CREATING POSITIVE SPACES: A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT
OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF A
MULTICULTURAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School
of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a response to those who believe in my effectiveness as a teacher of African American children. It is also a voice for teacher research and particularly research from an African American male point of view. I have found in my studies that an African American male perspective on teaching and learning in early childhood education is rare or unavailable in articles, books, and journals concerning educational theory and practice.

As a teacher researcher, I found it necessary to develop a unique approach to conducting research and methodological practices. Autoethnonarrative was developed to address the idiosyncratic nature of conducting inquiry as a teacher researcher. The approach is couched in an antiracist and multicultural lens. Autoethnonarrative enabled me to study myself in relation to pedagogical practices, styles and beliefs. In order to develop a methodological process suited for an autoethnographic approach, I introduced a new four-step systematic process. This process enabled me to organize data, create comprehensive narratives, build a list of scholars that support each narrative, and employ colleagues and peers for reflective conversations.
This work is a compilation of narratives based on my teaching and personal experiences over a prolonged time period that spans twenty-seven years. In particular, however, the majority of this work presents, discusses, and analyzes stories of classroom life that illustrate issues concerning language affirmation, teaching for social justice, and parent involvement. Themes surrounding language, social justice, and parent involvement form the chapters of data presentation. Throughout the work, these major themes are presented in narrative and analyzed. At the end of each data presentation chapter, implications for teaching are presented.

Finally, I present what I believe to be new and particular pedagogical frames for teaching and learning called the Critical Pedagogical Approach to Teaching and Learning. Sociopolitical constructivism, sociocultural reflective practice, and moralistic reflective practice are offered as new ways of thinking about ourselves as teachers as well as our relationship and response to teaching diverse student populations.
I dedicate this work in the memory of my brothers Byron and Kenneth Hancock,
my father Pagie Hancock, Jr. and my God-mother Geraline L. Gaines Though you
did not live to see it, without you, I could not have lived to finish it.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I am thankful to God for never leaving nor forsaking me throughout this process and bringing into fruition a dream birth in me since childhood. Without the comfort, love, mercy, patience, grace and assurance of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ none of this would be possible. Jesus Christ is truly able to keep us from falling.

I also thank God for placing in my path Dr. Barbara Seidl, my adviser. Your guidance, encouragement, and support were a source of strength, growth, and hope. I thank Dr. Evelyn Freeman for being an excellent balance of wisdom and modern savvy. I also thank Dr. Cynthia Dillard for challenging me to stretch, coming through when needed, and for introducing me to a place to call home.

I am grateful to the parents and students of room 108 for accepting me into their lives and heart. Thanks to my classroom staff and Mrs. Lewis for being an excellent lead teacher. I thank my former students as well as the principal, Baba Embry and staff at my former school who were the inspiration for this research project. I also thank Bishop J. H. Ross and the Triedstone family & Pastor Samuel Farina and Christian Assembly for providing spiritual nourishment, emotional support, and a foundation of faith centered in praise, worship, and the word of God.
My family has fed me the idea of becoming a doctor since I was 4 years old. I thank them for never allowing me to doubt my abilities and determination. I thank mother, Martha Hancock who is a model of strength, endurance, wisdom and love. To my sisters Martha, Maria, and Katina as well as my brothers Carl, Kevin, Pagie III, Eddie, and Don, all of your prayers, support, and encouragement have brought me to this point, THANK YOU for your sacrifices. To my twenty-two nieces and nephews I miss playing with you and watching you grow up but thanks for understanding. I now pass the torch. To my cousins, extended family, and in-laws, thanks for believing I could do it.

I thank all my friends for their support, endurance and understanding. Especially, those of you who encouraged me when I floundered, provided me a space to grow, and weathered the storms. You are a pillar of strength and a source of hope and I thank God for sending you my way.

Last and most important, I thank my wife, Kerrie for sharing me with The Ohio State University and for her patience, prayers, tolerance, sacrifice, love and dedication to our marriage and the completion of this dissertation. To our daughter Makayla, thanks for your radiant smiles, healing hugs and butterfly kisses and to our son Caleb whose birth has breathed new life into dead spaces, you are both precious gifts.

I shall bless the Lord with praises forever because all of you have fulfilled your purpose in this work. THANKS!!
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CHAPTER 1

Stimulating Conversations: Educating the African American Child

“You taught them (students) about the real world without making them scared. You showed them how to be confident and active and you challenged them intellectually. We need more teachers who can teach black children how the society works.”

-Mrs. Smiles, parent

We navigated the zoo with laughter, amazement, and interesting discussions about the benefits and problems of having animals caged and isolated from their natural environment. I am always amazed at how children, if given the opportunity, skill, and knowledge base, can hold intellectually stimulating conversations with adults and each other. Michael’s concern about the ape sparked our conversation. On this particular day, the male ape was upset and violent. In spurts of anger the ape would run to the Plexiglas viewing wall and hit it with all its force, frightening and amusing the spectators. Michael contended that he was mad because he was tired of people looking at him and that he wanted to be in the jungle. Others responded in agreement. Kenny, however, expressed an opinion that the ape needed help and that if it wasn’t in the zoo, then it could harm itself and the other animals in the jungle. Michael countered with the realization that it is better for everything to stay in its natural habitat because it’s where God put them. Tony,
in a critical epiphany, responded, “if everything stayed in its natural environment, then there would be no zoos and we would not know about these animals.” In their conversation and intellectual bantering, I could hear how they were reflective, mindful of each other’s perspective, and even aware of personal beliefs. I could also see how critical thinking activities, cultural affirmation, and reflective practice had prepared the students to listen, process, and thoughtfully respond. Critical thinking and reflecting before speaking were staples in our learning environment.

In an effort to support my children in becoming sensitive to multiple perspectives, we systematically and critically explored our attitudes, beliefs, and actions (Stremmel, 1997). Through storytelling and discussion we explored topics ranging from conceit, good character, and respect to racism. These discussions required students to critically think and self reflect before responding. As they continued in a sort of walking debate, highlighting other animals, I felt a sense of satisfaction that we were able to construct a learning space that supported the empowerment and critical thinking of students.

All conversations halted when the boys saw the gigantic play-gym. All it took was eye contact and an approving nod from me and they instinctively ran for the apparatus. The place was swarming with children yelling, laughing, running, and playing. In the mist of the bustle I heard someone call me Baba Hancock. The title “Baba” (which means father in Swahili) was used by students and parents at the Marcus Garvey School, so I was sure I would be reacquainted with a friend. As I turned to respond, it was a joy to see Mrs. Smiles. We exchanged hellos and hugged. It had been two years and I was eager to hear how she and her son were doing. We both began our conversation about how we missed the family atmosphere and opportunities we had at the
Marcus Garvey School. Our conversation touched on memories of our trip to NASA in Houston, Texas as well as issues concerning the education of African American children.

Mrs. Smiles communicated to me that she believed that schools are microcosms of our larger society and naturally reflect present cultural norms that hold potential for shaping future ideologies (Nieto, 2000). Therefore, the support and development of positive learning communities is important to our future. She discussed how it is the school’s responsibility to provide educational experiences within learning communities that support and validate the various ways of learning and living for children (Gay, 2000).

Mrs. Smiles also spoke about how classrooms at the Marcus Garvey School empowered students and teachers to think critically about learning and living in a multicultural and antiracist society as well as invited genuine parent involvement. She believed most classrooms at the Marcus Garvey School not only fostered empowerment but also promoted affirmation, reflective practice, personal and social enlightenment as well as validation among students, teacher and parents (Gay, 2000).

Mrs. Smiles, like many parents, was concerned about the education of her son. She had developed strong and informed opinions about how African American children should be educated. I listened attentively and with great interest as she expressed her beliefs, experiences and desires for education. Mrs. Smiles discussed the fact that her son’s present school didn’t provide cultural links to the larger society. She reflected on the atmosphere of our classroom at the Marcus Garvey School and said, “you taught them (children) about the real world without making them scared. You showed them how to be confident and active and you challenged them intellectually. We need more teachers who can teach black children how the society works.” She went on to express that I
should be teaching and telling other teachers how to reach African American students. I
told her that although I’m recognized by my principal, colleagues, and school officials for
being an effective teacher of African American children, the voices of teachers, and
specifically minority male educators, have been scarce when it comes to research and
writing on classroom practice. In fact, researchers and scholars have stated that the
majority of narrative sources concerning classroom practice and community “lie in
women’s experiences” (Green, 1991, p. ix).

We discussed the need for successful educators to tell their stories in an effort to
benefit the teacher education field. As an African American male educator it has been
my experience that there is little room for teachers to share, tell, and reflect on their
stories. This reality fuels my interest and desire to research (through narratives) the
experience of developing and maintaining a healthy learning community for African
American students. Like Mrs. Smiles, I also believe that it is imperative that educators
tell their stories of successful multicultural learning environments in an effort to benefit
the teacher education field. If the development of positive learning communities is not
shared, classrooms will continue perpetuating disconnected learning, fragmented
relationships, and culturally alienating pedagogy (Beane, 1997, Stremmel, 1997).

As America becomes more diverse, it is important that we create avenues for
teachers and teacher-researchers to present narratives and experiences that depict
successful learning communities. I contend that since narratives are the bridges that
connect life experiences with spoken and written communication, narrative accounts of
classroom dynamics can enlighten educators to culturally relevant pedagogy as well as
give insight on how to develop cohesive relationships between teachers and students.
Teacher narratives enable the voices and experiences of teachers and students to educate the unfamiliar, assist the novice, and bring a clearer perspective on how to develop healthy learning communities. Educators need access to a variety of narrative voices that view learning communities from the unique perspective of teacher researchers who couch themselves in reflective practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and an antiracist framework. In fact, narratives that provide details with rich descriptions of how positive learning environments are developed and sustained hold the potential to influence curricular and teaching practices (Clandinin and Connelly, 1991).

Mrs. Smiles’ awareness of the Eurocentric ideology and curricular practices that dominate schools was evident as she expressed the need for more teachers of color in the classroom. She stated that, “we need a way to get more teachers of color in the classroom so that more children can see themselves. Black teachers should be recruited to schools where there are a high number of Black students. And on the college level, teaching programs need to find Black high school students and teach them to be teachers.” We both agreed that there is a need for more teachers of color and that the student population is becoming more diverse, making multicultural learning communities an imperative concept in the twenty-first century (Gay, 2000). The U.S. Bureau of the Census predicts that by the year 2050, 38% to 47% of all students will be of color (1998). This reality has been a clarion call to teacher education programs, school districts, and curriculum developers as they seek to prepare teachers and establish curriculum for diverse student populations (Gay, 2000). One of the major challenges, however, that face teacher preparation programs in their effort to reform teacher education toward goals of
diversity, is the program's ability to enhance and enlighten the personal perspectives of prospective teachers and teacher educators (Crow, 1987 in Stoddart and Flodent, 1996).

As our conversation continued, we began to discuss factors that contributed to disconnected and culturally inappropriate learning spaces. I explained that many prospective teachers enter teacher preparation programs with preconceived notions about the purpose of schooling, teaching and learning, as well as what and how they will teach (Ross and Bondy, 1996). Further, due to inadequate teacher education programs and limited life experiences with diverse populations, pre-service teachers continue to lack knowledge, skills, insight, experiences and the desire to create antiracist and multicultural learning communities (Stremmel, 1997). As a result, students who do not fit the pre-established, Eurocentric, and monocultural communities in most classrooms are marginalized and are at risk of failure (Stremmel, 1997).

I further explained to Mrs. Smiles that my perspective on creating multicultural learning communities is grounded in personal experience as a child and teacher of children and is coupled with formal education as an undergraduate and graduate student. I told her that I believed that the fundamental component of learning communities that support diversity lies in the teacher’s ability to create an environment conducive to the social, emotional, cultural, intellectual and physical needs of its student population. In my experience as a school age student as well as teacher of young children, I have been exposed to teachers who were able develop multicultural classrooms. I have also experienced teachers who were not able to create culturally affirming communities. As a result of these experiences I continue to formulate questions, perspectives and assumptions centered around basic questions: How do effective teachers create
multicultural learning communities? How do African American male teachers deal with diversity in the classroom? Where are the voices and stories of classroom life from a teacher’s perspective?

On a couple of occasions Michael and Kenny came to sit with me in an effort to persuade me to join them on the play-gym. Mrs. Smiles found their behavior and desire to involve the ‘teacher’ in their play as a sign of love, respect, and affirmation on the part of the students. After I literally shook them off of me, raised my eyebrow, and told them to go play, Mrs. Smiles asked, “How did you do that?” “Do what?” I responded. She continued, “Get students so comfortable that they can ask you to play with them and also keep a level of professionalism and respect.” I responded, “I want to understand them beyond academics, I also know that if I don’t understand who and how I am, it will be difficult for me to understand the perspective of my students. My students are aware that I’m concerned about them as people and not just as test scores.” Mrs. Smiles, in a look of grave concern asked, “so, how do colleges prepare new teachers to understand the perspectives of black students?” I shook my head in dismay and said, “that’s an awesome challenge for teacher education programs.”

As we watched the children play, we continued discussing the need for more teachers of color in schools, the need for teachers to understand diversity, the need for more critical awareness of self as teacher, and how “good” teachers should be afforded professional opportunities to tell their stories. Mrs. Smiles commented about my classroom at the Marcus Garvey School. She reminisced about how the students loved to come to school, how they were academically and socially challenged, and how they loved their teacher and believed in themselves. At the end of our conversation, I thanked her
and motioned to my students. Before we parted, Mrs. Smiles said, “Baba Hancock you
should show and tell other teachers how to teach black children, you should write a book
on how to teach in inner city classrooms.” I turned to her and said, “that’s exactly what I
plan to do.” We laughed and headed towards the buses.

As I rode back to school on the bus, I began to think about the conversation with
Mrs. Smiles. We had touched on the problem of how some schools over-test,
marginalize and fail African American students. I began to reflect on a book I was
that schools are failing African American students because of low level curriculums that
are designed to align with standardize test. He further contends that African American
and other students of color are bombarded with memorization, skill and drill, and low-
level teaching techniques that fail to be culturally relevant, teach higher order thinking
skills, comprehension strategies, and text analysis (Kohn, 1999). Mrs. Smiles had
mentioned to me how her son’s reading ability had gone down since he was placed in a
rote/memorization reading program. She had also seen a rise in disciplinary phone calls
and notes. As an African American parent of a young black man, Mrs. Smiles questioned
the teacher and was concerned about how her son was being treated or if he was being
taught with culturally appropriate strategies and material.

School failure can also be attributed to failure to form healthy and appropriate
relationships among students, teachers, and curriculum. Scholars have described the
failure of students as a culture clash between student, teacher, and school culture (Delpit,
1995; Lubeck, 1994). Lubeck (1994) contributes school failure to underdeveloped
relationships between the student, teacher and curriculum as a culture clash. She
contends that culture clash is a product of misunderstanding and miscommunication that inevitably create discontinuities between students and the learning environment. Lubeck (1994) argues that “misunderstanding and miscommunication can lead to children being labeled or placed in low-level learning groups” (p. 159). In fact, Lubeck (1994) reports that students of color, when taught by unprepared teachers, are “disproportionately represented in special education classes and differentially placed in low groups and tracks” (p. 156). Delpit (1995) attributes much of the discontinuity between students, teachers and the curriculum to the devaluing of home and language culture. She suggests that when schools fail to acknowledge and accept home language, students are intuitively aware and may refuse to learn. In an effort to avoid this conflict it is the responsibility of the teacher to create bridges for students, teachers and the curriculum in order to understand and value personal culture and school culture (Lubeck, 1994).

Cartledge and Talber-Johnson (1997) contend that U.S. schools are failing a disproportionate number of students with diverse background as compared to white students. They also cite that educational tracking, monocultural curricula, competitive classroom environments, monocultural school staff, inhospitable school climates, and culturally inappropriate instruction methods disenfranchise students of color and purposefully ignore the learners’ cultural background. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1995) found that the marginalizing of students of color was directly related to student dropout and retention as young adult and adult students. The following table developed by the U.S. Department
of Education (1992) shows the disparity between retention rates of black students as compared to white students. Although the drop out gap is closing, black students are more likely to be retained more than once.

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<td>10.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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TABLE 1.1: Retention and dropout rate for 16- to 24- year olds in 1992.

Thus, Mrs. Smiles’ concerns about the culturally relevant nature of her son’s classroom are grounded in the reality that if he is not affirmed and taught from a multicultural perspective, it is probable that he may fail and be susceptible to dropping out of school. Mrs. Smiles’ other concern was the high volume of disciplinary notes and calls. She felt that it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide a community of learning that keeps students engaged and interested. She also believed that her son was bored and thus acting out of boredom. However, his behavior was seen as a discipline problem. Kea, Cartledge, and Bowman (2002) assert that schools are failing students because teachers do not reflect on their assumptions, preconceived notions, biases and beliefs about African American children. Many white teachers may have inherited negative attitudes toward African American students that are founded on their ignorance of African American culture and bias toward a middle class, Eurocentric perspective on
teaching and learning (Kae, Cartledge, and Bowman, 2002). Unfortunately, this leads to
students being labeled as discipline problems and consequently put out of school.

A Carnegie study found that although African American and other minority
students constitute 25% of the nationwide school population, they represent 40% of all
suspended and expelled students (Irvine, 1990). In one particular district, in a one year
period black males missed a total of 159 days of school (almost one black male for each
day of school), while white males missed 62 days, black females missed 32 days and
white females missed only 4 days (Irvine, 1990). It can be surmised that the
disproportionate number of African American students who missed school are also at risk
of failure.

In the conversation between Mrs. Smiles and me, I was reminded that as an African
American educator my commitment has been to explore methods and styles that would
grant success to all students and specifically African American students. As a teacher
who loves what he does, I rarely thought of or reflected on how I did what I did. I spend
countless hours reflecting on ‘why’ and ‘what’ I taught but rarely did I focus on how or
the process of my teaching style. After our talk, Mrs. Smiles helped rekindled my
commitment to explore my method and style of teaching.

As the bus bumped along the city streets, I began reflecting on my method and style
of teaching reading to children. One of my primary goals is to teach kindergarten, first,
and second graders how to read. In all my years of teaching I’ve been successful in
teaching my students the rhythm of reading, word attack skills, phonemic awareness,
blending strategies, reading with fluency and flow, as well as higher order thinking,
critical analysis of text, and comprehension. These skills all came through culturally appropriate and relevant raps, poems, games, songs, plays, stories, literature, and activities. To help me continue the process of reflecting on how I taught, I thought of opportunities and experiences provided to enhance reading in our classroom.

For example, the object of one lesson I taught was to read basic sight words from the ‘ack’ word family. My kindergarten students were having a hard time connecting the beginning sound and rhyming. Without much thought I asked them if they knew the hand jive called Miss Mary Mack. All of the girls and a few boys replied with a sunny “yeah I know it.” I then asked them to pair up and play the hand jive. Since many of the boys didn’t know it and none of them wanted to play, I encouraged them to listen and try to write down the words. The boys could not write the hand jive because we it sang too fast. So I proceeded to write it on chart paper. Before I wrote it, however, I asked the boys the words they remembered. The majority remembered back, black, and Mack. After writing the poem, we all sang it and underlined the ‘ack’ words. In an instant all of the children were rhyming and extending the ‘ack’ family into words like Big Mac, mac attack, smack, shack (Shaq), quack, backpack (Dora the Explorer), and a host of other ‘ack’ words. They began to infuse their culture and five-year-old logic into the activity and before long they were into nonsense words like drack and prack. For every word family that followed we either used a cultural song, game or we created our own poems and raps.

Reading in our classroom had become an empowering and affirming experience. The children couldn’t wait to contribute a poem, game, rap, hand jive, or song that would make our curriculum sight words more relevant, fun and consequently easier to learn. I
started announcing the word family a day before we studied it and some students would come to class the next day with prepared words for the next word family.

The conversation between Mrs. Smiles and myself had been stimulating. I walked away with a renewed strength and commitment to research my practices as a classroom teacher. As we drew near the school, the consistent hum of the bus coupled with the rocking and bumping had put most of my students to sleep. The active day at the zoo was exhausting for them and a sense of inspiration for me. I knew once we got to school that it would be hectic getting the children ready to go home so I jotted down a few notes on the back of the field trip envelop to remind myself who I was as a teacher. After we unloaded the buses and immediately dismissed the students, I went to the classroom, took a heavy sigh of relief, and began to reflect on who I was as a teacher and what it might mean for teacher research.

**Teacher Researcher and Dissertation Layout**

As a teacher, I describe myself as a culturally relevant, social constructivist tempered with a critically reflective perspective that’s nurtured by my experiences as an African American man. Although each component of my teaching style has a distinct meaning and purpose, the components are interrelated and inseparable.

In an effort to give a concrete reality to an otherwise abstract awareness of a multicultural learning community, this work is designed to share my teaching practices as well as provide practical ways or implications to *affirm* student linguistic styles, *acquire* skills to empower students towards social justice, and *accept* parental support. Linguistic styles, student empowerment and parental involvement are the three major themes found in this work and form chapters three, four, and five. In addition to these three themes, I
describe our classroom as a multicultural learning community. Multicultural learning community is the unique term that I created to describe our classroom. The term is used throughout this dissertation and it refers to a classroom that validates and affirms a pluralistic approach to teaching and learning. In a multicultural community, students are afforded a variety of learning opportunities and are nurtured from a cultural, class, intellectual, gender, physical, and social point of view.

Throughout this work, I have teased out my position as a teacher researcher, the epistemological and ontological realities that support my teaching styles, practical applications of my pedagogical philosophy as well as methodology and systematic process used as a researcher. In chapter two, for instance, I have explained my research position and methodology concerning teacher research. Although my use of culturally relevant practice, reflective practice, and social constructivism do not exist in a vacuum, I have singled out each component to render a clear understanding of how each concept affects my teaching and learning. For instance, in chapter three, I highlight how social constructivism supports the linguistic development of my students. In chapter four, I focus on the culturally relevant aspect of my teaching and how it fosters a critical social consciousness in our learning community. In chapter five, I implicitly and explicitly discuss how reflective practice, among other practices, is essential in understand self as teacher and parent supporter. Finally in chapter six, I provide the reader with a clear understanding of the new concepts and theoretical paradigms that I have created as a result of doing this research project.
Chapter 2

Discussing Questions of Methodological Practice

The air was sweet and warm as Indian summer carved out a couple of weeks in mid autumn. It was going to be another unseasonably warm morning in November and as Indian summer carved its way into autumn, I was also determined to cut out a place for myself in teacher research.

The roads were slick from an early morning rain and morning traffic was backed up due to an accident. Normally traffic jams would be a source of frustration and anger. However, I was too preoccupied with the delicate union of teaching and researching. I sat in my car going over the most effective methods to gather data for my research project; my position as a researcher; coding strategies; procedures; human subjects; and a host of other relevant factors. It all seemed overwhelming. Yet I knew that nothing short of doing teacher research could prepare me for becoming a teacher researcher. As I waited for the traffic to move, I began to mull over critical issues that concerned me as a teacher researcher. I started formulating these questions and responses:
**Who am I as a researcher?**

As a researcher I have found a place in critical theory and constructivism. It is in these two theoretical paradigms that I hear my voice, couch my beliefs, and frame research approaches. Critical theory, for this purpose, will support concepts of reflective constructivism from an ethnic epistemology similar to critical race theory that argues “that ways of knowing and being are shaped by the individual’s standpoint or position in the world” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 159). Therefore, a critical constructivist perspective dismantles the racist epistemological logic of Eurocentric ideology and allows one to view research practices from an antiracist perspective (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

**What are my theoretical and epistemological beliefs and assumptions?**

“It is important to reinforce that the concept of epistemology is more than a “way of knowing.” An epistemology is a “system of knowing” that has both an internal logic and external validity” (Ladson-Billings, 2000a, p. 257). In this sense, epistemological assumptions are symbiotic with how one knows and views the world (Ladson-Billings, 2000a). Shujaa (1997) contends that “worldviews and systems of knowledge are symbiotic—that is, how one views the world is influenced by what knowledge one possesses, and what knowledge one is capable of possessing is influenced deeply by ones worldview” (in Ladson-Billings, 2000a, p. 258). In an effort to repudiate dominant ideology and oppressive worldviews, active, reflexive, critical, and reflective practices must take place (Ladson-Billings, 2000a; Luke, 1991).
The epistemological foundation, as contended by Luke (1991) has three principles concerning critical theory. First, critical theorist must situate their ways of knowing in reflective, reflexive, and ironic concepts. “In seeking a reflective, reflexive or ironic knowledge of social relations, critical theorizing should repudiate a positivistic mode of knowing tied uncritically to natural science models of investigation” (Luke, 1991, p. 21). Luke (1991) further argues that when critical theorists ground their epistemological concepts in reflective and reflexive praxis, they are able to expand the analytical perspective of critical theory as it relates to generating and interpreting knowledge. Second, critical theorists must constantly refine their ways of knowing and moral sensibilities in an effort to equip others with critical thinking abilities and empowerment (Luke, 1991). It is the constant refining and reflecting on their epistemological stance that engages critical theorists in “accounts of how we can reliably know,” what we know (Young, 1992, p. 31). Third, critical theorists must embrace the phenomenology of knowledge (knowing through occurrences, appearances, or senses) (Young, 1992), and through phenomenology, move into an epistemological stance that is poised for action. This move must take place in order to “advance a systematic radical critique of society, demystifying how power, position, and privilege relate to class, group and personal inequalities” (Luke, 1991, p. 22). O’Neill (1985) contends that the epistemological nature of critical theorists must be grounded in these principles to combat the silence that oppression renders to its subjects. He states:
The oppressed are ruled in silence so long as they do not have a name even for themselves but are forced to speak of themselves as others speak of them—as niggers, as natives, as poor people. As long as three-quarters of the world’s men and women refer to themselves in terms of the theory of inhumanity through which the other quarter of the world dominates them, they live in enforced silence. (p. 57)

In an effort to emancipate, empower, and enlighten others to the silence of oppression, critical theorists must locate their epistemological assumptions in the principles of reflection, refining, and reflexive praxis (Luke, 1991; O’Neill, 1985). Thus, fulfilling “a way of seeing and a form of knowing that employs historical knowledge, reflexive reasoning, and ironic awareness to give people some tools to realize new potentials for emancipation and enlightenment” (Luke, 1991, p. 21).

The epistemological nature of constructivism rests in the notion that “human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct it” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). Therefore, the conditions in which one lives, learns, and acts influences both how they build knowledge as well as how they view the world (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Fosnot (1996) describes constructivist epistemology as fluid, subjective, internally constructed, and socially and culturally mediated. Supporting the concept of blurred genres, Fosnot (1996) describes the epistemological nature of constructivism with similar attributes of critical theory. She declares that learning from an epistemological perspective that possesses subjectivity, internal construction, and socially and culturally mediated praxis is viewed,
as a self-regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human meaning-making venture with culturally developed tools and symbols, and further negotiating such meaning through cooperative social activity, discourse, and debate. (p. ix)

Fosnot (1996) also contends that constructivism can take a radical approach to learning and viewing the world when we struggle with our personal constructions of knowledge. One must struggle with epistemological ideas of self-reflection, accept new perspectives, and explore ways of knowing if we are to dismantle the oppressive nature of the dominant culture (Fosnot, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

“Critical theory and constructivism connects action to praxis or creates links between theory and practice” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Fischer, 1985). And, since constructivism and critical theory are concerned with issues of emancipation, how one perceives the world, and empowerment, a dialectic and hermeneutic methodological approach to research that promotes action is needed (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) believe that teacher research and its methodology is apt for constructivist and critical theorists, which are the theoretical constructs that ground my epistemological perspective on research. The notion of teacher research and its methodology are also important to the inquiry practices of critical theorist and constructivist (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Teacher research expresses commitment to participation, social analyses, and issues concerning empowerment, justice and enlightenment (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994).
**Approaches to Research**

The unique perspective that guided my research interest on the development of a positive learning community is derived from elements of auto-ethnography, teacher research, and narrative approaches all framed in an antiracist paradigm. In other words, I conducted research from an antiracist perspective using an autoethno-narrative approach to research. Figure 2.1 provides a visual of how I perceive this approach to research. As seen in the diagram narrative, teacher research, and autoethnographic approaches share common elements. The overlapping sections are evident of how these approaches possess similar methods, strategies, and ideals for doing research. For example, each approach employs the notions of reflective practice as a means to understand self and how one perceives, and first person perspective as a position from which to represent data as well as dismiss the passive voice found in traditional research (Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson, 2001; Clandinin and Connelly, 1991; Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

![Autoethnonarrative Approach to Research](image)

**FIGURE 2.1. Autoethnonarrative Approach to Research**
Narrative, autoethnography, and teacher research are also used in this study to represent epistemological, ontological, and methodological perspectives. I describe this unique approach to research as auto-ethno-narrative. To define an autoethnonarrative approach to research is to breakdown the three distinct roots: auto – meaning an account of one’s own experience; ethnography – meaning the study of cultures within a community over a prolonged period of time; and narrative – meaning a written account of events. Each of these research approaches lends to the study a unique blend of methods and strategies for research.

**Narrative**

Narrative is used as a way of knowing and understanding the experiences in the classroom. Polkinghorne (1996) contends that “narrative knowing is a fundamental mode of understanding by which people make sense of their own and others’ actions and life events” (p. 77). Narratives also provide an alternative to the sterile, monocultural and impersonal forms of research practices that in many ways smother the voice and life of the researched (Cooper, 1991). It is the concepts of voice and lived experience that create the core of my rationale for using narrative with autoethnographic and teacher research traditions.

The epistemological purpose of narrative knowing is not to produce a representation of reality independent of the knower, rather to display meaning that life events have for the experiencer (Polkinghorne, 1996). In fact, verbal or written reports of experiences or the narrative descriptions of life episodes are not duplicate or mirrored reflections of what has occurred (Grumet, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1996). Rather, narrative
structuring is an interpretation of life where events of the past are understood to be meaningful for a current perspective (Clandinin and Connely, 1991). Narratives encourage an alternative way of knowing and representing knowledge (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1996).

**Autoethnography**

Autoethnography represents my disposition as researcher as well as define and highlight my integral position as a participant. This approach creates an ontological position that guide how I construct and represent the reality of classroom life. Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that an autoethnographic approach to inquiry compliments and supports classroom dynamics and real life experiences. Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) contends that autoethnographies offer opportunities to inform self and others so that we can move forward and make changes in our learning environment. The use of journal writing, interviews, artifacts, video, observational notes, and tape recordings are an integral component in narrative, teacher research, and autoethnographic approaches to inquiry (Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson, 2001; Clandinin and Connelly, 1991; Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

Autoethnographic and narrative approaches to research are not well received by all in the research community. Critics of autoethnographic narrative theory argue that stories fictionalize life and, thus, are not valid methods of research (Shotter, 1987). Atkinson (1997) believes that narratives display a “romantic construction of the self” which makes narrative knowing unworthy of the social sciences (p. 335). Polkinghorne (1996), however, contends that narrative knowing challenges the social sciences by highlighting the reality that the social realm includes the subjective experiences of
people. Ellis and Bochner (2000) understand that autoethnographic narrative is both about life and a part of life and concludes that narrative and living are inseparable realities. In my research project, I also address the critique that autoethnonarratives fictionalize life by using a systematic analytical process to develop narratives and establish a system of checks and balance as a researcher.

I believe that it is imperative that teacher researchers begin to conduct research from an autoethnographic perspective. In describing the autoethnographic position for my research, I focused on auto to encompass my epistemological and ontological realities as they related to being a teacher researcher. I could not imagine conducting teacher research without first taking into account a deeply personal awareness of my position. Because who I am affects every nuance of this type of inquiry, it was imperative that I reflected on my culture, biases, prejudices, growth, strengths, beliefs, and a host of other concepts that make me who I am. Critical awareness is one element that distinguishes the autoethnonarrative approach to conducting research from others. In fact, critical self-awareness is the epicenter of doing autoethnonarrative inquiry and it is the embodiment of what I mean by ‘auto’ as it relates to the autoethnonarrative approach.

