ROOTED PEDAGOGIES:
BLACK WOMEN ACTIVIST TEACHERS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

The history of activism on the part of African American women has laid the foundation on which contemporary African American women activists and scholars have developed theories, critiques and cultural frameworks that challenge pre-established paradigms and epistemologies (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 1999). This study seeks to extend the research begun on African American teacher activists to include the ways in which their life experiences as activists have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given current educational disparities. This study is informed by Black feminist epistemology and employs portraiture as its research methodology. Data analysis yielded several findings. First, the life experiences considered most significant were those that contributed to the teachers, developing critical consciousness as children. Secondly, each teacher pointed to the need to teach critical thinking skills so that students of color will be able to establish their places in the world as productive citizens. Thirdly, each teacher evoked a maternal and caring approach in enacting her role as teacher. Finally, what emerged from my conversations with the teachers is that their work as teacher activists is spiritually grounded and that their sense of spirituality is politically based. They consider their roles as teachers and as activists to be a spiritual obligation. The pedagogical approaches of the Black women activist teachers were theorized and named
Rooted Pedagogies because they are grounded in the historical tradition of Black women’s activism. Furthermore, implications for teacher education and practice were discussed, along with recommendations for future research in this area.
DEDICATION

To my sisters, Esther, Judy, Rhoda, Ophelia and Juliette you each have truly been an inspiration in my life. How lucky am I to have been blessed with such a dynamic group of Sister-Warriors.

To my grandmother, Ophelia, who stood fast for one hundred and seven years and led your family by example and in prayer; And to my mother, Nettie, who added new meaning to the definitions of faith and sacrifice—Job well done! You all have truly been, “the wind beneath my wings”.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Accounts of the struggles on the part of African Americans to gain access to equal and quality education in the United States are part of the historical record. For example, we learned from the speeches, writings and debates of such historical Black figures as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, the extent of the struggle over the nature and direction of education for Black Americans. These struggles were linked to the survival of the Black community and to the Black race as a whole. In the shadows of these struggles were Black women whose commitment to the educational advancement of Black people became a way of life. According to Giddings (1984), Black women have a history of striving for education beyond what their gender or their color seemed to prescribe (p. 7). The tireless efforts of such educators as Lucy C. Laney, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Septima Poinsette Clark provide insight into the activism of Black women involved in pushing forth the goal of education for all African Americans.

Although the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s eventually brought an end to the de facto segregation of schools and the so-called “separate but equal” doctrine of education, a racial gap in the achievement of Black versus white students remains a reality to this day. In a climate of demographic changes that have culminated in public schools that, throughout the United States, have come to comprise predominately students of color, Black women teachers have continued to struggle in order to ensure that Black students receive a quality education that will help them to succeed in life.
However, these changes have been accompanied by new struggles among which include how to best address the needs of diverse student populations, as well as how to eradicate contradictions that were not addressed by integration and that still contribute to the low achievement of Black students and other students of color.

In this chapter, I will discuss the following topics: (1) the purpose of the study; (2) the nature of the research questions; (3) the significance of the study; (4) the definition of terms used in the study and (5) an overview of the dissertation.

**Purpose of the Study**

As a teacher and doctoral student I have taken on the, sometimes, daunting task of researching the history, philosophies, theories and practices that exist within the field of education, the goal being to investigate more effective approaches to how my students can better achieve a quality education in this society. As a Black woman, these efforts have taken me on a self-reflexive journey leading me to examine my own approaches to teaching, as well as those of Black women, like myself, who have traveled similar paths. Also, as a Black woman who has engaged in social activism, the attempt to theorize my life experiences has lead me to focus on the role that the development of my own self-awareness and critical consciousness has played in my role as a teacher and researcher. As such, this study was designed to explore the perspectives of Black women activist teachers who, as veteran teachers, have honed their craft within the neighborhoods and schools of their own urban communities for more than two decades. It provides a view of a Black feminist pedagogy that is homegrown, emanating from their material realities (Joseph, 1995). The purpose of this study was to extend the research begun on African
American women activist teachers to include an examination of the ways in which their life experiences have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given current educational disparities. More specifically, this study seeks to examine African American activist teachers’ own understandings of their work within the context of their cultural and historical legacies (Casey, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixson, 2003).

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question that drives this study is: In what ways has the life experiences of African American activist teachers informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given current educational disparities. Other more specific questions include:

1) In relations to their own schooling, family and community lives, what life experiences do Black women veteran activist teachers consider most significant?

2) What issues and pedagogies do the teachers believe to be essential to the success of their students?

3) How has their work as activists influenced their work with students in the classroom?

4) What role has spirituality played in the teachers’ work as activists?

**Rationale for the Study**

When one closely examines the role that Black women teacher activists play today, what comes to light is the fact that they possess a clear political agenda that incorporates resistance to oppressive structures of power that exist within their schools. Casey (1993) likens them to “… guerrilla fighters in a semiotic war. Avoiding direct
confrontation, they cast an innocent smile to signal repudiation, turn a contended phrase to indicate defiance. If you are not alert to their covert intentions, you could easily miss these twists of meaning” (pp. 111-112). Also important to note is the fact that the roles that these Black women teachers play parallel those that they have taken on outside of school. Following in the footsteps Black women activist who, historically, used the activist potential of education to foster community development and institutional transformation, Black women teachers have taken on many roles that place them on the front lines of political battles for social justice and human rights (Collins, 2000; Dixson, 2003).

The rationale for this study is therefore, two-fold. First, this study contributes to our understanding of how the activism of Black women teachers informs their pedagogy and how that pedagogy, which is Black feminist in nature, acts as a change agent in and outside of the classroom (Joseph, 1995). Secondly, “feminist researchers emphasize the synergy and interlinkages between epistemology, methodology, and method and are interested in the different ways that a researcher’s perspective on reality interacts with, and influences, how she goes about collecting and analyzing her data (Charmaz, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006)” (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, pp. 4-5). My interviews with the Black women teachers revealed an understanding that they have developed a pedagogy that is grounded in Black feminist epistemology and that reflect a combination of elements related to their life experiences. Most significant among these elements are the development of critical consciousness and the role of spirituality. Also, the use of portraiture as a method of inquiry in this study, not only allows for the incorporation of
the researcher’s voice, perspective and experience but it also aids in establishing this study as a model for understanding Black women activist teachers beyond the scope of their stories. Portraiture assists in capturing their essence—that is, the quality of their characters, the complexities of their life stories and their reflections of history (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

**Limitations of the Study**

The small number of participants served to limit the number of life experiences and therefore perspectives obtained. This might be perceived as a weakness within my research. “Qualitative researchers argue that no direct relationship exists between the number of participants and the quality of a study; questions of numbers are answered in reference to research questions and levels of analysis; contexts are carefully described so that readers can make their own judgments about applicability to their own contexts; and there are no extraneous variables—any elements that is perceived to be important by participants is important to the study” (Hatch, 2002, p. 48). In addition, I argue that a study of this size allowed me to delve into the lives of the participants more deeply by facilitating the attainment of intimacy. Portraiture, the methodological approach used in this study, associates intimacy with empathy and views it as central to relationship building in research (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). Studying the life experiences of only three participants served to enhance the quality of relationships that engendered and allowed me to gain a greater understanding of their perspectives.

A second potential limitation to this study is that I did not actually observe the teachers in their school and classroom settings. This limited my ability to acquire data
inductively by observing and analyzing the teachers as they interacted directly with their students. It also limited my understanding and view of the physical context in which they work. However, my experience as a veteran teacher with many years of experience working in similar school and classroom settings provided me with insider status and therefore adequate familiarity with the context.

Finally, my background as a Black woman, veteran teacher and activist might be viewed as a possible limitation because of the potential for researcher bias. However, I will reiterate what I discussed in Chapter 3 and that is that portraiture allows for and supports the highly visible nature of the researcher [portraitist]. “The researcher is seen not only in defining the focus and field of the inquiry but also in navigating the relationships with her or his subjects, in witnessing and interpreting the action, in tracing the themes, and in creating the narrative…” “As a matter of fact, the voice of the portraitist often helps us identify her or his place in the inquiry” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

Definition of Terms

Activism. Black women’s individual and collective actions within everyday life that challenge domination in its multifaceted domains (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal) (Collins, 2000).

Activist teachers. Teachers who employ engaged pedagogy. For the purpose of this study, I draw from hooks (2010), who defines engaged pedagogy as a teaching strategy that aims to restore students’ will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized.
African American. An American of African descent. In this study, the term African American is used interchangeably with the term Black.

Black. United States ethnic group descended from African peoples. In this study, the term Black is used interchangeably with the term African American.

Spirituality. Spirituality...involves conscious relationship with the realm of the spirit, with the invisible permeating ultimately positive, divine, and evolutionary energies that give rise to and sustain all that exits (Hull, 2001, p.2).


