens in schools even when doing so means that they might experience discomfort facing challenges and confronting others. I say this because I believe that before teachers are able to teach students about how to love one another and respect who they are and where they come from, teachers need first to stand up for themselves and for their right to be who they are and what they represent and value. They need to understand that if they are to make a difference in the lives of others, they ought to have
the desire and strength to make a difference in their own lives first and in how others see them because in the end, their identities reflect their vision of themselves and how much they allow others to influence this vision. Only then, can teachers transform into social justice educators who are capable of making a change in people’s lives by raising the social consciousness of all members of the profession.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

Consent Form

**Consent Form**: A Case Study of an Early Childhood Teacher and How She Formed Her Professional Identity

I want to do research on how you understand and form your professional identity. I want to do this because I would like to know about the process in which you develop/construct and identify your professional identity. I would like you to take part in this project. If you decide to do this, you will be asked to engage in in-depth interviews and critical discussions and conversations which will take place over the next months (02/08/2008–06/30/2008).

During the interviews and discussions, your comments and responses will be audiotaped. The tapes will be transcribed and stored. Only the researcher will have access to the tapes. The findings of this study will be presented to my graduate committee members only. Your participation will be kept confidential; no identifying information about you will be given in the research report.

Taking part in this project is entirely up to you. If you do choose to take part, you may stop at any time.

If you want to know more about this research project, please call me at 330-389-0045 or my advisor Dr. Martha Lash at 330-672-0628. This project has been approved by Kent State University. If you have any questions about Kent State University’s rules for research, please call Dr. John L. West, Vice President and Dean, Division of Research and Graduate Studies (330-672-2704).

You will get a copy of this consent form.

Sincerely,

Amal J. Al-Khatib
Ph.D. student, Early Childhood Education

Consent statement(s):

I agree to take part in this project. I know what I will have to do and that I can stop at any time.

_________________________________________
Signature

_________________________________________
Date

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Audio/Videotape/Photograph Consent Form

I agree to audio taping

at ________________________________

on ________________________________

________________________________________________________

Signature Date

I have been told that I have the right to hear the audio tapes before they are used. I have decided that I

_____want to hear the tapes   _____do not want to hear the tapes

Sign now below if you do not want to hear the tapes. If you want to hear the tapes, you will be asked to sign after hearing them.

Amal Al Khatib and other researchers approved by Kent State University may / may not use the tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for

_____this research project _____teacher education _____presentation at professional meetings

________________________________________________________

Signature Date

Address:
Appendix B

IRP Approval Form

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL TO USE HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
Send completed forms to one of the reviewers designated for your Department or Katherine Light, Research and Graduate Studies, 125 University Auditorium

Form can be downloaded from http://www.kent.edu/reogs/forms/Human_Research-Participants.cfm

Please type all information. HANDWRITTEN FORMS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED. Move through the document using TAB or Mouse. Do not use the enter Key. To mark a box, click with the mouse.

| Name: Amal J. Al-Khaisib |
| Telephone: 330-365-9345 |
| Address: Allerton St. 887 B |
| Email: aalikhaisib@kent.edu |

| Department: TLC/CI |
| Faculty Rank/Student Status: PhD Candidate/Graduate student |

Project Title: A Case Study on a Preschool Teacher and How She Forms Her Professional Teaching Identity.

Type of Project: 
☐ FACULTY RESEARCH ☐ External Funded (Agency: ) Include copy of proposal
☐ STUDENT DIRECTED RESEARCH (Advisor: Dr. Martha Lash )
☐ Thesis ☐ Dissertation ☐ Course Requirement (Course #: )
☐ Other (Specify: )

Duration of Project: Starting Date: February/2008 (But not before approval is obtained) Ending Date: Fall/2008

I certify that the research procedures for this project and the method of obtaining consent (if any), as approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board, will be followed during the period covered by this research project. Any future changes will be submitted for Board review and approval prior to implementation.

If this project involves approval/permission from other institutions, the principal investigator (and the faculty advisor if the PI is a student) must sign below to certify the following statement: "I/we will not begin research at other institutions before having obtained their permission to do so."

[Signature] [Date]
[Signature] [Date]

Principal Investigator Faculty Advisor (IF PI is a student)

Action Taken: By KSI INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD:

[Signature] [Date]
[Signature] [Date]

Co-Reviewer (Level III) Date

IRB Level III Action: Approved, Level I Approved, Level II

IRB Comments:

[Signature] [Date]

Chairperson, IRB Date

[RECEIVED JAN 30 2008]
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE OF SUPPORTING QUESTIONS IN DATA COLLECTION
Appendix C

Sample of Supporting Questions in Data Collection

- Tell me about yourself, who you are, and what do you value in your life? Tell me about your family? What kind of relationship do you have with them and how do you spend your time with them? I would like to also know about your childhood memories with your siblings, friends, and neighbor children, what sticks out about your childhood?