Teacher Research

In the study of classroom community and experiences, the autoethnonarrative approach creates a powerful space for doing teacher research. I understand the term teacher research to place me as the teacher “at the center of the educational enterprise” (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994, p. 1). Teacher research, then, is “insider research done by practitioners using their own site as the focus of their study” (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994, p. 2). Anderson, et al. (1994), suggest that teacher research is a
reflective process that is a deliberate and systematic process that require some form of evidence to support outcomes. In fact, throughout this dissertation self-reflection as a vehicle to gain critical awareness is evident in my practices as a teacher researcher. Teacher research is conducted in school settings that are microcosm of a society that holds “conflicting values and unequal distribution of resources and power” therefore reflective practices are essential in teacher research (Anderson, et al., 1994, p. 3). McKernan (1988) contends that teacher research is “a form of self-reflective problem solving which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social settings” (p. 6).

I share the perspectives of McKernan (1988) and Anderson, et al. (1994), as I do believe that teacher research is a systematic process that employs reflective practices that are purposefully designed to understand pedagogical practices and create implications and rationales for improvement. I am aware, however, that an autoethnonarrative approach to teacher research is designed to create narrative accounts of classroom life that may not necessarily focus on rationales for instructional improvements. Rather, an autoethnonarrative approach to teacher research creates narrative accounts that not only produce implications for instructional, and curricular improvements but also for personal and cultural growth. Through reflective processes, teachers are made more aware of their commitment level, weaknesses, motivations, likes and dislikes, and strengths as they relate to teaching, learning, and researching.

As a teacher researcher I believe in reflective practice as a means to check and balance my assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, biases, ignorance, and growth. The act of reflecting then becomes a way to critically evaluate self as I relate to the current social,
political, cultural, economic, and academic environment that encompasses my reality as a teacher researcher. Teacher research and reflective practices are so tightly linked that McCutcheon and Jung (1990) defines teacher research as a “systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice in order to improve practice” (p. 148). As evident throughout this work, reflective practice is the spine of what I do as a teacher researcher.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to describe the development of a learning community in a second grade classroom. This research project describes and interprets the way that I attempted to create a healthy learning community. Given recent challenges that traditional research practices have been Eurocentric and racist (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Madriz, 2000), the use of narrative, teacher research, and autoethnographic approaches framed in an antiracist paradigm is an attempt to find an alternative way of conducting research on classroom life. I have created this position out of a necessity to conduct teacher research from a perspective conducive to who I am as an African American man, teacher, and researcher. The unique perspective and approach to research that I call autoethnonarratives provide narrative accounts on how our particular multicultural learning community was constructed.
What is the purpose and guiding questions in the research project?

Purpose

As a result of my culturally appropriate teaching methods and style, I have been sought out to consult in early childhood programs as well as present in seminars and conferences. I’ve also been complimented by my colleagues and asked to share my pedagogical methods and styles with other teachers. It is for the purpose of sharing and hopefully helping others that I present this dissertation project.

Educational research has traditionally marginalized or underdeveloped research concerning the education of African American children. However, over the past 10 – 15 years we have heard from a growing number of African American scholars who say schools are not providing culturally appropriate and intellectually stimulating learning opportunities for African American students (Gay, 2000). Ladson-Billings (1994) and other scholars have begun to conduct research on effective teachers of African American children. Still, while there are some narrative accounts of effective teaching strategies and experiences concerning African American children, there aren’t enough from the perspective of the teacher and none from an African American male primary teacher.

I believe that there is no more powerful perspective in the research of classroom dynamics than the perspective of the teacher-researcher (Tappan and Brown, 1991). I agree with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) that the teaching community will gain great benefits from more insider knowledge, narrative accounts, and conversations written from the unique perspective of a teacher. The teacher-researcher perspective makes it possible to illuminate decision-making processes, relationships, beliefs, values, dialogue, interactions, routines and many other experiences that are nurtured in a healthy learning
community (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993). Experiences in healthy classrooms that are interpreted through an antiracist lens, are best explored and understood through narrative accounts presented by teacher researchers (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Clandinin and Connelly, 1991).

Unfortunately, the voices of male teachers, and specifically minority male educators, have been limited or unavailable when it comes to research and writing on classroom practice. I believe, therefore, that my experiences and perspective on teaching and learning with African American children can provide rare and beneficial information about educating minority students.

Research Questions

This research project describes and interprets experiences and occurrences that I as a teacher construct in an attempt to create a learning community with my students. Gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity are highlighted in this study because the development of healthy learning communities cannot succeed until these components are acknowledged, accepted and affirmed within the learning environment by the teacher, students and other participants. The emergent nature of this project allowed flexibility that altered and moved the study in new directions as the year unfolded. However, the central questions that guided this narrative account of teacher research and personal experiences are:
• What are the structural, interpersonal, and political dynamics of our classroom community?

• How does my understanding of African American culture and class-based culture influence the way I teach?

• What are common or reoccurring experiences within our classroom that help develop critical awareness of social realities and injustices?

• How are written language, school conversations, and home language accepted and developed in the classroom?

• How do I build productive relationships with parents and children?

I believe that the experiences and interactions between and among students and teachers are vital to future knowledge and progress in educational research. Unless teacher-researchers are given a voice, it is difficult for the larger community to know the experiences in the classroom (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Polkinghorne (1996) contends that the experiential realm doesn’t present itself publicly, it is only knowable to the experiencer. If this is so, narratives must be produced to allow practical experiences, particular meanings, and classroom occurrences to be displayed for the benefit of in-service and pre-service teachers as well as their students (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1996).
What is my timeline?

Given that I am conducting an autoethnonarrative research project, I have been involved in data collection and narrative development for an extended period of time. It is important to note that this extended period of time spans my life as a child, adolescent and adult educator. I have used narratives from my years as an elementary student, kindergarten teacher at a former school, as well as narratives that centered around my family and a recent trip to Ghana, Africa. The narrative accounts that are presented as the core of each chapter, however, are derived from my year as a teacher researcher. As a point of context, the Marcus Garvey School (not the real name) is a school that I taught at prior to the formal inquiry and is referred to in some analysis. To provide anonymity for the school where the formal inquiry took place I have not named it in this dissertation. I only refer to it by using the room number 108 or in one instance using the year 2001-2002. In cases where the school is unidentified represent the school where the formal research took place.

The use of journaling, observational note taking, participating in self-reflective practice, interviews and collecting documents was an ongoing process throughout the study. The ethnographic nature of this project extended into my life outside of the classroom environment and my personal journal also became a source of data. The autoethnonarrative approach to teacher research afforded me space to be flexible and collect data in an emergent design. During the course of the school year, new themes continued to evolve and create possibilities for dynamic stories that represented our multicultural learning community.
I intensely collected data the last four weeks of school. During this period, I interviewed students, audio and video taped, and continued to collect documents as well as created narratives. I chose the last weeks of school to conduct intense research to (1) allow participants to reflect on year, (2) allow time for participants to mature and better understand research procedures, and (3) to receive an overview of what the participants experienced as well as implications for what should happen with future students.

The observations, informal conversations, group discussions, audio and video recording, and note taking times were specifically scheduled in the mornings and afternoons in an effort to explore interaction patterns during different times of the day. During the four week period, I conducted individual and group conversations, audio and video recorded, collected work samples, constructed stories, solicited other teachers to observe my teaching methods, and continued to keep a personal and reflective log or diary of everyday occurrences.

- In week one I recorded group discussion with my students {Tuesday and Thursday during morning reading block}. Each group consisted of four students (five groups) with the exception of one group (three students). In addition, I continued observing occurrences, conversations and experiences in our classroom. I also videotaped interactions during our morning activities, reading block, and afternoon student senate session.

- Week two I conducted and audio recorded an initial interview with three students {Wednesday and Thursday} and the STARS {Monday and City Year Tuesday} tutors. I continued note taking, journal writing and coding. I solicited
teachers to visit my room and formally observe, take notes, and provide feedback on my teaching methods. I also continued the story constructions and preliminary narrative analysis.

- Week three I continued observing student behavior, conversations and interactions. I also continued journaling and constructing narrative vignettes.
- Week four I scheduled final interviews with classroom staff. The interviewees were audio taped. I continued to solicit other teachers to observe my practice and comment on my teaching methods. I also continued journal writing, observing classroom behavior and interactions, coding data stories, and collecting student work samples that pertained to classroom community development.

To navigate the hectic end of the year school schedule as well as help me maintain a systematic approach to time management and research, I developed and posted in our classroom a timeline that reflected my four-week schedule. I had already compiled narrative accounts of our school year as well as stories from the Marcus Garvey School and my personal life. I used the last four weeks of school as a research tool to help confirm and/or disconfirm our stories and provide more narratives. I had decided to observe for fifteen hours each week. I also divided the times between morning and afternoon learning times.

The first week I observed, collected data, interviewed, video and audio taped, and participated in reflective practice for six hours in the morning and nine hours in the afternoon. The subsequent weeks I alternated nine hours for morning and six hours afternoon and so on. The actual time of intense investigation was concentrated to an hour a day for the five hour span, and the ten hour span meant I researched for two hours a
day. For example, during the first week I conducted inquiry for an hour each morning to equal a total of five hours for the week. Each afternoon I investigated classroom practices for two hours to total ten hours for the week. I tried very hard to keep on task and on schedule. However, sometimes I ended early due to various school activities and other times I went over to make up time or to collect important data. Although I stayed with the fifteen hours a week, the time frame was somewhat flexible.

Setting

The elementary school is in an urban district of 65,054 students with 92 elementary schools. The main portion of the building was built in the early 1900’s and has three floors. The exterior of the main building has been restored. The beautiful oak colored bricks, ornate window casings, and high-pitched rooflines are a reminder of the building’s history and status. The classrooms in the main building are large with high ceilings and hardwood floors. In the early to late 1960’s the district constructed a newer one-story building. To accommodate the growth in population and build an efficient building for student activities, the one-story addition includes the library, multipurpose room (gym, cafeteria, auditorium), and seven additional classrooms. Our classroom is located in the one-story addition, across from the library.

The classroom was a basic square that allowed furniture to be arranged freely. There were four blackboards, two on the west wall and two on the east wall. There were five rectangular tables that each sit four students. All chairs at the tables faced the east blackboards where the daily list of activities were written. Five computers and a printer lined the west wall and rendered the two blackboards useless. There was also a bookshelf on the west wall that housed construction, drawing, writing, and graphing paper, books,
and extra learning assignments all accessible to the students. We received lots of sunlight because of our three five-foot high windows on the south wall near my desk. To the west of my desk there was a kidney shaped table and behind it was a black book shelf that housed teacher resource material and our CD/radio player. On the east side of my desk there was an easel and a large green rug for morning meetings, story time, movement activities, presentations, experiments and instruction.

The area also had an easel, built in bookshelf on the south wall and a small book display table placed on the east wall under the blackboard. Adjacent to the green rug was a smaller blue rug we used for our Everyday Counts math activities located on a lowered bulletin board on the east wall. The north wall housed the sink, water fountain, coat closet, storage shelves and cabinets. There was a bulletin board designed by the students that had famous African Americans, and two science boards; one displayed the scientific method and the other was a changeable display of the cycles of life (i.e. water cycle, butterfly cycle, tree cycle, season cycle).

Participants

The district pupil population is 59% African American, 40% White or other, 51% male and 48% female (Public School, 2000). Our elementary school is located in the inner city and is 96% African American and 4% White or other, with a gender population of 48% males and 52% females. It is a neighborhood school and the majority of the students walk to school. Our school is in a working class neighborhood with a combination of houses and apartments; the majority of our population rents. It is a more mature neighborhood with old homes that are being remodeled and some new constructions where older homes were condemned and destroyed.
The class is composed of eight girls and eleven boys. The racial composition consists of one White girl, and seven African American girls, nine African American boys, one Bahamian American boy and one Ethiopian American boy. Each child has a personal and unique personality that became a part of our community. There were comedians, activists, public speakers, caregivers, teachers, and a host of other character traits. The socioeconomic status of the students ranged from the working poor to lower middle class. Family compositions included single parents on public assistance, two working parents, single working parents, and grandparent guardians.

In addition to myself, an African American man, there were two other adults present in our classroom. These adults work as literacy tutors from 9:00 am until 12:00 pm. They include a Seniors Teaching and Reaching Students (STARS) tutor, a 72 year old African American woman, who is a widow that brought to our class a sense of history and a wealth of knowledge on social issues. Mrs. King would tell us stories of the civil rights movement and treat us to her homemade pound cakes. Her presence as an elder allowed the students to see me as a listener, giving respect, honoring elders and as a son. Ms. Sloche was the City Year tutor, a 19 year old African American woman who was a recent graduate from high school. She was searching, like most high school graduates, for a place that is congruent with her dreams and passions. She brought into our learning community a sense of calm that balanced my high energy.

The school had a special grant to keep classroom size low and an abundance of resources to assist students in learning. City Year and S.T.A.R.S tutors were just two resources that directly assisted students in the areas of reading proficiency and language
arts. Mrs. Copper, the second grade lead teacher, shared that the school also had volunteer fire fighters who served as tutors, DARE mentors, a parent liaison and a family resource room.

What are the best methods for conducting my teacher research project?

Interviews

Interviews have three major forms: structured, unstructured, and group interviews (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Fontana and Frey (2000) suggest that group interviews straddle the line between formal and informal interviews that allow flexibility and choice for researchers. Frey and Fontana (1991) developed a table to show the dynamics of how group interviews can be used in research practices. I referred to this table during my research project to help keep me grounded and aware of the types of interviews.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Group Interviews and Dimensions</th>
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<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
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<td>Focus group</td>
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<td>Brainstorming</td>
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<td>Nominal/Delphi</td>
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<td>Field, natural</td>
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<td>Field, formal</td>
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TABLE 2.1. Types of Group Interviews and Dimensions.
Interviews can be viewed from several directions. First, the interviewer can be very formal and directive, taking a controlling stance and allowing little to no digression from the topic (Normal/Delphi and focus group); second, the nondirective role can take place in informal settings or in controlled settings (brainstorming and field-natural); and finally, interviews can be different according to question format and purpose which lead to interviews for exploration, pretest, or phenomenological findings (Fontana and Frey, 2000). I tended to take on the nondirective role as an interviewer. I wanted my students to feel comfortable and risk free. Although I had to be directive, to gain control or redirect the interviewee, I focused on maintaining a nondirective position in the interviews in order to encourage discussion and comprehensive responses.

Interviews were used in this study to discover how an individual student felt about events, occurrences, and the dynamics of classroom interactions (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994). Although the nature of the interviews were informal, the questions and focus of the interview had purpose and direction (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994). The interviews I conducted with my students also allowed space for emerging questions and responses to develop. The use of audio-recording enabled me to track individual interviews in an effort to listen for reoccurring themes and contextual meaning.

Informal Conversations and Discussions

In conducting group interviews or informal conversations there are three problems that I had to confront. First, I could not allow one person or a small team of people to dominate the dialogue; second, I was responsible for encouraging and engaging unwilling participants; and third, I had to remember and be prepared to record notes from all group members (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Fontana and Frey (2000) also believe that no matter
which type of group interview or small group discussion is conducted they are inexpensive, produce rich data, are stimulating for respondents, aid in respondent recall, and provide a flexible format for discussion.

Since small group discussions were a normal part of our classroom, they took place during our regularly scheduled time. During discussions students were encouraged to talk, debate, or ponder a question concerning classroom dynamics. Group discussions allowed the voices of all students to be heard. They were also the source of data collection and story development. The audio recording of these discussions was a great source for recapturing the actual conversation.

Observation

Observation has been characterized as the fundamental component of qualitative research methods and a staple in the ethnographic praxis (Werner and Schoepfle, 1987). Anderson, Herr, Nihlen (1994) contend that of the research methodology, the most important to researchers is participant observation. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) noted, “participant observation ranges across a continuum from mostly observation to mostly participation” (p. 40). The continuum positions researchers as such: positioned at the complete observer end of the continuum, the researcher usually employs quantitative techniques (i.e. viewing subjects through a two-way mirror) and is uninvolved; at the complete opposite end of the continuum, the researcher is completely immersed in the environment and is a full participant (i.e. teacher as researcher in a classroom); in the middle of the continuum the researchers can be positioned as observer, as participant, or participant as observer, depending on which end they are more near (Godwin and Godwin, 1996).
I situated myself as a total participant observer. Meaning, I observe myself, students and other adults as participants in the research project. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) represent the continuum of participant observation in Figure 2.2 below:

![Participant Observation Continuum](image)

**FIGURE 2.2. Types of Participant Observation**

Spradley (1980) developed six categories that describe the difference between a participant and participant observer. Anderson, et al. (1994) believes that the differences between participant and participant observer are important information for teacher researchers. As a participant observer I was required to deal with issues concerning dual purpose, explicit awareness, wide-angle lens, introspection and record keeping (Spradley, 1980).

The issue of dual purpose was problematic for me. Initially during interviews I would engage the participant and forget to observe their actions and activities. This prompted me to create a systematic questioning strategy and form to remind me to both engage and observe the participant. Explicit awareness and wide angle lens were observational strategies I used with ease. When I desired to focus on a certain occurrence, I was able to block out unwanted occurrences and explicitly focus on the targeted phenomenon. Introspection was also easily attained through reflective practice.
and peer reflective conversations. As an introspective observer I was able to keep old or mundane occurrences new and refreshed through constantly reflecting on my experiences in the classroom. Finally, in order to maintain a consistent formula for record keeping, I developed a teacher research journal and I used it to record my observations. To conduct effect teacher research each of these issues concerning observation must be understood and addressed (Anderson, Herr, and Nhilen, 1994).

The use of observational notes enabled a clearer and more valid perspective on classroom dynamics and its effect on our learning community. I took notes on daily social interactions between students as well as between teacher and student. Observational notes also enabled me to record how students interact with each other and myself as well as how I interact with students and other present adults. The use of video-tapes enabled me to view interactions, and experiences for further analysis and story development.

Document Collection/Journaling

Document collection consisted of student work samples about our learning community as well as student and teacher journals, weekly parent letters, informal correspondence between teacher and parents, and notes, cards or expressions given to teacher by students. These documents afforded me opportunities to analyze emerging themes for stories such as, how effective I was as a teacher, how students perceived their classroom environment, how students perceived our relationship, how I perceived parents and their involvement, and the development of parent/teacher relationship.

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Journaling created an opportunity for me to reflect on teaching practices in an effort to create culturally and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. Journal writing also enabled me to reflect daily on how I’ve interacted with students as well as helped record events, experiences, and reoccurring themes.

As stated the data collection methods for narrative representation complement and include data gathering methods used in autoethnographic and teacher research. Conversations, discussions, journaling, interviews, observations, document collection, and the use of audio and video recordings are all consistent with the narrative approach to research as well as teacher research methods.

The choices of data collection were guided by my purpose to create stories about life in a second grade learning community. The stories have relevance because they represent the dynamics of our particular learning community as well as give voice to teacher research from an African American male perspective that is rarely heard or seen.
What are the analytical systems?

As I began the collection and the analytical process of the data, a four-step system emerged. The system emerged out of a necessity to organize the data and began a process of analyzing data into narrative vignettes. The four steps that guided my analytical system were:

1. Broad collection of Data with loosely identified stories;
2. Create a Data Web that supports a codebook to further categorize the loosely identified stories;
3. Specifically identify narratives, create more specific themes, preliminary analysis of narrative; and
4. Analytical questioning process.

In the first step I broadly collected data, loosely identified stories and experiences as they unfolded with an intent to systematically analyze them, and used peer reflective conversations and observation to provide feedback on collected data.

Secondly, I began to web the data, create codes, tease out major themes, and make connections. In an effort to organize the codes, I used the concept of webbing as a graphic organizer. Using a web to create a visual image of how the codes were developed, helped me review and revise existing codes while also creating new themes from emerging experiences in our learning community. To further manage the data I constructed from the web a codebook. The codebook enabled me to organize, manage and categorize themes in my stories (Anderson, Herr, Nihlen, 1994). Building a codebook assisted me in developing major narrative themes or chapters as well as helped exclude unneeded topics and experiences.
Figure 2.3 shows how I systematically developed data through a webbing process. The figure also shows how I merged common themes and developed or extended other major codes. For example, initially I created a separate category for ‘social consciousness’ and ‘character development and respect.’ However, as I continued to collect data I found that these two themes had common stories and concepts. Eventually ‘character development and respect’ was merged into ‘social consciousness’ and placed in chapter four.

![Diagram of data web](image)

FIGURE 2.3 Data Web.
The third step involved the process of identifying stories, clustering them under major themes, and conducting a preliminary analysis. My position as an autoethnonarrative researcher afforded me access to understand and construct meaning and purpose for the stories I had collected. Since outsiders are not able to know as I knew, narrative analysis made our actions and experiences “explainable and understandable to those who otherwise may not understand” (Miller and Glassner, 1997, p. 107). Richardson (1990) suggest that, “participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other” (p. 24). The use of narrative analysis enabled me to analyze data from a cultural perspective, produce stories as outcomes of research, and synthesize data in a coherent whole (Polkinghorne, 1995). In addition, narrative analysis allowed me to relate concepts and happenings in an effort to develop and support story plots. The diachronic nature of narrative analysis creates spaces where I can organize temporal information to form sequential events experienced in our learning community.

After the narratives were tentatively developed, I began the fourth step, which is to put each narrative through another analytical questioning process. I prepared questions such as,

- Who are the scholars that support the concepts of the narrative?
- What is worth teaching from this narrative?
- How does what is told help the reader learn about teaching African American children?
- What am I trying to teach others about teaching African American children?
- What does the narrative reveal about class, culture, and social consciousness?
• What would a non-black teacher not understand or know from the narrative?
• What biases or stereotypes might be challenge through the narrative?

These question helped keep me balanced as well as put distance between the data and myself. In addition to the analytical questioning strategy, I solicited the help of my colleagues for peer debriefing and reflective conversations to assist me in identifying what to make explicit and to make the invisible – visible.

**What are issues concerning trustworthiness and limitations of the Study?**

It was always my intent to be transparent and truthful to the nature, goal, and purpose of this research project. In addition, I followed the four codes of ethics as described by Clifford Christians. “In value free social science, codes of ethics for professional and academic associations are the conventional format for moral principles” (Christian, 2000, p. 138). The first of these codes; informed consent – is committed to individual autonomy, voluntary participation without coercion, and full disclosure of project goals; the second, deception – emphasizes that there should be no deliberate misrepresentation, withholding of information concerning the health and welfare of research participants; the third, privacy and confidentiality – insist on safeguards to protect the identity of the participants as well as research location with the use of pseudonyms; and the final code, accuracy – ensures that data is accurate and that fraudulent, fabrications, and omitted information is unethical (Christian, 2000).

With the issue of trustworthiness the acknowledgement and confession of personal biases as it relates to teaching and researching methods are important. In
addition, methodological triangulation that includes interviews, observations, video and audio recording, and research journals have afforded a sense of trustworthiness in my research methods. For multiple ethnic purposes, this study is limited because of the age of students as well as the small ethnic mix in the classroom.

Nonetheless, this dissertation is a result of what I call autoethnonarrative inquiry. It draws from my experience as a classroom teacher. I have also adopted a recursive, reflective stance to critically analyze my pedagogical style.
CHAPTER 3

Communicative Languages and Expressions: Crossing the Street to Hear the Other Side

“di’n’t I tell y’all I ain’t pressed, so ya betta git yo’self togetha for I come ova dere an’ jack y’all up.”

-Mr. Hancock, teacher

The waves danced in a gentle rhythm against the white sands of the Ghanain beach resort. With deliberate purpose and direction each series of waves moved in a harmonious flow towards their destination. Unlike the waves that seem to find their place on the shoreline, I could not find a rhythm or foresee a direction that would bring me to my destination. In a daze I lounged in a tan beach chair, covered in an oversized umbrella that shielded me from the blazing morning sun. I was set to meet with Dr. Dee to discuss if I would be ready for the Candidacy Exams. As non-threatening and relaxing as sitting on a beach could be, I found no comfort in the therapy and beauty of the beach because of the conversation that was about to commence. I toyed with how I should sit. Am I prepared to answer her questions? But most importantly I thought how should I speak? Do I use my home language or academic language? As I pondered which language pattern would be most appropriate, I remembered what a Ghanain elder said to me as a Ghanain friend and myself tried to communicate from different sides of a busy street. He walked up behind me and in a strong but calm voice he said, “why don’t you cross the street so you
can hear the other side?” I then decided that I would listen to Dr. Dee’s language patterns to hear how she spoke and I would speak accordingly.

Dr. Dee was relaxed and calm as she crossed back and forth from home to academic language in a fluent rhythm. The more I listened to her, the more relaxed I became. I was able to cross in and out of home and academic language without feeling pressured or tense. Dr. Dee assured me that I would do fine. I left our meeting with a sense of support and I began to enjoy my stay in Ghana, Africa.

I stood motionless, my eyes were closed, and sweat rolled abundantly down my back. I could hear, feel and see Cape Coast, Ghana. It was alive with conversation, market place transactions, bartering, laughter, and a sense of harmony. Unfettered with the worries of the Candidacy Exams, I too, was among the throngs of Ghanaians and other tourists from around the world. In a country of many languages it was surprising to know that I had maintained (through ancestral lineage) cultural and linguistic nuances similar to the Ghanain people. In fact, Black English as well as expressive and cultural patterns are rooted in a synthesis of West African traditions (Smitherman, 1998). For example, I noticed Ghanain women rolling their eyes in contempt when confronted with foolishness. I also noticed Ghanain men’s gestures, movements, and expressions as they related to being in charge. Both Ghanain men and women displayed mannerisms that were similar to African Americans. I and other African American tourists often commented on how some Ghanains looked and behaved like a relative in the states. I stood in the mist of the market place with my eyes closed observing communicative patterns and gestures.
and it felt natural and affirming. I saw how people crossed over from their home language into a language suitable for the market place. The feeling of kinship and experiences of affirmation were almost surreal.

Then I heard a sound that seemed to come from a distant place. Someone was calling me. It was a distinctly American voice. “Mr. Hancock!” The voice got louder and closer. “Mr. Hancock!” The market place in Cape Coast, Ghana seemed to fade before my eyes. “Here’s yo’ las’ box.” Startled, I opened my eyes to find myself in the mist of boxes, overturned tables, disconnected computers, covered bulletin boards, and paper on every surface. “Thank you, Mr. Lee,” I said. Mr. Lee, our custodian, had brought my last box of workbooks from the storage closet and had woken me from my African daydream.

It was a hot and humid August afternoon and I desperately longed to go back to Africa. The summer had been hectic and stressful. I stood in the middle of my classroom realizing that I had taken a trip to Ghana, Africa, completed my candidacy exams, and was now preparing to become a teacher researcher.

Soon after Mr. Lee left the room, Mrs. Copper came in to welcome me to the school. Mrs. Copper, the second grade team leader and teacher next door, has beautiful caramel skin, naturally curly hair and a very chipper personality. Immediately after our introduction she began to warn me of school politics. As I listened to her I couldn’t stop thinking about the anxiety of teacher research. It was real. I was now embarking on a real research project that would reveal to myself and to others how I taught. It all seemed a bit overwhelming.
Mrs. Copper came into my room weekly to discuss teaching practices and techniques. One of our main discussion topics was Ebonics or Black English and how we deal with it in the classroom. I expressed complete acceptance of Black English or home language (as I will refer to it in this work) in the classroom and explained to her that if our students’ home language is affirmed and validated, then they will be more apt to transition into Standard English or Market Place Language. I prefer Market Place Language because the word ‘standard’ implies that everything else is nonstandard or unacceptable. However, Market Place Language (MPL) describes exactly the language we must speak in the work place, or, as in Africa, the market place. Just as the elder in Ghana advised me, Mrs. Copper and I agreed that our responsibility was to advise our students to create bridges so that they could cross the street to hear the other side of the English language.

Communicative Expressions

I’ve found in my experience as a teacher of diverse children that affirming their communicative styles is an important factor in the development of empowered students (Foster, 1992). It is because communicative expressions are socially and culturally constructed that shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds are factors that often influence the development of student empowerment (Foster, 1992). If we are to have healthy learning communities where students and teachers are empowered, it is important that teachers and students understand one another’s background and specific language patterns and not assume or take for granted cultural literacy (Delpit, 1998). Understanding what my students say and the reasons for their verbal and nonverbal
expressions are extremely important in creating a positive and educative relationship. A lack of unfamiliarity with the home language of students can promote misinterpretation, misrepresentation and could insult African American students (Foster, 1992). I have also realized that learning the language patterns of my students was more a social and cultural undertaking rather than an academic pursuit. However, because I was privy to the language and to some of the social and cultural rules that were used and followed in my classroom, I only had to adapt to the new and emerging language patterns that were dictated by the ever-changing hip-hop and T.V. cultures. I can take advantage of the sociocultural rules and linguistic patterns of my students because I am an African American who speaks and values African American home language in my personal life and in the classroom.

Not only do I value and use home language in the classroom, I also understand the issues concerning social class and my students. Many of my students are what is considered the working poor and at or below the poverty level. In fact, many of them “are isolated in neighborhoods where they seldom see, not to mention know, people who work, speak standard English, or live in two-parent families” (Irvine, 1990, p. 126). Unlike middle-class African American students, my students lack experiences and market place language models to teach them how to acquire proficiency in code switching (Irvine, 1990). In our learning community, we value the rich culture each child brings to school no matter the socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, many classrooms operate in an arena where student culture is not validated and miscommunication and cultural illiteracy dominate student/teacher relationships (Gay, 2000).
It is important as we think about communicative expressions and language that we take into account a more comprehensive understanding of communication. In this chapter, I have compiled narratives that highlight home language, body language, and slang as it relates to language in a healthy learning community. Issues concerning gender, race, relationships, sociopolitical realities, success, and culture are all interwoven in the narratives.

Throughout the narratives and the analysis in this chapter specifically and the following chapters, evidence of social constructivism is related to linguistic development. Social constructivism as a component in my teaching philosophy is a cognitive position where all mental acts are affected by the social milieu and constructed from a socially tempered perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). A social constructivist teacher, then, focuses on how students socially construct meaning and seeks to provide culturally and socially relevant learning opportunities to foster a greater potential for learning. There are four basic principles that guide a social constructivism in my teaching practice namely: “(a) embedding instruction in meaningful and purposeful activities, (b) promote a classroom dialogue for self-regulated learning, (c) maintain instruction that is responsive to students, and (d) establish a classroom community of learning” (Englert, Tarrant, and Mariage, 1992 in Trent, 2002, p. 200). These fundamental principles of social constructivism are evident in the narratives and analysis found in this chapter.

It is important to understand the reality that social constructivism, as a component in my teaching philosophy, is not an isolated factor just to affirm linguistic styles. It is highlighted in this chapter, however, to provide a concrete or practical example of how a
broad and interrelated component of my teaching practice is used in these specific everyday classroom interactions, occurrences, activities, and structured lessons.

Walking on Eggshells: The Drama of Transitioning Home Language to Market Language

I announced the time, flicked the lights off, then on again. It was 9:50 a.m. and in our second grade classroom we were aware that for the next ten minutes we would speak Market Language. Without prompting, chairs were pulled in, papers were organized, throats were cleared, backs were straightened, and a pretentious silence covered the room. It was the quietest time of the day. You could feel the tension in the room. Some children opened their language arts book, others had determined that they would not talk, and still others looked at it as a game to be played and won. Nonetheless, for most of the students it was like trying to walk on eggs without breaking the shell.