Veteran teachers. For the purpose of this study this term refers to K-12 teachers who have taught for more than twenty years.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to extend the research begun on African American women teacher activists to include an examination of the ways in which their life experiences have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given current educational disparities. In this chapter, I provided a brief look into the historical background of Black women activist teachers’ efforts toward attaining and achieving quality education for Black people and aligned it with the purpose of this study. I then presented the research questions that guided this study. Next, I explained the rationale behind this dissertation study and described its significance. Finally, I discussed the limitations of the study and presented definitions of key terms and descriptors that are used throughout this dissertation study.
In Chapter 2, I review literature related to the history of Black women’s activism and their struggles for group survival and the transformation of the institution of education. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used during the research process. In chapter 4, I present and discuss the findings from this research by analyzing the intersecting themes that were consistent in each portrait. Finally, in chapter 5, I discuss the implications of this research for teaching and teacher education and provide recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study explores the ways in which the life experiences of African American women teacher activists have informed their roles as educators, given current educational disparities. The literature that informed my research represents a sampling of the literature that underlie the purpose of this study and that focus on Black women activists, in general and Black women activist teachers, specifically. I will include a review of three areas of literature. These include: (1) a historical overview of African-American women’s activism; (2) an examination of studies and issues related to contemporary Black women activist teachers; and (3) an exploration of Black feminist pedagogy along with current theories and perspectives. Connected together, these areas reflect the two dimensions of Black women’s activism: (1) the struggle for group survival and (2) the struggle for institutional transformation (Collins, 2000). I begin with a brief discussion of Black women’s activism.

Black Women’s Activism

The term activism is use often throughout this research. It is generally defined as the doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals, as by demonstrations, protest, etc. (Costello, 1991). While this definition may reflect the use of the term in my research to a certain extent, it does not fully delineate the meaning of the term with respect to Black women’s lives.
With respect to Black women’s lives, the term activism incorporates meaning that is grounded in Black women’s historical tradition. It, therefore, assumes a level of complexity that reflects the various systems of oppression that Black women face, as well as the intersection of those systems of oppression. Collins (2000) asserts that understanding the complexity of Black women’s activism requires not only the need to address more than one form of oppression, but the significance of how singular and multiple forms of oppression are organized (p. 203). Collins offers a model for examining Black women’s activism that incorporates two dimensions: (1) struggles for group survival; and (2) struggles for institutional transformation. These struggles are waged against patterns of domination that encompass structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power. In order to effect social change Black women act to create Black female spheres of influence that provide the tools to resist and undermine established rules of dominance (Collins, 2000).

The literature exclusive to Black women’s teacher activism, while limited, illuminates the activist role that Black women teachers have played within their schools and communities (Collins, 2000; Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 1999; hooks, 1994; Giddings, 1984; Ladson-Billings). This role has been one aimed at uplifting the race through fostering the educational attainment and achievement of Black people.

**Historical Overview of African American Women’s Activism**

According to Gordon (1995), “History is replete with stories known and unknown about African American women who dedicated their life work to the advancement of African American people. As demonstrated in the works of numerous African American
women scholars (e.g., Giddings, 1984; Washington, 1987; Lerner, 1973; Carby, 1987), in response to their cultural hegemonic image and status constructed from the ravages of slavery, African American women waged struggles to define and situate themselves, as well, as their communities, as constituent elements and partial creators and re-creators of American society (p. 62).

While both African men and women endured dehumanizing experiences that were indicative of the period of slavery in America, their experiences are distinguished by the fact that African women had to deal with the issue of sexual exploitation. Giddings (1984) cites literature that examines how the sexual exploitation of Black slave women was sanctioned and their dehumanized status was established through the legal system. Beginning in 1661, Virginia passed a series of laws that rendered the status of Black women, whether free or enslaved, to property that was taxable. Added to this were laws that established the status of children born to Black women slaves as equal to that of the mother, regardless of who the father was. These laws set the stage for the further denigration and exploitation of Black women slaves because they provided an opportunity for slave owners to circumvent the cost of purchasing new slaves by impregnating their own.

African women, “in their struggle to thwart their own sexual exploitation by whites and, more importantly, to avoid bringing children into the hideous world of slavery, they participated in rebellions, acts of sabotage, and escapes; they joined maroon societies; and used birth control methods, self-induced abortions, and even reluctant acts
of infanticide” (Gordon, 1995, p. 63; also see, Davis, 1983, p. 205; Washington, 1987; Giddings, 1984). In the face of such hardships, Black women demonstrated significant strength and resilience in their resistance to slavery. Along with Black women slaves, free Black women worked tirelessly in support of the antislavery movement by participating in fundraising activities, lecturing and writing newspaper articles. They understood the relationship between the progress of the race and their own feminism and worked together with the men of their race against racism and for the advancement of their community (Giddings, 1984; Yee, 1995). Like Black men, Black women participated in the formation and operation of mixed-race and all-Black antislavery organizations and, at the same time, were actively involved in activities such as temperance, moral reform, education and benevolence in their communities” (Yee, 1995, p.40).

Black women’s active participation in the Civil war is documented by Zinn (1980), who asserts that Black women played an important part in the war, especially toward the end. Sojourner Truth, the legendary ex-slave who had been active in the women’s rights movement, became recruiter of Black troops for the Union army, as did Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin of Boston and Harriet Tubman (p.188). Susie King Taylor (1902) was another Black woman and former slave who, during the Civil War, worked directly with a regiment of Black soldiers South Carolina. Among the roles that she took on was that of cook, laundress and nurse. In addition, because of her grandmother’s efforts to find ways to have her taught to read and write as a child, Taylor, unlike many
slaves, became skilled in these areas and began teaching other slaves while still a teenager. After the war she opened a school for freed Blacks in her native state of Georgia. Later in life, Taylor wrote about her life experiences as a child, as well as during the Civil War in a book that she published in 1902.

Black Women’s Activism: Racial vs. Gender Equality

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, African American women continued their activism—which now, focused on establishing themselves, their families and their communities as equal members of American society. According to Gordon (1995), “the nineteenth century has revealed itself as an interesting transformative movement in the history of African Americans, during which many African American women challenged dominant social structures and narratives and created institutions to serve the African American community (p.63). Beginning in the nineteenth century, white women began to organize woman’s clubs with the aims of self-development and social reform. One of the earliest White women’s clubs was founded in response to the exclusion of women journalists from the New York Press Cub in 1868. After helping to organize a dinner honoring Charles Dickens, the women were put out when they were denied tickets to attend the affair. The consequent founding of the Sorosis Women’s Club set a general pattern of these organizations. They were created by women who were frustrated by their exclusion from occupations and other activities for which their education and background had prepared them. They had little concern for women who were forced to work, with the exception of “the middle-class spinster, widow, or women
whose marriage had failed, or were teaching, doing office work, or in some instances training herself for a profession,” as a feminist historian noted (Giddings, 1984, p.97).

The onset of the Women’s Movement added another dimension to how African American women conceptualized their position within the struggle for equality and against oppression. Hine (1994) asserts that Black women were the ones to raise the question of women’s rights within Black organizations and issues of racism within white women’s organizations. Maria Stewart, born free in 1803 and raised in Hartford, Connecticut, is heralded as the first woman to break with convention and speak in public to a mixed audience of men and women on behalf of Black rights and advancement. In an 1832 address before the newly formed Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston, she declared: “Me thinks I herd a spiritual interrogation—‘Who shall go forward and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?’ And my hart made this reply—‘If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!’” Stewart cursed the institution of slavery and urged Black women to “awake, arise: no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves” (p.9). For free Black women the line between involvement in religious institutions and in the women’s suffrage movement was a permeable one. Because their religious orientation was toward spiritual liberation and personal autonomy, suffrage for Black women became the political expression of their persistent yearnings to be free (Ibid, p.9).

Historically, tensions have existed between Black and white women over the question of racial equality versus gender equality. During the Women’s Suffrage
movement, for example, the issues of voting rights brought these tensions to a head. Gordon (1995) argues, “While there were differences and even conflicts between Black men and women, the struggle for suffrage was the one issue that coalesced them in their struggle for the right to vote. However, this cause placed the Black community at odds with white feminists, whose position on the issue of suffrage was one of expediency, which, in essence, was their attempt to close ranks with white men on this issue (Giddings, 1984). White feminists reasoned that if only one group was to get the vote, they would try to position themselves in the best way they could in an effort to influence white men (p.69). Black women such as Frances Ellen Harper, Sojourner Truth and Ida B Wells-Barnett took issue with the strategies used by the suffrage leaders, namely Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Anthony and Stanton’s attempts to place white women’s suffrage above the political rights of both Black women and men led many Black women leaders to close ranks with Black men in support of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Women’s right to vote was not included in the Fifteenth Amendment. However, according to Giddings (1984), “The support of the Fifteenth Amendment by Black women did not mean that they had less interest in their suffrage, economic independence, education, or any other issue that pertained to them”… “[They] understood that the rights of Black men had to be secured before Black women could assert theirs. If the race had no rights, the women’s struggle was meaningless” (p. 68).

An early critic of the contemporary feminist movement, Audre Lorde (1984)
criticized white feminists for focusing on the values and experiences of white middle-class women. Lorde succeeded in exposing significant contradictions within the feminist movement at the time. In her speech entitled, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Masters House” (1979), Lorde points out contradictions and inconsistencies that arose during her participation in conference focusing on the role of difference within the lives of American women. Lorde takes exception to the fact that, although the aim was to engage in discussions of feminist theory, the conference organizers failed to recognize the absence of poor, Third world, Black and lesbian women. Calling attention to the fact that the two Black women who were invited to participate in the conference were last minute additions, Lorde assailed the white feminist organizers of the conference for not taking into account the many differences that exist among women and for excluding the voices of marginalized women. She accused them of buying into the racist patriarchal structure by merely showing tolerance of difference and ignoring “the creative function of difference in our lives” (Lorde, 1984, p.111).