- Tell me about your childhood and self as a student at school. Did you enjoy going to school and learning? Did you have a favorite teacher? Who was your favorite teacher and why? How involved were your parents in your own learning experiences at school?

- Why did you choose to become a teacher and who inspired to be one? In your own opinion, who is the good teacher and what makes good teachers, and how does good teaching look like? Tell me about your journey in becoming a preschool teacher, what experiences (personal and professional) have most influenced you and your teaching style, attitude, values, and beliefs? Can you tell me more about how certain work contexts you taught in influenced the teacher identity? How do you perceive your role as a teacher and a professional?

- Tell me about your relationships with others at school. How would you describe these relationships? Are there particular staff members that you feel closely connected to and are supportive to you and in validating your work? Do you reflect together on your work and share your studying of children’s work with one another? How would you position and place yourself in the school? How do you understand your professional teaching identity and how would you define yourself as a teacher? Do you see yourself as a preschool teacher a professional? What is a professional? Please explain.

- Reflecting on your own teaching experiences in different teaching contexts, do you believe that schools give their teachers certain teaching identities? Tell me about your teaching identity as a Reggio Emilia inspired teacher. What do you like about this philosophy of teaching and learning in the field of early childhood? To what extent do you think that the school context influenced the formation and reformation of your professional identity? How do you think others see you as a teacher and how do you feel about how others at school perceive you as a teacher?

- Emotions seemed to play a great role in how you interpreted, gave meaning, formed, and understood your teaching and professional identity, to what extent do
you think that your feelings and emotions determined and impacted the way you felt about others and how you believed they perceived you? To what extent do you believe your feelings and thoughts about how others at school perceive you are valid and how do you see them influencing your conception and formation of your professional identity?
APPENDIX D
SAMPLE OF DATA ANALYSIS AND CODING
## Appendix D

### Sample of Data Analysis and Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Selections From Data Source</th>
<th>Participant's Behavior and Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significance of family in Maria’s life and its influence on her teaching values and beliefs and work with children</td>
<td>II₁</td>
<td>“I am who I am because of my family, because of how I was brought up to be.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II₁</td>
<td>“I am very close to my family, we are always very close.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FIC₁</td>
<td>“It’s important that children’s families are part of their lives at school.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FIC₃</td>
<td>“Family involvement is salient to every child’s development.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II₁</td>
<td>“My family cared and loved me unconditionally and that’s how I feel about the children I work with, too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II₂</td>
<td>“I want my children to learn to accept each other and no matter what differences they have, I want them to feel loved, welcomed, cared for, and part of the classroom as I want us to come together as a one big family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SRI₁</td>
<td>“Being respectful to one another is very important to me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II₃</td>
<td>“I was brought up to always talk in a respectful way.”</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>FIC₈</td>
<td>“The children are my priority. I want them to always know that I care for them, love them, and this is why I use every opportunity I have to make sure they know I am there for them because I want to be with them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FIC₉</td>
<td>“Attitude towards the children and the way I feel about them and about my teaching is somehow related to my own experiences with my teachers.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and personal experiences</td>
<td>II₇</td>
<td>“You can’t be a good teacher if you didn’t have the ability to relate to children’s needs and being sensitive to those needs.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II₉</td>
<td>“Teaching should be about providing pleasant experiences to be remembered.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIC₂₂</td>
<td>“It is important that teachers get to really know the children. They need to know about their lives even beyond the classroom (e.g., learn their nick names, favorite pets, favorite games at home, etc).”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II₃</td>
<td>“Teaching should be fun, exciting, and engaging.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRI₃</td>
<td>“Teachers should never give up on the children, but rather they should make learning different and more entertaining to reach out to everyone.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIC₁₅</td>
<td>“Teaching is about trusting the children and their abilities.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II₂</td>
<td>“Teachers sometimes do experience culture shocks! As I moved from an urban setting to a Caucasian school, I had to figure out those children, know them, and learn about who they were.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Tension | II₈ | “I wish I didn’t have to think about it as a problem just because I am a black teacher.” |
| II₉ | “Feeling demeaned and belittled!” |
| II₁₀ | “Value me as an individual and a teacher, value my mind, and just ignore my ethnicity.” |
| II₉ | “I was working so hard to be the same, but I really wasn’t—I will never be white and I am who I am, so will you ever be able to admire me the way I am that the color I have?” |
APPENDIX E