Therefore it had become somewhat of a courage marker for the student who spoke first. Some students took the challenge and were quite versed at translating their home language into market language. Today, Bryan was the first to raise his hand in response to a question about story sequence. He said, with his back erect and with a look and voice of pious pomposity,

Bryan: “I do believe that the story began with coyote sticking his nose in the other Animals’ business. Next the silly coyote wanted to fly with a group - oh wait a minute – (as he raises one finger and places it on his temple) not a group but a flock of crows. The crows were nice and helped the coyote fly but the coyote became boastful. At the end of the story the crows took back their feathers which made….?”
Me: Wait sir, Is ‘made’ the best word to use in this instance?

Bryan: No! I do believe that a better word is ‘caused.’

Me: Good! Continue.

Bryan: At the end of the story the crows took back their feathers which caused the coyote to fall from the sky. (he bows to claps and giggly cheers)

At the conclusion of his accurate summation of the story we all laughed and marveled at how well he translated his home language to market language.

**Analysis**

In an effort to explicitly teach my students that there was another language that they must learn in order to be successful, I scheduled a daily practice session for bridging home language to market place language. In the initial sessions I taught students subject/verb agreement, tense, voice, and how to deal with the infamous ‘be’ that is a carry over from our African heritage. For example, a ten minute session on the infamous ‘be’ involved the entire class. For the first five minutes students were paired and given five sentences. Each sentence used the word ‘be’ in a Home Language context and the students were challenged to change the verb ‘be’ and replace it with a Market Place verb. If the sentences read, **He always be trying to act cool,** The students would have to change it to, **He is always trying to act cool.** In the last five minutes they have ‘verbal challenge.’ Verbal challenge is when one student says the sentence using Home Language and the other student must say it using Market Place Language. In the span of ten minutes we have completed a culturally relevant and fun language arts activity.
We also learned about semantics, proper use of pronouns, contractions, homonyms, antonyms, synonyms and other language structures. Ten minutes a day may not seem long, but with culturally relevant lessons, in the form of verbal games and challenges, the students learned quickly how to code switch from one context to the next.

This ten-minute routine of speaking Market Place Language was a time when I and my students practiced skills that enabled us to switch between home language and the language of the work or market place. Market Place Language in definition and socio-cultural use neither degrades other forms of language nor is it elevated and elitist. It is simply the language spoken in the work place, business world, or job market.

I describe my teaching style as culturally relevant, social constructivist tempered in critically reflective practices. In my teaching I employ Vygotskian theory as it relates to the dynamics of linguistic interaction between children and their social milieu. In the narrative Bryan, like most students in the classroom, was not explicitly aware of code switching as it concerned language patterns. He was able to internalize, however, from the help he received in former lessons to reach beyond his comfort zone and solve the problem of code switching (Moll, 1999). His ability to identify experiences from his social arena, construct bridges to use the experiences, and apply the experiences to solve a problem, is an example of the process of social construction.

Vygotsky (1978) described Bryan’s learning within the proximal development level or zone. “The zone is defined as the distance between what children can accomplish independently (the actual developmental level) and what they can accomplish with the help of adults or more capable peers (the proximal development level)” (Moll, 1999, p. 77). Bryan came to school with a social and internalized awareness of his
language patterns. He could independently summarize the story in his home language or best market place language. However, as a teacher who practices social constructivism it was my responsibility to engage Bryan in activities that would bridge him into potential development where he understands and applies the dynamics of market place language. The area where bridging takes place is called the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and it’s the core of our learning community. “It is within the zone that social characteristics, communication styles, personality, cognitive ability, linguistic style, and academic knowledge are transmitted from external social activities to internal psychological knowledge” (Gillani, 2001, p. 129). Bryan’s ability to code switch is directly a result of him taking the external social and intellectual activities of language games and market place language exercises and transforming these activities into internal psychological knowledge. Moll (1999) believes that effective instruction should focus on the child’s proximal development where expectations are limited, yet social interactions within the zone should be culturally relevant and intellectually appropriate. In Figure 3.1, Gillani (2001, p. 129) displays the zone of proximal development as a recursive learning process where actual development is transformed into potential development with the help of others.

FIGURE 3.1. Zone of Proximal Development
At some point in our lives we all have to switch our codes of language and dialect. A white man from rural Kentucky who is a New York Stock Broker must develop skills to emotionally, psychologically, socially, and cognitively switch from a rural Kentucky language pattern to a language pattern conducive to being successful on the New York Stock Exchange. He has to bridge his home language patterns into a potential to speak in a language pattern similar to those on Wall Street. This rural Kentuckian has to find opportunities from his social environment, colleagues, and friends to help bridge him from the zone of proximal development into his potential development. When he has engaged in opportunities that assist in nurturing his potential, he then has the potential to become a successful Stock Broker. As this white man from rural Kentucky was provided opportunities to develop his potential, so too, must African American children be provided a place of proximal development where they can navigate the drama of translating their home language into market place or (school) language.

**Fixing our Attitudes: The Culture Beneath the Conversation**

On a humid afternoon in September, Mrs. Copper formally introduced me to Ms. Little, a first year teacher who wanted to observe my class. Ms. Little was an active and driven person. She often talked with passion about becoming a teacher in urban schools. As a white woman, she expressed that it was her choice and not a last resort to teach in the inner city and she was committed to providing the best opportunities for her students.

On the day she observed, we were engaged in several different activities. A group of students was doing computer activities, another group was working independently on a reading activity, and the final group was working with me in our
discussion session on classroom dynamics. Our discussions on classroom dynamics were indirectly a decision by the students. It started as a result of how I dealt with behavioral problems in the classroom. The students didn’t seem to care for my communal philosophy for discipline which states, ‘if one acts up, all must pay.’ So they asked if they could talk to me about changing it. That incident led to a once or twice a month talking session that eventually developed into a full-blown student senate. Ms. Little meandered through the room and finally settled at my desk, where she could see the entire room. She listened in on our round table discussion on **Fixing our Attitudes**:

**Me:** The topic for the day is fixing our attitudes. Alright, what do you think we need to do to fix our attitudes?

**Lisa:** Stop playing so much and try…

**Me:** Stop playing so much and try to do what…?

**Lisa:** Try to do stuff that I don’t know how until I get good at it.

**Me:** O.K.!

**Lamont:** And stop talking too much.

**Lisa:** Uhhh! It’s the same thing I mean as playing too much.

**Lamont:** Talking is not playing.

**Lisa:** Uhhh! Can I smack Lamont upside his head?

**Me:** Well, is that good for your attitude?

**Lamont:** No!!! ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

**Me:** I thought you just said you were going to try to change it.

**Lisa:** Ooohh! But I want to smack him so bad.

**Me:** Then, I’m glad you’re controlling your attitude. O.K! Yes, Mario.
Mario: Uh, me think we need to stop dancing around and playing with people and try to do our work and stop whining.

Me: Good! Stop whining, playing with people and do your work, very good Mario.

Mario: You need to ask for help when you don’t know.

Me: Aaahh! You need to ask for help from people that’s something good.

Anything else you could do to change your attitude, Mario. O.K so what do you think is going to happen in the classroom if we change our attitudes? How do you think the classroom is going to change?

Malcolm: It wont be that much of noise.

Me: Aaahh, it wont be that much noise. Do you think noise is a bad thing Malcolm?

Malcolm: no!?

Lisa: Yeah, because then you can’t work a lot. You won’t be able to work.

Our discussion continued in an informal, respectful and jovial manner. Towards the end of our fifteen-minute conversation, I impressed upon the group a need to develop at least two actions we could all accomplish to change our attitudes for the better.

Lisa: (in a strong and assertive voice) I think we should stop playing and do our work!

Me: Is that one or two behaviors?

Lamont: It’s one ‘cause nobody else had a turn.

Lisa: Ooooh, see Mr. Hancock, he always gotta say som’in, but I’m gonna control my attitude (as she rolls her eyes at Lamont).

Me: Lamont don’t say nothing else, just be quiet. Lisa is that one or two behaviors?

Lisa: I think it should be one ‘cause you have to listen to do your work.
Me: Alright, does anybody else have a behavior that will make our attitudes better?

Mario: Yeah, we should stop dancing around and playing with people and try to do our work and stop whining.

Me: O.K. We can use ‘stop whining’ as a behavior because Lisa pretty much said stop playing and do you work. We have two behaviors we should work on don’t forget them (I turned my gaze to Lisa and Lamont and gave them a look of ‘yall need to practice the behaviors.’ I then dismissed the group to begin their assignments).

Analysis

In Fixing our Attitudes my students are participating in a discussion session about classroom behavior. It is more of a social setting where the students are relaxed and expressive. A group of students are called together to discuss how we can change negative attitudes in our classroom. As the group begins to dialogue, there is a subliminal and yet relevant conversation going on between Lisa and Lamont. Subliminal because everyone may not be aware of the method used or the purpose and message found in the conversation. It is relevant because the children’s interaction show us, as teachers and students, how to fix our attitudes.

Lisa is an expressive student. She is what many African American adults would look at as ‘fass’ or ‘grown’ meaning acting, looking or behaving like an adult; generally used in a negative sense (Smitherman, 1994). Lamont is a smooth talker who likes talkin’ smack or talking junk/nonsense as well as a bit mannish or acting like a man would act towards a women (Smitherman, 1994). He likes Lisa and is signifyin’ just to get her attention. Smitherman (1994) describes signifyin’ or siggin as
The verbal art of ritualized insult, in which the speaker puts down, needles, talks about (*signifies on*) someone, to make a point or sometimes just for fun. It exploits the unexpected, using quick verbal surprises and humor, and it is generally characterized by non-malicious and principled criticism (p. 206).

In Lisa and Lamont’s interaction, Lamont is the leader. He seeks a response from Lisa and is successful. He is aware of what buttons to push to make her expressive and retaliate on his signifying behaviors. Lisa is acting out of gendered behaviors that she has learned from her sociocultural reality as a black girl. The rolling of the eyes, high-pitched voice, and snappy remarks are behaviors that will be pruned and trimmed over time to produce a strong Black woman who is able to survive in her social, political and professional environment. However, when I inadvertently focus on Lisa’s attitude, Lamont gives a victory laugh. She responds by wanting to slap Lamont because she knows he is picking with her (signifying). Yet, Lisa controls herself and sits quietly, which is a sign of maturity, yet she gives Lamont the evil eye. Lamont is also acting out of a gendered performance. He is clearly the leader in this interaction, which will likely be his position in future relationships. As the male, Lamont has watched and waited for a safe opportunity to signify on Lisa. He knows that I won’t let her hit him (as she did two days prior on the playground).

As an African American, I am aware of the culture beneath the conversation and I take into account what it means for African American students in general. For both students, the conversation is being socially constructed and processed. The conversation is full of interaction, meaning, and culture and will consequently dictate future behavior and relationships. In this instance, I am aware of what it meant for Lisa to reject Lamont
and what it meant for Lamont to be cool and keep trying. For Lisa, a sociocultural rule requires her to reject Lamont. She must resist Lamont’s attempts to engage her in playful conversation as a sign that she’s not interested in being his special friend. Lamont, however, must consistently try to engage her as a sign that he won’t give up. Their conversation was based on the fact that Lamont liked Lisa and wanted her to like him too. Although he would emphatically deny any interest, he stayed near her and even tried to protect her. As the teacher, my knowledge of the sociocultural reality that goes on beneath the surface enables me to redirect and refocus the discussion without negatively disciplining either student. In fact, it is their freedom to be expressive that makes the discussion worthwhile. Although other students were involved in our discussion, Lisa and Lamont had the most to say about the nature of our classroom and how well we were doing as a community.

It is important to note that in an environment that fosters risk taking, cultural affirmation, student empowerment, and personality appreciation are promoted, and students are apt to feel comfortable, playful, and engaged in learning (Moll, 1999). Many African American students have a natural desire to perform or display stylized behaviors in the classroom (Smitherman, 1994). However, African American students who display these stylized behavior patterns are often perceived as bad, aggressive, or possessing too much attitude. In these classrooms students are not empowered, appreciated or affirmed. As a result, social connections are minimized, academic performance suffers, and classroom community is broken (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1998).

Many teachers don’t understand the interrelated and inseparable nature of culture and language (Richardson, 2003). In analyzing Lisa and Lamont’s behavior it is evident
how gendered style, interaction patterns, and stylized performance are natural factors in the sociocultural reality of African American children. In fact, African American children are socialized into stylized behaviors at church, family gatherings, family outings, and recreation activities (Hale, 1994). Only in schools are African American children forced to suppress their expressive behavior patterns for a more docile and passive style of behaving (Hale, 1986; Kohn, 1999; Obiakor and Ford, 2002).

Nel Noddings (1992) suggests that caring learning communities for young children should be a place where students are "able to resist the demands of the community for conformity or orthodoxy" while simultaneously accepting the communities "binding myths, ideas, and commitments" (p.118). Lisa did this when she resisted her desire to hit Lamont. Her actions were centered in her cultural community as a young black girl. Hitting in this situation is a playful and outward form of resistance where Lisa is the beneficiary. She benefits because hitting or resisting Lamont in any way may influence her peers to view her as strong and independent. Lisa, however, accepted the ideas and commitments in our classroom and decided not to conform to her cultural identity and slap Lamont. Our learning community provided a place where Lisa could act on a variety of decisions that will enable her to live and grow with her peers and teacher. Noddings (1992) states "classrooms should be places in which students can legitimately act on a rich variety of purposes, in which wonder and curiosity are alive, in which students and teachers live together and grow" (p. 12).

The building of a multicultural learning community should involve students in discussions about classroom concerns, policies, and procedures. I believe that "the sense of community is built not only on the relationships among the adults and young people
but on the idea that they are mutually engaged in addressing shared questions and concerns" (Beane, 1997, p. 65). Student involvement in classroom policy helps build bridges to further academic, linguistic, and personal potential. In fact, in an effort to build a multicultural learning community it is important that we move students from where they are to a greater potential. As a social constructivist it is a goal in our learning community for every student to move from their actual level of understanding to a greater potential of growth academically, socially, and linguistically.

In our class, students were encouraged through explicit and implicit instruction to express natural language patterns and behaviors. We discuss and acknowledge our language patterns, attitudes, and behaviors and chart activities to positively maximize our potential. Vygotsky (1978) supports this practice as he validates the importance of what students can do on their own, what they can do with help, and their potential for further success.

Misunderstood: The Dilemma of Cultural Illiteracy

It was another hot day and the children had just come in from recess. Students were lined up at the water fountain fanning and chatting. I was observing two second graders, Chad, an African American boy and Dee, a white girl, in a heated discussion. Chad had taken off his shirt, to keep it clean and because he knew he would be hot during recess. He was wearing a white tank top as an undershirt. The discussion started when Dee asked Chad why he was wearing an undershirt to school. Chad replied, with his arms bouncing up and down, head cocked to the side, a pimp in his step, and in a mannish (acting like a man) tone, “it’s not a undershirt it’s a wife beater.” Then Dee
became upset and began to cry. She turned to a teacher, a white woman who stood behind her and who was unaware of the slang term “wife beater” drawn from the portrayal of Ike Turner in the movie ‘I Tina’. In the movie Ike wore a white tank top in most of the scenes when he abused Tina. Hence, the slang ‘wife beater.’

As the teacher approached Chad, he gravitated towards me. She did not seem to acknowledge me and proceeded as if I were invisible. She said to Chad in a polite but stern voice that he should not say that he would beat white girls. He responded in confusion telling the teacher and the little girl that he didn’t say he would beat her. By this time there was an audience of second graders gathering to see the outcome.

The discussion went back and forth with the Dee saying that the Chad called himself a “white beater” because she commented on his undershirt. Chad, realizing how upset Dee and the teacher had become, began to plead his case. Neither the little girl nor the teacher would hear him. To add insult to injury the teacher then scolded Chad for taking off his shirt and had started to take disciplinary action and contact the principal.

I had had enough of the children’s lack of cultural literacy and the teacher’s unwillingness to hear the other side and was concerned and confused about her disrespectful attitude towards me. I was aware that the teacher had prior negative experiences with Chad and that she might be uncomfortable with me as an African American male educator. I couldn’t believe that she would stand before me and attempt to discipline my students without acknowledging me. Being mindful of my building anger against the teacher, I calmed myself and addressed the group.

I explained to both the teacher and Dee what the gestures and term meant. I also explained to Chad that some people might take his behavior and tone as a threat. I
insisted that the children apologize to each other and that the teacher not take any
disciplinary actions.

However, if disciplinary actions were enacted, what would Chad’s father say or
how would his mother respond to the situation? How would Dee’s parents react to the
situation? Potentially it could’ve gotten out of control because a young black boy
exposed his undershirt (‘wife beater’) and a young white girl misread his gestures and
comments as a threat. Fortunately, we were able to help clear up a simple and innocent
misunderstanding, but I wonder how many more students are being misunderstood.

**Analysis**

I must admit that I was extremely frustrated with the teacher. It almost seemed as
if she knew that Chad was guilty without giving him a chance. As an African American
man, I could only see myself as Chad and it made me angry to know that an adult would
be so blinded by ignorance and personal stereotypes that she would lash out on a child.
On the surface the actions of the teacher could be seen as appropriate because children
should keep their clothes on in school.

I understand fully Dee’s fear and misunderstanding of Chad’s behavior. In a
country where African American men are vilified both by the African American Hip Hop
community and mass media, Dee was acting out of learned fear. Her reaction to Chad
was a result of what she heard and saw on T.V, and what she experienced in her
neighborhood and home. Chad’s initial action of taking off his shirt during recess was
directly related to his personal culture. Historically African Americans have held a high
standard for education and the need to stay neat and clean was a response to their
standards. A reverence for education compelled many poor African Americans to
admonish their children to stay neat and clean in order to re-wear their clothes the next day (Hale, 1994). This traditional behavior continues in many African American families and may have been a reality for Chad.

Chad displays behavior and expresses language that is interpreted as threatening by people outside of the African American culture. In the African American tradition, however, Chad’s behavior is identified as a verbal and kinesthetic form of signifyin(g) (Gates, 1988; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 1998). Signifying was used in an earlier analysis but also has implications for this story.

Gates (1988) perspective on signifyin’ highlights the importance of cultural literacy. Earlier I spoke of it as a “communicative practice that deploys exaggeration, irony, and indirection as a way of speaking on two different levels (Smitherman, 1998). Signifyin’ is used when someone needs to get ‘told’ or corrected indirectly and in a playful way. Chad’s behavior displayed a highly stylized use of signifyin’. Without directly responding to Dee’s description of his ‘wife beater,’ which is an imagistic phrase rooted in his daily life, Chad humorously and rhythmically confronted Dee with an unexpected play on words. The verbal dexterity and dramatic expressions are components that “avoid the creation of social distance between speaker and audience because the rich humor makes you laugh to keep from crying” (Smitherman, 1998, p. 33). However, if the speaker and audience are not from the same cultural background, the act of signifyin can be misinterpreted. In an effort to explain the dynamics of signifyin’ Smitherman (1998, p. 34) has developed eight characteristics.
1. indirection, circumlocution;
2. metaphorical-imagistic (images rooted in the everyday real world);
3. humorous, ironic;
4. rhythmic fluency;
5. teachy, but not preachy;
6. directed at person(s) present in the speech situation (signifiers do not talk behind your back);
7. punning, play on words; and
8. introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected.

I can imagine Dee’s fear as Chad walks up to her flailing his arms, bouncing and talking in a sarcastic and mannish tone. Her fear and lack of knowledge of the slang term for undershirt coupled with Chad’s desire to engage her in the sociocultural act of signification caused her to misunderstand ‘wife’ for ‘white’. Regardless of Chad’s cultural illiteracy toward Dee, the threat was real to her and she sought refuge.

Knowing he didn’t mean any harm, Chad was shocked and confused that the situation has gotten out of control. Chad then tries to take responsibility for causing the problem by pleading his case. Unfortunately, his attempts were rejected and consequently he was told that, “it’s not O.K. to be an African American boy.” Because the teacher denied his voice, culture, and language, they also denied his existence (Foster, 1992).

The teacher did not hear Chad because of the dynamics of dominance. Dominant groups are prone to claim truth and rightness as their domain (Howard, 1999). They can afford to be blind and not hear the other side or pay attention to cultural difference. The dynamics of dominance are identified by “the assumption of rightness, the luxury of
ignorance, and the legacy of privilege” (Howard, 1999, p. 50). Each of these components were employed by the teacher. Not until we were all engaged in dialogue was the assumption of rightness, luxury of ignorance, and legacy of privilege challenged.

My role in this incident was purposeful observer and teacher. As the event unfolded, I maintained a distance from the fray. Although both Dee and Chad were in my class, I watched the dynamics of the three characters. Chad was actively trying to defend himself, Dee was the helpless victim seeking vindication, and the teacher was the enforcer of an unexamined, white, middle-class notion of justice and fair play. I was trying to help them understand the sociocultural misunderstanding. I thought about how I would explain to Dee that some African American children used gestures, movements, and tones to “mediate their interactions with their physical and social environment” (Moll, 1999). I also needed to explain to Chad that what we do and say is interpreted and constructed through a sociocultural lens that may differ from our own (Smitherman, 1994).

I explicitly explained to Dee and Chad that it was a misunderstanding of a sociocultural phenomenon in the African American community and no one was to blame. I explained to Dee that Chad meant no harm nor was it his intent to be a threat. I further explained that he was engaging her in a sociocultural interaction, which meant that he accepted her as a friend. I put my hand on Chad’s shoulder, bent to his ear and implicitly explained that some white people may not understand his behavior as some of his black friends do, so he should remember his environment and company. I was adamant about him being able to read his environment before acting or speaking. My gestures, volume, and use of the words ‘white people’ helped Chad realize that it was a they-just-don’t-
understand situation and that he was operating in a culturally and politically different context. He gave me a nod of understanding and went to the water fountain. I explained to my colleague that before we can enforce discipline, it is important for us to first learn about the social context, culture, language, and expressions of our students.

A House for a Car?!: Sensitivity Towards Cultural Literacy

Similar to Chad’s genuine confusion and dismay about the term ‘wife beater,’ I was also confused and bewildered when I was misunderstood. In my life as a student there are many occasions when I was misunderstood or marginalized because of my cultural literacy and/or communicative style.

I had been reading since I was four years old and my teachers were supportive in my continued development as a good reader. Being one out of eleven children I had been tracked as an at risk student. I had also been bussed to a school on the other side of town for integration purposes. Here, for the first time, white women were at the center of my learning. By the first grade my teacher seemed determined that I would prove the at-risk label wrong. She felt that it was her duty to help me understand white, middle-class principles. She had a missionary approach to teaching and felt that a poor, Black boy from the projects needed to be rescued and taught the ways of middle-class America.

At the end of the year all first graders were given a battery of tests to assess comprehension, reading ability, and vocabulary. I had done well on comprehension and reading. I remember beginning the vocabulary test. I was shown a series of pictures and was asked to point to the picture that matched the word spoken by the teacher. Everything was going fine. I had successfully chosen the correct picture for most of the
words. However, on the last page there were four pictures. The pictures were of a barn, a house with an attached garage, a gas station, and a fire station. I was instructed to point to a garage. I was baffled! I had not heard of a garage. So, I tried to eliminate my choices through deductive reasoning. I knew what a barn was; I had experience with a gas station and fire station; and I knew people who lived in houses. So which picture was a garage?

I could sense my teacher’s desire for me to ace the test but I had no idea how to answer. Her desire seemed to turn into frustration and she uncharacteristically gave me a clue. “It’s a house for a car!” But her attempt to help made matters worse. I tried to reason and deduct with this new information. Tractors can go in barns, fire trucks go in the fire station, my uncle’s friend works at a gas station where cars are repaired, and people live in houses. So I knew it wasn’t the house. So, I logically deducted that it must be the gas station. My teacher was devastated.

She began to explain to me that the garage was attached to the house and its purpose is to shelter the car from the outdoor elements as well as secure it when it’s not used. I sat there feeling like I had lost a game. But more importantly I was bewildered that someone would put a car in a house. I finally said to her, “there are people in my neighborhood that have to live on the street, couldn’t they live in the garage instead of the car.” I don’t know if she understood my sociocultural and class based perspective. And, I later realized that the outcome of the test was a determinate for advanced academic tracking. As a high school freshman my counselor told me that I was only a few points from being labeled gifted and talented as a first grader.
**Analysis**

My first grade teacher’s genuine care and desire to see me successful unfortunately blocked her ability to see me through a class and cultural lens. In a sense she was, “culture blind” and “class biased.” Although she recognized that I was an African American boy, in an effort to ‘save’ me, she didn’t take into account issues concerning class and socioeconomic status. Her missionary attitude towards educating the African American child, although produced from good intentions, was inappropriate and potentially detrimental. In summation, good intentions + ignorance = student failure. There is no room for assumption in the educating of children. In fact, my motto is “Assume Nothing, Expect Everything.” It is our responsibility as teachers to suspend our judgments and assumptions and reflect on our personal sociocultural reality and the sociocultural reality we are trying to construct in our classroom (Nieto, 2000). Teachers shouldn’t assume what students know or what their actual level of development might be. Rather, we should find out where students are, provide opportunities that will enrich their actual level, and create paths within a proximal level of development (Moll, 1999; Vygostky, 1978). When our students have had ample opportunities to be supported within their proximal level of development, we can then expect a higher level of thinking and a potential for further growth and success. My ability to read was not an indication that I had developed the vocabulary of middle class America. It was, however, an indication that with the proper guidance I could be expected to easily bridge an understanding from my sociocultural reality to a more middle-class ideology and knowledge base.
I’ve always liked my first grade teacher because she required much more out of me than I thought was possible. I remember her pushing me to read a chapter from the story *Charlotte’s Web*. Although I was nervous and marginally successful, she made me feel like a star. Not until this test, however, did I realize the power of language and how it was a crucial key to my identity (Perry and Delpit, 1996). I remember feeling as if I wasn’t good at vocabulary and that my words were not sufficient. My self image as an excellent reader and thinker had taken a blow. I felt that I was supposed to know what a garage was and just didn’t think hard enough. But what is more daunting is that neither the test nor the teacher picked up on my ability toward deductive reasoning. As a six year old, I had already grasped strategies to logically deduct and reason. The mental processing that allowed me to choose the gas station weren’t recognized as important. This example points to how social class and biased testing affect many African American students. My critical reasoning abilities were not being measured, only my knowledge of or access to middle-class vocabulary was important. Unfortunately, African American students fail these standardized or norm-referenced test at a rate higher than whites and Asian Americans.

It disturbs me that a first grader would be tracked on the basis of a norm-referenced or standardized test that doesn’t measure how much is known nor the developmental level of the student. Rather, standardized tests are designed for the sole purpose of profit (Kohn, 1999). Standardized tests, similar to the vocabulary test that I was given, don’t take into consideration sociocultural realities or actual development and are solely based on a median score. Kohn (1999) discusses the problems and flaws in our thinking and use of standardized tests.
“Think for a moment about the implications of this fact. No matter how many students take the test, no matter how well or poorly they were taught, no matter how difficult the questions are, the pattern of results is guaranteed to be the same: exactly 10 percent of those who take the test will score in the top 10 percent, and half will always fall below the median. That’s not because our schools are failing; that’s because of what “median means. A good score on a norm-referenced test means “better than other people,” but we don’t even know how much better. It could be that everyone’s actual scores are all pretty similar, in which case the distinctions between them are meaningless” (p. 77).

The vocabulary tests that I was subject to as well as other standardized tests have no real academic reward. Yet, they have the power to dictate the educational fate of students all over the country. African American children and other children of color are disproportionately on the failing end of these ‘for-profit-tests’ (Kohn, 1999). Many scholars believe that standardized or norm-reference tests are oppressive and racist instruments that are designed to marginalize students of color (Freire, 1999; Gay, 2000; Kohn, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994). It is imperative, therefore, that teachers look beyond tests and understand that actual development can not be assessed through norm-referenced tests and that culture, class, and race, are weightier factors in the role of educating young children.

Let’s get cronked! – A Lesson in Slang(uage) Arts

Every Monday I introduced the students to their spelling words for the week. Each lesson had ten words and we always added an additional five words. Whether it was words with double consonants ending in ed or words with long o, the students were
always excited to see their choices as official spelling words. On this particular week the spelling words were words that were sounds. The list included words like beep, bang, splash, toot, and so on. The activity was so routine that I gave no thought to how the children would interpret and choose words for the spelling list.

Me: Alright, let’s come up with five more words for our spelling test.

Antwan.: I got one, Mr. Hancock. What about bling-bling?

Me: Bling bling is not a word.

Antwan.: Yes it is, I heard it on T.V.

Malcolm: Yep it mean diamonds.

Lamont: No it don’t, it mean you got a bunch of money and your rims are shining.

Me: O.k. use it in a sentence.

Antwan: O.k. I got one. Your diamond watch is bling blinging.

By the time we were on the second word the entire class was involved in choosing words for our spelling list. The noise level had risen to a chaotic chatter but we all were able to follow the conversation. This interchange went on with the next four words and took up all of our spelling period. We had come to the final word and the students were talking among themselves and trying to come up with creative words from their lexicon of semantic words. It had become a lesson in Slanguage Arts.

Kiesha: Mr. Hancock, Mr. Hancock! Cronked! Cronked! (yelling over the others)

Me: How do you spell it and what does it mean?

Kiesha: I don’t know.

Lisa: I think it’s spelled c-r-o-n-k-e-d that mean to start something.

Me: O.K. somebody use cronked in a sentence.
Kenny: Let’s get cronked! (the class responded with a line from Mary J. Blige’s song and began to laugh).

After much laughter, discussion and fiddling with spelling, tense, meaning, and category (noun, verb, adjective, adverb) we had all decided on five additional words.

11. bling-bling (noun or adverb) – expensive items that shine or sparkle; Look at her bling-bling (noun). His rims bling-bling when they turn (adverb).

12. da bomb (adjective) – The height of something; the ultimate quality of anything (Smitherman, 1994). My new coat is da bomb!

13. twerk (noun or verb) – a popular dance; the act of doing the twerk is twerking.

14. tight (adjective) - describes intimate or close friends; describes a person’s business, appearance, game (to have style; how something is done), possessions, etc. (Smitherman, 1994). Her outfit is tight.

14. cronked (verb) – means to get something started with high energy and fun. She got cronked at the party last night.

The relevance, interest, and energy the students put into this activity had excellent benefits for learning. Needless to say this was one spelling test that the majority of the class passed with grades between 90% and 100%.

**Analysis**

Every Monday, my students were engaged in constructing five new spelling words. The activity may have been fun for them, but I knew that it was better for “teachers to involve students in classroom dialogues about cognitive processes rather than rely on seatwork and independent practice to develop students’ ability to self-
regulate” (Englert, Tarrant, and Mariage, 1992, p. 72). My students took ownership of this activity and were totally engaged in constructing additional words. The slang words in the spelling list are particular to this group of students or the current Hip Hop generation. Those words don’t carry over to the entire Black community. African American elders and those not into the hip-hop culture may not recognize the slang words on the spelling list. Thus, words like ‘twerk,’ ‘cronked,’ and ‘bling-bling’ are in the slang category.