In criticizing the white feminist organizers of the conference, Lorde also exposed contradictions that existed within the feminist movement. Was the goal of the feminist movement that of achieving a status “equal to men” or of eradicating the institutional structures that serve to perpetuate inequality? If the latter was the case, then would this issue not incorporate women of different races/ethnicities, classes and sexual persuasions? If so, should their voices not be heard?

Lorde (1984) encouraged women and feminists to embrace their differences and convert them to strengths and sources of creative power in order to bring about change.
Her central point was that “only within the interdependence of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters” (p. 111).

Organized Black Women’s Activism

Racism played a significant role in the emergence of Black women’s organizations. Ida B. Well-Barnett, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Mary Church Terrell were African American woman activists and leaders who contributed to the establishment of the Black women’s club movement. Davis (1983) points out that “…the leadership of the Black club movement did not come from the masses of working women…What set such women apart from the white club leaders was their consciousness of the need to challenge racism. Indeed, their own familiarity with the routine racism of U.S. society linked them far more intimately to their working-class sisters than did the experience of sexism for white women of the middle classes (p.129-130).

Prior to the emergence of the Black women’s club movement, the first large meeting independently organized by African American women was prompted by the racist assaults on the newspaper woman Ida B. Wells-Barnett. After her newspaper offices in Memphis, Tennessee were destroyed she decided to take up permanent residence in New York where she was able to publish accounts of her experiences in Memphis. Wells-Barnett’s writings succeeded in inspiring several prominent women in New York’s African American community to organize a large rally to honor and support her. This rally lead to the establishment of the first women’s club created and exclusively
led by Black women (Davis, 1983). A few years later, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was established as an effort to unite the numerous Black women’s clubs that had formed at that point.

In 1896, Mary Church Terrell became the first president of the NACW. As co-founder, she along with Harriet Tubman, Frances E.W. Harper, and Ida Bell Wells-Barnett sought to establish the organization as a vehicle for addressing such issues as segregation, lynching, and the education of women. According to Davis (1981), “When the First National Conference of Colored Women convened in Boston in 1895, the Black clubwomen were not simply emulating their white counterparts, who had federated the club movement five years earlier. They had come together to decide upon a strategy of resistance to the current propagandistic assaults on Black women and the continued reign of lynch law” (p. 133). In addition, “They believed that if they worked for the poor, they worked for Black women, and if they worked for Black women they worked for the race. Since, in their minds, ‘a race could rise no higher than its women’, they felt that when they improved the condition of Black women, they necessarily improved the condition of the race. When they spoke in defense of Black women, they automatically spoke in defense of all Black people. They talked about their work as ‘race work,’ and their problem as the ‘race problem.’” In their minds, though, the problems of the race revolved around the problems of its women” (White, 1999, p.24). It is important to note that while the activism of the Black women discussed thus far has been well documented, the activism of countless Black women remained undocumented. Collins (2000) points to Blacks women’s struggle for survival as a form of resistance. She asserts that “without
the efforts of countless Black women to ensure group survival, struggles to transform U.S. educational, economic and political institutions could not have been sustained” (p. 202). In the next section, I will examine the efforts of Black women educators to attain equal education for African Americans.

*Early Struggles for Black Education*

The Black Women’s Club movement coincided with the aims of African American women activists who viewed the education of Black people as key to the upliftment of the race. According to Gordon (1995), “Other woman primarily dedicated to the education of the Black community also engaged in the club movement and the struggle for suffrage, such as Charlotte Forten Grimke (1873-1914), Craft Laney (1854-1933), Frances (Fannie) Jackson Coppin (1837-1913), Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), Charlotte Hawkins Brown (1882-1961), and Mary McCloud Bethune (1875-1955). While several of these women created educational institutions, all were educators whose work and goals were, in part, interrelated with the social activism and advancement of the community at large. They participated in various organizations in an effort to educate African American people, as well as to organize the community for political action (Lerner, 1973; Giddings, 1984; Lowenberg and Bogin, 1976) (pp.66-67)”.

However, many of these Black women educators found themselves forced onto the sidelines during important discussions and debates surrounding the direction of education for Black people.

An important debate that took place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involved Booker T. Washington and W. E.B. Du Bois, two widely respected
and dominant Black leaders. Both men had the same goals—eradicating racism, segregation, and discrimination against the Black race. Having been born into slavery in Virginia, Booker T. Washington rose to national and international fame and was accepted in the North and South as a major leader of his time. Washington’s base was at Tuskegee where he arrived in 1881 to found a school which would serve as a model of the vocational education he saw as the way for Blacks to raise themselves and gain the respect and tolerance of whites. His main argument was that vocational education was the key to Black economic success and urged Blacks to get into practical occupations such as agriculture, mechanics, commerce, domestic service and the professions (Karenga, 1989).

Washington’s foremost critic was W.E.B. Du Bois, a Black activist-scholar. Du Bois studied at Fisk University and the University of Berlin, received three degrees from Harvard and became in 1895 the first African American to receive a Ph.D. Du Bois rejected Washington’s demand that Blacks give up political power. Insisting on civil rights and higher education Du Bois argued for: (1) a “Talented Tenth,” an intellectual and political vanguard which would lead Black people to freedom and a higher level of human life; (2) a multidimensional education which would enable Blacks to grasp, confront and be effective in society and the world; (3) a cultural nationalism and pluralism, which stressed pride in Black heritage and unity yet a full and effective membership in American society; 4) Du Bois insisted on confrontational activities in the struggle for social, political and economic rights and gains. He also saw political rights as the basis for economic opportunities and defense of economic gains (Ibid, pp.115-116).
The debate between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington was a source of much tension and debate among the leaders and members of the Black women’s club movement. According to Giddings (1984), the Black club movement coincided with the rise of Booker T. Washington to fame and power. Although Black women leaders were influenced by his formidable presence, they never became captives of the famed Washington machine. Though in many instances there was accommodation to Washington’s ideas—and power—Black women also operated independently of his influence. Many of the Black women educators, for example, believed in industrial education, but they also believed that Blacks should attain the highest academic level possible” (p. 104).

Borrowing from the self-help theories of both W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, Black clubwomen envisioned leadership as a response to crisis circumstances that would require pragmatic solutions. They understood the African American population and the local communities where they worked and lived. The inventiveness of the clubwomen, particularly in social service, education, and health care, contributed to community survival. Inventiveness also encompassed race and gender consciousness (Cash, 2001, p.40). One such clubwoman was Mary McLeod Bethune. Bethune was a dominant voice in the National Association of Colored Women. She believed that the clubwomen were at the forefront of social reform (Ibid, 2001). In the decades before the U.S. Supreme Court repudiated the “separate but equal” doctrine (1954) and virulent, legalized, and pervasive racial subordination sometimes made Black militancy a matter of “you walked down the street with your head up,” Bethune
understood the centrality of the civil rights struggle to American democracy and to the world. Bethune also helped to blaze the way to the Civil Rights Era (1954-1964) by providing encouragement to people of African descent, using the political system to her advantage, and participating in freedom-fighting organizations. With highly acclaimed accomplishments, oratory, and courage, she inspired her racial kin to hold on and fight for the time when color was irrelevant to opportunity (Smith, 2001, pp. 11-12). Bethune’s vision of Black empowerment stemmed from appropriating opportunities in education and public life. In spite of racism, her vision reflected an optimistic belief that the American principles of democracy and equality would triumph over its discriminatory practices based on class, race and gender (Cash, 2001, p.143).

According to Vanessa Siddle Walker (2005), the role of Black educators as organized advocates for equality in educational facilities is not captured in recent historical accounts of Black segregated schools. Instead, achievement of equality in Black educational opportunity has been attributed most consistently to the NAACP. Perkins describes the emergence of Black teacher organizations throughout the South by 1900, arguing that the Alabama State Teachers Association was interested in improving teacher salaries and having longer school terms as early as 1910. She also points out that by the 1930s Black educators were campaigning vigorously for equality of educational opportunity in individual states and through their national organization, the American Teachers Association (pp. 356-357). Walker (2005) argues that organized teacher resistance existed for decades, during the period of de jure segregation in the South and
before the period when many Black educational organizations formed more formal collaborations with the NAACP (p.537).

During the decades that defined the Civil Rights Movement, many Black women educators attempted to carry forth Bethune’s vision of Black empowerment and equality by working on the grassroots level to mobilize working class Blacks. One such woman was Septima Poinsette Clark. For many years Clark was a teacher in Charleston, South Carolina and participated in the legal campaigns to equalize salaries for Black and white teachers. Clark also taught in separate Black schools on the Sea Islands in South Carolina, and after attending workshops at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, an integrated retreat and planning center for community activists, she began to develop adult education programs to achieve “Literacy and Liberation.” The “Citizen Schools” that Clark established provided literacy training for Black southerners to prepare them to register to vote. In the early 1960’s, after Tennessee officials closed the Highlander Folk School, the Citizenship School program was taken over by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Clark became the director (Rouse, 2001, p.93).