TEACHING IDENTITY, TEACHING ROLES, AND CHANGES IN IDENTITY
Appendix E

Teaching Identity, Teaching Roles, and Changes in Identity

Teaching self-image and teaching roles as they emerged in the study: Nurturer, child-centered, caring, loving, respectful, serious about her teaching, enjoys working together with the children and student teachers in harmony, a cooperative leader, multi-tasker, motivates children to learn, keeps them on task, focused, and always asks them to have a purpose for doing what they do.

Changes in identity as related to Maria’s relationships with others (and how she thought they perceived her as a Black preschool teacher) and emotions and interpretations of certain incidents: At times, feeling lonely, underestimated, the Other, at times feeling disengaged, different, the outsider, confused, lost, rejected, and belittled.
APPENDIX F

A SAMPLE OF MARIA’S RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS RELATED TO UNDERSTANDING HER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY
Appendix F

A Sample of Maria’s Responses to Questions

Related to Understanding Her Professional Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maria’s Responses</th>
<th>Characteristics Related to Understanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do I look upset? O₆</td>
<td>Careful about what others think of her and how she acted and talked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am I giving the impression that I am angry or that I don’t want to play? O₆</td>
<td>Tried to be aware of the kind of facial and body impressions she gave to others, including the children,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>student teachers, and families</td>
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<tr>
<td>I need to be cautious with what kind of messages I give out to children, and I</td>
<td>Tended to be very cautious with others and with how she addressed problematic and sensitive issues related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was just too upset today because of how a child’s behavioral issue can distract</td>
<td>to her classroom and the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the attention of other children, and this is not right.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that as a teacher I should know when and how to address a critical</td>
<td>Respected children’s privacy and the importance of not embarrassing them in front of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>issue For example with F., I prefer to talk to him in private and not in front of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others especially that his sister is also in the classroom.</td>
<td>Misbehaving was not acceptable; it hindered other children’s ability to focus on what they were doing.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Children needed to learn to be responsible, and they also needed to learn to be friendly with one another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and to always find a way to work and be together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I value the importance of caring and respecting others’ feelings.</td>
<td>Showing respect, being respectful, and acting in a respectful manner were very important to Maria.</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children should not use hurtful words that might hurt the feelings of others.</td>
<td>Care and consideration of others’ feelings mattered. Accepting others and finding a way to relate to one another and getting along with one another were very important to Maria. Maintaining close connections were very important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was raised to always talk, act, and behave in a respectful manner</td>
<td>“The aim of life is neither happiness nor perfection but caring and being cared for” (Noddings, 1984, p. 174). Caring, appreciating, and valuing the individuality of each child were very important to Maria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important that the children learn to enjoy the company of each other, and it is important that they care about each other not only in the classroom but at all times they are together</td>
<td>Maria’s attitude toward herself and her teaching related to her experiences with her own family. I care for the children, but I am not a caregiver or a babysitter! I see myself as a loving caring individual who tries to reach out to children not physically only but also spiritually and mentally (image of self as a teacher and a reflection of how Maria saw her work professionally).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I value the time we spend together.</td>
<td>A big part of teaching is its moral responsibility. Responsibility to learn how to occupy children’s mind and lives in a meaningful way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invited children to work together</td>
<td>As a teacher, part of understanding your professional identity is understanding the children’s identity. In order to understand your own identity as a teacher, you need to know how others think of you and feel about you. When others learn where I am from, how I look, and what do I do and know, this tells much about how they see me and it is the same with children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wish I could be at all places with all children at all times.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| How dare you to say what we can and cannot do? | A good teacher is a teacher that knows how to help children succeed no matter what even if they come from urban settings.  
It is important that I hold children up to high expectations.  
A teacher needs to be aware of how everything connect to everything else in our lives to make us who we are. |
| Learning is a way of changing and becoming a better, wiser, and more experienced self | Must act professionally no matter what conditions you work with or under  
Consistency is important with children, and maintaining it is also important.  
The images children have about a teacher matter, and through them we get to learn more about ourselves.  
I was blind-sided with this research.  
It hit me like a slap in the face!  
So just because I am Black, that mean I can never be good enough.  
I feel like I have lost myself for seven years.  
My identity is now changing as I am learning more about myself. |
| I worked hard to be the teacher and not the black teacher! |
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