The difference between slang and Home Language was evident when I went home to Virginia to be with family and friends. My close friends from high school decided that we would get together. We all congregated; teachers, bankers, government employees, corporate junior executives, and nurses. We were watching B.E.T., and talking about Mary J. Blige’s new album and her song “Family Affair” that was blaring on every Hip Hop radio station in the country. We started joking about how black people are always making up words or saying words and phrases with hidden meanings. As if it were timed, Mary J. Blige’s video for ‘Family Affair’ flashed on the screen. Unaware of the Hip Hop slang, Raydasia asked, “what is she saying? Let’s get what?” As I listened to my friends’ discussion on the word ‘chronced,’ I couldn’t help think how slang is transitory and specific to a particular culture within our culture. My students were all aware of the word chronced or chronked, however, my friends’ lack of knowledge of this word indicated that it was an emerging slang term. If the word were in the Ebonics lexicon, it would have had meaning across the African American culture. It would’ve also been extensively spoken and possibly used in written genre like poems or stories to
develop a concrete spelling. After I explained that ‘chronced’ came from the word ‘chronic,’ and that it could refer to being or acting intense or a potent form of marijuana, they all understood how the slang term fit into the song.

Although Home language or Ebonics encompasses slang, “it has a lexical core of words and phrases that are fairly stable over time and are familiar to and/or used by all groups in the Black community” (Smitherman, 1998, p. 39). Ebonics is neither broken English nor sloppy speech, nor merely “slang,” nor some bizarre lingo spoken only by baggy-pants-wearing Black kids. Rather, “Ebonics is rooted in the Black American Oral Tradition and represents a synthesis of African (primarily West African) and European (primarily English) linguistic-cultural traditions” (Smitherman, 1994, p. 30).

African American English, Ebonics, or home language began when Africans were enslaved and it was necessary to be doubled-voiced so that speaking meant one thing to Africans and another thing to Europeans (Smitherman, 1994). The most popular use of doubled-voiced or early Ebonics was through songs that told enslaved Africans about escaping on the Underground Railroad. Doubled-voiced describes how “common English words are given unique Black meanings” (Smitherman, 1994, p. 27). The concept of ‘doubled-voiced’ is evident in Ebonics.

Slang is similar to Ebonics, in that word meaning and word structure are manipulated to create new words with complex and sometimes multiple meanings. The semantics, word manipulation, and syntactical creativity found in Hip Hop slanguage, like Ebonics, is a struggle to define and redefine life from a Black perspective (Foster, 1992; Richardson, 2003). “The manipulation of sounds is important not only to word delivery and creativity but in its connection to aesthetics, visual imagery, polyrhythmic
beats, technologies, and vibrations” (Richardson, 2003, p. 70). Although both Ebonics and slang have the same beginning, it is important to note that the only thing that separates the Ebonics lexicon from Slanguage Arts is the recognition and mass use from the African American community.

Slang can be derived from local, national, or even international sources. Smitherman (1994) describes slang as transitory and specific to a particular group of people (musician, teenage, hip hop slang). Most of my students pick up and are drawn to slang from the Hip Hop culture that can be found in music, BET, MTV, VH1, cartoons, sitcoms, movies, and their communities. Hip Hop is a complete subculture within the African American culture (Richardson, 2003). “The communicative styles and ways of knowing of the performers can be traced to Black Vernacular expressive arts developed and constantly modified by African Americans as resistance and survival strategies” (Richardson, 2003, p. 69). This subculture is used to speak of historic and contemporary African American trials, tribulations and success.

Like Ebonics, slang is a language of survival. Hip Hop slang, then, is a language in constant flux. It will not be placed in the Ebonics lexicon until and unless the general population of African Americans recognize it and pick it up (Smitherman, 1994). It is this thin line between slang and Ebonics that is the source of much debate and confusion in public schools and legislative assemblies (Perry & Delpit 1998; Hoover, 1998). In fact, much of the debates on the use of Ebonics in public schools pivoted on confusion between slang and Black English (Perry, 1998). It was funny for me to watch some black parents who spoke Ebonics use it to oppose and vilify the use of Ebonics. However, when I listened closely to the countless parents, politicians, scholars, and even students
who opposed Ebonics in the classroom, what they really were trying to oppose was slang (Perry, 1998). Unfortunately, many people were in opposition to Ebonics because they were unaware of the difference between slang and Black English. Yet, many African American children have developed the linguistic and literacy skills to decipher the difference and use of slang and Ebonics when appropriate.

Although many of my parents speak in their home language when conversing with me, they were quick to discipline their children if they heard them speaking slang. Yet, the ability to speak Ebonics, move in and out of slang, and code switch to Market Place Language is an awesome testament to the intellectual linguistic capacity of African American children. However, the combination of and inability to decipher home language and slanguage coupled with a lack of cultural-linguistic appreciation continues to further distance many teachers from the culture of their students and many students from the culture of their teachers, classrooms and schools.

As Loud as Silence: The Cultural Language of Body Talk

It was one of those days when report cards were due to the principal, seven additional students were spending the day in our classroom, our scheduled music class was canceled, and the classroom was extremely hot. By 2:00 p.m. I was in no mood to deal with behavior issues. I was very aware that my situation had nothing to do with my students, so I calmed myself and reflected on appropriate behavior. I then explained to my students that my nerves were ‘plucked’ due to unforeseen events of the day. The
students were understanding and expressed that they would be “good” for the rest of the afternoon. I was pleased that they understood and responded to my need for a smooth and calm afternoon.

However, as I began to present the lesson on three digit addition and subtraction with regrouping, I heard faint talking and laughter from the visiting second graders who were sitting in the back of the room. Without a word I abruptly stopped talking and writing on the overhead projector, lifted my left eyebrow, wrinkled my forehead, cocked my head to the side and with a slow, purposeful turn I stared at the talking students. With a look of utter and dramatic disbelief I stared and expressed as loud as silence “di’n’t I tell y’all I ain’t pressed, so ya betta git yo’self togetha for I come ova dere an’ jack y’all up.” They didn’t feel or hear my stare over their chattering. So with the authority of my grandfather, the mood and will of my mother, and the drama of a soap opera actor, I stared at the talkers with an intense and powerful quietness. The silence blanketed the room and the entire class turned with a quiet sigh and looked at the talkers with a “oooh yall in big trouuuble” expression. When the talkers felt the students’ attitude and heard my gestures, they both stopped talking and hung their heads in a sign of apology and respect. With my piercing gaze still on the talkers I motioned with one hand, as if I was parting the Red Sea, for them to split up and sit at opposite ends of the room. In dramatic fashion I then slowly turned toward the overhead and in a low voice, that dared anyone to utter a sound, I continued the lesson.
Analysis

It is clearly a cultural phenomenon when nonverbal expressions are effective and accurately understood between participants. In fact, body language is an integral part of our culture and an inseparable element in the Ebonics lexicon. Many African American children know when they are wrong and, in an effort to discipline with dignity, body language in the form of a purposeful look or stare can bring harmony back into the class. The look I gave is similar to how my mother looked at me in public places when I knew I was doing the wrong thing. But the “stare” or “look” doesn’t just happen. It is important to note that the “look” or any other form of nonverbal communication is not something we can learn through academic pursuits, rather, it is a social and cultural phenomenon. The act or drama of nonverbal communication cannot be listed as a set of skills to be learned and mastered. In an effort to participate in nonverbal communication, one must look “inward into one’s own thought and cultural/language patterns and history, while looking outward into the world’s” (Richardson, 2003, p. 116). Reflecting on personal culture as it relates to our environment enables us to situate our behaviors in a manner best suited for our situation.

My communication with the visiting students in our class is a good example of how body language is a valid and valuable tool for discipline in the classroom. Quickly and without a sound my entire class was captivated by my body language. I sent out several messages through non-verbal communication. My abrupt silence was the first message and form of body language. The use of instant silence creates a ‘cliff hanging’ effect that usually gets immediate attention in my room. The second message I sent was through facial expressions. The lifting of my eyebrow and wrinkling of the forehead was
meant to be read as, “Who has the nerve to talk when I’m teaching?” The third message was delivered by my stare. ‘Staring someone down’ in most cultures means that there is a problem between the looker and the subject of the stare. It was evident that I had a problem with those students who were talking.

The nonverbal literacies developed in the African American culture by the students and myself were put to use in the normal context of the classroom. As the teacher, I explained my feelings and problems to the students. We were all aware that disrespecting our shared values, understandings, and feelings would cause unfavorable consequences. We were also aware of the “meanings, values, understandings, personal histories, and the expectations the participants bring to the event” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 7). For example, after discussing my disposition with my students, I received a favorable response from the majority of the class and expected them to behave. When our understanding and expectations were not met, unfavorable consequences were in order. The choice of body language to discipline the students rose out of my exhaustion and stressed out state.

“Every language act arises in an individual’s communicative purpose and is an attempt to carry it out” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 3). Body language is no different and holds great potential for solving conflicts, rewarding students, and communicating beyond words. African American people often speak louder through physical expression and gestures. Thus, black children are often proficient in nonverbal communication (Hale, 1986). The communicative purpose for nonverbal discourse comes from a wide range of reasons. We communicate and develop nonverbal literacies to “comfort, persuade, entertain, inform, request, encourage, insult, promise, invite and inquire” (Lindfors, 1999,
Culturally, African American people are people-oriented, emotionally driven, and sensitive to physical nuances (Hale, 1994). These components led to a flare for the dramatics, one of the most important factors in nonverbal communication. In fact, body language or nonverbal communication rests on dramatic representation. How else can one describe my actions or the expressions of a father who suppresses a laugh, closes his eyes and walks away shaking his head at the ‘off the wall’ comment of his four year old daughter. It’s drama! The father and daughter as well as teacher and student have developed cultural understanding, social environment, respect for family dynamics, acceptance, and a willingness to view the world through multiple perspectives. These elements create a foundation for reading the drama in nonverbal communication. Because we are inescapably social beings, our environment and culture are essential factors in all types of language development (Moll, 1999). Therefore, unless there is a comprehensive understanding of personal culture and the culture of diverse students, it will be difficult to connect on a nonverbal level. And although there is not a quick skill list to nonverbal mastery, the incorporation of culturally responsive teaching, kinesthetic awareness, relationship development, fine muscle development, and a flare for the dramatics are important components to nurture.
Implications for Affirming the Linguistic Styles of African American Children

“So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 59).

In considering family and community culture from the lens of the classroom, it is necessary to decipher and choose from the myriad of elements that form culture. I believe that language is one of the most powerful forms of culture that children bring to school. In fact, for me and others, the native language of children offers valuable insight on cognitive, social, and affective development (Gay, 2000; Richardson, 2003). Delpit (1995) argues that, “the acquisition and development of one’s native language is a wondrous process, drawing upon all of the cognitive and affective capacities that make us human” (p. 49). When we value the native or home language of young children, we are able to tap into a vast potential of awareness and understanding. Unfortunately, when we fail to value linguistic diversity, we hinder our ability to create meaningful relationships and create learning environments conducive to success for all students.

Lubeck (1994) argues that, “misunderstanding and miscommunication can lead to children being labeled or placed in low-level learning groups” (p. 159). In fact, she reports that teachers who are unprepared to provide a place where proximal development is nurtured, code switching skills are practiced, and language is valued, often have students who are “disproportionately represented in special education classes and differentially placed in low groups and tracks” (Lubeck, 1994, p. 156). This is evident in school districts across the country when teachers, administrators, politicians, and testing agencies devalue home language patterns, use biased and culturally insensitive tests, and
use tracking as a tool for failing diverse students (Kohn, 1999). Richardson (2003) asserts that, “American culture is so opposed to the idea of the rationality of African American ways of knowing that we are willing to accept the dismal literacy achievement rates rather than exploit the language and culture that students use” (p. 16).

As a social constructivist, I welcomed students, as a student senate, to challenge any policy, practice, negative attitudes, or behavior that they deem unfair. As sociocultural beings it is no secret that children are aware of negative attitudes and stereotypes from teachers and curricula practices (Moll, 1999). Delpit (1995) contends “they may also have become increasingly aware of the school’s negative attitude toward their community and found it necessary – through choice of linguistic form – to decide with which camp to identify” (p. 52). It is safe to say that when our classrooms and schools do not create spaces where positive relationships are formed, it creates a situation where students resist what school has to offer and move deeper into other emerging and established cultures. Since constructing learning communities that affirm all students is a goal of schools, then it is the responsibility of teachers, school officials, and administrators to provide an atmosphere of appreciation for diverse ways of speaking, knowing, and understanding the world around them.

In order to do this, schools must first change in order to fit the educational needs of children. As documented in the Ebonics debate (Perry and Delpit, 1998), linguistic or language diversity is one of the most well known forms of culture clash among teachers, school officials and students. Unless we begin to probe into issues of language and linguistic diversity, provide students with opportunities to translate home language, and
teach skills for acquiring market place language, we will not find ways to support genuine relationships with students.

Delpit (1995) asks, “What should teachers do about helping students acquire an additional oral form” (p. 53)? She also provides two important elements for helping children understand the language of school as it relates to their home ways of speaking. She first encourages teachers to “recognize that the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity” (Delpit, 1995, p. 53). Through the recognition of linguistic forms teachers can create caring and nurturing relationships as they understand the intimate connections young children have with language. In fact, Delpit (1995) argues that, “to suggest that this form is “wrong”…is to suggest that something is wrong with the student and his or her family” (p. 53).

The second element Delpit (1995) suggest is for teachers to “support the language that students bring to school, teach them explicitly the discourse or code of power, and give them the opportunity to use the new code in a non-threatening, real communicative context” (p. 53). If children with linguistic styles or language patterns different from white middle-class speech patterns are provided with an educational environment that affirms and nurtures their socio-linguistic styles, there will be increased academic performance, stronger classroom relationships, and relevant learning opportunities (Beane, 1997; Gay, 2000; Richardson, 2003). Thus, the implications for affirming the home language of African American and other marginalized students are positive and educationally responsible (Irvine, 1990).
In reflecting on my experience as an early childhood educator and teacher researcher, I’ve compiled six essential components that will enable teachers, the learning environment, and other students to benefit from the language diversities in the classroom. These six components can be best presented in the acronym, AFFIRM.

A = Accept

Accept the home language of each student as a viable and important way of communicating. Acceptance is simple. First, receive diverse language patterns by not over correcting students. Second, invite students to speak and interpret their home language. And, finally, introduce your home language into the classroom. Remember, if teachers fail to accept the students’ language patterns they also inadvertently demean the culture, lifestyle, and existence of the student (Anzaldua, 1987). It is important socially, culturally, and intellectually for students to be linguistically affirmed at their actual developmental level.

F = Feature Diverse Language Forms

To accept the language diversity of students it’s also important that we feature it in classroom learning opportunities and lessons. Student language styles should be featured in written stories and oral presentations. The use of poems, books, and oral stories that highlight diverse language patterns, provide intellectual and affective stimulation, and nurture cultural literacy, are bridges to learning additional language codes. These bridges are zones where students can began bridging home language to market place and other languages.
F = Forming Bridges

Featuring student linguistic styles enable teachers to form bridges from home languages to market place languages. When we first affirm, then feature, it is easy to explicitly discuss the language of the market place without making students feel inferior, stupid, or inadequate. Encouraging students to speak home language and then translate into market language is an excellent way to create bridges and teach skills for writing. For example, during a writing activity Rondell said he wanted to write, “about a boy that be flyin’ jus’ like a super hero.” I asked him if he wanted to write it in home or market place language. He chose market place language so I asked him to translate. His response was, “I want to write about a boy who can fly like a super hero.” Building bridges gives students skills to code switch when it is necessary as well as connect them to greater linguistic potential.

I = Interest

As a teacher it’s imperative that you show interest in diverse ways of speaking through lesson planning, speaking patterns, field trips, and curricula activities. For instance, I often intentionally speak in a stressed southern, Jamaican, or British accent while teaching. The students are at first baffled at what I’m saying. As a result, I’m asked to translate. In addition, I use my three years of high school and four years of college Latin experiences while speaking and writing. My students take my use of foreign languages, accents, and styles as a sign that I’m interested in diverse language patterns.
R = Relevant Lessons

Teachers should provide opportunities for students to learn different ways of speaking and understanding through role-play, stories, translation activities, language creation activities, songs, talk time, and movement activities. Relevant Lessons can move students from proximal to potential development. These activities are integrated into the daily learning process, relevant to the students needs, and support curriculum goals.

M = Motivate

Motivating students to acquire diverse linguistic styles and knowledge is a byproduct of accepting, featuring, forming bridges, being interested, and providing relevant lessons concerning language arts. When students are affectively stimulated, intellectually and socially accepted they are then motivated to become high achievers.

If we are going to develop learning communities that validate and affirm the linguistic complexities of diverse students, then we must form language alliances between home and school cultures. Linguistic alliances rely on the social interactions, affirmation, respect, and nurturing of a diverse form of communication styles. Home and market place languages, slanguage, and kinesthetic or body language are all forms of dialogue that enable teachers and students to develop and nurture appropriate relationships with the curriculum, environment and each other. It is the duty of teachers to AFFIRM linguistic styles and it is the rights of students to be educated in the most affirming learning community possible.
CHAPTER 4

Empowerment: The Birth of Social and Critical Awareness

“But where’s the justice Mr. Hancock, where’s the justice?” - Keisha, student

It was the Christmas season and like most Christian families we were preparing for meals, family gatherings and gift exchanges. I had read *Twas the Night Before Christmas* and the rendition of it would be my gift to the family. I walked around for a week reciting the story until I knew it by heart. The excitement of Santa coming to our house was unbearable. Flying reindeer and helpful elves, bundles of toys, and good treats were all reinforced by my daily practice of the Christmas story and the festive cartoons that aired nightly. I was ready for Christmas! Until, I accidentally discovered our Christmas toys. It was a mix of excitement and disbelief. It was also the beginning of critical and social awareness.

I approached my older brothers with my discovery, wondering if they knew about the toys. Initially, I was taunted and teased for believing in Santa. The real lesson, however, began when through my tears and confusion Kevin said, “can a reindeer really fly?” I thought and thought, “yea if it gets magic flying pills.” He further asked, “how can a sled that small carry billions of gifts?” My response, “magic!” I could sense his frustration, but as a teenager he seemed to know how to get a six year old to understand critical
issues. He asked, “how can Santa get into our house, we don’t have no chimney?” I was baffled. I felt my little world turning upside down. “So Santa only visits people with chimneys?” I replied. He gave no answer but another question, “how many white people do you see coming in our neighborhood?” This question hit home. I was aware of how white people perceived the housing projects as a rough place. The few that I’d seen in the hood, dropped people off and moved quickly. With the help of my brother and a critical analysis of where I lived, I concluded that Santa was make-believe.

Santa wasn’t real! My mother worked hard to buy us presents for Christmas. Knowing this gave me a greater appreciation for my mother and for the gifts. I still recited the *Twas the Night Before Christmas* story but I thanked my mom for being Santa. At six years old, my ways of knowing the world had begun to change.

This episode in my life marked the beginning of a thirst for critical awareness. I began to question why I couldn’t go to the elementary school in our neighborhood, why we couldn’t go in certain neighborhoods and stores without being the target of dirty looks, and why I felt out of place in social settings with white classmates. My older brothers, who were aware of the Black Panthers, Jim Crow laws, and political, economic, and social discrimination, were adamant about us thinking and acting with social and critical consciousness and they began to answer my questions. I was taught to think critically about commercials, TV shows and the political and criminal systems that sought and continue to target African American boys and men. My brothers and I were groomed by my older brothers to be aware of social and educational racism. When we were taught the concept of Manifest Destiny and American Glory in school, we were also taught at home the reality of the Trail of Tears and the genocide of Native Americans.
When I learned about the great railroad to the west coast in school, my brothers taught me about the forced labor and indenture servanthood of Asian Americans. As I grew older, I was also taught about the evil acts committed by Ku Klux Klan toward blacks and how the American government supported institutionalized racism. One such lesson came when JET magazine featured a story about Emmit Till, an African American teenager from Chicago who was brutally murder for talking to a white girl near his grandparents’ home in Mississippi. This story coupled with the stories about the four African American girls who were killed in a church bombing, the murder of Medgar Evers, and the constant amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1957, 1960, 1965, and finally 1968 was instrumental in my understanding of U.S. policies and culture toward African Americans. The Civil Rights Acts were of highlighted because we were taught that it took the government eleven years to create a law that only existed because of cultural and institutionalized racism.

We were taught to question authority, get multiple opinions, and to view everything through a critical lens. Throughout my adolescent and teenage years I was never allowed nor able to construct a pristine or complacent view of life. Each time I tried to embrace the concept of the ‘American Dream’ it would vanish as my own critical lens or the knowledge of others in my family would expose social injustices, economic disenfranchisement, and the political marginalization of people of color.

My thirst for critical and social consciousness coupled with my desire to teach compelled me to work for curriculum change, diversity awareness, and equity for students of color. Today I teach and learn to be enlightened, empowered, and involved in actions for self and social improvements. I’ve learned that teaching for social and critical
awareness is to challenge current curriculum practices and school policies, as well as personal (often uninformed) perspectives on what it means to teach a diverse student population.

Empowerment, Social Consciousness and Voice

I believe as Gay (2000) does that before creating multicultural curricula, one must systematically explore one’s attitudes and practices as essential components for moving toward cultural awareness and multiculturalism (Gay, 2000). In fact this critical introspection is a primary goal or prerequisite in a curriculum that seeks to empower through diversity (Banks, 1991). In an exploration of curricular practices for a diverse population, it is imperative that student empowerment is a central factor. Although attitudes and persuasion are important components of empowerment, McLaren (1988, in Sleeter, 1991) stresses that “the social purpose of empowerment is the process through which students learn to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live” (p. 186). Curriculum that foster empowerment demands the education community to take seriously “the strengths, experiences, strategies, and goals” of multiethnic groups (Sleeter, 1991, p. 6). According to Banks (1991), “we must engage students in a process of attaining knowledge in which they are required to critically analyze conflicting paradigms and explanations and the values and assumptions of different knowledge systems, forms, and categories” (p. 126). Banks (1991) believes that empowerment through multicultural education will also move curriculum into a more democratic process where multiple perspectives are experienced through culturally relevant teaching.
As a teacher who promotes culturally relevant teaching, I believe it is important that students are afforded academic and social opportunities to express critical consciousness (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive or relevant teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000b). Throughout this chapter, the elements of culturally relevant teaching are both implicitly and explicitly evident. In this chapter I’ve also explored how cultural relevance is a catalyst for creating socially conscious students.

“But, where’s the justice Mr. Hancock”: Empowerment and Critical Consciousness

Through executive decision, I, the president of room 108, declared a rule that simply stated “No Homework – No Recess.” During recess those students who didn’t turn in their homework would complete the homework assignment and catch up on other missing work. The Student Senate was aware that an executive decision could neither be overturned nor negotiated. They were not happy with the decision, but accepted it.

The decision was effective. Within a week of its declaration, everyone, with the exception of Keisha, turned in homework. After three weeks, 90% of all homework assignments were returned. It seemed that the students and parents were aware of the rule and accepted the consequence.

On an unseasonably warm day in March I was forced to deal with my idea of control as it related to executive decisions and authority. Before this day I believed that there were certain elements of teaching and classroom dynamics a teacher could not negotiate with his/her students. I believed that, as the adult, I had to be in control of the day-to-day dynamics in the classroom. I believed that it was my professional and humane
responsibility to guide my students in the learning process. I set rules, made plans, gave grades, and prescribed consequences. In short, even though we had a Student Senate, I was the big cheese, the judge, and the authority on every subject. Although our system of classroom discipline was based on an Africentric principle of communal justice and personal responsibility, there was no other forum other than the student senate where my students could voice their opinions about how I was running the classroom. On this day in March, everything changed and the Student Senate became an empowered and enlightened body.

Keisha had missed three weeks of homework and consequently missed three weeks of recess. I had not thought about what would happen if a student consistently failed to meet the rules. She stomped into the classroom yelling and crying. She was upset about missing recess for the third straight week. I simply said to her, “you know the rule; no homework – no recess.” Keisha went ballistic! “It’s not fair, but where’s the justice Mr. Hancock, where’s the justice? We can’t even redeem ourselves, Where’s the justice?”

She was the lowest reader, performing on a kindergarten reading level; disruptive during class, yelling constantly; arguing with her peers; unable to control herself; but very apt in social settings. Many would have and had, written her off, but I was bound to find something good in her, and I did. She could sing beautifully, hold a note, and follow a melody. So, I incorporated music in her lessons as much as possible. Her progress was slow, but successful. She felt good about herself and learning. On this day, she was mad. She hurled accusations at me, questioning my leadership and authority in class. Through tears and loud sobs she rattled off a list of complaints, “Why do we always have to get homework anyway? You never give us a break. How can I keep up with stuff when my
brother throws it away? It’s not my fault. I can’t do it anyway. I’m never going to recess.” I responded, “We have homework so that we can practice what we’ve learned in class. I never give you homework that you have not already done in class.” Through more tears and louder sobs Keisha replied, “but it’s too much homework, I can’t do it.”

At this point I began to listen to her anguish. She really felt that it was too much and too difficult. Why don’t you bring this issue to the Senate Floor to be voted on by your classmates, I said. Keisha began to really yell and cry, “It don’t matter, you just going to veto it. You always get what you want and we have to do it. It’s a executive decision remember, we don’t have justice!” I was shocked that she knew the language, but even more shocked that she viewed me as a dictator in the classroom. I thought I was democratic and fair. It took a minute before I could respond. I began to speak to Keisha in a calm voice, “You’re right, I will veto a bill that says no homework and I will not change the executive decision but maybe you can think of how to change our homework policy.” I couldn’t believe I’d said that. I had given homework on Monday through Friday for four years. Was I really giving my students the power to change classroom policies? Whoa! Before I could collect myself, she agreed to take the homework issue to the class senate. She began to toss out ideas. I could sense that Keisha felt empowered and confident that she could present the class with a good proposal, one that would not be vetoed. Her tears stopped and she started on her homework assignment. I marveled at her thinking process, her observation of my teaching personality, her sense of social justice, and her critical analysis of classroom dynamics.

The students all set at their tables. Keisha had passed out the senate cards. These were cards that each student had. The cards were folded in half with the name of each
student and the state the student studied in our first research project. Each card had a picture of the Capitol building and read: Senator (student’s name) of (state studied). On one side their information was printed on white paper, the white side indicated a vote of ‘yes.’ On the other side their information was printed on yellow paper which indicated a vote of ‘no.’

After Michael called the session to order, Keisha, with poise and purpose, moved to the front of the class and presented her proposal. The immediate response was a mixture of shock and celebration. Her proposal was to not have homework for two weeks in April. I was not happy with it and had decided to veto it if it passed the student senate. Michael immediately said, “That will never pass the president, he will veto in a minute.” Keisha looked at me as if to say, “I thought you would let us decide.” Without acknowledging her expression I instructed Senator Keisha Cricket that she had three minutes to lobby for votes.

The proposal failed by 4 votes. Keisha was upset. I was glad I didn’t have to veto her proposal. I then instructed the senate body to take the matter up for discussion and present a proposal that was fair, well thought out, and easy to explain to parents. It was wonderful to watch the students think critically, taking into account the reality of the teacher, parents, and the idea of homework itself. Ten minutes later there were two proposals and the originators of the proposals were lobbying for votes. At the end of the lobbying period, I instructed Michael to call the senate to order. “The Senate floor is now open for presentations. Will Senator Nordstrom and Senator Cricket take the floor.” Michael seemed to be a natural announcer. Having called the senate to order all year it was refreshing that I didn’t have to whisper to him and tell him what to say.
I was very nervous. I heard some of the discussions and knew of one proposal but not the other. As Senator Keisha Cricket presented her proposal I was pleasantly surprised and willing to sign it. She and her constituents had proposed that we eliminate homework on Fridays only; effective the following week. Senator Antwan Nordstrom and his constituents proposed that we have homework only on Mondays and Wednesdays. I would surely veto that idea. As they presented their proposal with supportive opinions and some accurate facts, I was pleased that they were socially conscious, passionate and empowered to make a change. The final vote revealed that the Cricket Bill had won and I gladly signed it to law. This incident catalyzed a revolution of change in our classroom. Many bills followed as students realized that their voice mattered in our classroom. Senate sessions were called at least twice a week. They addressed wasting food in the lunchroom, how each child should be a line leader, field trips, activity time, classroom awards, as well as national issues (keeping the penny) and international issues (should Puerto Rico become a state).

Analysis

Keisha left the senate floor feeling successful, empowered and validated. She had gained a strong voice on the senate floor and was a vocal participant in all the sessions that followed. She learned about the power of one vote and how to lobby or persuade her peers to vote in her favor. Keisha had become really engaged as a Senator. It was one activity that she did well. For me this Senate Session was initially a source of anxiety, but in the end it wasn’t as bad as I thought. In fact, the final decision was a source of relief because I did not have to plan homework for the weekend, or grade and return homework on Monday mornings. Although the class had had previous sessions that
decided how we would line up, restroom breaks, student of the month awards, and parties. This decision affected deep policy issues that went beyond the classroom. Keisha had to explain the decision to the principal as well as help me mention it in the weekly parent letter. In the end, I learned that I had oppressive tendencies when it came to the rules, routines, and practices that I establish for my classroom. However, those tendencies were what I had to put under the microscope of critical consciousness.

As an African American male the experiences of life have prepared me with a “critical understanding of the larger social, historical, and political dynamics,” on schools and teachers, and a knowledge of how public policy is inequitably balanced (Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 116). Life experiences, coupled with a desire to teach for social justice and critical consciousness, continue to motivate my purpose in the classroom. I fundamentally believe that critically aware students can positively change their situations and environment. According to Foster (1998), “when a people can think critically, they can change things. They are less likely to be taken advantage of and more likely to see the traps that others set. An uneducated people can be taken advantage of because of their ignorance or naivete” (p. 288). African American children must avoid traps of standardized tests, language discrimination, and culturally inappropriate teaching strategies in an effort to be successful. I am compelled to teach my students to critically navigate the social injustices that persist in our classroom and school.

Experience and motivation toward critical consciousness does not, however, prohibit the presence of anxiety when one is faced with giving up control in the classroom to second graders who are critically and socially conscious. It is important, therefore, to be critically reflective of professional policies as well as work within the students’ proximal
level of development in order to provide a bridge from the known to a new and emerging understanding of critical awareness. Students who are empowered to think critically about social injustices will begin to work toward addressing issues they deem to be unjust or unfair (Foster, 1998). It becomes the challenge of the teacher to support and encourage students to act even if the focus is on how the class is operated and teacher established rules are targeted.

In an effort to reach a diverse student body we must began to dismantle the dogmatic approach to curriculum that seeks to disenfranchise diverse perspectives (Gay, 2000; Stremmel, 1997). Stremmel (1997) contends that in order for teachers to dismantle curricular practices that marginalize diverse students we must (1) “develop an awareness of the many cultural and historical experiences that shape our own realities before we can begin to appropriately incorporate a multicultural perspective in the classroom” (pp. 363-64), (2) teachers and others involved in educating children must understand that the intellectual, personal, social, and physical development of children “occurs within a sociocultural context” (p. 364), and (3) teachers must view multiculturalism as a dynamic and life long process that moves us beyond our individual experiences and single point of reference, in an effort to benefit from and give to the experiences of others. In essence, it is our responsibility to challenge self in order to move beyond teaching and curriculum practices that marginalize or disenfranchise students of color.

Banks (1991) asserts that curriculum practices that hail from the dominant perspective tend to justify the status quo, legitimize inequities in regard to race, class, and gender, and create a sense of powerlessness in students. The need for multicultural curriculum that supports empowerment is urgent. However, Banks (1991) warns us that
curricular practices that are designed to empower “cannot be constructed merely by adding content about ethnic groups and women to the existing Eurocentric curriculum or by integrating or infusing ethnic content or content about women into the mainstream curriculum” (p. 130). As we establish equity curriculum that empowers diverse students we must investigate a variety of approaches to multicultural education and opportunities to teach for critical and social awareness.