Septima Pointsette Clark’s work as an activist, organizer and educator exemplifies how African American woman teachers utilized their organizational memberships and associations in their fight for educational equality and social justice. Contemporarily, their sense of mission is reflected in bell hooks’ (1994) memories of growing up and being taught by an all Black staff of mostly Black women teachers in the pre-integration South:
They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—Black folks who used our ‘minds.’ We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization. Though they did not define or articulate these practices in theoretical terms, my teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anti-colonial. Within these segregated schools, Black children who were deemed exceptional, gifted, were given special care. Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission (p.2).

The historical role played by Black women, like Septima Poinsette Clark and countless others, has contributed to the on-going development of the Black community as well as to group survival. Contemporary African American women teachers continue to demonstrate a collective ethical responsibility and personal investment in the education and uplift of their communities and race (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 1999). These efforts are captured in recent studies focusing on Black women teacher activists. In the next section, I will briefly examine several studies that focus on the activist roles of contemporary Black women teachers.

**Studies of Contemporary Black Women Teacher Activism**

My search of the literature for studies on contemporary Black women teacher activism turned up a limited number. Those studies focusing on Black women teacher activists that do exist reveal their collective activist agenda, as well as common sources
of inspiration for their activism. One of these studies is Kathleen Casey’s (1993), *I answer with my life: Life histories of women teachers working for social change*, which focuses on the oral histories of three groups of racially and ethnically diverse activist teachers. This study includes the life stories of four Black women activist teachers. As in my study, Casey (1993) points to the fact that as children, “these teachers drew their strength from the [B]lack community; now as adults, they initiate others into the same living tradition…Working in places where white racist priorities prevail, these teachers practice a complex (re)interpretive pedagogy” (p. 153). While there are several parallels with respect to the childhood influences on their development as activist, my study illuminates the collective influences of a variety factors contributing to the development of the Black women into activist teachers.

Another study by Michele Foster (1996) exemplifies Black women activists’ trend toward rejecting Eurocentric models, interpretations and perspectives when conducting research on African American teachers. In her study entitled, *Like us but not one of us: Reflections on a life history study of African American teachers*, Foster sought to obtain definitions of a “good teacher” from the perspectives of African Americans. The paucity of existing research on the practices and perspectives of Black teachers motivated the study. Through a process that she called “community nomination” Foster allowed the Black community to provide her with names of teachers considered good teachers. The findings addressed some of the issues that arise when researcher and informants are members of the same speech and cultural community. Foster asserts, “There is no doubt that the teachers’ view of me as an insider influenced their willingness to participate and
shaped both their expectations and responses. There is no guarantee that research
called by ‘natives’ will be any more objective or less biased than that conducted by
outsiders. What we can hope for is that native researchers will offer new insights and
alternative ways of thinking and that including the minority perspective will be a means
of creating new paradigms” (Foster, 1997, pp. 223-224). This study’s similarity to my
study center on my position as an insider. My use of portraiture as a methodology
supports and encourages this position while also providing space for my voice(s) in the
research process (See Chapter 3).

Another significant study conducted by Beauboeuf-LaFontant (1997) is entitled
*Politcized mothering among African American women teacher: A qualitive inquiry.*
Drawing from the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and African American
educational history, this study examines the life experiences, beliefs and practices that six
Black women teachers bring to teaching. Beauboeuf-LaFontant (1997), advocates for the
renaming of “culturally relevant teaching to “politically relevant teaching” in order to
emphasize the political, historical, social, and cultural, understandings that Black women
teachers bring to their profession”. She maintains that politically relevant educators
demonstrate “political clarity” and “are mindful not only of the cultural norms, values,
and practices of their students, but more importantly of the political realities and
aspirations of people of color. In my study, the political clarity of the Black women
teachers, though acknowledged as very significant, is not viewed as more significant than
the cultural and spiritual understandings that they possess. As Black women the teachers
adhere, strongly, to their identities as women of African descent. This along with the
presence of an alternative, African-influenced value system and their engagement in cultural maintenance via its conservation of African-influenced ideas and practices lays the foundation for political activism of diverse ideological persuasions…” (Ibid, p. 207).

The teachers in this study demonstrate a strong connection to their African cultural heritage and to a spirituality that drives their commitment to fighting for social justice. Dillard (2006) advocates “embracing a paradigm where culture and spirit are central” (p. 37). She uses the term, “‘endarkened’ feminist epistemology to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppression and resistance for African American women” (p. 3). With respect to African American teachers and researchers, Dillard also points out the spiritual nature of their work and suggests that placing culture and spirit at the center of academic life is necessary for those who value and work toward social justice (Ibid, p. 43). Dillard’s point is supported by Collins (1998) who argues that “spirituality …provides one important way that many African American women are moved to struggle for justice” (p. 244).

A study that is complimentary to my research is discussed in Dixson’s (2003) article entitled, *Let’s do this! Black women teachers’ politics and pedagogy*. In this article, Dixson examines the political nature of contemporary African American women’s pedagogy and its place within the Black feminist activist tradition. This study of two African American elementary school teachers reveal that as teachers, both function
within the Black feminist activist tradition. This is indicated by their belief in teaching as a lifestyle and as a public service. It is also demonstrated in their daily political battles against racism and for a quality education for their students. The similarities of Dixson’s study to my study are evident, not only in the teachers’ level of commitment to the achievement of their students, but also in the extent to which that commitment extends beyond the boundaries of the school.

Overall most of the themes within the above studies demonstrate similarity to those within my study. However, my study is distinguished from each of the above studies with respect to two positions. First, this study examines the role that spirituality plays in the lives of the three Black women teachers. I argue that spirituality serves to support and maintain their roles as activists. Secondly, Dixson’s (2003) suggestion that scholars in the fields of education and teacher education should explore the ways in which identities work synergistically for African American women teachers, provided me with an additional angle from which to examine the life experiences of the three Black women teachers in this study. In Chapter 4, I demonstrated how their roles as activists emerged synergistically from elements related to the socio-historical realities and traditions; their family, school and community relationships and their spiritual leanings. I argue that it is this synergistic nature of their experiences that shaped how they function as Black women and how they work.

The work of Black women teachers has been referred to as Black feminist pedagogy. Black feminist pedagogy evolved out of the activist tradition of Black women teachers. It sets forth learning strategies informed by Black women’s historical
experience with race/gender/class bias and the consequences of marginality and isolation (Omolade, 1987, p. 32). Black feminist pedagogy embodies the four criteria of Black feminist thought: (1) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims; (2) the centrality of personal expressiveness; (3) the ethic of personal accountability; and (4) concrete experience as a criterion of meaning (Mohanty, 1995; In Joseph, 1995, p. 465; also see Collins, 1994). The focus and purpose of Black feminist pedagogy is to raise the political consciousness of students by introducing an Afrocentric worldview and centering the experiences of Black women. Its major premise is active engagement in the struggle to overcome the multifaceted oppression that they face (Joseph, 1995). In the next section, I discuss the place of Black feminist pedagogy within the shifting context of Black education. In particular, I discuss its relationship to multicultural education, culturally relevant/responsive teaching and teaching for social justice.

The Shifting Context of Black Education

According to Perry (2003), “...evidence from history and the African-American narrative tradition suggests that African Americans have understood the distinctive nature of the task of achievement. And out of their lived experience, from slavery to the dismantling of segregated schools, they have developed and enacted a philosophy of education that was capable of providing answers to some of the aforementioned queries. This philosophy was freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship and leadership (pp.5-6).”

Attempts at realizing this “task of achievement” that Perry mentions above are reflected in contemporary educational movements that emphasize equity and social
justice and that are aimed toward introducing theoretical and methodological modes of teaching that are responsive to differences that exist in schools today. In this section, I discuss the emergence of multicultural education and other forms and models of pedagogy within the shifting contexts of Black Education that has occurred. I will also discuss their relationship to Black feminist pedagogy.

**Multicultural Education: Multiple Meanings**

According to Banks (1995), Multicultural education has deep historical roots. It is linked directly to African American scholarship that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and indirectly to the intergroup education and research movement that was formulated in the 1940’s and that had largely vanished when the civil rights movement emerged in the 1960’s (p. xi).

Often omitted from writings and discussions of the origins of multicultural education are the works of early Black writers and scholars who challenged Eurocentric portrayals and interpretations of the history and cultures of people of color. The publication of W.E.B. Du Bois’ book, *The souls of black folks, published in 1953*, is credited with having a great impact on young Black intellectuals at that time and since. In his book, Du Bois appealed to Black Americans to acknowledge their connection to Africa and to America. “Du Bois called on Blacks to create new images out of their own history and experiences, merging Africa and America, ‘into a better and truer self’” (Drimmer, 1968, p. 2). In addition, Du Bois maintained that African Americans:
…had been situated as the ‘other’ by slavery. In this position they had been stripped of their cultural consciousness. A worthy education would restore self-consciousness, self realization, and self-respect. It would allow Black people to see themselves through their own eyes instead of solely through the eyes of white people—as in traditional forms of education (http://www.freireproject.org/content/web-du-bois-1868-1963-0).