“I Can’t Do It Anyway”: Critical Awareness and Academic Performance

One of my strategies to ensure that my students are independent thinkers, learners, and workers is to write all daily assignments on the board. The reading, language arts, computer, and spelling assignments occupy one board and are usually morning activities. Mathematics, science, social studies, and health are placed on another board and are usually in the afternoons. I say usually because it has been my experience that sometimes my students want a change and they vote on changing the activities around. This change usually lasts a week and it doesn’t disrupt learning, rather it provides a different perspective on planning and preparing lessons.

By March of every year it is my goal to be a facilitator and allow learning to flow freely. I purposely foster a sense of independence and autonomy to encourage my students to take responsibility for their own learning. I present the work on the board and encourage the students to work at their own pace with an imaginary clock saying, “it’s due by the end of the day.” I become a facilitator walking around and assisting students as needed. It is also a time when I meet with small groups of children to help remediate and strengthen reading and math strategies. There are only two whole group activities,
Market Language Time (Language Arts) and Group Review Time, when students discuss what they learned and how they will apply or integrate it in their life. Most of my students embrace the concept of being independent learners and are motivated to take initiative in classroom activities and projects.

It was mid April and the days were getting brighter and warmer. My students knew that it meant outdoor recess and lots of fun. Because of the harsh winter everyday, if it didn’t rain, we were outside playing. It was a warm morning and all the children were eager to finish their activities so that they wouldn’t have a working lunch (students had to take their assignments to lunch and try to finish them after eating) or worse a working recess (students were to stay in the class until assignment was complete). My students were very aware of the work ethic in our classroom. We supported the notion that completing our assignments, staying on task, and being responsible for homework developed well-rounded students. I reminded them often that, “excellent work equated to excellent character and excellent character, meant excellent careers.”

It was about 10:50 a.m. and my students are working diligently in their groups. Each group was a random cluster that included students who worked on the same reading level along with someone slightly stronger. Chad, Kenny, and Rondell are working on reading activities; Bryan, Tony, Michael, and Dee are working on spelling; Nikki, Lisa, and Brittany were working on their assignments; Antwan, Isaiah, Lamont, and Malcolm were finishing up their reading assignment; and Jennifer, Shaneta, and Robin were working on the computers. Keisha, however, was sitting at her table fiddling with her hair and singing the Fugees version, of “Killing Me Softly With His Song” featuring Lauren Hill and originally by Roberta Flack. Keisha’s repetition of the same verses was
live substitute of background music that we usually played on a CD or radio. She sang loud enough for us to hear while quiet enough not to disturb the learning process. Her voice was beautiful.

Knowing how easily upset she could get, I gave her five minutes to do what she had to do with her hair before I approached her. Sure enough when I approached her the quiet hum of intellectual conversation and her rendition of “Killing Me Softly With His Song” halted as she screamed, “I don’t know why you over here, I can’t do it anyway.” She had not even looked at her assignment, yet she had conceded defeat. I had remembered in November how she complained about the work, so I made a conscious effort to provide her with culturally and developmental relevant activities that were a challenge but I knew she could do with a little effort. I asked her had she looked at the assignment. She responded, “It don’t matter, cause I can’t do it!” She went on to express that she knew she wouldn’t pass and that she couldn’t read Kindergarten material. She also, as always, hurled accusations that I was only interested in the smart students, I wrote the work on the board to confuse her, and that I didn’t give her easy work because I didn’t like her. I didn’t address any of her accusations, instead I said, “Keisha you can read more than kindergarten stuff. If you can remember the words to “Killing Me Softly With His Song” then you can read.”

I knew that if I could relate learning to music, then she would get it. She was interested as she gave me the go-on look while fumbling with a hair clip. I pulled out a piece of paper and pencil and said tell me the words to the song “Killing Me Softly With His Song.” She smiled and said, “wait a minute…oh it go like this, scrubbing my pain wit his fingers, singing my life wit his words, killin’ me sofly wit his song, killin’ me
Although I knew the song, I asked Keisha to tell me the words a little slower so that I could write them down and to help her listen to what she was saying. After I wrote the words, I encouraged Keisha to look at the words and recite the song as I pointed to each word. I then convinced her that instead of “scrubbing my pain” the correct words were “strumming my pain.” When we finished going over the lyrics I told Keisha that she had to present the song to the entire class during group review time. I instructed her to go to the computer to type and print the lyrics. I knew that she loved the computer and she felt successful when she typed and printed information. Sure enough her love of music and technology enabled her to stay focused and complete the activity.

Keisha was a hit at review time. She brought over the paper and read as she sang. When she finished I asked her the routine question, “So, what did you learn?” She responded, “I learned how to write music, read it, and sing it at the same time, and I learned that I can read anything if I try.” I was shocked and pleasantly surprised.

Analysis

Although Keisha was not what most would label on or above grade level, she was critically aware of her abilities. It had been a challenge throughout the year to get Keisha to change her disruptive behavior and learn to read. I made a home visit almost weekly to talk with Keisha’s mom about her attitude and academic progress. Ms. Cricket assured me that Keisha would straighten up and for a couple of days Keisha would try to control herself and participate in our learning community. Inevitably she would revert back to her loud outbursts, disruptive behaviors, and critical accusations concerning the dynamics of our classroom.
I didn’t respond to many of her accusations but for me they were a source of reflection and growing points. Keisha was very aware of her right to question the dynamics of the classroom and she did it whenever she wanted. Although yelling in class and being a pest were not behaviors that I welcomed in class, we as a community embraced Keisha and we often ignored her behavior but listened to her critiques. Keisha’s perspective on classroom dynamics was more than just name calling, her critical examinations were thought provoking and required a sense of inner reflection on self, culture, professional motives, and teaching styles. She taught me that students can be very aware of their abilities and of how teachers treat their ability or inability to complete an academic task. Keisha also revealed to me that my biases towards certain types of students were not hidden, but very evident in the way I planned, implemented, and assisted with instruction. She was a source of my determination to create culturally relevant lessons and activities where she could be successful.

I’ve always believed that the aim of culturally relevant teaching was to empower diverse students “through academic success, cultural affiliation, and personal efficacy” (Gay, 2000, p. 111). I took this belief and began to prepare opportunities for Keisha, Jennifer, Chad, Robin, Mario, Isaiah, and Mark to be academically successful. These students had reading challenges that affected their progress in every subject. As Keisha pointed out, I was biased against students who had reading challenges.

One afternoon in November, as I participated in reflective practice, I asked myself, “Why the bias against ‘bad’ readers?” After several more questions and struggling through the ugliness of prejudice, I realized that my bias came from my ability to read at age four. I inadvertently judged my students’ success, developed relationships,
favored or disfavored, and geared my method of instruction based on those who had a strong reading ability, similar to myself. Although the cultures and language patterns of my students were validated, almost half of my class had reading challenges and was somewhat marginalized by my teaching practices. I realized that even I have a need to deeply probe and make conscious efforts to be more culturally relevant. From that day in November until the end of school, I changed some of my teaching practices to construct an environment of success for all.

Determined to construct activities for the challenged readers to be successful, I began to focus on their strengths (Irvine, 1990). Each student had a special talent or personality strength. For some it was buried and unknown and for others their talent was evident. For example, I observed on the playground how students interacted and found out that Robin was assertive and determined. In class Robin seemed quiet and shy because of her reading challenges. She rarely spoke and was often daydreaming during reading. I had high expectations for my students and looked beyond tests scores, class status, and behavior to groom their potential (Irvine, 1990).

Irvine (1990) asserts that effective teachers of minority students accept students experiences and integrate them in the classroom to create successful learning outcomes. To create successful reading opportunities for Robin, I wrote a one page story about what she actually did on the playground. I used simple sentences and placed Robin’s name in it as the main character. During reading the next day, I gave the students who were struggling the story to read and all were successful. I eventually created a story for each student. The reading activity was neither too easy nor too challenging, rather it provided students with an opportunity to be successful (Irvine, 1990). Irvine (1990) suggests that
in order to teach diverse students, teachers should be aware that, “(1) all students are capable of learning and that student failure is a challenge for the teacher, (2) effective teacher provide their students with opportunities to learn and practice, (3) there is a match between the difficulty level of the material and the students’ ability to be successful, (4) supportive learning environments with caring and sensitive teachers are essential, (5) effective teachers frequently depart form “teacher-proof” curriculum guides and directives, and (6) effective teachers of minority students often develop idiosyncratic styles of teaching and relating to their students” (p. 119). My awareness of effective teaching compelled me to embrace the responsibility to provide successful opportunities for my challenged readers.

I immediately began to provide books that were geared to their reading ability and subsequent activities. The students were engaged and more expressive in writing and talking about passages. I was aware that if I affectively and culturally involved the students, then I could affirm and validate them through culturally relevant activities (Gay, 2000). I was determined to validate my students’ experiences and construct “learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). In short, my goal was to validate the actual level of my students, create an environment where their proximal level of development would be nurtured, and construct bridges to a potential to read with less challenges.

Kea, Cartledge, and Bowman (2002) suggest that effective instruction for students with learning challenges is the first line of defense to foster success and lessen behavior problems. They contend that teachers who are effective in educating minority students must provide a structured, yet affirming environment, adequate learning opportunities
and explicit lessons, and a needed link or bridge to the middle-class ideology and structure found in most schools (Kae, Cartledge, and Bowman, 2002).

By March most of my challenged readers were having success in reading. In fact, the improvements, although not measured by standardized tests because they still fell in the below average percentile, were impressive. Robin had moved from what is labeled as a first semester kindergarten level to a second semester first grade level. Although she was still labeled below average, and unable to read the current second grade series without constant challenges, she had academically grown a year and a half in her reading ability. This phenomenon was similar for most of my challenged readers. Keisha, however, had learning challenges that were not addressed because of her transient school background. Nonetheless, she was getting better at understanding the concepts of reading and was an excellent critical thinker. She was also sought out by classmates and other teachers to sing, and she never declined an invitation.

Culturally relevant teaching results in improved academic achievement as well as cultural affirmation and validation (Gay, 2000; Irvine 1990). Although this academic achievement is not measured on norm-referenced tests (Kohn, 1999), it is evident that students who are afforded opportunities to be successful through culturally and developmentally appropriate practices will succeed (Gay, 2000; Neito, 2000).

**Telling it Straight: Sociopolitical Consciousness and Black Boys**

I was heated! It was May and our year together was drawing to an end. Yet, my boys seem to have lost their minds. They were fighting at lunch, being disruptive on the playground, and not conducting themselves like African princes. Although it wasn’t all
the boys, they knew that if the majority were out of control, then the whole must be responsible because we learned that we were responsible for each other.

In my days at the Marcus Garvey School, I had created a discipline plan called, The Circle of Justice. Based on principles of communal responsibility and democratic justice, the student that acted out of character would be placed in the center of a peer formed circle. I would also be in the circle acting as the judge and the students would be a jury. The student in the middle would state his/her out-of-character behavior and set his/her own consequences. If the student refused to talk or was adamant about his innocence then they would be appointed a lawyer (another student who was familiar with the situation) to represent the case. Another student who was familiar with the case would then argue against the student in the middle. Based on the evidence I would give the final judgment and the students would give the consequence based on the behavior. At the end of every session (which lasted only five minutes), we would all say, “We love you, but we don’t love your behavior,” and someone would be appointed to hug and encourage the student in the Circle of Justice. No one liked the circle of justice and disciplinary problems reduced dramatically after the first month of its implementation.

On this day most of my boys had violated the very principles that we believed in, and because it was the majority I decided that there would be no Circle of Justice, there would only be me. So with the voice of an over dramatic actor, attitude of a brutal dictator, and ferocity of a lion on the hunt, I demanded that my boys leave the playground and get to class. The walk to class was riddled with boys yelling at and accusing each other. We sat in silence for one long minute. Some of my boys were still huffing and puffing with anger, some were trying to look innocent, and others didn’t have a clue why
they were pulled from recess. I was in the process of preparing my speech and deciding how I would respond to their insubordinate behavior. I wanted to make sure I got them straight before the girls came in from recess.

After the long minute, I began my speech. I paced the room with a slow and deliberate walk moving among each student and with a low, calm, and steady voice I said, “I’m disappointed in your behavior. But I hope you are more disappointed than I am. In one afternoon y’all have manage to disrespect your elders, the principles of Maat and the Nguzo Saba, lie about the Minute by Minute poem, but most importantly you let yourselves down.” I punctuated each transgression with a slight pause that created a silence that made the words linger in the room like a dense fog. The students knew I was serious because I had mentioned our classroom poem, the guiding principles of our classroom community, and atmosphere was polluted with tension. The poem Minute by Minute was recited every morning to remind us of who we are and how we are supposed to act. The Principles of Maat and the Nguzo Saba are ancient African and the Kwanzaa principles that guided our behavior and character.

As I walked around the room, I used my yardstick in dramatic flare to hit the tables and demand that they sit up straight. Although I was laughing inside (because of my behavior), I was serious about getting them to understand what their behavior meant as African American males in the sociopolitical arena of American society. “Stand up!” I demanded, “and recite Minute by Minute.” Without hesitation every young man stood up, pushed his chair under the table, formed a circle and began,
Minute by minute, hour by hour,
If you lose your history, you lose your power.
If you lose your faith, you lose your power
If it is to be -- then it’s up to me!
I feel good about myself!
I feel good about the people around me!
I feel goodness all around me!
And, it will follow me for the rest of my life
‘Cause I walk with Good! And I talk with Good!
And I am Good! And that feels real Good!
Good better best! Never let it rest!
Until your good is better! And your better is your best!
People you were once great, you shall be great again,
Lose not faith, lose not courage,
Go forward! Uplift the race!
Harambee! – Pull Together!

After the boys dropped hands and sat back in their seats, I immediately interjected
a rhetorical question, “Did y’all live this poem? No! Instead you acted like chickens and
chickens are only good for one thing and that is what,” the boys replied, “being plucked
and eaten.” I rebutted, “Is that what you are, chickens?” The boys shook their heads to
answer my pathos. I demanded a verbal answer, “Did you hear me! Are you chickens?”
They all replied, “No, I’m not a chicken.” I thought I would take the time to remind them
of the story of the chickens and eagles. “Remember what happened in the story, how the
eagles were kidnapped from Africa and the baby eagles were made to believe they were
chickens. Remember, the eagles were locked in a coop with chickens and all the
chickens did was fight, whine, complain, and tell the eagles that they were ugly chickens.
It was sad but the eagles believed the chickens and didn’t live up to their potential, until the great eagle spotted them and descended on the chicken coop to rescue the eagles.” I wanted to make sure they were listening. I had told this story all year and because it’s from memory, it changes every time. Nonetheless, I asked, “Who remembers what happened next?” Lamont said, “I know! The chickens was scared of the eagle and the baby eagles was scared too. But the great eagle told the baby eagles to fly and when they knew they could fly they believed they was eagles.” I responded, “Y’all must’ve forgotten that y’all were eagles. You forgot about your history as kings and princes. You must’ve forgot that goodness follows you and I know it slipped your mind that if you lose your power you’ll have no faith.”

With the volume, intensity, and tone of an army sergeant I reprimanded the boys. “Your behavior was disgusting and not fit to stay in this eagles nest. We are eagles full of dignity, self-control, and respect for others. But what I saw today was a bunch of chickens on the loose. If you’re gonna stay in here you betta get it together. Do you hear me!” Faint and timid “yes sir” pierced the air. I interjected with an even louder voice, “Speak up and answer me when I’m talking to you.” This time the boys spoke with volume, unison, and strength, “Yes sir.”

I directed my attention to a student and said, “Michael stand up and recite the Principles of Maat.” He stood and without hesitation he responded, “the principles of Maat are Truth, Justice, Righteousness, Reciprocity, Balance, Harmony, and Order.” “Now tell me which one y’all have violated, Michael.” “We violated all of them Mr. Hancock.” I turned my attention to another student, “Rondell, stand up and recite the principles of the Nguzo Saba.” Rondell stood up and said, “Umoja – unity, Kujichagulia
– self determination, Ujima – collective work and responsibility, Ujamaa – sharing resources, Nia – purpose, Kuumba – creativity, and Imani – faith.” I retorted, “Did y’all practice self determination? How ‘bout unity? You couldn’t’ve practiced responsibility and purpose because y’all are out of control.” I gave them no sympathy because I knew they had to understand what it would be like to live as a black man in America.

“As an African American young man you don’t have the luxury of getting out of control. You either control yourself or who will control you,” the boys said in unison, “the police.” I continued, “If you are controlled what does it make you?” “A slave!” they all responded. “Our ancestors have fought too long and too hard for freedom and you gonna risk it because you can’t control yourself.”

I came out of military mode and into a more story telling disposition. “Let me tell y’all something. You know that you have a choice when become a young man. You can live in a dorm and go to college, live in an apartment and go to work, live in barracks and serve in the military, or you can live in a cell and serve time. Everyone of these living quarters are being prepared for you right now but the one that’s being built the fastest for young black men is the cell. So if you want a federalized apartment that’s about 6 feet by 8 feet, then the only thing you have to do is lose self control and the cell is yours all expense paid. You don’t have to worry about bills, air, heat, recreation, or food it’s all provided for you courtesy of the state penitentiary. They are in control so you become a slave. Although everything is free, they tell you when to sleep, eat, bath, and play. So if this is the type of life you want, continue to forget about your history, lose your faith, and disrespect the principles of Maat and the Nguzo Saba.” The boys were silent. I knew this
story hit home because many of their fathers, uncles, cousins, and older neighborhood
friends had experiences with being in jail or the state penitentiary.

  Recess was almost over so I asked the boys what should happen next. Many
responded that they should apologize and try to redeem themselves. I agreed and hugged
and shook every child’s hand as an acceptance of their apology, and ensured them that I
would be watching for redemptive behavior.

*Analysis*

  For the remainder of the day the boys were back on task. Malcolm approached
me and told me he was sorry for fighting and that his dad went to jail for fighting. The
boys were deeply and positively affected by the apartment story. For the last month in
school I constantly reiterated to them that self-control is better than police control. I also
made it clear that they have political power through their character, protesting, and voting
that could change the plight of young black men.

  I am aware that as a black man, I have a cultural advantage and responsibility
when it comes to teaching black children. I can say things that white men and women
have no right or foundation to utter, and I can do things that even black women can’t do
in the classroom. I don’t have to yell, raise my voice, flick the lights, or sing attention
songs to get the attention of my students, a silent look is all it takes and my students
respond appropriately. My presence alone is a source of strength and power in the eyes of
black children and often a marker for immediate respect. As a black man in early
childhood education, I’m rare. It is this rarity that gives me subtle advantages. I’m
usually a child’s first African American male teacher. Students don’t know how to
approach me so I fill their unknown with what I want them to know about being a black man in education.

One of the things that I give my students, before the window on novelty wears off, is the idea that they are powerful, intelligent, and special students. I also plant seeds of empowerment, critical consciousness, and justice. Through the student senate, storytelling, real life experiences, poems, and purposeful lessons, I construct paths to social and critical consciousness. By the time my students get used to me, they also begin to be critical of their classroom and life in general.

I am often the first and last African American male elementary teacher many of our students may encounter. That’s why it’s important for me to groom children to understand their sociopolitical realities. It is not my intention to scare them or create militant radicals. Rather, it’s my responsibility to educate my students beyond a status quo curriculum that is designed to groom complacent, socially and politically uncritical citizens (Freire, 1999). There is a need for revolutionary educators who, for the sake of marginalized students, resist the demands to support the prescriptive methods of Eurocentrism (Friere, 1999). I believe that to practice culturally relevant teaching, is to be a revolutionary educator. Culturally relevant teaching creates opportunities for teachers to expose injustices that are present in our classrooms and society.

It is crucial to African American boys that they understand the systemic and institutionalized injustices designed to imprison them. Not only imprison them as adults but as students. Because schools are microcosms of society, it is congruous to compare the public school’s suspension system with the public prison system. Studies concur that African American boys are suspended at a much higher rate than any other population
and unfortunately the same types of culturally inappropriate, racist and classist social policies imprison more African American men (Mason, 1999; Myers and Sabol, 1987). The disenfranchisement of African American boys in schools nurtures an environment where African American men are economically oppressed (Myers and Sabol, 1987). Unfortunately, “imprisonment is a major public policy response for meeting the needs of economically marginalized African American males” (Mason, 1999, p. 163). In fact, on the national level 31% of all school suspensions and corporal punishment cases are comprised of African American males (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990). At the same time, 37% to 44% of black adolescent males were confined juveniles, incarcerated in punitive social institutions (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1994).

It is equally important that black children are explicitly taught that they have choices and to prepare them to cross bridges in order to make socially, academically, and politically successful decisions. Many contend that it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide culturally relevant opportunities for students to understand the sociopolitical climate of schools and make beneficial choices for success (Foster and Peele, 1999; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 200b). Foster and Peele (1999), suggest these guidelines to assist teachers in constructing culturally appropriate learning opportunities for African American boys, “(a) set a tone for learning each day and remain consistent from day to day. Do not expect to accomplish anything without structure and discipline, (b) learn to manage your classroom instead of resulting to suspension and expulsion, (c) know that it becomes impossible to discipline or teach the Black male unless the boy believes that you care, (d) understand that African American males, from as early as second grade, are
haunted by and have to overcome the negative portrayals of who they are, (e) believe that African American males are perfectly capable of performing at high academic levels. The one thing that the Black male student does not need are teachers who accept the statement “I can’t do this,” (f) learn as much as possible about the community in which the Black male lives, (g) do not assume that every Black male is a troublemaker, and (h) Expect, regardless of your race, social class, background, or teacher preparation to struggle to find ways to establish meaningful relationship with African American male students” (pp. 18-19). Affording African American boys these suggestions as well as being explicit about the purpose of instruction will increase success in the classroom.

Through explicit and repetitious activities students should be afforded opportunities to master the subject matter (Irvine, 1990). Since, “disproportionately large numbers of African American boys in our city schools are expelled, suspended, relegated to special education programs, and left with fewer personal resources than their European American peers” (Murell, 1999, p. 82), it is only logical that teachers address this problem through explicit instruction and culturally responsive teaching. When students are explicitly, developmentally and culturally taught the sociopolitical rules and realities of the schools and society, they are more likely to adhere to them and be successful (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Destiny’s Child: Realizing Potential, Nurturing Dreams**

We had just finished our Off to College Rally. Off to College Week is a district wide rally that is designed to encourage students to consider college. All teachers were asked to wear college sweatshirts and were encouraged to be the first speaker among
many interesting guest in the classrooms. In addition to me, my students had been treated to Ph.D. candidates, a nurse, a soldier, and a businessman. Each speaker had the same message for the students – ‘you can do whatever you set your mind too.’

We were also given reading material and a video to share with each child. It seemed as if the students were all eager to go to college and I took for granted that they believed they could. So I was shocked to hear doubt, fear, and disbelief in the ability to go to college that the students expressed as the activities continued. They knew my story and how I was able to go to college and become a teacher. I was supposed to be their role model. However, as we read the paperback booklets, the reality of college seemed to fade and be replaced by reality of their surroundings. Bria said, “nobody in my famly went to college.” “I know,” said Lamont, “I can’t pay all that money, we aint got the money.” “Mr. Hancock, don’ you hav’ to have good grades to go to college,” yelled Antwan. The questions kept coming. I was both happy and concerned. Happy, because they were aware of the realm of college life and had a critical understanding of what is needed to be college bound. Concerned, because I could also hear the hopelessness in their critical awareness of financial, academics, and family hurdles that could deny their dream of college.

At that moment we stopped reading the booklets and began talking about their future aspirations. I was amazed at the variety of careers that each student chose. It was refreshing to see the lights glow in their eyes as they talked about what they really wanted to do. Lamont wanted to be a rapper in his teenage years and a preacher when he got older. Shaneta wanted to be a nurse because she loved taking care of people. Keisha wanted to sing and perform.
The conversation went on and on. Each student talked about his or her dream. After everyone finished I asked, “Does anybody know what they need to do to get to your destiny?” Silenced blanketed the air until Jennifer said, “I don’t have to go to college to be a model.” “So what do you have to do to become a model,” I said. “I ‘on know you just have to look pretty an exercise.” “Good, to be a model one of the things you need to do is look good. This means you must eat right, you can’t do drugs or drink alcohol, and you must get plenty of rest and exercise.” Everyone began to shout out their destiny and what they thought they had to do to accomplish their goals. “I have to go to bible school and learn about Jesus, after I finishing rapping,” responded Lamont. Lisa chimed in, “I’m going to law school when I get big and I’m gonna be a lawyer.”

I decided to turn their enthusiasm into a research project. I asked each child to chose no more than two destinies. I then encouraged them to go to the library and use the internet to research their destiny. Since this was our fourth research project I gave the students a week to finish. After gathering their data, answering the research questions, and creating a folder, the students had to present their destinies before the class.

With a little guidance from me, all my students chose a career path that not only matched their personalities but also complimented their talents. After their presentations I posted the results (see table 3.1).
### The Destiny of Students in Room 108

**School Year 2001-2002**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Destiny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lamont Branch</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rondell Blue</td>
<td>Teacher / Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki Callens</td>
<td>Nurse / Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiesha Cricket</td>
<td>Singer / Entertainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario Crupp</td>
<td>Speaker / Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Floral</td>
<td>Lawyer / News Reporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah Foust</td>
<td>Construction Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee Gentle</td>
<td>Social Activist / Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenny Johnson</td>
<td>Speaker / Athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaneta Johnson</td>
<td>Medical Admin. / Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad Johns</td>
<td>Politician / Mayor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm McKnight</td>
<td>Deacon / Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Meadow</td>
<td>Professor / Scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antwan Nordstrom</td>
<td>Teacher / Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bria Rogers</td>
<td>Model / Business Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Smalls</td>
<td>Model / Fashion Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin Turner</td>
<td>Pre-school Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Walker</td>
<td>Professor / Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan Wiston</td>
<td>Architect / Police Officer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 4.1: Student Destinies for 2001-2002**
As other teachers, the principal, and other members of our teaching and learning
community came to read the list, they were interested and somewhat amused at the
chosen destinies of my students. However, it was a powerful reality for my students and
their parents. The students took seriously the research project and presented their
findings as experts. Parents were shocked to see their children presenting a future career
path. One parent said, “I wish I did this when I was in school, it would have at least
given me something to focus on.”

Analysis

The idea of college became more of a reality when my students had to research
their career paths. Foster and Peele (1999) believe that teachers should help children sort
“through career options and help them to understand the importance of setting career
objectives, specific achievement strategies, and plan of action for fulfilling the course
requirements needed to realize those goals” (p. 18). Every student was engaged in
computer and library research to find out about their potential career. During the
research project many of my students realized that college wasn’t a requirement and not a
necessity to have a fulfilling career. Many students also changed their career paths when
they realized that college was mandatory. They seem to believe that college wasn’t a
realistic goal. They had no neighborhood role model to inspire them to go to college and
their social reality was stronger than my influence on issues about college (Irvine, 1990).
I wanted them to at least believe that college was a choice among a variety of options. I
reiterated, however, that post high school learning is important and inevitable for any
successful person. It was my goal to instill in my students that life long learning is a
process. “No matter what you do,” I said, “You will always need to know how to do it better.” I remember trying desperately to instill a sense of hope in life long learning.

Michael picked up on my push and knew exactly what he wanted to do. He was one of the students that Keisha rightfully accused me of favoring. From the first month of school until the end of school, I called him, Dr. Walker. He and his mother were fond of the name and it caught on in our school and his neighborhood. He was a motivated student with excellent reading and writing skills, and he wanted to be a teacher, then a professor. A seed of confidence was planted, and Michael worked so that it would grow into its potential. He, along with Tony, Bryan, Nikki, and Lisa, were confident about college and encouraged conversation about their imagined experiences.

After the research project, however, the lights in all of my student’s eyes brightened as they felt they had a future to look forward too. Foster and Peele (1999), suggest that teachers seek out opportunities for career planning and “encourage students to set career goals” (p. 18) and take ownership of their dreams. They took ownership in their career choices and discussed their choice with others. In fact, my students held each other accountable for their future career. Lamont was the subject of most of the attention because of his choice to be a pastor. Not a day went by without someone saying, “God is watching you and I don’t think a pastor acts like that.” He would immediately straighten up and say, “but I’m not a pastor yet!” The inevitable and consistent response was, “But we all gotta prepare for our future now, so when you gonna start?”

I really wanted my students to grasp the idea that college was a possibility. I wanted them to have the power to choose whether or not they wanted to attend. My conviction to push my students into doing research on a career was far deeper than the
academic benefits of learning to gather information, write it up, and present it. Rather, it was because I cared about where they would be in 10 and 20 years. I also knew the sociopolitical and economic marginalization they could face if they didn’t have a career goal or future aspiration. I wanted them to be critically conscious and socially aware concerning the power of setting goals and making positive choices.

Not until I reflected on my motivations for teaching, did I understand how much I wanted my students to succeed. I wanted to do more than just nurture the idea of learning for intellectual success, I believed that nurturing their spirits or affective development is also important. “Feeding children’s bodies is important; feeding their spirits is even more so” (Noddings, 1992, p. 13). I genuinely cared about my students’ success from a wholistic perspective. Intellectual development in our classroom was not the only focus, instead, I constructed learning opportunities that challenged the social, emotional, spiritual, and physical development of my students. I listened, looked, and felt the needs of my students and created activities that fostered success. Noddings (1992) describes the act of hearing, seeing, and feeling what others try to convey, as care. I genuinely cared for my students’ well being beyond school hours. I strove to understand them and relate to them at their level of development. Noddings (1992) further believes that “caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviors” (p. 17).

Care for my students, was neither grounded in sympathy for their life experiences nor an attempt to rescue them from their environment. Rather, the type of care I perpetuated in our classroom relationships was of high expectations, determination, endurance, and mutual support (Noddings, 1992). I was firm, yet understanding. As their teacher, I provided my students with an “open and nonselective” notion of care that was
fair and available (Noddings, 1992, p. 15). Noddings (1992) refers to this type of care as engrossment which she characterizes as an emptying of personal biases in order to receive and nurture others.

Encouraging my students to do their best was always stressed in our classroom. This notion of care is referred to as confirmation (Noddings, 1992). Burber (1965), described confirmation as an act of affirming and encouraging students to rise to the challenge and do their best. I not only challenged them to do their best, I taught them to be responsible for their actions. I didn’t allow my students to feel sorry for themselves either, but at the same time I showed empathy when they were in troubling situations. For instance, when Kenny was reprimanded by another teacher and written up for suspension, I said to him, “I’m sorry about what has happened, if I could change it I would but remember that reciprocity means that sometimes we will get back what we put out. You are being suspended from school because of your behavior. I will make sure you don’t miss any work and I will make a visit to help you.” Kenny was put out of school for three days.

On day two he was excited to see me at his house. I spent a half hour trying to beat him in a Nintendo video game and another half hour explaining to him what he had missed in school. When Kenny returned to school, he responded differently to my request and instruction. He knew I sought to engage him and provide academic and social opportunities for success. Kenny realized that I cared about his success as a whole person. My attitude towards his education was characterized by action, accountability, intellectual stimulation, cultural affirmation, and emotional support (Gay, 2000).
Noddings (1992) contends that this type of caring “accepts, embraces, and leads upward. It questions, it responds, it sympathizes, it challenges, it delights” (p. 29).

At the presentation of their Destiny Child’s research project, I was happy to see that for the moment my students were engaged in the belief that they could be successful in whatever career path they chose. I also realized that if nothing else a seed of hope was planted in their minds about college being a possibility. As I listened to the presentations, I could hear the hope and possibility in my students’ voices.
Implications for Acquiring Skills to Teach for Social & Critical Consciousness

A teacher in a system of oppression is either an oppressor or a revolutionary.  
-Unknown

The oppressor seeks to silence the voice of students who are critical of the social dynamics or their environment (Freire, 1999). The revolutionary, however, understands that the development of critical and social consciousness is a political process that requires voice, indeed a strong voice. The revolutionary also understands that teaching is a political activity and that “it is impossible to teach in ways that are not political and value laden” (Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 116). Kohl (1998) contends that a teacher who teaches for social and critical consciousness cares about the political development, culture, and voice of his students, and is enraged about the inequitable curricular or administrative policies that seek to destroy their lives. As educators we must began to address with critical purpose, personal issues that may hinder our ability to act as revolutionaries; curriculum practices that seek to disenfranchise and neglect the educational needs of our children; and administrative policies that block provisions to teach for social and critical consciousness. However, before any of these elements can be addressed we must first understand what it is to teach for social justice and critical consciousness.

Teaching based on social justice and critical consciousness compels students to focus on societal inequities, students then must study and act on the issue, and finally students form strategies to address the issue (McNeil, 1990). “To describe learning to teach for
social justice we must describe not simply what it looks like—but also how teachers make sense of it—how they struggle and think about what they are doing” (Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 138).

Within the United States, only a few schools have tried to teach with an emphasis on social justice and critical consciousness, and of those schools, efforts were chiefly in poor communities (McNeil, 1990). McNeil (1990) cites Project Ixtliyollotl in San Andres, Mexico. The project for social and critical consciousness began when the residents of this poverty stricken community realized their loss of “human resources, family disorganization, and poverty not being addressed by the educational agencies” (p. 35). As a result, 600 members of the community united and formed their own school based on “improving the social and economic conditions” (p. 35). McNeil (1990) contends that subject matter was taught from a social justice perspective: science dealt with local health improvement; history focused on understanding the origin of their current situation and plans for a better future; for social studies students analyzed political implications through the newspaper; writing included students developing their own newspaper as well as preparing letters to politicians; and finally, math dealt with the economy of San Andres with a focus on improving resources management. It is evident that Project Ixtliyollotl employed activism, power, and inequity issues as part of their curriculum, work with, not against families and community, used knowledge, interests, cultural and linguistic resources, taught skills, and enabled significant and relevant work for all students (Cochran-Smith, 1999).

McNeil (1990) also reports how difficult it is to implement a curriculum for social justice. He states, “harassment instigated by political powers that fear an empowered
community and educational bureaucrats who are uneasy with Ixtliyollotl’s achievement” (p. 35) resisted their efforts with legal challenges and idle threats. Cochran-Smith (1999) notes that the behaviors of these politicians and educators are not surprising because “public discussion of inequities and injustices are difficult” (p. 133). However, if curriculum development seeks to effectively embrace a diverse student population, then students must be empowered, and social inequities and injustices must be critically analyzed and acted upon. McLaren (1988) surmises a curriculum that acknowledges society as unfair and unjust, uses empowerment to mean “enabling students to do more than simply adapt to the social order but rather to be able to transform the social order in the interest of social justice” (p. 3). It is important for students of color to be afforded a learning community that will enable them to resist the status quo.

Peterson (1992) suggests that these learning communities are constructed by a myriad of practical components that involve ceremony, ritual, rite, celebration, conversation, play, routines, jobs, language, and residency. The development of multicultural learning community that fosters social awareness is more beneficial than isolated learning methods, fragmented relationships, and irrelevant teaching techniques that do not foster cohesive, productive, and well-informed ideas (Beane, 1997). In fact, for Peterson (1992) creating multicultural classrooms is synonymous with making a caring place for all students. He says of multicultural classrooms,

"It has to do with developing our expressive abilities and participating in everything that interests us, with being able to benefit from the insight and experience of others as we work at making the world make meaning for ourselves,
with living and learning in a place outfitted with opportunities to learn, a place where we can fumble and make mistakes without being scorned or laughed at."

(Peterson, 1992, p. 3)

In this passage Peterson lays out the blueprint for a productive classroom. He emphasizes an environment that promotes a relevant curriculum that benefits the experiences of the student and teacher. In addition, the notion of love, affirmation and acceptance is apparent as he describes a place where "we can fumble and make mistakes without being scorned or laughed at." Subsequently, the sociocultural reality in the classroom is where genuine conversation, ceremonies, rituals, language, and play are validated, where routines, jobs and celebration are implemented, and where young children can take up residency and build genuine relationships (Goldstein, 1997). In short, a multicultural learning community should prepare a bridge that connect children of color to the codes of power, while simultaneously connecting white students to the realities of inequalities and institutionalized racism.

In reflecting on my experience as a culturally relevant early childhood educator who teaches for social justice and a teacher researcher, I’ve compiled seven essential components that will provide teachers with practical applications of culturally relevant opportunities that are designed to teach for social justice. These seven components can be best presented in the acronym, ACQUIRE.
A = Accept

In an effort to engage students in the learning process we must accept their cultural and socioeconomic background as well as the knowledge that they bring into the classroom (Banks, 1991). We should also accept the reality of social and cultural injustices that are affecting and will affect minority students and work toward constructing learning opportunities to create a sociopolitical conscious.

C = Create

It is imperative that teachers create learning environments that foster cultural relevance. Students should be afforded a classroom that affirms, validates, empowers, and intellectually stimulate. In the forms of singing, dancing, storytelling, poetry, rap, exercise and other stimulating and relevant learning styles, students should be encouraged to create bridges of understanding from home to school culture.

Q = Question

Engage students in the process of critical questioning. Encourage students to ask why and seek answers through research. Provide them with newspaper and magazine articles, T.V. commercials, and advertisements for sale and have students critically analyze subliminal or hidden messages. Also, ask reflective question of self in order to bring to light personal biases, prejudices, misunderstandings, and points of growth. Reflective questioning should also reveal positive development.
U = Understand

Understand that there may not be visible fruit of your labor as a culturally relevant teacher. Culturally responsive teaching and the evolution of social consciousness is a process not a goal. There may be days that as a teacher, you feel like giving up. But the alternative is teaching that seeks to oppress rather than liberate the minds of our students (Freire, 1999). Also understand the concept and reality of dominance and how it relates to teaching and learning. Apply that understanding to students of color and teach so that they are able to overcome the obstacles that Eurocentric and monocultural perspectives perpetuate. Understand that African American students, especially males, come to school with a number of strikes (linguistic, culture, socioeconomic, and school identity) against them. Adjust the classroom to suit the needs of your student population.

I = Investigate

Begin a personal journey into understanding what it means to teach for social justice with a culturally relevant perspective. Also, engage your students in investigating principles that they feel one must have to teach in inner city schools. Two of the major themes that came from my students’ investigation of what it takes to be a culturally responsive teacher were fun and fairness. Fun from their perspective meant dancing, singing, rapping, and storytelling. Fairness meant that they could, as a senate body, decide on rules and policies in the classroom. Encourage students to investigate new ways of learning and teaching. Embrace their findings and implement them in class.
R = Reading and Writing

Don’t neglect the realities of learning the basics. As a teacher it is our fundamental goal and duty to nurture and develop proficient readers and writers. No matter how critically aware our students are, how fair and fun the classroom is, or if we are teaching from a culturally relevant position, if our students can’t read and write proficiently then we’ve missed the basic mission of education.

E = Excellence

Assume nothing, expect excellence! Promote a sense of excellence in everything you and your students do. Don’t accept sloppy, half done, or poorly thought out answers or assignments. Foster a sense of learning pride where students are engaged in learning for the sake of growth and sharing their knowledge. Construct a climate of mutual respect and high expectations and give students opportunities to learn about their history and legacy. Plant a seed of excellence in your students’ future by encouraging them to construct a career goal and path. Remember that they are capable of higher order thinking and expect them to rise to the challenge.
CHAPTER 5
Parental Involvement: Breaking Down Barriers of Separation

“You’ more den a teacha, you’ jus’ like famly.” - Ms. Branch, parent (Lamont’s mom)

It was a late summer afternoon in 1978 and we had been in school for two weeks. Gone were the days when we sat out on the porch and played games until midnight, had street races, or swam all day in the local pool. Gone were also the days that my mother seemed more relaxed and in control. It seemed that instead of looking forward to the beginning of school, like I imagined most parents did, she instead dreaded it. I did not know why my mother was so irritable during this time of the year until I got much older. From 1977 until 1979, myself and all ten of my siblings were enrolled in school. In 1978 we ranged from the first grade to the twelfth grade. With four of us in elementary, three in middle school, and four in high school, my mother had to deal with the more than three-dozen teachers and sign just as many forms. It was a high stress time for her, yet she managed. I vaguely remembered her policy on school activities and conferences – she couldn’t and didn’t attend. Not because she didn’t care, but because it couldn’t be done fairly, it was virtually impossible, and it wasn’t economically feasible for our family.
It didn’t make matters easier when the mercury seemed to freeze at 95 degrees. It was hot at school and hot at home and, although summer was ending, it seemed to tighten its grip on our weather pattern. Nonetheless, I was excited to be invited to join Visual Literacy Club at my elementary school. We would learn about visual, photographic, and a new emerging literacy called computer art. The club would create shoe box cameras, take field trips, present projects, and learn about optical illusions. I was thrilled! There was one hurdle to jump, my mother had to sign a permission slip that would allow me to participate in the after-school club. Now it doesn’t seem like a big deal to most children, but when you are in line behind forms for drivers education, senior pictures, football, basketball, tennis, track and field, music, medical physicals, free lunch forms, and a number of other personal interest and school required forms, you realize that reading and signing the Visual Literacy Club permission slip is not a priority. I had to time my delivery perfectly and couch it within a beneficial purpose to the family.

I waited until after dinner, when my mom and oldest sister (eleventh grader) were sitting at the kitchen table reviewing all the forms. My oldest sister was a great source of help for my mother because she would categorize the forms and place them in order. She would also read them prior to my mother reading them and explain what needed to be done and the importance of signing it. This saved my momma time and energy and consequently made her less irritable. As I approached the table, I held the form behind my back. My oldest sister, Tesa, asked, “What do you have Stephen.” While looking at my momma I told her what it was about and that I would have help with homework and
wouldn’t stop my older siblings from participating in after school activities (to keep me). My momma held out her hand and said, “gimme the paper.” She read it quickly signed it and gave it back to me. I was ecstatic!

Although I knew my mother wouldn’t be able to come to our final presentation, I was overjoyed that I could participate. During the final presentation, my sisters, Tesa, Maria, and Tina along with my brothers Don, and Byron came to support me while my mother worked.

It was evident to me that, while my mother could not be involved in school in a traditional manner, that she valued our education. She visited our schools at least once a year and whenever her schedule allowed. Yet, my mother would be one of those parents who are labeled as not caring about the educational development of her children. It is important that as teachers we realize that parental involvement is multifaceted and complex. My mother’s involvement in our education may not have been what teachers, school officials, and administrators call active, but it was effective. My mom’s calls, impromptu visits, and notes were respected by most teachers, and they were a warning to us that we would be in trouble if we didn’t value our education. My mother’s non-traditional involvement was essential in my development as a successful student.

**Encouraging Parental Involvement**

One of the primary components of a healthy learning community is the level and quality of parent involvement. Parent Involvement in the educational enterprise is neither a panacea nor a luxury. It is absolutely a fundamental and essential component in creating a healthy learning community in public education. In fact, without the help and
support of involved parents I could not be an effective teacher. I rely and depend on parents to be active participants in our classroom. However, although I expect 100% parent participation, the type and amount of parent involvement is always based on individual family circumstances. This means that I take into account the socio-economic and marital status as well as education level, age, gender and ethnicity of my parents in an effort to create a classroom that empowers and invites them to participate. I place myself in their shoes and try to picture school from their point of view in an effort to be nonjudgmental and empathetic.

As one of eleven from a single parent home, knowing that for a span of three years we were all in school at one time, and living through the pressure that it put on my mother who worked everyday, it is not very hard for me to be non-judgmental and understanding, yet fair in my request and methods of parent involvement. At a minimum, I ask parents to read, sign, and return the weekly letter as well make at least one visit per quarter. I engage parents who are more comfortable and who have time to donate to our classroom in a variety of activities. Parents are asked to do story time, teach their favorite subject, grade papers, create bulletin boards, tutor students as well as a host of other jobs or activities in the classroom.

In this chapter, I show narratives, letters, and conversations to demonstrate how I break down the barriers of miscommunication, distrust, alienation, and misunderstanding that is prevalent among parents and teachers. I address issues that concern the quality of parent involvement, building relationships in and out of school, and practical forms of communication.
My position as a teacher who lobbies for quality parent involvement, and one who understands what keeps parents away from schools, helps me become an effective and sensitive parent involvement coach. I believe that any teacher who promotes parent involvement must first reflect on personal bias, stereotypes, prejudices, and culture as a means to know self in order to understand others (Palmer, 1993). I believe that, if we are not grounded in a positive and healthy self-image, then we are likely to view others through biased lens. I also feel that teachers should critically analyze personal motives in order to foster genuine relationships with students and parents. Unfortunately, African American parents are often characterized as not caring, lazy, uninterested, and hostile towards school (Irvine, 1990). I contend, that if teachers take the time out to critically reflect on their assumptions, they will hopefully realize their prejudice and uninformed opinions and in turn began to invite parents to have genuine partnership in the classroom.

Figures 5.1 and 5.2, are forms that I use in my classroom. It is important to note that the positions and/or activities can be custom designed for any classroom. In fact, as teachers if we are going to be culturally relevant and inviting, it is imperative that we create positions and activities that our parents are interested in and will accomplish.

Figure 5.1 is an adaptation I used in class. Berger (1995), has developed the original form and the form is designed similar to a newspaper, classified section. For most adults this is a familiar format and may provide the initial comfort for reading and responding to the positions. I believe it is important to label and describe positions in language common to your parents as well as give verbal descriptions for more detail and clarification. I also think a good idea to provide a space where the parent can create a
position that suits them. When parents take the initiative to create a position it is a sure sign that they are interested and will be dedicated to volunteering.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help Wanted Positions Available</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Tutor</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have an interest in children learning to read? Come tutor! We will train you in techniques to use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good-Will Ambassador</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help us make everyone feel an important part of this school. Be in charge of sending get well, birthday, &amp; other cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photographer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anyone want to help create a scrapbook of our year in class. Photgrapher needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scientist</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like to experiment with different material, discover how things work, explore unique habitats, animals and plants? Become our class Scientist!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Game Player</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need someone who enjoys playing games. Checkers, Bingo Trouble, Chess, Sorry, Math Whiz, computer games, and a host of other fun games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book Designer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The class needs books written by children for our reading center. Edit, help create, and publish books for our reading center and display board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Volunteer Coordinator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need someone to coordinate all our volunteers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tour Guide</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have memories, slides, pictures, or stories about other states or countries? Come share.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SIGN UP IN OUR CLASSROOM OR RETURN THIS FORM WITH YOUR POSITION CHECKED. YOU CAN HAVE MORE THAN ONE JOB!

Reading Tutor ___  Good Listener ___  Game Player ___  Good-Will Ambassador ___  
Photographer ___  Scientist ___  Book Designer ___  Volunteer Coordinator ___  Tour Guide ___

NAME_____________________________________ TELEPHONE________________________

FIGURE 5.1 Parent Volunteer Form

The form in figure 5.2 is more formal with less detail. I use this form as my second attempt to get parents involved. The letter format and lack of great detail encourages the parents to quickly read and decide which activity best fit their interest.
The second attempt also reminds parents how much we need and want their assistance in our classroom. I also send the 5.2 form once a quarter with updated positions and activities.

Dear Parents of Room 108,

We need your help in our classroom. You can share your time and talents by helping while at home, in our classroom, or in the parent resource room. Let us know how you will help us.

Are you interested and able to volunteer this quarter? ___ Yes ___ No

Please check the ways you want to help.

___ In the classroom
___ In the resource center
___ At home

What would you like to do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the classroom</th>
<th>In the resource center</th>
<th>At home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>___ Share your hobby</td>
<td>___ Create games</td>
<td>___ Coordinate Field Trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Go on field trips</td>
<td>___ Grade Papers</td>
<td>___ Be the contact Parent (phone tree, email)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Be a room parent</td>
<td>___ Grade Spelling</td>
<td>___ Good-Will Ambassador (birthday/get-well cards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Assist students in class</td>
<td>___ Computer Research</td>
<td>___ Snack Provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Tutor reading/math</td>
<td>___ Design Bulletin Boards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Story time reader</td>
<td>___ Create research models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any other suggestions? ___________________________________________________________

Comments _____________________________________________________________________

When can you volunteer? MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY
Circle time and dates AM – PM AM – PM AM – PM AM – PM AM – PM

Name______________________________________ Telephone _________________________

FIGURE 5.2 Parent Volunteer Letter
Radical Fans: Getting Parents involved

This year the speech was presented at our annual Open House/Parent Night in early October. As the parents filed in our classroom, I started connecting them to their child based on appearance, attitude, and speech patterns. I also began to decipher how I would present my speech. I studied body language to see who was receptive to me and comfortable in the classroom, speaking patterns to hear if parents were being pretentious in their speech (noticeably trying to speak market place language) or if they were secure and affirmed in our learning community (comfortable communicating in a classroom), clothing to get a vague idea of occupation and work schedule (if parents wore uniforms they were either going to or coming from work), and attitudes to see if parents were agitated and uncomfortable or if they displayed a sense of exploration and ease. All the while, I smiled, greeted parents and children, gave a tour of our room and held mini conferences about academics and behavior. After we were all acquainted with each other, I knew I could be “real” and give my speech straight and strong. I sensed that the parents were ready for a radical year of teaching and learning. None of the students had an African American man as a teacher. So, I had an advantage and privilege to do things differently with parents and students.

I started the speech by inviting parents to be a part of our team. I created an analogy between our classroom and an NBA team. Drawing upon my understanding regarding motivation, I put my reputation, teaching ability and professionalism on the line and promised (like I do each year) that our children will read on and above level, understand and compute math concepts, be proficient researchers, know world geography, be excellent writers, have self confidence, a future career and be able to
compete with any second grader in the country. I maintained, however, that none of this would happen if they (parents) were not involved. As a team, I’m the coach, the students are the players, and the parents are the fans. It is the job of the coach to lead, support, and develop opportunities for players to be successful. It is the responsibility of the players to display good character, be respectful, work hard, and enjoy the process. And finally it is the duty of the fans to support the players and coach through communication, being present, providing positive cheers, forming a relationship to the arena, and assisting in developing the players’ skills.

I also explained that for NBA teams, home court advantage almost always guarantees victory because of the commitment, cheers, dedication, and loyalty of the fans. Without the fans, the players and coach would be disenfranchised and eventually out of business. Finally, I continued to stress the importance of parental involvement in the support and development of a multicultural learning community. I beg the parents to assist the coach, give their child home court advantage, and be a dedicated fan to our team and arena.

Immediately after I finished my speech, I canvassed the room looking for contrary responses or confusion. What I saw was surprise, astonishment, and acceptance on the faces of the parents. I knew from their acceptance that it was a good time to hit hard. My disposition changed from a coach to the voice of our ancestral mothers and fathers. Again, I reiterate how important their participation is to the development of high achievers. And in a tone, less motivational but more serious, I explain to the parents that our success as a class and community relies on their dedication, work, and endurance. Finally to ensure that I was heard, I ended with a “saying” from my mother. I said to the
parents, “This might come as a surprise for some of you but it’s the truth and it drives home how much I want you in our classroom. I am not a savior or glorified missionary. If you’re a Christian your savior is Jesus Christ, if you’re a Muslim your savior is Muhammad, and if you’re Buddhist your savior is Buddha so don’t expect me to work educational miracles. Remember this if nothing else, I have your child for nine months and you have them for life; you laid down to have ‘em and now you must stand up and raise ‘em. Alone I cannot give our children what they deserve, but together we can nurture and create geniuses.” These words are what made my speech as unique. Each year I say the same thing. The monologue gets the attention of my parents and creates a space for immediate conversation and questions. After hearing the speech, Mrs. Wiston jokingly responded, “Well! I guess you told us. So what do I need to do to get involved?”

As Open House came to an end I presented the parents with these equations:

Coach + Fans = Successful Players - which equates to - Culturally Responsive Teaching + Parent Involvement = Successful Students. I felt it was a good meeting and as the year progressed it became evident that the parents were dedicated fans.

Analysis

Just like fans at a NBA game must adhere to the rules of the arena, so must my parents adhere to rules in our learning community. The most important rule that parents must adhere to is that I am the coach. At no time do I compromise my expertise, responsibility, and professionalism as the state mandated agent of education. Although I create spaces where parents can find their interest, help with daily activities, and even help with paperwork, I maintain my position as coach without being overbearing or threatening. My parents know that I am there to teach and it will be done by any means
that are developmentally and culturally appropriate. Fans also must respect the arena and players. My parents know that no matter how upset they become or how excited they get that property, language, and physical engagement with the players and coach must be respectful.

As an African American teacher who’s embedded in the culture of my students and parents, it is sometimes easy to forget or take for granted the privilege that my position creates when it comes to building relationships with parents. Most of my parents are African American women, between the ages of 21 – 35, Christian, and believe strongly in the necessity of a male role model at home and in school. This reality coupled with my commitment to teaching African American students affords a partnership that is based on mutual goals and culturally necessary teaching practices. My parents often feel that their children have a cultural and social need to develop a partnership with an African American male teacher. Still, constructing these positive relationships is done with careful purpose. I strongly believe that we can never tap into the full potential of students unless we have quality parent involvement (Bastiani, 1997; Epstein, 2001). For me, getting parents involved requires motivating them to be a part of the classroom, presenting an attainable goal for involvement, and establishing goals for their child (Berger, 1995; Epstein, 2001). I see teachers who seek to serve students and families through a savior or missionary perspective, rather, with an interest in, belief in, and commitment that goes beyond the school and into the child’s future.

I believe that one of the basic tenets for quality parent involvement is not necessarily a commitment to the parent, rather a commitment and genuine interest in the child as well as the ability to constantly reflect and grow to understand our disposition as
educators (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996). In my experience, when parents realize that the teacher feels strongly about the emotional, intellectual, physical, and future of the child, the parents are more likely to try and help the teacher (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996). This genuine interest opens the door for creating caring relationships between teachers and families. Emmons, Comer, and Haynes (1996), suggest that to develop positive relationships with students and their parents teachers should, “arrange the school environment to enhance the life space of all students, learn about the child’s family and community, and anything that influences the child’s life space, and provide experiences that expand options for freedom of movement both for child and for the significant adults in their lives” (p. 33). Emmons, Comer, and Haynes (1996) refer to “freedom of movement” as an environment that is open for parent visitation and participation and for students to literally move while learning. At our initial meeting, I try and convey to the parents how I want them to take ownership of our class and be active participants.

In my speech parents are explicitly aware of how I feel about their involvement in our classroom. It becomes crystal clear that they must be active partners in educating their children. I use the metaphor fans as a non-threatening avenue to get parents to breakdown the traditional ideas of parent involvement. If parents view themselves as fans it lessens the responsibility that traditional parent involvement ideals creates and provides “freedom of movement” in our learning environment. Instead of being required to be at PTA meetings and conferences, the fan has autonomy in choosing when and how they will be involved. The fan doesn’t have to adhere to the regular parent teacher conference schedule because they have been in constant contact with the coach and
player. Many of my parents received report cards, test scores, and work samples before parent teacher conferences because they are always in the school helping or just visiting.

During my third year at the Marcus Garvey School, we had a parent in our classroom everyday and two parents were in the classroom when I was absent for the birth of my daughter. Those parents were dedicated to cheering on their players and they cheered harder in my absence. Parents were so involved that they decided on classroom and school policy. For example, they were instrumental in persuading the principal to consider allowing me to loop from the kindergarten to the first grade with their children. After the principal approved the parents’ petition for me to loop, the parents unanimously voted on my idea to take a field trip from Columbus, Ohio to Houston, Texas. We met all summer to fund raise for our trip to NASA in Houston, Texas. The parents took ownership of the classroom (Epstein, 2001), and helped coordinate a trip for 30 adults and their 6 year-old first graders to fly to Houston, Texas for 4 days and 3 nights. Throughout the year they worked as classroom assistance, tutors, cheerleaders for fundraising, and support in whatever capacity I needed. Their actions were the epitome of parents who have embraced the notion of fans who cheer radically for their team.

During the two years we spent together as parent, teacher, and student partners, we shared more than a school-based relationship. In fact, one of my parents was the maternity nurse who helped with the delivery of my daughter. My wife and I were grateful that someone we knew and trusted was able to be involved in such an important event. We were family! We were invited to birthday parties, weddings, cookouts, church activities, and sporting events with my students and parents. Our classroom and school community promoted and encourage relationships beyond the classroom.
A few days after the Open House I received notes and calls from parents asking how could they help in our classroom. Notes and emails came with times and dates of availability and others sent in their parent involvement forms stating their desire to help. The time seemed to slip by quickly. For the first three months I was playing catch up with research and teaching activities. The weekly task of journaling, reflecting on and collecting narratives for my research coupled with the daily duties of teaching second grade was a heavy workload. I had not realized how much work was involved in teaching and researching. The overwhelming workload had caused me to neglect our hallway bulletin board. I was first asked by the second grade team leader and then by the principal when I would have it complete. I consistently put it on my “To Do” list each day for two weeks but was unable to get to it.

On her weekly visit, Mrs. Wiston asked, “How may I help you today Mr. Hancock?” Initially, I was going to assign her a student to tutor, some papers to grade, or some information to research on the computer, but I remembered her telling me in our meeting that she liked to help with art projects. So, instead of giving her a tutoring assignment, I asked her if she could design a display for our bulletin board. She beamed with delight. Mrs. Wiston was an undercover artist who had a talent for creating beautiful works. I gave her the bulletin board theme and for two days she diligently worked on the board. Mrs. Wiston even bought additional material to complete the board. She was excited, involved, and dedicated to the project. I was happy, grateful and relieved that it would finally be completed. I was also, happy that Mrs. Wiston felt affirmed and validated as a parent.
Mrs. Wiston was very involved in her child’s education. She worked a full time job and was still able to commit to a high level of parent involvement. Either Mr. or Mrs. Wiston visited at least twice a month to check on Bryan. Mrs. Wiston took the initiative in our classroom and provided needed and appreciated services. Although constructing a bulletin board may seem trivial and irrelevant to the learning process, Mrs. Wiston found more meaning in doing the board than she found in helping out in another capacity. Her help with the board freed me to focus more on preparing and providing culturally responsive learning opportunities for my students.

At the completion of the bulletin board, Mrs. Wiston said that it was nice to be needed and appreciated by a teacher. I thanked, reassured, and let her know how much stress and pressure she helped lift from my shoulders. I told her that anytime she wanted to help that our classroom was her classroom.

“Look at this mess!”: Quality Parent Involvement       Story #2

For the span of three weeks our students were given written, reading, math, and a battery of standardized tests. I’m not a big supporter of standardized tests. I tell all my students that “a test only measures what you know, how you feel, and if you care about a certain subject at a particular time. Tests don’t measure how smart, wonderful, and unique you are. So if you are not having a good day don’t worry about the results just try again.” Although I believe that tests are racist and classist they still exist and are a real part of public education. Therefore, I asked parents to come to school and help with our testing procedures. I was motivated by the belief that if parents were involved in the proctoring then it may ease some of the tension with the students. So I petitioned parents
to bring snacks, to read, sing or tell stories between tests, or to walk the room during test making sure students had sharpened pencils and were on the right pages.

I had a good response. Four parents promised to come by during various stages of the tests and help out. Mrs. Callens agreed to bring a snack. Ten minutes before the morning tests concluded Mrs. Callens brought in the snack. She reminded me that she had to be at work and couldn’t stay long to help. Five minutes after she distributed the snacks the students were well into eating and enjoying themselves and the room had become a mess. Without hesitation, Mrs. Callens began cleaning the room. I tried to assure her that we could handle it but she insisted on sweeping and wiping down the tables.

For the next three days of testing, Mrs. Callens came by before she went to work and spent twenty minutes helping us clean and reorganize the room. It was a source of genuine involvement for Mrs. Callens. She didn’t look at the task as demeaning or trivial. Mrs. Callens felt that learning couldn’t take place in a disorganized and messy environment. Being a registered nurse compelled her to keep our classroom sterile, clutter and germ free. I thanked her and later realized how much time and energy she saved me.

**Analysis**

A common feature in both of these narratives is that parent involvement emerged out of need and interest into a more meaningful event. Although I provided jobs for parents to choose (Berger, 1995), I also created a space where parents could explore emergent interest and ways of helping (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996). One way I create spaces where parents’ interest could emerge is by reflecting on and revealing my
weakness. For example, I would rather be playing, teaching, and interacting with my students than bogged down with paperwork. I don’t have a problem letting parents know, that although I’m very organized, I usually have a pile of organized papers to grade, read, or even return to the principal. Mrs. Wiston was an excellent assistant with paperwork. In fact, she was a law clerk and seemed to enjoy organizing, grading, preparing papers to be sent to principal, and creating our monthly attendance awards. It is important to note, that I neither complained about the stresses of teaching nor did I act as if I had it all together; rather, I treated parents to see the real me. Someone that loves what he does, is effective, yet, can be much more effective with parental help. Reflecting on the work it involves in educating children in today’s society, should propel teachers to seek as much help as possible. Hale (2001) contends that teachers should recruit “other adults who can assist them in working with children in small groups and individually” (p. 133), to maximize learning outcomes.

One of my strongest attributes when it comes to parents is my ability to be real. “Being real” is directly correlated to being self reflective and critical of ones abilities. I don’t propose to know everything and I don’t think I can do everything. Rather, I embrace my parents’ help and use their perspectives as tools for teaching and learning (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996). “Parent participation at every level of school building activity is illustrative of the assumption that the clients for whom a service is being provided should be involved in the design and implementation of that service” (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996, p. 38). Many teachers work way into the evenings trying to catch up or get ready for the next day. I usually leave no later than 4:00 pm, because I empower my parents to help in the daily activities of the classroom and they
have always risen to the challenge to assist me in daily activities (Emmons, Comer, Haynes, 1996). We shouldn’t hide behind degrees as if our education makes us invincible. We should, however, acknowledge that in order to be more effective teachers we need help from effective parents who are genuinely involved in classroom life (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996).

Mrs. Callens and Mrs. Wiston were dedicated parents with high academic goals for their children. Both parents were married, worked full time, and were not able to visit as much as they wanted. In fact, outside of visiting for the testing, I only saw Mr. & Mrs. Callens at parent teacher conferences. They were what I call “silent partners.” Although they didn’t make regular contact, I knew that they were dedicated to the academic and social development of their child. I had to only mention either of their names when Nikki acted out or refused to work and she would straighten up immediately.

Ms. Wiston, on the other hand, was visible in our classroom at least twice a month. She visited on her days off and was a consistent force in our learning community. Mrs. Wiston was a wonderful helper. It gave her a sense of joy and acceptance to help in our class. She commented to me that she had a fun school career and she was glad that Bryan was enjoying school too. Before long Mrs. Wiston could read my face and would simply ask, “Where is it Mr. Hancock, I’ll grade the papers.” I would always respond, “Thanks for lifting that burden, now I can give my energy to teaching.”