In addition, in his book, *The mis-education of the negro*, Woodson (1933) pointed to the inadequacies underlying the education of Black people and underscored the need to incorporate the history and culture of Blacks into their education. Woodson also criticizes the use of teaching approaches that are “borrowed from a ‘foreign’ method” and argued that only by careful study of the lives that Blacks are forced to lead can a correct method for educating them be developed.

Also omitted from discussions surrounding the origins of multicultural education are early Black women scholars and intellectuals. Black women such as Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune, among others were very vocal in expressing their views on such issues as women’s suffrage, racism, as well as the educational and economic status of Black people. However, they had to contend with the patronizing attitudes that many men had toward Black women of intelligence. They also had to contend with being excluded from such organizations as the American Negro Academy, organized in 1897 to bring together the leading Black intellectuals (Guidings, 1984). According to Henry (1998), “…throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African American women intellectuals have grappled with the same issues dealt with by
leading Black male intellectuals. Their work has had added significance because they have almost always asserted the inextricable roles of gender and sexuality to the cultural conditions wrought by racial marginality and exclusion” (p. 1). Both Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper wrote about Black women’s contributions to the advancement of the African American race. In the following speech, published in, *The voice of the negro* in July, 1904 (pp. 292-294), Mary Church Terrell pointed to the intellectual progress of Black women at that time.

The intellectual progress of colored [Black] women has been marvelous. So great has been their thirst for knowledge and so Herculean their efforts to acquire it that there are few colleges, universities, high and normal schools in the North, East and West from which colored girls have not graduated with honors (Foner, 1972, p. 644).

Anna Julia Cooper associated the intellectual advancement and contributions of Black women to the advancement of the Black race as a whole. Cooper’s (1892) book, *A voice from the south*, emphasizes the important role that Black women in the cultural and political advancement of Black Americans (Henry, 1998).

Mary McLoed Bethune was very clear about the need for organized Black women to look beyond their “narrow concerns” and work towards a “larger vision” that is international in nature and that also impacts national public policies, During her reign as president of the National Council of Negro Women (Giddings, 1984).

In its contemporary manifestation, multicultural education emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s. The Civil Rights Movement emerged
when African Americans, frustrated by deferred and shattered dreams, took to the streets and used the ballot box to demand symbolic and structural changes throughout U.S. society. Many of these demands focused on changes in the nation’s schools, colleges, and universities (Banks, 1995). Among these changes was the movement to institute Black Studies programs and courses within schools and university curricula.

According to Karenga (1989), Black studies as an academic discipline began as a political demand which emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s. As a part of this Movement the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) lead efforts to politicize and mobilize students in the struggle against segregation an other forms of racial discrimination. However, clearly influenced by the writings of Du Bois and Woodson, as well as the speeches of Malcolm X (later known as El Hajj Malik El Shabazz) and younger Black leaders like Huey P. Newton, one of founders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a Black activist organization that espoused revolutionary change for Black people, SNCC changed its focus (Edwards, 1970). The Black Student Movement that emerged during the 1960’s began to challenge the power structure in place on college campuses around the country. Echoing the sentiments of Woodson (1933) and others, it “...stressed the need to bring the campus to the [Black] community and the [Black] community to the campus” (Karenga, 1989, p. 134). Thus, it was within this social and political context that the Multicultural Education Movement emerged.

Since the onset of the Multicultural Education Movement, the concept has taken on several different meanings. According to Gay (1994), many of these differences are more semantic than substantive, a reflection of the developmental level in the field and
the disciplinary orientation of advocates (p.1). Yet when allowances are made for these differences, a consensus on the substantive components of multicultural education quickly emerges. Such agreement is evident in areas such as the key content dimensions, value priorities, the justification for multicultural education, and its expected outcomes. Only when these fundamentals are articulated do variations emerge (Ibid, 1994).

According to Banks (1995), “a major goal of multicultural education, as stated by specialists in the field, is to reform the schools and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality. Another important goal of multicultural education…is to give male and female students an equal chance to experience educational success and mobility” (p.3).

Bennett (2001) describes the field of multicultural education as a hopeful and idealistic response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s that developed into a Black Power movement and spread to include many other minority groups, including women. This and other social movements motivated education theorists and practitioners to create new curriculum and instructional practices to reflect changes in the sociopolitical landscape (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Multicultural education challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers represent. Its proponents believe that multicultural education should permeate the curriculum and instructional strategies used in schools as well as the interactions among teachers, students and parents, and the very way that schools
conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis), as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes the democratic principles of social justice (Nieto, 1996).

*Culturally Relevant Teaching*

Upon her examination of previous studies conducted by researchers who have attempted to focus on the role of culture in the education of various minority groups, Ladson-Billings (1995) points to their common features. “Each locates the source of student failure and subsequent achievement within the nexus of speech and language interaction patterns of the teacher and the students. Each suggests that student “success” is represented in achievement within the current social structures extant in schools. Thus the goal of education becomes how to ‘fit’ students constructed as ‘other’ by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure that is defined as a *meritocracy*” (p. 467). Ladson-Billings’ concern is that this approach only serves to reproduce current inequities. She highlights the use of such terms as culturally appropriate, culturally congruent and culturally compatible in these studies and argues that they seem to suggest accommodation of student culture to mainstream culture. She argues further that only the term culturally responsive appears to refer to a more dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture (Ibid, p. 467).

Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse
students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of ethnically diverse students and is culturally validating and affirming (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Gay also notes that improving academic achievement is far from the only goal, as a culturally responsive approach to teaching helps students of color “maintain identity and connection with their ethnic groups and communities; develop a sense of community, camaraderie, and shared responsibility; and acquire an ethic of success” (p. 30). Further, culturally responsive/relevant teaching can be described as multidimensional. While it does address curriculum content, culturally relevant teaching also includes “learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments” (Ibid, p. 31)).

Ladson-Billings (1995) maintains that her work is informed by Black feminist thought. However, she argues that while Black feminist thought provided her with a way to think about her work as a researcher, it did not provide her with a way to theorize about the teachers’ practices” (p.474). Furthermore, she contends that by situating her work in a more critical paradigm, a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy would necessarily propose to do three things—produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order (Ibid, p.472).

Ladson-Billings (1995b) defines culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition (1992c) not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, (not merely individual) empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must
develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (p.159).

Ladson-Billings employs the Freirean concept of critical consciousness (Conscientization) in achieving these criteria (Freire, 1974). Conscientization is defined as the process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and discover their own capacities to re-create them (Darder et al., 2003, p. 15; See Freire, 1974). Citing her study, Ladson-Billings (1995) provides an example of this process:

In the classrooms of culturally relevant teachers, students are expected to engage the world and others critically. Rather than merely bemoan the fact that their textbooks were out of date, several of the teachers in the study, in conjunction with their students, critiqued the knowledge represented in the textbooks, and the system of inequitable funding that allowed middle-class students to have newer texts. They wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper to inform the community of the situation. The teachers also brought in articles and papers that represented counter knowledge to help the students develop multiple perspectives on a variety of social and historical phenomena (p. 162).

During the course of her study of exemplary teachers of African American children, Ladson-Billings (1995) developed an approach to theorizing about teacher practices. She proposed three broad propositions that emerged from the research centered around the following:
• The conceptions of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers; the teachers:
  o believed that all the students were capable of academic success,
  o saw their pedagogy as art-unpredictable, always in the process of becoming
  o saw themselves as members of the community,
  o saw teaching as a way to give back to the community,
  o believed in the Freirean notion of “teaching as mining” (1974, p. 76) or pulling knowledge out.

• The manner in which social relations are structured by culturally relevant teachers; The teachers:
  o maintain fluid student-teacher relationships,
  o demonstrate a connectedness with all the students,
  o develop a community of learners,
  o encourage students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for another.

• The conceptions of knowledge held by culturally relevant teachers:
  o Knowledge is not static; it is shared, recycled, and constructed.
  o Knowledge must be viewed critically.
  o Teachers must be passionate about knowledge and learning.
  o Teachers must scaffold, or build bridges, to facilitate learning.
  o Assessment must be multifaceted, incorporating multiple forms of excellence (Ibid, p. 478-481).

Ladson-Billings (1995) believes that her study “represents a beginning look at ways that teachers might systematically include student culture in the classroom as authorized or official knowledge” (Ladson-Billings, 1996). Like Lather (1986), she also sees it as a way to encourage praxis as an important aspect of research (Ladson-Billings, 1996). She asserts that this kind of research needs to continue in order to support new conceptions of collaboration between teachers and researchers (practitioners and theoreticians).

Furthermore she argues that we need research that proposes alternative models of pedagogy, coupled with exemplars of successful pedagogues and that we need to be willing to look for exemplary practice in those classrooms and communities that too
many of us are ready to dismiss as incapable of producing excellence (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 483).

Seidl’s (2007) work with preservice teachers represents an effort to train perspective teachers in exploring and personalizing culturally relevant pedagogies. Working in partnership with a large African American Baptist church the students, who were African American and white American, served as tutors in the church’s afterschool program. The purpose was “to provide our student with the experience they need to begin to develop socioculturally relevant pedagogies (Seidl & Friend, 2002, pp. 142-143). As a result of their experience the students shared the knowledge that they gained and personalized it by naming the cultural, political and communicative patterns and structures that they encountered and imagining how the knowledge gained would influence their teaching pedagogies (Seidl, 2007, p. 172).

*Teaching for Social Justice*

A criterion of culturally relevant teaching involves fostering the development of a critical consciousness with which students can challenge the status quo of the current social order. This implies teaching for social justice. According to Ayers (1998), “teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles. Therefore, the fundamental message of the teacher for social justice is: You can change the world” (p. xvii). Hunt (1998) asserts, “Teaching for Social Justice is at the core of democratic education. It serves as a reminder, not only of the inequities and of biases that continue to wear away at the foundation of democratic
values, but of the powerful stories, which inspire us to work toward change, to make the world a better place” (p. xii).

Bell (1997) defines social justice as both a process and a goal. “The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs,” (Bell, 1997, p.3), while, “the process for attaining the goal of social justice...should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (p.4). To Bell’s goals of social justice education, Hackman (2005) adds student empowerment, the equitable distribution of resources and social responsibility and to her processes; he includes democracy, a student-centered focus, dialogue, and an analysis of power (p. 104). He stresses that “social justice education does not merely examine difference or diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality. It also encourages students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural, and individual levels in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change (Hackman, 2005, p.104). Next, I outline and discuss the nature and models of pedagogies related to the approaches to teaching employed by the Black women teachers in this study.

Tyson & Park (2006) suggest an approach to social justice education for children that starts with an examination of what is socially unjust. They believe that social justice educators should aim to look at the realities of lived experiences and move toward social justice as both process and goal. This can be accomplished by having children: a) engage in naming the realities of social injustices and b) using children’s literature as a way to
address issues in society (knowledge of social injustices), to expand our understanding of children’s lives (attitudes toward caring, empathy and civic courage), and to simultaneously act for a socially just society (social action) (p. 23). The following outline represents a summary of the rationale for using children’s literature:

Young children come into a classroom with certain knowledge of the world through three different sources: (a) the historical events they are told by family and community members; (b) the current social, economic and cultural contexts they live in; and (c) their day-to-day first hand experiences. In addition to utilizing these three knowledge sources, Tyson & Park (2006) point out that students can “locate themselves in the text” by empathizing with the characters in the literature. Students can also critically examine the gaps between the social reality they live in and a socially just world they read about. It helps them find different ways of taking social actions (p. 24).

Enid Lee (1998) argues that spelling can be linked to the larger agenda of social justice because writing has the power to change the social order. She also argues that students’ spelling start to improve when it becomes a tool for making statements about themselves and their community. Furthermore, she asserts that when spelling is used as a tool for naming their world, students are being prepared “… for the onslaught of antihuman practices that this nation and other nations are facing today: racism, sexism and the greed for money and human labor that disguises itself as ‘globalization’” (Ibid, p. 171). Emphasizing the notion that literacy is political and can be empowering, Lee points out that this perspective allows us to: a) look at the agents of power and change located in
our classrooms and, b) recall the histories of our people with respect to reading and writing. Finally she suggests, “if we think of reading in a more symbolic way than simply reading from a textbook, we see that it is the native ability to use information that you have in your head, to make sense of the world around you, to make sense of the text of the world (Lee, 1998, p. 172).

A quest to find a more equitable approach to social justice education, led Hackman (2005) to pinpoint five essential components that characterize effective teaching for social justice:

1) *Content mastery* - Content mastery is a vital aspect of social justice education and consists of three principle spheres: factual information, historical contextualization, and a macro-to-micro content analysis.

2) *Tools for critical analysis* - to provide both deep knowledge and a direction for the application of that knowledge in students’ lives.

3) *Tools for social change* - Teaching these tools will aid in the creation of classroom environments that support critical thinking and classroom spaces where students are taught to feel empowered.

4) *Tools for personal reflection* - This component reminds teachers to reflect critically on themselves and the personal qualities that inform their practices.

5) *An awareness of multicultural group dynamics* - An awareness of these dynamics determines how social justice educators will approach the previous four dynamics, and thus impacts the efficacy of their implementation (p.105).

These five components are essential to creating democratic, empowering classrooms that are equipped for adequately preparing students to become active agents of social change (Hackman, 2005).

The theme of social change exists throughout this discussion of multicultural education, culturally relevant teaching and teaching for social justice and underlies their
common goals of achieving social justice, education equity and academic success for all students. Multicultural education acknowledges that schools are essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of oppression and injustice. Culturally relevant teaching and teaching for social justice are both firmly situated within the broader literature on multicultural education. In addition, within multicultural education both culturally relevant teaching and teaching for social justice utilize similar tools and strategies that are aimed towards achieving the goals of social justice and social change. Among these tools are caring, critical self-reflection and critical thinking.

Caring

Gay (2000) maintains that one of the most fundamental features of culturally responsive teaching is the power of caring. She states that caring is frequently manifested through teacher attitudes, expectations and behaviors. Nieto (1999) posits that "the way students are thought about and treated by society and consequently by the schools they attend and the educators who teach them is fundamental in creating academic success or failure" (p. 167, In, Howard, 2003,). Referring to it as the “ethic of care”, Nel Noddings (1992) propose the theory which states that, “whether and how teachers and schools care for students can make an immense difference in how students experience schooling. However, care does not just mean giving students hugs or pats on the back, it also means loving them, having high expectations and making rigorous demands (In, Nieto, 2005, p. 7). Gay (2000) maintains the following:
Genuinely caring teachers are academic taskmasters. All students are held accountable for high academic efforts and performance. It is not uncommon to hear these teachers making declarations to students to the effect that “there is no excuse for not trying to learn,” “you will never know what you can do unless you try, and I can’t do’ is unacceptable in my classroom.” Their performance expectations are complemented with uncompromising faith in their students and relentless efforts in helping them meet high academic demands. The results are often phenomenal. Students who others feel can only reach minimal levels of academic and social achievement produce stellar performance for caring, culturally sensitive teachers (pp. 75-76).

Social-justice multiculturalists believe the primary focus of education is to fight social oppression, change the structure of society to make it more just and create egalitarian education. However, children who are failing cannot wait until the structure of society changes. Consequently, a caring-centered multicultural teacher conveys a sense of urgency in raising students’ levels of achievement and self-efficacy. Through a caring and culturally relevant education, children will develop skills and become successful in schools so that they can contribute to the creation of a more just society (Dempsey & Noblit, 1996; in, Lin, 2001, p. 109).

**Critical Self-Reflection/Critical Thinking**

Proponents of culturally relevant teaching and teaching for social justice site critical self-reflection as necessary activity geared toward creating an environment that is conducive to change. According to Howard (2003), critical reflection attempts to look at
reflection within moral, political, and ethical contexts of teaching. Issues pertaining to equity, access, and social justice are typically ascribed to critical reflection (Calderhead, 1989; Gore, 1987).

Outlining the ways in critical self-reflection lends itself to an effective social justice teaching environments, Hackman (2005) asserts the following:

- Ongoing self-reflection allows dominant group members to begin to extricate themselves from the trappings of this invisible privilege and work to be more effective agents of change in their classrooms and communities.

- Ongoing self-reflection also reminds educators that there is always more to consider and helps to keep their minds open to other possibilities.

- The final issue of self-reflection is that it provides the educator and students sites to take action.

Howard (2003) argues, “critical teacher reflection is essential to culturally relevant pedagogy because it can ultimately measure teachers’ levels of concern and care for their students. A teacher's willingness to ask tough questions about his or her own attitudes toward diverse students can reflect a true commitment that the individual has toward students' academic success and emotional well-being” (p. 5).

Hytten (2006) posits, “Educational philosophers have long argued for the importance of developing critical thinking abilities in students, as they are essential to democratic participation and decision-making. They are also necessary for imagining alternative possibilities, as without critical reflection, students tend to think of the status quo (including persistent inequities) as natural and inevitable” (p.2).
Rather than teach content alone, Hackman (2005) suggests that educators must help students to use critical analysis and the careful consideration of issues of oppression in order to avoid the following pitfalls:

1. First, the mere possession of information does not necessarily translate into wisdom or deep knowledge.

2. The possession of information alone does not necessarily provide students with a pathway for action.

3. Presentation of information as truth devoid of critique runs the risk of creating a dogmatic and prescriptive classroom environment.

4. Information presented outside a context of power and oppression runs the risk of recreating the marginalization experienced by members of oppressed groups, such as students of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer students, women, or poor/working-class folks (pp105-106).

Critical thinking is the process by which we consider perspective, positionality, power, and possibilities with respect to content. (Ibid, p. 106).

*Culturally Relevant Teaching/Teaching for Social Justice: Models*

Conceptualizations of multicultural education, on the part of several educators, place culturally relevant teaching and teaching for social justice within the overall process of multicultural education. Clayton (2003) asserts that, multicultural education is a process; it is pervasive, it fosters intercultural adeptness, it requires an understanding of one’s own culture, it insists on multiple perspectives and it leads to social justice.