Although, it is very important to provide parents with jobs or opportunities to help in the classroom, it is also important to allow space for their help to emerge from necessity or interest. I’ve found that parent involvement is most satisfying when the teacher displays a sense of need, a desire to be helped, and a spirit of welcome.
Mrs. Callens and Mrs. Wiston were fans who cheered through their visits, communications, and assistance. Their presence in our classroom was a source of empowerment and positive interactions among the students (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996). By inviting parents into our room, students were able to extend their learning far beyond our walls (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996; Foster and Peele, 2001). For instance, many students recognized the parents by the appropriate title and their first name. Students, also, brought in stories from the neighborhood and engaged the parents to support and validate them. I encouraged students to write these stories and tell them during story time. It was a joy to see how parents could bring out what I couldn’t. Parents in our learning community decreased the adult: pupil ratio, gave us extra resource in terms of their experience and interest, built bridges from home to school culture, understood better the progress and challenges of their child, and created a core of parents who were able to support our classroom. Rivalland (1989) believes that parents assist classrooms, “through an increased adult: pupil ratio” children are provided with a more “effective learning environment, providing schools with extra personnel and human resources, and providing schools with parents who are knowledgeable about school needs” (in Wolfendale, 1992, p. 57). Bastiani (1989), asserts that parents volunteer “to help their own children, to help the school, and to meet some of their own needs” (p. 85). In our learning community parents did what they could, when they could and were always welcomed into our space.
I didn’t expect Jennifer’s father to come to the parent-teacher conference. As he walked in our classroom with Jennifer’s mom I explained to them the time restraints on our conference. We didn’t waste time with small talk because we had only 15 minutes. So we went straight to the heart of the matter, Jennifer’s below average reading ability. As I displayed her work and discussed on grade level activities and how I wanted Jennifer to read on grade level, her father, a man of large stature, gently but firmly asserted “I didn’t learn to read until I got locked up and it was hard.” He continued with an urgent concern for reading. His life had revealed to him the power in reading and he discussed how his commitment to teaching his daughter to read as well as how he has become a supporter and believer in the power of reading. To the surprise of Jennifer’s mother and myself, he opened up and began to discuss how his path in life led to school failure. I helped him understand that his choices were half of his problem and that the schools, curriculum, and some teachers were the other half of the problem.

His openness created a pathway for me to connect, identify and share. I shared a little of who I was and how I got through growing up in the housing projects of Richmond, VA. We began to discuss the cons of not being able to read as an African American child in urban America. For a brief moment I knew him. We shared common stories about our childhood, adolescence, and manhood and arrived at similar places. Although I had spoken with Jennifer’s mother as well as made home visits, she sat silently and listened to our stories.

They decided that if we weren’t able to reach grade level reading then Jennifer would be retained in the second grade. They would request a 504 – Individual Lesson and
Assessment Plan as a requirement of retention, and Jennifer would attend a nationally known reading program over the summer. I believed that Jennifer would do well in school. She had the support she needed to become a better reader and the hope of a bright future. In our conference we managed to catch her between a rock and a hard place. The rock being her parents’ determination to stand firm and strong for the education of their daughter and the hard place being our classroom where Jennifer would not slip through the cracks but be supported by my commitment to providing a hard and sure foundation of learning. We parted with a sense of trust, hope, and empowerment. It was an excellent conference that ended after 30 minutes.

“Can you take me home?”: Parent and Teacher Relationship Story #2

One morning, as I drove to school the temperature in my car read 7 degrees Fahrenheit. Being from the south, a temperature that low was mind-boggling. As I got out of my car and proceeded into the building, I could feel the wind biting my nose and chaffing my face. It was a bitter and ruthless cold. It was the type of cold that made it hard to get warm. It was just unbearably frigid and the temperature danced between 5 and 21 degrees. In fact, it was so cold that we had to cancel outdoor recess for two full weeks.

I made sure that my students were properly warmed before we started any activities. We practiced jumping jacks, head-shoulder-knees-toes, running in place, stretching side to side, and a host of other exercises. I also, provided the students with a half of bagel and some hot chocolate for a morning snack. The snacks were for those students who walked to school and couldn’t get to breakfast. For those cold weeks, I
routinely prepared about three to seven snacks and the students were honest about who needed to get a snack. The other students also received a smaller snack from our snack closet. It was a fun time for us to just sit, eat and chat in the classroom. Yes, it took an extra 20 minutes from traditional instruction but it was well worth it and it was a unique source for learning linguistic patterns, home drama, and understanding peer culture.

It was one of the coldest mornings yet. In fact, it was a record low of 0 degrees at 6 a.m. and only 6 degrees by 8 a.m. As I drove to school I thought of our students who had to walk to school and I prayed that they wouldn’t get frostbite. At the conclusion of our exercise period Chad came bundled up like an Eskimo. While he was in the coat closet, I placed a peanut butter cracker at his seat because I knew he didn’t walk to school. However, when he finished hanging up his coat, got his homework from his backpack, and stopped shivering like a wet dog trying to dry itself, he walked over to the table and picked up a bagel and a cup of hot chocolate. I immediately stopped him and reminded him that those snacks were for the walkers. Without hesitation Chad said, “I did walk to school.” I initially didn’t believe him.

Chad was an argumentative student with a strong sense of justice and fair play. He sometimes displayed immature behavior and is very animated and expressive in conversation. As a first grader, I was told that he drove his teacher crazy and spent most of the year in the principal’s office. As a second grader he seemed to have calmed down. My colleagues believed it was because I was an African American man as well as my teaching style that helped. However, from time to time he would act out, be disrespectful, and disruptive to the learning process. I thought it was another one of his attempts to argue his way to a treat. But when I touched his hand it was cold as ice.
Chad responded, “I told you me and my sister had to walk, you didn’t believe me did you.” I apologized and with an empathetic tone I asked him why he had to walk to school. He told me that his mother’s car broke down and they had no other way to get to school.

That afternoon I called Ms. Johns and asked her if there was anyone who could bring them to school. Ms. Johns had several negative experiences with our school. She had been called only for negative reasons and visited for discipline problems or suspension hearings. I was aware of her history with Chad’s previous teachers but I didn’t allow it to prejudice my approach to her as a parent. Our conversation continued, and she told me that everyone she knew had to be at work and she couldn’t arrange a ride. I then asked her if she knew if there was a school bus stop near her home and she told me that it was four blocks north or the opposite direction of the school and across a busy four lane street. I then asked her if she would like me to pick them up and bring them home until her car was fixed. I knew that this would require Ms. Johns to reach out and trust a teacher beyond the classroom. Without hesitation and much surprise she agreed and thanked me. I also lobbied the principal to see if she could get a bus to alter its route to pick them up, but it wasn’t feasible.

Chad and his sister lived 1.8 miles from school, just .2 tenths of a mile too close to school to be on a bus route. The almost two miles that they had to walk was brutal because of the cold. Each morning I would call Ms. Johns on my cell phone and tell her my time of arrival. Some mornings Chad and his sister were waiting at the window and other mornings they were trying to finish breakfast. Ms. Johns and I had developed a daily routine of discussing Chad’s academic and social behavior. In just one week, our
conversations and partnership had turned Chad’s behavior and academics around. Chad, however, was caught in a paradox. Although he loved the idea of me taking him home, he didn’t like the reality that I would discuss his daily behavior with his mom.

Ms. Johns, who worked while her children were in school, couldn’t get her car fixed for five weeks. In that span of time, Chad began to do his work, display appropriate and respectful behavior, and trust me as his teacher. One morning neither Chad nor his sister came out when I blew the horn. After five minutes I knocked at the door. Chad peeked through the window and yelled, “Mom its Mr. Hancock.” By the time Ms. Johns opened the door I was a frozen. She invited me in and began to tell me why Chad and his sister were not ready for school. As I listened to her, I couldn’t help think how much she trusted me with her personal information. She had been going through drama with the father of her children and wasn’t able to get home until late the previous evening. They had all overslept and she was in danger of losing her job. I told her that I would wait for Chad and his sister to get dressed so that they could go to school. We made it to school by 8:50 a.m. and had a wonderful day.

As spring broke, Chad knew that I wouldn’t be taking him home or picking him up for school. Every afternoon, however, he would ask, “Can you take me home?” Ms. Johns continued to communicate through letters, notes, calls, and an occasional visit. She had become an active parent and expressed that visiting our classroom was always a positive experience.
Analysis

Mr. Smalls and Ms. Johns were both comfortable with me, as their child’s teacher, to allow me to see them in a personal and vulnerable light. We connected on a level that created a place to develop healthy and productive relationships. It was evident that we all cared about our learning community and sought to help and be helped by building relationships (Noddings, 1992). Mr. Small, Ms. Johns and myself had developed a circle of care for the sole purpose of educating our children and being accountable for their success. Through consistent calls, visits, and letters we strengthened and sustained our partnerships (Noddings, 1992). We each took responsibility for doing our part in the education of our children.

Although, as a teacher, it is easy to blame parents for the failure of their children, and give excuses why schools are so inept to teach basic skills (Kohn, 1999), I neither blame nor ‘pass the buck.’ Rather, I solve or deal with the issue of student failure with the people most affected, the students and parents. It is true that parents can be difficult to deal with when there are problems with learning or behavior. I believe, however, that if teachers have an open line of communication, a relationship, and are careful to suspend judgmental and accusatory tones, parents are apt to become partners in education (Haynes, Emmons, Gebreyesus. and Ben-Avie, 1996). African American parents were once children who were groomed in body language, stylized behavior, gendered language, and social intuitive skills (Delpit, 1995). As adults these elements are matured and enable parents to realize if teachers are genuine and truly interested in educating their children. As a result, most African American parents pick up on pretentious comments.
and behaviors towards them and their children and are turned off instantly by the teacher (Smitherman, 1994).

Although, meeting Jennifer’s dad was a surprise, we connected on a personal and professional level that created a partnership designed to support Jennifer’s education. We had come to the table as strangers but left with a mutual understanding of each other and a goal of providing opportunities for Jennifer to gain reading proficiency.

We were seemingly different people, but as we found out we were more similar than different. Without compromising my professionalism, I shared with Mr. Smalls my student history in an effort to bring to light my present beliefs and convictions as a teacher. He, in turn, shared his history as a student and how he reached his present status. We purposefully formed a relationship for that time and season, and in those moments we knew each other enough to trust. I trusted Mr. Smalls to provide Jennifer with supplemental reading opportunities at home, and he trusted me to continue providing reading activities that challenge and supported her ability. I concur with Noddings, (1992) and Hale (2001) that when trust is not present among teachers and parents, then there is a lack of partnership.

Over the year, Jennifer’s dad stopped in our class to sit and read with her. He also provided birthday treats and told children about the importance of reading and staying off the streets. His presence in our classroom gave our students another opportunity to see an African American man encouraging them to succeed. Mr. Smalls was an excellent fan and although he only visited our class three times it was a powerful signal to our students and more importantly to Jennifer.
My desire to help Ms. Johns went beyond my role as an 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. teacher. I had observed Chad’s behavior and academic progress and knew that I couldn’t reach him without the help of his mother. I had spoken with Ms. Christian, our in-school suspension teacher, better known as the detention lady, to ask her about his past as well as if there were any suggestions she would make to curb Chad’s negative behavior. The only advice she had was, “all I can tell ya is pray, jus’ pray cause he’s a piece of work.” We made a deal that if she didn’t see him more than three times in the semester, then she would reward him with a special certificate.

It was indeed a challenge to live up to but I was determined to turn his behavior and academic situation around. I couldn’t, however, do it without the help of his mother. Our daily conferences and character behavior with Chad was just what was needed to assist him. Together Ms. Johns and I were able to do wonders as a fan and coach to create a player who was excited to play the game. Ms. Johns became a fan who supported both Chad and me. It was a conscious effort on my part to find an opportunity to pull Ms. Johns in and the car incident created the perfect opportunity. Ms. Johns became a parent with a renewed faith in public schools and Chad became a student who believed in his potential to be successful.

Supporting the caring relationship with parents in our learning community are six basic tenets that help Mr. Smalls, Ms. Johns and myself sustain a healthy partnership. The first was parenting (Epstein, 2001). Just as many teachers don’t want parents to tell them how to teach, I believe that at no time should teachers tell parents how to parent. Parenting is specific and unique to each family (Bastiani, 1997). Although teachers are able to suggest activities that will enhance the education of the child, we must not cross
the line and force personal culture, beliefs, and attitudes on parents. Reflecting on self as a teacher and parent enables me to stay balanced as I communicate with parents.

The second tenet that supports healthy relationships is communication (Epstein, 2001). Communicating with parents is often a challenging task for teachers. With the increase in ESL students, coupled with African American and other linguistic styles, teachers must make it a priority to develop multiple forms of communication. Parents in our learning community receive communicative attempts in the form of a weekly letter, email, notes, phone calls, and home visits.

The third type of care that supports relationship is volunteering (Epstein, 2001). It is important to provide opportunities for all parents to volunteer in the classroom (Berger, 1995). I try not to force parents into a duty or job in our learning community, rather, I encourage parents to come in and express their interest. Mr. Smalls was not asked to come to school and talk to the class about the importance of reading and staying in school. After reading with his daughter, he asked if he could say something to the class and for the next 5 to 7 minutes he talked about how he couldn’t read until he was an adult, the affect it had on finding gainful employment, and that reading is an avenue to keep children off the streets and in school. I couldn’t have planned Mr. Smalls’ speech more perfectly. We were in the middle of our reading block and he volunteers to give a speech about the importance of reading. Some of the students knew and respected him from the community and all of the students listened attentively. This type of volunteering only happens in a space where parents can emerge into a job that interests them.

The fourth type of care that helps sustain parent–teacher relationships center around the notion of home learning (Berger, 1995; Epstein, 2001). For me, home
learning goes beyond homework and interactive family experiences (Epstein, 2001). Home learning also encompasses what teachers can learn from the home environment. I chose to take Chad home because I wanted to visualize his path to and from school. It revealed that Chad was responsible and mature enough to navigate busy residential and commercial streets safely despite his immature behavior in class. Upon visiting his home for the first time, I also realized why he sometimes displayed immature behavior. As the baby in the family, Chad was used to getting all the attention. However, he had an infant brother who was now getting more attention. This home learning experience made me realize that school was an outlet for the baby that still lived inside of Chad. It was natural for him to feel abandoned and frustrated even though his family cared for him. This home learning experience went beyond the regular teaching hours, but it enabled me to perceive other avenues to reach Chad and his family (Berger, 1995).

The fifth and sixth tenet of care includes decision making and collaboration (Epstein, 2001). The idea of parents making decisions about the education of their children and collaborating with schools and community to help reform schools, are scary notions for many teachers. However, teachers who understand that parents are interested in the best education for their children are less likely to fear, disregard, or oppose parental input. I reiterate the importance of teachers reflecting on their beliefs and assumptions concerning parental involvement. If teachers ask themselves questions that reveal their motives, biases, and prejudices toward the issue of parents as decision makers and collaborators, it is likely that these teachers will reveal a need for change within.
You’ Jus’ Like Fam’ly: Building Trust Beyond the Classroom

It had been a troublesome week for Lamont. His mom had mentioned that she had recently separated from his father, and was scheduled to start classes at the local community college. She also held down a full time job while raising three children. Knowing this I didn’t bother her with Lamont’s behavior until it was unbearable. Lamont naturally has a comedic personality. In our classroom he has ample opportunities to keep us laughing. However, what was going on at home coupled with the pressures at school was too much for him to deal with. I took it as my responsibility to assist Ms. Branch with Lamont. I had choices. I could write him up on a behavioral referral (which could mean in or out of school suspension). I could tolerate his talkative, inappropriate and sometimes disrespectful behavior, or I could make a home visit and talk to Ms. Branch with him present. I chose the last.

Fall was approaching as the beautiful colors began to peak through the canopy of green leaves. As I walked the two blocks to Lamont’s house, I observed nature and the neighborhood. Although I had not met Ms. Branch’s neighbors, they all seem to know who I was as they greeted me with smiles and nods.

I had allowed ten minutes to lapse between the time Lamont left and the time I visited. I had also given him a note to inform his mother that I was visiting. As I approached the row house, Lamont was looking out of the window and before I could step on the porch he had flung the door open. With a big grin, he shouted, “hey Mr. Hancock, ain’t seen you in a long time.” Ms. Branch responded from the kitchen, “Lamont is that Mr. Hancock or is you playin’ wit me.” She came from the kitchen holding a dishcloth and looking a little surprised. I asked if she had received the note and
her answer was, “no Lamont ain’t gimme non’in’.” I gave Lamont the “look” and he immediately went to get the note. After she read it, Ms. Branch began to apologize for his behavior and promised that his behavior would get better. Since it was a last minute visit, I explained to Ms. Branch that I usually give more notice before I visited. She responded, “um glad he gotta teacha that’s gonna take time to visit me before he get his tail put out of school. Anyway you’ more than a teacha, you’ jus like famly. The way you treat ‘im, I wish he can have you all the way through school.” Ms. Branch continued updating me on her situation. I in turn offered to help him after school both intellectually and socially. I then reminded her that a good coach helps the fans cheer when the fans become preoccupied. We both laughed and she thanked me and promised to make a surprise visit on her lunch break.

For the next three weeks Lamont stayed with me after school, finished his homework, and talked about whatever he wanted. In that three-week period, Ms. Branch visited once a week on her break and Lamont’s behavior improved tremendously. She had developed a relationship with our classroom, the students, and myself that strengthened the triangulated partnership between teacher, parent, and student. We had caught Lamont between a rock and a hard place and we were not going to let him slip away into failure.

**Analysis**

Lamont was a comedian. He enjoys making people laugh and he was effective. However, his natural talent to bring the moisture of laughter into dry places is also seen as playful and immature behavior. Teachers neither tolerated nor channeled his talent into structured learning outcomes. Instead Lamont had disciplinary forms written and
was either sent to in-school suspension or put out of school (Irvine, 1990). His behavior was seen as intolerable and a disturbance to the education of the other students in the class. And although Lamont’s comedic expressions were inappropriate at times, we as a learning community learned to embrace, ignore, or redirect his behaviors. His behavior, however, became uncharacteristically negative and aggressive. I did all I could to help in class and I knew it was time to contact his mother to ensure a positive change.

Ms. Branch and I were members of sister churches. Sister churches are two or more churches who commune closely because the pastors are best friends and understand that there are more resources when two or more churches are gathered. We often saw each other at church gatherings and Lamont was always excited when he saw me with my family. This connection proved invaluable. When Ms. Branch visited we often talked about the power of Jesus Christ and how our lives are different because of Christianity. Finding common ground with parents is an important step in establishing a relationship.

As a result of our church experiences, my home visits were non-threatening and comfortable. I gave Lamont a note and told him to give it to his mother as soon as he got home. I knew a face-to-face meeting with her would help solve Lamont’s challenges. Ms. Branch knew that I cared for Lamont’s well being beyond the classroom. Lamont was aware of the partnership between fan and coach and he respected my position. Providing him with time after school and allowing him to express himself was the least I could do to help him. I didn’t want him to get suspended from school so I had to do what was necessary. A home visit was my last resort for successful intervention. Hale (2001), suggests that if teachers are going to be a viable part of the village of learning, then home visits and parent partnership are essential. As I walked those two blocks to meet with
Ms. Branch, I began to reflect on what to say and how I would say it. Berger (1995) suggests that in preparation for home visits teachers must remember to, “be good listeners, set specific goals for each visit, be flexible, realize the limitations of our role as teachers, remember that small improvements lead to big ones, be yourself, respect cultural and ethnic values, don’t impose personal values, don’t expect perfection from parents, and begin working with the parent and child on a specific activity immediately” (pp. 316-317).

Through home visits and constant communication with Ms. Branch, I was kept abreast of personal and family factors that affected school (Berger, 1995). My awareness of his home situation made it easier for me to accept, and help him get through. Also understanding the plight of African American boys in American schools motivate me to do all I could to lighten the stigma and burden placed on ‘learning while black’ (Hale, 2001). I use the phrase “learning while black” to summarize or encompass the negative and demeaning culture of testing, curricular, teaching, and learning styles that marginalize and disenfranchise African American boys (Hale, 2001). ‘Learning while black,’ is a euphemism that describes the plight of African American boys in a Eurocentric, and monomaniacal learning environments that are designed to marginalized and alienate black boys from the learning process (Hale, 2001). As evident by a variety of scholars (Hale, 2001; Irvine, 1990; Obiakor and Ford, 2002), African American boys are targets of a disproportionate number of suspensions, retentions, and disciplinary reports. They also disproportionately represent a high number of tests failures, retention, and dropout rates (Irvine, 1990; Kohn, 1999).
I believe that if teachers are going to become involved in the getting parents to participate in the classroom, then we should began to reflect on the best methods and strategies to include them and their child. Berger (1995) suggests teachers “monitor their own behavior” and beliefs about parents and self (p. 316). Epstein (2001) believes that questions and scenarios that honestly reveal the opinions and beliefs of teachers encompasses these four statements; parents are important but unable to be effective helpers in school; parents don’t care and should stay away unless behavior is a problem; parents care but should not try to help in schools; and parents care and are an awesome help in the classroom. Reflecting on how we feel about each of these statements enable teachers to understand better where they stand in relation to supporting parental involvement.

It is evident that I feel that parents are an awesome and important piece of the education puzzle. I welcome their involvement into our learning community and provide opportunities for parents to work in partnership with me.

My Mama Can’t Make It: Supporting Families

It was our second parent teacher conference. I was happy that I had seen thirteen parents and relieved that I had only one to go. I had seen seven parents the first night and was scheduled to see seven on the final night. I looked down at my list and saw that I had to conference with Mrs. Meadows, an Ethiopian American woman. She had been in American for nine years and was still learning the complexities of the English language. In our first conference she wasn’t able to communicate in English as well as she wished
and employed her 18 year-old son as her interpreter. He did an excellent job and we were able to discuss Tony’s reading challenges and class work.

As I prepared Tony’s portfolio, I heard a light knock on the door. I turned to see Tony’s brother. I smiled and invited him in, waiting to see his mother not far behind but she never appeared. I looked at him and Tony with a something’s-missing look. Noticing my expression he said, “my mama can’t make it.” He then asked me if it was O.K. for him to come to all of Tony’s conferences, I assured him that it was fine. He was very nervous and unsure of how to respond to some of my questions. So, I decided to approach this high school senior from a more relevant point of view. Since he knew what happens to low readers in high school, I began to discuss Tony’s reading progress from that point of view. I said, “Tony has made good progress in his ability but he is still a little below average. If he doesn’t read more at home and pick up on reading strategies he might be headed for remedial reading course in high school.” With love and parental chastisement he looked at Tony and in his native tongue spoke words that seemed to get Tony’s attention.

Tony’s brother came to school for the remainder of the conferences and special after school events. After our initial conference, Tony’s brother became comfortable and found it easier to talk with me. We would go in and out of talking about his brother’s education and what he planned to do after school. He was an excellent parent liaison and he relayed his mother’s messages concerning Tony’s education. He was a very responsible young man and he thanked me for understanding and supporting his family’s efforts towards school.
Analysis

I can remember my oldest sister, coming to my school as a liaison for my mother. She seemed to listen more intently and I was sure I wasn’t going to get that you’re-in-trouble look. Whatever ‘bad’ thing my teacher said or bad grade I received, I knew she would cover it up and tell my mother everything was alright. Tony felt the same way about his brother. He knew that his brother would protect him if he did what the teacher suggested and worked hard in class.

Tony’s family had a lot of challenges as new citizens. I was not going to add to those problems by setting up roadblocks to communication. Instead, I embraced how the family wanted to communicate and I learned more than I could imagine about Ethiopian American life. I was taught basic words, staple foods, and a little history of the Ethiopian people. It was exciting and interesting to explore different perspectives on life. I challenged myself to learn how to say, “You are an excellent role model for your brother, Tony,” in an Ethiopian dialect. At the final conference as Al was leaving, I told him in his first language that he was a good role model. With shock and a huge smile, he shook my hand and in his native tongue, thanked me.

During our initial conferences, Al was nervous and unsure what to do. He viewed me as the expert and didn’t know what questions to ask (Dietz, 1997). I was very aware that he was a young man acting as parent liaison to our school, so I was careful not to speak over his head, use educational jargon, or flaunt my knowledge of child development (Berger, 1995). Instead, I clearly explained the conference objectives and provided Tony with a list of questions concerning discipline, social development, academic progress, and emotional stability and encouraged him to go over them with his
family for our next conference (Berger, 1995). I also followed the basic principles of parent-teacher conferences to ensure that we both understood and received what we needed to best educate Tony.

First, I realized that although Al was not the parent, he still shared the same goal of success for his brother (Dietz, 1997). I also was aware that like many cultures, Al viewed Tony as an extension of his family and even himself so I was careful about criticisms and negative comments. Dietz (1997), states that, “teachers should exercise caution when discussing students’ strengths and weaknesses (p. 45). Teachers should use an icebreaker to ease initial tensions between teacher and parent (Berger, 1995; Dietz, 1997). From the first conference to the last, Al and I first discussed the difference in schools in Ethiopia and those in the United States. This was an icebreaker that seemed to relax Al and transition us into the conference. Secondly, I wanted to understand as much about Tony’s home life and learning style as possible. In order to obtain this information, I talked less and presented Al with open-ended questions that required more than a yes or no answer (Dietz, 1997). For example, Tony’s reading fluency was choppy and broken so I asked Al what books did Tony read in his spare time. After a quick thought, he rattled off a list of Dragon Ball Zee comic books and explained Tony’s interest in the books as well as how much he reads them. Al provided me with valuable information on Tony’s interest that helped me construct reading activities to promote reading fluency.

Listening to parents’ reactions and watching their behavior is imperative as teachers offer feedback and information concerning their child’s progress (Dietz, 1997). Berger (1995) warns us that, “parents are watching” (p. 316) our interactions and reactions to information and behaviors as a means to assess trust and further partnership.
Working with Al, I had to monitor the information I provided and be very aware of his saturation level. Finally, I would give Al an opportunity to ask questions or share concerns. Often times he wanted to know grade point averages and reading and math levels. I felt it was very important to summarize the conference so that we both had similar understandings of what transpired throughout our meeting (Dietz, 1997). I also use the summary to reiterate how we would “cooperate to improve student achievement and/or behavior” (Dietz, 1997, p. 46).

As a teacher, it is essential that we support parents in their efforts to communicate and make connections with the school (Emmons, Comer, Haynes, 1996; Epstein, 2001). We should also foster non-traditional ways that parents can help in our classroom and a variety of ways to communicate. In addition, we should invite families to support our learning community through whatever resources they can provide. Al was an excellent resource for his parents and he was always welcomed into our classroom.

**Holla back!: Practical Communication**

Within the next four pages I share actually letters I send to the parents each week. The letters reveal daily activities, concerns, and a glimpse at the status of the relationship between parent, teacher, and students. Revealed in the letters are themes centered-around parents as partners, ownership in our learning environment, accountability and responsibility, appreciation, celebration, positive news, and suggestions for improved academics. Issues concerning good work habits, attendance, reading, and praise are the four components present in most of our parent letters.
February 19, 2002

Dear Parents of Room 108,

I hope all have had a wonderful three-day weekend. The year is moving very fast. We have only 74 days left in school. Now is the time to start thinking about summer school and reading enrichment programs. I will be stressing summer reading for the next 74 days. If our children are going to continue to excel we must not stop providing opportunities for them to read, write, and critically think. Please contact me if you need information about summer school or reading enrichment programs.

Next week our second graders will be taking the state-wide writing assessment. Please send your child to school everyday ready to learn and prepared to take the writing assessment. If you have any questions please feel free to call me at school or send a message by your child or email me at hancock.@osu.edu

I do not have a policy of putting children out of school, however, some of our students are displaying inappropriate character. Attitudes and disrespectful tones, gestures, and conversations must be addressed. I ask that you discuss proper school behavior with your child. If inappropriate behavior persists, your child will be put out of school. Please continue to send your child to school ready to learn.

As always, I look forward to seeing or talking to you this week!

Thanks,
Mr. Hancock

It takes an entire village to raise a child.
-African Proverb
February 25, 2002

Dear Parents of Room 108,

I hope all have had a wonderful weekend. The year is moving very fast. If our children are going to continue to excel, we must not stop providing opportunities for them to read, write, and critical think. Some students in room 108 have been considered for retention because of low reading ability. However, we are working hard to raise reading levels and provide our students with opportunities to be successful in reading.

As the parent you must also take responsibility for your child’s reading ability. Trips to the library, buying books, reading to your child, encouraging your child to read to you, and preparing to send your child to summer school are all ways you can help your child become a better reader. Please contact me if you need information about summer school or reading enrichment programs.

We will be taking the state-wide writing assessment for the next two weeks. Please send your child to school everyday ready to learn and prepared to take the writing assessment. Some of our students do not have the proper items for school. Please make sure your child has a pencil before coming to school.

Thank you for addressing inappropriate character. The disrespectful attitudes, tones, and facial expressions have decreased in the past week. I ask that you continue to send your child to school socially and academically ready to learn. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to call me at school, send a message by your child, or email me at hancock@osu.edu

As always, I look forward to seeing or talking to you this week!

Thanks,
Mr. Hancock

It takes an entire village to raise a child.
-African Proverb
March 11, 2002

Dear Parents of Room 108,

I hope all have had a wonderful weekend. I will begin my research project next month. I thank you all for your support and interest. We have two weeks left in the grading period. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns about your child’s progress.

We will be taking the Target Teach Tests this week. Please be sure to prepare your child for the test by enabling he/she to get proper rest and materials for success. We are also taking the Second Grade Writing Assessment. Many of our children are writing excellently. I am excited that we have students who are writing remarkable stories. Please continue to encourage your child to write.

DO NOT FORGET: As the parent you must also take responsibility for your child’s reading ability. I have sent home flyers for a summer reading program that cost $269.00. If you know your child is struggling in reading, this will be a good investment for your child’s future.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to call me at school, send a message by your child, or email me at hancock@osu.edu.

As always, I look forward to seeing or talking to you this week!

Thanks,
Mr. Hancock

It takes an entire village to raise a child.
-African Proverb
March 18, 2002

Dear Parents of Room 108,

I hope you’ve had a blessed weekend that has prepared you for another week of learning. This is the last week of the third grading period. All grades are due on Friday and report cards will be completed by next week. As always please contact me for information on your child progress.

Our children are writing excellent stories and essays. Please continue to encourage your child to read and write. If you have not been by our classroom lately, I strongly recommend you visit this week.

We have adopted a NO-TOLERANCE policy for the fourth nine weeks. This is a time of intense learning and preparation for the third grade. We will not tolerate disrespectful behavior or negative attitudes. I urge you to send your child to school everyday, prepared and ready to learn.

Those children who are having reading challenges, I ask that you support your child by providing books from the library and limiting video games and T.V. time.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to call me at school, send a message by your child, or email me at hancock@osu.edu

As always, I look forward to seeing or talking to you this week!

Thanks,
Mr. Hancock

It takes an entire village to raise a child.
-African Proverb
**Analysis**

Without fail, I sent a letter home at the beginning of the every week and I expect it to be signed and returned. I believe that “letters are an effective means of communicating an idea or message to parents” (Berger, 1995, p. 361). Although I sparsely get the letters back, I am aware that the majority of my parents are interested in the content of the letters. Each week they’d ‘holla back’ via phone calls, notes, and visits. In fact, I place in each of my letters “a standing invitation for readers to communicate their opinions” concerning our classroom (Dietz, 1997, p. 42). I believe that consistent communication is the key to getting and keeping parents involved.

I’m careful not to use overly fluffy or harsh language and I try to stay away from educational jargon but I’m conscious not to dummy down the letter (Dietz, 1997). There is a direct tone to my letters that encourages parents to act, be involved in the educational process, warn them of challenges, thank them for assistance, and invite them to participate in our classroom. I am able to use this tone because “I know the audience” and the letter is “tailored to the audience and its information needs” (Dietz, 1997, p. 41). It is also important for me to use a font that is easy to read and that has clear letter formations as well as provide important and useful information (Dietz, 1997).

Through the weekly letters I let parents know the important events of the week as well as interesting happenings in our classroom. Even if the parents or fans don’t know whom we are playing, they at least need to know that there is a game going on. In some letters, for example, I post the time for a scheduled Senate Meeting or a Research Presentation time. I have also posted results from a Senate Meeting, like the Cricket Homework Bill, to advise parents of the change in our homework policy. My letters also
include birthdays, awards, field trips, learning opportunities outside of school, special guest, conferences, and in school programs, to inform parents of our weekly schedule.