According to Banks (2009), a key goal of multicultural education is the education of effective citizens in a diverse society. This goal requires that students develop decision-making and social action skills so they can take personal, social and civic action to make the United States and the world more democratic and humane (p.25). He states, further,
that the multicultural curriculum should help students develop the ability to make reflective decisions on issues related to race, ethnicity, culture, and language and to take personal, social, and civic actions to help solve the racial and ethnic problems in our national and world societies (Banks, 2009, p.26). With respect to the multicultural curriculum, Banks adds the following:

- The multicultural curriculum should help students view historical and contemporary events from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives, clarify their ethnic and cultural identities, and function effectively within their own cultural communities.

- The multicultural curriculum should help individuals develop cross-cultural competency—the ability to function within a range of cultures.

- The multicultural curriculum should provide students with cultural and ethnic alternatives.

- The multicultural curriculum should try to reduce ethnic and cultural encapsulation and help students develop a better understanding and awareness of their own cultures.

- The multicultural curriculum should help students master essential reading, writing, and math skills (Ibid, pp. 26-27).

**African-Centered Pedagogy**

A model of culturally relevant teaching that can also be viewed as teaching for social justice is African-centered pedagogy. African-centered pedagogy evolved out of the Black Student Movement of the 1960’s. After achieving success in establishing Black studies programs in schools and universities around the country Blacks, who were still unsatisfied with the quality and content of these programs called for the need to establish alternative [Afrocentric] models of education. This led to the establishment to
the development of Independent African-centered schools in various parts of the U.S. Akbar (1982) argued that “We [Black people] must begin to produce our own models of education. In those models of education we will show the power of reality as a means of developing and cultivating the minds of human beings. We will speak to the strength in human beings” (p. 23). Asante (1991) points to Carter G. Woodson (1933) for providing the motivation for the establishment of an Afrocentric approach to teaching Black children. Asante uses the term Afrocentricity to describe an Afrocentric approach that places people of African descent at the center of analysis. “In education this means that teachers provide students the opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts and history from an African world view (Ibid, p. 339).

Murrell (2002) views African-centered pedagogy as “a holistic system of practices which builds directly on the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy and seeks to address the ‘achievement gap’ through the use of approaches that appropriately contextualize African American achievement in social, cultural and historical context—culturally relevant pedagogy and a practice/performance based African-centered pedagogy” (p.17).

African-centered pedagogy speaks to what Murrell (2002) sees a “the disconnect between a teacher exhibiting the qualities of culturally relevant practice on one hand, and what actually happens for African American children on the other hand” (p.16). He, therefore, focuses on culturally relevant pedagogy as a system of practices that actually produces achievement outcomes for African American children.
African-centered pedagogy represents a challenge to those who claim to be advocates and practitioners of multicultural education. Murrell argues that:

Cultural learning for a better world is valued in our educational debates and discussion, but rarely articulated in the terms needed to make it happen. People are content with the form, but not the substance of multicultural education. Unless we are willing to fully engage what it means to know the world through a widening understanding and read of human systems and cultures, the default approach of multiculturalism will continue to be the boutique look at cultural differences. The requirements for teachers in the African-centered pedagogy included culture and cultural learning, not multicultural education as it is currently realized in public schools, it is an important aim (p. 169).

The Place of Black Feminist Pedagogy

The literature reviewed in the previous section, outlines the nature and models of pedagogies related to Black feminist pedagogy, employed by the teachers in this study. Their relationships stem from the notion they each evolved out of a historical struggle against oppression and focuses on the common goal of social change. The principles of Black feminist pedagogy have been practiced for centuries and have empowered Black woman as they took on various activist roles in support of attaining and achieving quality education for Black people. The relationship of Black feminist pedagogy to the pedagogies and models discussed is evident because, “It offers the student, instructor, and institution a methodology for promoting equity and multiple visions and perspectives that
parallel Black women’s attempts to be and become recognized as human beings and citizens rather than as objects and victims” (Omalade, 1987, p. 32). Finally, as a pedagogy designed to raise the political consciousness of students, Black feminist pedagogy can be viewed as informing multicultural education, culturally relevant teaching and teaching for social justice because of its introduction of a non-western [Afrocentric] world view and its inclusion of gender and patriarchy as central to an understanding of all historical phenomena (Joseph, 1995)

Summary

My research focuses on veteran Black women teacher activists’ perceptions of their roles as educators. In this chapter, I reviewed the literature that informs my research. The literature review comprises two areas: one includes literature that encompasses a brief historical overview of African American women’s activism in which I highlight the key roles that Black women have played in fostering the attainment and achievement of equal and quality education for Blacks as a whole. The second area of my literature review explored studies and issues related to the shifting context of Black education and the relationship of Black feminist pedagogy to that shifting context. The brief historical overview of African American women’s activism is significant because, while it highlights the very diligent and active role that Black women played in the attainment of education for Black people, it also reveals the absence of Black women’s contribution to the development of theoretical frameworks and models for educating Black people. More recently, such contributions are evident, however this literature review highlights the limited number that exists and underscores the need for more studies that examine the
perspectives of Black women teachers and that look at the ways in which teachers are influenced by larger social factors. This study stands to contribute to the literature by addressing this gap and by adding more voices of contemporary Black women activists. This literature review centers the experiences and voices of my study’s participants within the context of the Black women’s activist tradition of resistance to oppression via struggles for group survival and institutional transformation. The importance of centering Black women’s life experiences is that it serves as a way to offer fresh insights on the prevailing concepts, paradigms, and epistemologies of the Eurocentric male oriented worldview while revealing new knowledge about the experiences of African-American women and creating spaces for them to define their own realities, thus becoming empowered (Collins, 1990).
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this Chapter, I describe the methods used in conducting the study. I first discuss my epistemological and theoretical stance along with my positionality as a researcher. I explore portraiture as the key methodology used in this research and describe significant elements of the research design. These include the data collection strategies, research questions, participants, context of the study and the procedure for analyzing the data.

My Researcher Positionality: Epistemological and Theoretical Stance

I was born and raised in a family of teachers during an era that was defined by social movements and social change. The teachers, all of whom were my sisters, represented half of my eight siblings. My initial knowledge of the profession was gained from discussions that I heard in my home as my sisters shared their experiences, achievements and struggles. Having entered the teaching field during the early to late 1960’s, my sisters witnessed and were a part of many important changes that were occurring in schools throughout the country. Through her activities as one of the early members of the African American Teachers Association, which was formed in 1965 to address the poor teaching and miseducation of children in New York City’s Black communities, as well as her other activist activities, my oldest sister served as a role model and mentor for her sibling teachers. Outside of work, they were also involved in community and political organizations that focused on eradicating racist policies and practices and opening doors that were historically closed to Blacks and other people of color.
After growing up under the guidance of four Black women activist teachers, I began my teaching career in the 1970’s. My decision to begin teaching in an independent African-centered school was influenced by my sisters’ experiences, along with those of other Black women teachers with whom I had become acquainted. The myriad roles played and battles fought on their parts represent stories that have yet to be told. Thus the inspiration for doing this study results from my own experiences with my family, teaching in the community in which I was raised and experiencing life as a Black woman in America.

According to Dillard (2006), “All research is social construction and a cultural endeavor. A major contribution of feminist, ethnic, and cultural studies to the educational research community has been the reframing of the research endeavor as an ideological undertaking, one deeply embedded within the traditions, perspectives, viewpoints, cultural understandings, and discourse style of the researcher” (p.3). She further argues that much of qualitative research still subscribes to the metaphor of “research as recipe” and that this is reflected in the nature of the relationship that exists between the researcher and the subject. In order to obtain knowledge that is “objective”, their relationship is one of detachment, which mirrors approaches to quantitative research and its conceptions of “truth” (Ibid, p. 4). Palmer (1993) posits, “The myth of objectivity, which depends on a radical separation of the knower from the known has been declared bankrupt. We now see that to know something is to have a living relationship with it— influencing and being influenced by the object known” (p. xv).
This declaration foregrounds my paradigmatic stance and the manner in which I approach this qualitative study. Theoretically, I situate myself within the critical Black feminist paradigm. Situating myself within this paradigm allows me to take the ontological stance of a researcher who views the material world as being made up of historically situated structures that have a real impact on the life chances of individuals. These structures are perceived to be real (i.e., natural and immutable), and social action resulting from their perceived realness leads to differential treatment of individuals based on race, gender and social class (Hatch, 2002, p.16). The epistemology inherent in this theoretical perspective and therefore in the methodology chosen for this study (Crotty, 1998) assumes that knowledge is always mediated through the political positioning of the researcher and thus require a methodology that is transformative, requiring dialogue between researchers and participants that can lead to positive social change (Hatch, 2002); that is social change that promotes freedom and diverts oppression (Howard-Bostic, 2008). Thus, in this study I engaged in emancipatory research (Tyson, 2005),

Collins (1990) highlights the unique position in which African American women, as an oppressed group, are situated. As women, oppressed on multiple levels, including race, class and gender, an analysis of their oppression requires examination of how these oppressions intersect. Placing the experiences of African American women teachers at the center of analysis offers fresh insights as well as a re-conceptualization of the social relations of domination and resistance, revealing new knowledge about their own experiences and creating spaces for them to define their own realities.
Research Methodology: Portraiture

Portraiture made its debut with Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1983) publication of *The Good High School*, an in-depth study of the school cultures and subcultures of six successful high schools. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) sought to develop a methodology that “bridged the realms of science and art capturing the essence of the research participants” (p.5). She views portraiture as a way of reflecting its cross between art and science, its blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor, and its humanistic and literary metaphors (Ibid, p. 4). These elements along with portraiture’s focus on documenting expressions of goodness and its production of analyses and texts that invite dialogue with the people in the “real world” is what distinguishes portraiture from narrative inquiry, ethnography and other forms of qualitative inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In order to illuminate the lives and voices of the African American women activist teachers in this study, I used portraiture as the methodology. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) presented this unique form of social science inquiry as counterpoint to the traditional approach to researching issues related to people of color by searching for what is “good”, as opposed to what is not normal about such groups.