The four staple components found in most of our parent letters include, attendance issues, reading, praise, and good work habits for student success at home. It is a logical fact that if students are not present, then they can’t benefit from the learning opportunities presented in class. Good attendance is constantly stressed and every child’s attendance is monitored in relation to progress (Berger, 1995). The development of strong readers is a fundamental goal in our classroom. Therefore, it is imperative that parents understand and support reading activities at home. I encourage parents to read “magazines, newspapers, comics, and books to increase their child’s knowledge and reading ability” (Berger, 1995, p. 361) as well as invest in reading programs and activities that will support reading skills. Praising students and their efforts is also included in my letters. I believe that “praise reinforces learning and behaviors” (Berger, 1995, p. 360). I encourage parents to let children know when they are doing well and provide rewards and encouragement for consistent success. The final component I stress to parents in our weekly letter is good work habits. I suggest to parents that students should have a set time and place to complete assignments and that there should be supplies at home to support success. In order to suggest how parents should manage their home experiences with their children, Dietz (1997) reiterates that we must know our parents’ personalities and cultural backgrounds.

In each letter there is always a positive opening. It has become routine for me to ask about the weekend because it can be a source for breaking the ‘reading ice’ (it takes the edge off of reading another boring paper from the school) and it indicates to parents
that I hope that they’re doing O.K. I also never let an opportunity to invite parents to communicate or visit slip away. There is no other way that parents will know that they are welcomed into our classroom unless I consistently invite them (Dietz, 1997). In fact, on a drop by visit, Ms. McKnight, in response to my letters said, “I had to come by because the way you keep asking in them letters you must have something for me to see.”

Another trait that my letters have is a tone of accountability. My strong belief in the benefit of parent involvement makes me adamant that parents support their child’s education in explicit and specific ways. As an African American male teacher speaking to predominately African American women, I am situated in a cultural partnership that allows me to be direct yet understood. The verbal use of “in-group crossover lingo that is shared within the race” (Smitherman, 1994, p. 25) affords me space to speak directly to my parents. Our partnership is situated in a cultural linguistic understanding and is grounded in the reality that we care for the success of our children beyond test scores and school hours. As a result, I am given unspoken privileges to be direct and forthcoming with accountability issues. In addition to being direct, I also use subtle cues so that parents will understand that I need them to be a responsible and accountable partner in their child’s educational progress.

One of the most important things I eliminate in my weekly letters is a judgmental and accusatory tone. As a reflective practitioner, I am constantly examining my belief system, stereotypes and prejudice toward certain behaviors and interests of my parents. I remember a parent’s response to my letter stated that she didn’t think teaching reading to her child was her job. My immediate reaction was shock and disbelief that she would send me a note essentially stating she’s not suppose to teach and provide opportunities for
her child to read. That’s just triflin’! However, after reflecting further on the note, I realized that this was one of my parents who struggled with reading as an adult. In our first parent-teacher conference it was evident that she had reading challenges when she fumble over words on her child’s report card. I began to ask myself, “Am I being fair to all parents concerning accountability for their child’s reading? Am I providing appropriate opportunities to assist parents in helping their children to read? Do I need to also include resources for adult reading? and, What is the best way to respond to this parent’s note?” After my reflection an overwhelming sense of empathy compelled me to write (see Figure 5.3):

Thanks for your note. Let me know if you need any additional reading material or resources for your child. Remember I’m here to help and serve you and your child so if there is anything I can do to help your child read more outside of our classroom let me know. I visit the main library on most Tuesday afternoons and can take you and your child if you want to go. If you don’t have a library card let me know and I’ll send an application home tomorrow.

Thanks, Mr. Hancock

FIGURE 5.3: Response to Parent Concern

Although I was empathetic to this parent’s plight, I didn’t apologize for my convictions about reading and parent accountability. I also continued my campaign for the importance of reading. However, I did provide her with more practical resources and offered to take her and her child to the library. Had I not reflected, I would’ve probably ignored the note and subconsciously referred to the parent and indirectly the student as trifling and uncaring.
I later had a chance to talk to her in person and she expressed that she couldn’t help him with some words because she didn’t know all the different nuances in vowel sounds, diphthongs, blends and other phonemic elements. I ensured her that it took at least two years before I was able to confidently teach phonemic awareness. I then gave her an example of a diphthong and we laughed at the paradoxical simplicity and complication of this phonemic element.
Implications for Accepting Parents as Viable Partners in the Classroom

As I reflect on my partnerships with parents, I’m reminded that we had strong connections and partnerships. There was a foundation of respect, trust, and gratitude that flowed between and among teacher, parent, and student. This reality was not a mistake! From my initial parent speech until the last day of school, I communicated with classroom parents every week. I visited, made phone calls, sent and responded to notes, emails, held impromptu conferences, chauffeured students to and from school, as well as provided free after school tutoring. My dedication and endurance sent a signal to parents that teaching for me was more than a 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. job rather, it was a way of life. Consequently, most of my parents responded with the same dedication and endurance. The parents of our classroom knew that I depended on their expertise, assistance, and support. They were aware of how important their presence was in the creation of a healthy learning community.

In order to maintain focus and balance I relied on reflective practice to center my actions and convictions. It is important, however, to highlight that reflective practice can construct a reality that lessens “the freedom to practice without challenges to competence, the comfort of relative invulnerability, and the gratifications of deference” (Schon, 1983, p. 299). In fact, reflecting on beliefs and assumptions as it relates to parent involvement ushered me into a place of transparency, where the parents knew the real me (Palmer, 1993). Therefore, I believe that if teachers are going to construct meaningful parental involvement opportunities, teachers should also reflect on biases and beliefs in an effort to construct meaningful relationships.
In order to accept the challenge to support parental involvement it is also important to acknowledge the challenges facing teachers and parents. Conditions that may hinder the implication of a solid parental involvement program are (1) teachers’ negative experiences with previous parent involvement programs, (2) teachers’ lack of desire to change, (3) parent and teacher lack of comfort with each other, and (4) teachers’ blatant resistance to parents in the classroom (Haynes, Emmons, Gebreyesus, and Ben-Avie, 1996). As implied by Haynes et al., the challenge of parent involvement is first dealt with in the schools. The fact that parents send their children to school is an indication that parents are willing to be involved.

The first condition concerns teacher attitudes and experiences with an onslaught of programs and strategies that were ineffective (Haynes, et al., 1996). In most cases, teachers are right to be concerned about another program that only create additional paperwork, and loss of instruction time. That’s why it becomes important that we engage teachers in concrete examples of parent involvement successes. For me, concrete actions starts with an active reflection on who I am as a teacher and my motives for teaching African American children. From this vantage point I compare my motives to the goals of the program. If they are congruous then I become a supporter.

The second condition focuses on the personal motives of teachers. Many teachers are satisfied with the status quo and don’t desire a change school policies concerning parents (Haynes, et al., 1996). Some teachers are not interested in being on decision-making committees or managing school affairs. It becomes even more problematic if parents are invited to be members of committees that govern school policy. In my experience at the Africentric School, parents were very active in the Village Council.
They were responsible for maintaining a safe playground, beautifying the parent/teacher lounge, voiced opinions on teacher placement, worked on hiring committees, and extremely influential on school uniforms. Instead of creating friction with teachers, parents at the Africentric School were able to be teacher advocates and provide beneficial services and resources. The parents involvement compelled teachers to change from a traditional approach to parent involvement to an approach that embraced active parents.

As a result of their activity, parents and teachers developed comfortable relationships and interactions. At the Africentric School parents and teachers were able to meet the challenges of partnership and positive interactions. In an effort to overcome the challenge of comfort among teachers and parents, teachers should take responsibility to create a space where parents don’t feel threatened or inferior (Bastiani, 1997). For example, although Al was a high school senior, I took on the responsibility of creating a comfortable space for him to be a parent liaison. No doubt he initially felt inferior and out of place, but as time went on our conferences became relaxed and comfortable.

The final condition that hinders parent involvement is also the hardest to confront. The blatant resistance of teachers towards parent involvement has implications the stem from historical events in education (Ravitch, 2000). The negative attitudes that were characterized during the period of desegregation continue to linger in teachers’ behaviors today concerning parent involvement (Ravitch, 2000). Many teachers mistrust the motives and interest of parents and deem them as ineffective volunteers (Haynes, et al., 1996). Teachers also use their educational backgrounds to subliminally and overtly intimidate parents from returning to school (Haynes, et al., 1996).
Unfortunately, resistant behaviors concerning parent education are common through our society. In an effort to ACCEPT parents as important members in classroom life, I have provided six characteristics that will assist teachers and schools in developing parent-teacher partnerships.

A = Access Community Resources
It is important for teachers who genuinely seek to get parents involved, to connect with the community where parents live. Visiting the local grocery store, fellowship in church, mosque or synagogue, and find recreation activities in the school neighborhood. In addition, teachers should also use the neighborhood library as a meeting place and resource for teaching and learning.

C = Continually Monitor
Like children’s needs, adult needs and interest change as well. Be aware that you don’t fall into the “last-year-lesson-plan-syndrome.” Where you use the same plans and activities for last-year-parents. Monitor parent forms and communication activities in an effort to change them to suit current parent partners. Send forms to parents periodically throughout the year to give parents other opportunities to respond as volunteers.

C = Continually Modify
Parents should always be genuinely involved in the learning community. Modify positions or volunteer opportunities to enable parents to transition easier. Create a classroom environment where parents can develop their emerging interest in school.
E = Empower Parents

Engage parents in making decisions about classroom policies. Encourage parents to be room parents, help with organizing field trips, planning social activities, and deciding award criteria. These activities empower parents and release teachers to do more planning and teaching. Provide parents with information through weekly letters that will make them aware of events and give them time to become involved.

P = Plan Well

Carefully plan parent involvement opportunities to avoid confusion, anxiety, or disaster (Haynes, Ben-Avie, Squires, Howley, Negron, and Corbin, 1996). Parents should be able to come into the learning community and know how to assist. Get into a routine of providing activities for parents and provide them a space to help. Also plan parent teacher conferences and other meetings and functions thoroughly.

T = Trust

Building trust is a foundation for productive partnerships with parents. Help parents feel accepted and at ease in the classroom. Usher parents into conversations outside of school in and effort to break the ice. Encourage parents to talk about their level of expertise or the strengths and dreams of their child. Through effective and genuine communication, parents will come to build a sense of trust with teachers.
CHAPTER 6

An Analysis of a Critical Pedagogical Approach to Teaching and Learning

It is fitting that I end this work as I began. I started this process years ago trying to understand what constitutes an effective teacher. I had emergent interest in social constructivism, culturally relevant teaching, and reflective practice. In fact, these three tenets helped me form and are embedded in research questions guiding this project:

- What are the structural, interpersonal, and political dynamics of our classroom community?
- How does my understanding of African American culture and class-based culture influence the way I teach?
- What are common or reoccurring experiences within our classroom that help develop critical awareness of social realities and injustices?
- How are written language, school conversations, and home language accepted and developed in the classroom?
- How do I construct productive relationships with parents and children?

I hope that it is evident to the reader that these questions are the foundation for the chapters on language, social consciousness, and parent involvement. While
conducting this research project, I was able to answer each question as well as learn more about reflective practice, teacher research, social constructivism, culturally relevant teaching, and my teaching philosophy.

For most of my teaching career I have identified myself as a social constructivist and culturally relevant teacher who practices self-reflection as a means to grow and stay balanced in the classroom. Although each philosophical position of my teaching style has a distinct meaning and purpose, the positions are interrelated and inseparable. In the process of this project, however, I realized idiosyncratic differences that veered away from traditional notions of my teaching philosophy. The clear definition I used for social constructivism was blurred by social and political concerns of African American children in our school. Culturally relevant teaching also changes to highlight a need to create learning opportunities that were socioeconomically appropriate for my student population. Finally, self-reflection became a practice of moral enlightenment and personal growth.

Figure 6.1 represents a critical pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. It is composed of four triangles that represent each distinct philosophical position of my teaching position. In the center of the triangle where a star is formed, by the points of the triangles, lies the core of who I am as a teacher. The circle that encloses the triangle represents the school and community environment. Parents, students, school administrators, and community officials are included to show that they influence who I am as a teacher.
Within this final chapter I look back over the stories presented earlier in an attempt to explore and delineate the principles that undergird my teaching practices. My practices have been informed by many of the theories and positions in the field including social constructivism, reflective practice, and culturally relevant teaching. Throughout the dissertation, I have displayed how these positions provide a foundation for my pedagogical style. I will now move on to identify how these positions are idiosyncratic or are personalized and made particular within my own philosophy of teaching and learning.
The tenets of social constructivism, reflective practice, and culturally relevant teaching have played a prominent role in describing the pedagogical philosophy found in this work. Each of these theoretical positions have been discussed and explained by many scholars, educators, and researchers. Social constructivism, for example, shares an ideology based on the notion that human beings construct or make knowledge against a sociocultural background that then forms certain perspectives on reality (Gergen, 1994; Schwandt, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Reflective practice, for example, employs an ideological stance that challenges personal perspectives, status quo, and notions of power (Schon, 1983; Zeichner, 1994). Finally, culturally relevant teaching creates an environment that is conducive to affirmation, validation, and empowerment of students and teachers (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Although the ideological natures of these theoretical positions are fundamental components in my teaching philosophy, the original meanings have been infused with the ontological nature of my experience as an African American student and teacher to give rise to a unique approach to the use of these tenets in teaching and learning. I was aware that my teaching approach encompassed the basic components of culturally relevant teaching, social constructivism, and reflective practice, however, not until this research project did I realize that notions of the sociocultural and sociopolitical realities of African American students, issues concerning economic class and educational thought, and self analysis as a spiritual and moral process to foster multiple perspectives and cultural consciousness, are at the core of my approach to teaching.

As an analogy for building a house, social constructivism, cultural relevant teaching, and reflective practices are the foundation from which I build my approach to
teaching. As I see it, notions of sociocultural and sociopolitical constructivism, social
class and pedagogical thought, and spiritual and moral reflection, become the wooden
frame of my own personal teaching approach and philosophy. And, finally, the personal
reality of being an African American man relegated into a world of ‘at risk’ and low
economic status becomes the ceiling, walls, and floors as well as provides the outer shell
of the house. So then, when one sees me as a teacher, you first see validation of social
class and ethnicity, as you focus on the learning opportunities, activities, and style of
teaching you then notices the components of sociopolitical constructivism, sociocultural
relevance, and moral reflective practice. An even deeper analysis of the frames will
reveal the foundational theoretical positions of social constructivism, culturally relevant
teaching, and reflective practice.

**Sociopolitical Constructivism**

Vygotsky (1978) describes social constructivism as human development that
originates out of social and cultural interactions. Gergen (1994) contends that social
constructivism “is human interchange that gives language its capacity to mean, and it
must stand as the critical locus of concern” (pp. 263-264). Hence, human beings neither
find nor discover ways of knowing; rather we construct it from a variety of social and
cognitive languages and experiences (Schwandt, 2000). Finally, Noddings (1992) uses
both Vygotsky’s (1978) and Schwandt’s (2000) concepts of constructivism and asserts
that, “constructivism is a cognitive position holding that all mental acts, both perceptual
and cognitive, are acts of construction” (Noddings, 1992, p. 153). Meaning, in a
constructivist learning environment students acquire knowledge by constructing bridges
from former knowledge to new ways of knowing. Knowledge, then, is a subjective notion that is grounded in personal perspectives. Thus, teachers who practice constructivist methods assume relativist ontology or believe in multiple realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). For example, Keisha’s ontological perspective of our classroom dynamics was based on a social and personal construction of understanding. She saw me as a dictator who rejected the voices of the students. I, on the other hand, had a very different reality of viewing my teaching styles. I felt that I was fair and impartial to all my students. However, when our realities collided, we were both required to negotiate our epistemological perspectives in order to coexist in a healthy learning community.

As a result of this research project, my understanding of social constructivism has evolved. A further analysis of Keisha’s story reveal that my points of negotiations were politically charged because I innately believe that “constructivism as a pedagogical orientation has to be embedded in an ethical or political framework” (Noddings, 1992, p. 154). Therefore, I encouraged Keisha to become politically active in her quest to construct new classroom policy. As female student of color, I felt it imperative that she began to understand how her political voice could be an agent of change. My convictions, experiences, and beliefs toward teaching students of color, a political construction of knowledge, redefines for me the common understanding of social constructivism. In fact, I not only redefine social constructivism to describe my teaching approach, but I also rename it to encompass a more complex meaning and use.

Social constructivism then emerges into sociopolitical constructivism that embraces the reality that African American children must construct knowledge around issues of justice, racial discrimination, political alienation, and double consciousness in
order to navigate success. Keisha, for example, had previously constructed notions of justice and political alienation. She had constructed knowledge based on her interactions with our social environment that there were discrepancies in classroom policies as well as how learning opportunities were constructed. Keisha didn’t, however, understand how to move from a vague understanding of classroom discrepancies to a more informed perspective. Sociopolitical constructivism, then, seeks to create a bridge from Keisha’s vague understanding of political realities to a more developed perspective on issues of power and finally to a potential to act on, change, and challenge the political discrepancies found in our classroom.

Sociopolitical constructivism employs the basic tenets of Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. However, it possesses a critical focus on learning and development from a social and political perspective. Thus, sociopolitical constructivists create teaching, learning, and living opportunities based on the political and social realities of the students. In Figure 6.2 Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development has been altered to display how a sociopolitical constructivist might use it.

![Figure 6.2](image-url)
The zone of sociopolitical development would describe Keisha’s awareness of discrepancies in classroom policies as her actual sociopolitical development. The zone of sociopolitical construction would then describe Keisha’s ability to build on her actual knowledge, a more sophisticated understanding of sociopolitical issues. This zone is a place where students can build a more elaborate knowledge base with the help and guidance of others. Finally, acting on her newly constructed knowledge becomes a form of autonomy and liberation that allows Keisha to use her new sociopolitical knowledge as a stepping-stone for scaffolding to more sophisticated understandings. This process is recursive and leads to a deeper awareness of sociopolitical awareness that is idiosyncratic to the child and his/her environment and experiences. This awareness also provides students with a sense of empowerment and hopefully a thirst for more justice and equality.

Sociocultural Relevant Teaching

Focusing on teaching practices, Gay (2000) developed concepts concerning how to teach with a culturally responsive style to a diverse student population. “The fundamental aim of culturally responsive teaching is to empower ethnically diverse students through academic success, cultural affiliation, and personal efficacy” (Gay, 2000, p. 111). However, before teachers take on culturally responsive teaching (CRT), Gay (2000) warns that CRT should be complimented with self-analyses of the teacher’s beliefs, attitudes and knowledge of others, “the expectations they hold for students from different ethnic groups” (p. 71), and how their beliefs will affect the way they teach.
Teachers must participate in reflective practices, and commit themselves to multicultural education, before they can effectively implement cultural responsive teaching (Gay, 2000).

Gay (2000) describes six characteristics that support and compliment culturally responsive teaching. The characteristics suggest that:

1. *Culturally responsive teaching is validating*: uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning relevant and effective.

2. *Culturally responsive teaching is comprehensive*: develop intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by “using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 382).

3. *Culturally responsive teaching is multidimensional*: encompasses student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, performance assessments, curriculum content, learning context, and classroom climate.

4. *Culturally responsive teaching is empowering*: translates into academic competence, personal confidence, courage, and the will to act.

5. *Culturally responsive teaching is transformative*: recognizes the strengths and accomplishments of diverse students and respects student ethnicities.

6. *Culturally responsive teaching is emancipatory*: releases the intellect of students from the constraining manacles of mainstream canons of knowledge and ways of knowing.

Gay (2000) believes that if CRT is to be used teachers must negotiate their current teaching styles and adopt behaviors and pedagogical approaches conducive to teaching
diverse populations. There is a great “need for a negotiated curriculum and teaching practices that recognize, respect, and support different cultural groups and their knowledge and experiences” (Stremmel, 1997, p. 365). If teachers are going to implement curricular practices that can effectively educate a diverse student population, then it must include a design that has multiple perspectives and is focused on emancipatory, transformative, empowering, multidimensional, comprehensive, and validating for all students (Gay, 2000).

Robin was one of my lowest readers. She was quiet and docile in class to the point where she could’ve been forgotten. One day while observing her on the playground, I discovered that Robin was not as quiet and reserved as I perceived. As I observed her, she noticed me noticing her rambunctious yet appropriate behavior. When we returned to class, I began to take a different approach to educating Robin. I began to validate her natural assertiveness by challenging her notions of fair play and creating a culturally and developmentally appropriate lesson for reading. While challenging Robin’s idea of what fair play was, I realized that my questioning and tactics embraced social and cultural concepts as a form of empowerment. I asked her, “Why were you running from Rondell?” She responded, “Because he was trying get me.” “What do you mean by ‘get you’?” I interjected. “My mama told me that if a boy try to get you, you need to hit him and get away and I don’t want him to hit me or play with me.” She retorted. I was amazed that she was expressing herself and displaying a sense of empowerment. I further explored Robin’s sociocultural understanding of peer relations and developed a culturally and academically appropriate story about her experiences.
Until the point of this reading lesson, Robin had menial success in reading. She often sat quietly and timidly refused to read aloud. After giving her the story about her playground experience, reading it to her, and having her read it, I was happy to see her read with confidence. A sociocultural awareness of the student, coupled with an ability to empower through culturally relevant teaching, provided success for Robin and consequently every student in my classroom.

I also realized that I used socioeconomic methods to provide culturally appropriate lessons. I used real life experiences of my children, to create socioeconomic bridges for stories and experiences that were otherwise foreign to my students. For example, during story time I read a story about a family trip to the ski lodge. I had read the story previously and began to prepare culturally appropriate lessons dealing with issues of family dynamics and individual responsibility. However, I had missed the obvious, my students have never been skiing. To gain a better understanding before, during and after reading the story we participated in a KWLS (what do you Know, Want to know, what did you Learn, what do you Still want to know) activity. At the conclusion of the KWLS activity many students still wanted to know what it would be like to ski. I asked, “How many of you have ever been on a sled, cardboard box, or trashcan top and slid down a snowy hill?” Almost all the hands went up. I responded, “If you can imagine standing up on your sled or trashcan top while you are going down a hill, then that’s almost like skiing.” The students lit up with conversations about how cool or dangerous it would be to go skiing. Mario asked, “Is it free to go skiing?” Bria responded, “Nope! It cost a lot of money and only white people go skiing anyway.” Dee retorted, “I don’t go skiing.” “Uh, uh, I saw on Disney when this black boy went skiing with his friend from
Hawaii.” Interjected Lamont. “It still cost a lot of money” Bria reiterated. I ended the
discussion by asking Shaneta, Lisa and Kenny to go to Google.com and research places
and prices of skiing packages in Ohio. Each student found information on skiing in
Bellefontaine, Ohio. I explained to the students that it did cost but it was more expensive
to go to Kings Island or to take four friends to the movies. Although they had
never been skiing, the socioeconomic and culturally relevant approach to this topic
enabled my students to create imaginary bridges from their socioeconomic position to a
socioeconomic activity that many believed was impossible.

I had never really reflected on how the reality of the socioeconomic status of my
students affected my teaching. I understood the principles of empowerment, validation,
and affirmation. I was also aware that culture encompasses, among other realities, a
socioeconomic reality. However, to view lessons, activities, and even life experiences
from a perspective where the class or socioeconomic status of the student population is
primary, created a unique point of reference. So, I began to merge socioeconomic issues
into the basic theoretical principles of culturally relevant teaching.

I understood my students’ socioeconomic background. We (me and my students)
were socialized in the same socioeconomic reality. Our socialization taught us the same
“skills, attitudes, and customs needed to participate in the life of the community” (Gilbert
and Kahl, 1987, p. 13). Unfortunately, many students’ socialization realities are not
congruous with the culture of schools and thus the cause of much distress for students
and teachers. Schools in general, through its choice of books, testing methods, teaching
practices, and curriculum design, are guilty of using its power to try and conform students into a middle-class ideology without taking into account the socioeconomic reality that students already possess.

An approach to teaching where the socioeconomic status of the students is embraced, understood, and challenged creates a perspective that has the potential to educate students to understand class consciousness. I believe when teachers are able to view learning from a socioeconomic perspective, it will only benefit students.

**Moralistic Reflective Practice**

Hunt, Touzel, and Wiseman (1999) argue that teachers of diverse students must have the ability to critically examine their actions in an effort to enhance or change their teaching practices. They refer to the ability to critically examine personal actions as reflective practice. “Reflective teachers think deeply about what they are doing; reflective teachers are thoughtful, analytical, self critical, and informed decision makers” (Hunt, Touzel, and Wiseman, 1999, p. 6). Reflective teachers analyze what they did and why in an effort to improve learning for their students. Schon (1983) concludes that reflective teaching is reflection-in-action which is an active process where the teacher reflects on his or her knowledge in an effort to discover limits and pursue growth. Finally, Zeichner (1994) found that the ideal of a reflective teacher was one who viewed the teacher as being bent on improvement of teaching and learning practices while simultaneously developing and sharing professional knowledge and skills.

Any discussion that focuses on reflective practices for teachers must provide discourse on the relationship between teacher and student (Schon, 1983). In the
traditions of reflective teaching the teacher and student interactions are a core component (Schon, 1983). It is important, however, to highlight that reflective teaching lessens the rewards of authority, “the freedom to practice without challenges to competence, the comfort of relative invulnerability, and the gratifications of deference” (Schon, 1983, p. 299). Teachers must be aware that reflective practice as a reform effort in teacher education compels teachers to rethink personal perspectives, invites student empowerment, and challenges status quo teaching methods (Schon, 1983, Ziechner, 1994).

In an effort to effectively deliver curriculum to a diverse population, teachers are challenged to build critical relationships based on reflective practice (Schon, 1983). Noddings (1992) contends that students are set free to pursue their own growth when reflective practice is a factor in the student-teacher relationship. Just as reflective practices demand alternative competences and interactions for the teacher, it also changes and challenges the traditional concept of students (Schon, 1983). When teachers become reflective practitioners, they compel students to be responsible for and contribute to their own growth (Zeichner, 1994). And, although “the contributions of teachers and students are necessarily unequal, they are nonetheless mutual; the relationship is marked by reciprocity” (Noddings, 1992, p. 108). Schon (1983) suggests that when students are participants in reflective practices, they must be able to challenge expert knowledge without causing hostile or defensive attitudes. Noddings (1992) says that students must not be passive spectators rather, they must accept responsibility for communicating their intellectual, social, and personal needs to teachers.
Keisha had not completed any of her assignments. She sat in her chair and played with her hair for the majority of the morning. When I approached her she began to hurl off accusations of my prejudice, conspiracy to miseducate her, and my lack of interest in her abilities. For the most part I ignored Keisha’s remarks. However, I couldn’t help notice that she believed these accusations to be true. She had apparently observed classroom dynamic, thought about her perceived injustices, and became an activist for change. Keisha had done what I wanted all my students to do. She accepted responsibility to relay her needs to me as the teacher.

On my lunch break I began to reflect on what Keisha said. “Was I really biased against challenged readers?” “Was I aware that writing the daily work schedule on the board was confusing to some students?” I had begun a reflective questioning strategy to help me understand or reveal hidden beliefs and assumptions. However, this questioning strategy often led into more moral questions concerning humility and fairness. “How fair is it to gear the class around the top readers when half the class are struggling with reading?” “Do I believe I’m always right?” “If not, then what is the moral course of action?” Although these types of questions possess implications beyond the classroom, they also welcome a fresh new perspective on teachers as reflective practitioners. This new perspective introduces moralistic questions into what teachers do.

In our class we have a redemption policy, where a child can be redeemed if they change the bad behavior. Seldom, if the class was out of control, I would say, “There is no redemption for the rest of the day.” This was hard because the students knew that a circle of justice could be called for any infraction. One day I enacted the ‘no redemption policy’ and immediately my moral voice said, “We all need another chance. Are you so
perfect that you can go through an entire day without doing something wrong?” I began to reflect on my personal and spiritual journey through life and realized that I have always been given an opportunity of redemption. From that day on redemption was always an option for my students.

It is evident that a moralistic approach to reflective practice produces challenges, insight and new perspectives on teaching, learning and living. Palmer (1993) believes that these challenges, insights and perspectives should not only compel teachers to alter teaching strategies and methods, but they should also engage teachers in a journey of self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and spiritual growth.

**Recommendations for Teachers and Teacher Education**

It is important to note that the narratives presented in this dissertation are idiosyncratic to the interactions, environment, and situated realities of how I, along with my students developed a multicultural learning community. I do believe, however, that teachers of any race, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, or gender are capable of constructing an environment that affirms, validates, and empowers the students as well as the teacher. Reflecting on and researching my own teaching has given me fresh insight into the nature of teaching and supporting children within a multicultural learning community. I believe the following recommendations would support other teachers as they attempt to gain an understanding of who they are as educators that practice a critical pedagogical approach to teaching and learning it is important that you are aware of the following recommendations. These recommendations are applicable to student teachers,
new teachers and seasoned teachers. The recommendations also integrate how I believe teacher education programs must change in order to prepare effective teachers.

- The first recommendation suggests the teacher to engage in a personal reflective journey to decipher, construct, and expose knowledge and experiences concerning who they are as a sociocultural being. I contend that effective teachers of any population of students must first use moralistic reflective practice as a means to check and balance personal assumptions, beliefs, privileges, growth, attitudes, biases, ignorance, strengths and weaknesses. The act of moralistic reflection will become a way to critically evaluate self in relationship to the current social, political, cultural, economic, and academic environment that encompasses your teaching reality. I believe that moralistic reflective practice is a fundamental component for teachers who desire to take a critical approach to teaching and learning. This implies that teacher education programs must prepare faculty and develop courses that foster moralistic reflective practices as a means to understanding self in order to understand others.

- The second recommendation is that teachers to nurture a critical perspective on issues of equality, justice, and success in an effort to dismantle the status quo. I feel that teachers are either revolutionaries or oppressors. Therefore, I believe that teachers must begin to construct multiple perspectives on school and personal issues in order to perceive multiple realities and truths. Colleges of education, then, must educate teachers to become progressive and politically conscious. I believe that teaching is a political act and therefore teachers must be aware of their position in the politics of educating students. Designing courses on the
sociopolitical issues of urban, suburban, and rural schools should be the responsibility of teacher education programs and must be required for all teachers.

- The third recommendation suggests that teachers educate themselves through literature, conferences, and real life experiences on issues that affect their classroom environment. I believe that teachers must began to stretch beyond the sometimes antiquated knowledge found in teacher education programs and take more progressive measures to understand their student population. I have found that a short walk or drive in my students’ neighborhood provided me with a wealth of knowledge that no other experience could give. A few teacher education programs are providing prolonged experiences in the classroom before graduation. In these programs students are in the minority and become resident teachers. I believe that this practice is progressive and will better prepare future teachers for a diverse school population. I also believe that course topics that focus on critical self-awareness, understanding personal thoughts on diversity and academic success, and sociocultural and socioeconomic methods for teaching should be required.

I believe that the recommendation for teachers are not impossible and are necessary if educators are going to teach in an increasing diverse population. As teachers we can no longer marginalize the Keisha’s and Chad’s in schools. It is our responsibility to foster a sense of empowerment and excellence in all our students. I believe that teachers set the tone for learning in the classroom. Therefore it is imperative that teachers know who they are and understand the personal issues, prejudices, and privileges they bring into the class. I also believe that half of all student difficulty is a result of
teaching and curriculum practices. If teachers can change their practices and styles to compliment the students while manipulating the curriculum toward socioculturally relevant concepts, then students will rise to a level of academic excellence. It is my hope that this work will help others better understand the nature of effective teachers of diverse students.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