I used portraiture in order to explore the participants’ life experiences and the synergistic nature of their roles as activists. In particular, I sought to explore the aspects of their teaching experiences that have been influenced by their roles as activists. I also used this methodology with the intention of providing ample space to expose the complexities of the participants’ lives and voices while minimizing the possibility of
distortion and further marginalization. Finally, I believed portraiture provided me with the framework most appropriate for listening to and examining their voices as well as for supporting my on political, professional and epistemological commitments to this study.

While Dixson (2005) assert that portraiture is best described as a blending of qualitative methodologies, life history, naturalistic inquiry, and most prominently, that of ethnographic methods (p. 17), Chapman (2005) compares portraiture’s focus on goodness to critical race theory’s (CRT) counter-stories, which depict people of color as survivors, activists and emancipators. Chapman argues that both critical race theory and portraiture highlight aspects of the cultures of people of color that are rarely promoted. Critical race theorists seek to promote the notion of difference over deficit as part of their commitment to social justice while portraitists describe it as empowerment (Chapman, 2005).

Portraiture centers the researcher’s role as a decision-maker and crafter of the research. It also acknowledges the fact that the identity, experiences and judgment of the researcher is infused throughout the research process. “In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework she brings to the inquiry; in the questions she asks; in the data she gathers; in the choices of stories she tells; in the language, cadence, and rhythm of her narrative” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85). While voice, in portraiture is boundary-less, relationships are structured around clearly defined boundaries.

“The use of portraiture as a method highlights the development of relationships that are negotiated and re-negotiated throughout the research process. It is in the building of relationships that the portraitist experiences, most pointedly, the complex fusion of
conceptual, methodological, emotional, and ethical challenges” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.135). My use of portraiture served to contextualize the data obtained in order to expose the synergistic nature of the participants’ roles as activist, while representing both the participants and the myself physically, psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally in the research, thereby dismantling the notion that the researcher is the only knower and expert on the lives and experiences of the participants (Dixson et al, 2005).

Studies focusing on Black women teachers have highlighted the use of voice as a metaphor for Black women’s empowerment (Beauboeuf, 1997; Dixson & Dingus, 2008). Black women teachers represent a marginalized group whose voices, until recent years, remained absent from educational discourse. In her book, Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black, bell hooks (1989) discusses the issue of women of color coming to voice. Although she acknowledges the need for their voices to be heard she suggest that women of color develop a new way of speaking, employing a libratory voice that is not determined by one’s status as being oppressed. She asserts that opposition and resistance characterize speaking with a libratory voice: “It demands that paradigms shift—that we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way” (p. 15). Collins (1998) acknowledges that the call for Black women to gain a collective voice is not new. The metaphor, “coming to voice” emerged out of a more contemporary political context and provides a potentially useful metaphor for African-American women’s political activism. The metaphor “coming to voice” consists of three interrelated components—breaking silence about oppression, developing self-reflexive speech, and confronting or “talking
back” to elite discourses, all of which are essential for Black women’s journey from objectification to full human subjectivity (hooks, 1990).

**Voice Defined**

Voice in portraiture encompasses three orientations—of epistemology, ideology and method, along with others that include the portraitist’s explicit interest in authorship, interpretation, relationship, aesthetics, and narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot presents six ways in which voice can be used during the research process. These include voice as witness; voice as interpretation; voice as preoccupation; voice as autobiography; voice discerning other voices, and voice in conversation (Ibid, p. 87). Voice, as used throughout my study, encompassed all six uses. My use of voice as autobiography, which reflects the familial, cultural, ideological and educational aspect of my own life story, was significant in that the similarities between my life story and those of the participants provided me with greater insight into the contexts and relationships highlighted in their stories. My use of voice in conversation allowed me to connect with each of the participants in a way that enabled me to demonstrate support, encouragement, empathy and challenge when necessary. My use of this voice also required the assistance of my voice discerning other voices. This aspect of voice helped me to listen for and respond to changes in the tone, quality and cadence of the participants voices. However, my use of voice as interpretation dominated throughout the research process. Assisted by the interplay with my voice of preoccupation and my voice as witness, my voice of interpretation guided me through the process of assigning meaning to the various stories, patterns, gestures and emotions heard and observed both in the field and during the
process of constructing and weaving the portraits. I used my interpretive voice in determining the meaning of the experiences that were shared. I not only paid attention to the words but I tried to zero in on the emotion with which the words were expressed. I therefore paid close attention to the mood changes; whether the facial expression and tone of voice changed with each experience that was shared. For example, I noticed that Njeri, when relating stories of her childhood, became almost childlike. She giggled and chucked and at times use a child-like tone of voice. However, I found her to be very opinionated and when she expressed her opinions about issues of concern to her, like her views on spirituality, she used her “teacher voice”. She spoke louder and often checked to see if I was following and understanding her points.

Davis (1997) denotes that “regarding voice, the methodological question that portraitists must repeatedly ask of process is: How (to what extent) does the disposition of my voice inform (give shape to but not distort) the product (the developing portrait)? And the question that portraitists must repeatedly ask of product is: How (to what extent) does the articulation of my voice inform (clarify but not mislead) the process (the developing understanding)” (p. 106)?

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) asserts that “Voice is the research instrument, echoing the self (or the ‘soul’ as Oscar Wilde would put it) of the portraitist—her eyes, her ears, her insights, her style, her aesthetic” (p. 85). The notion of “voice as research instrument” speaks to the personal history that I bring to the research process. As an African American woman educator and activist who taught, for many years, in both African-
centered and public schools, I share a common experience with the participants in this study.

**Participants and Criteria for Selection**

The participants in this study were selected purposefully, the goal being to obtain thick descriptions of their lived experiences as teachers and activists. After establishing the criteria for participants, I went on to select specific participants. First, I compiled a list of women known to have had connections to one or more of the Brooklyn Family schools, a network of independent African-centered schools that developed out of the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent Black Student Movement (see chapter 2). Most of these women were either acquaintances that I had met 20-30 years ago or who were referred to me by friends and acquaintances. I contacted these friends to acquire some current information on the women and to inquire as to whether there was a way to reach them now. I also contacted those few women that I knew I could reach on my own. Of the three Black women teachers who agreed to participate in the study, all had relationships with the Brooklyn Family schools. One was a former parent who had enrolled her daughter in one of schools, another had worked as an art teacher in one of the schools and the third teacher had taught for more than a decade in one of the schools. All are currently employed as K-12 public school teachers. The three veteran African American women teacher activists chosen as participants in this study, represent a homogeneous sampling of teachers who share the common characteristics of being: (1) Black women born into working class families and raised in a large urban center during the 1950’s and 60’s; 2) Veteran teachers who have taught grades K-12 during the years
ranging from 1975 to the present; and (3) Black women who have a history of engaging in social/political activism. One indication of the activism of these participants can be found in the places where they lived and taught early in their careers.

*Background of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Community*

One unique characteristic of the participants in this study is that prior to teaching full-time in the public school system; they each taught in and/or sent their own children to alternative African-centered schools. The group of independent schools, referred to as the “Brooklyn Family Schools” was part of a group of African-centered schools that emerged during the 1970’s after a series of grassroots political movements during the 1960’s. The first of the Brooklyn Family schools was formed after a failed attempt on the part of African American parents, educators and community activists for community control of neighborhood schools in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York.

Residents of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community sought community control over its local school board for two reasons. First, members of the local community believed that they were more attuned to the needs of the local schools and so had a vested interest in the schools because, among other things, they lived in the community and children were the ones attending the schools. Second, the members of the local community wanted to rid their schools of racism, which they believed was perpetrated primarily through the control of their schools by outsiders. For the community advocates, if their local community had some measure of control over the recruitment and retention of school personnel, the
curriculum, school morale, and the budget, then such control would affect positively the quality of the education their children received” (Johnson, 2003, p.105).

The fight for community control and for equal and quality education for the children of Ocean Hill-Brownsville led to a fierce battle with the teachers’ union, and the eventual end to local control of schools (Gordon, 2001). In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, “the pursuit of educational autonomy was informed by the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black Power. Of course, not everyone had participated in these movements, or followed their every detail. However, many of those in positions of leadership had participated in freedom rides and voter registration campaigns as members of activist groups, or knew people who had. Others had studied the writings and listened to the speeches of activist intellectuals like Malcolm X [aka. El Hajj Malik El Shabzz] and Stokely Carmichael [aka. Kwame Toure]. While the residents of the neighborhood were disenfranchised, desperately poor, and isolated, they were nonetheless driven to action by the mood of a particular historic moment whose currents were felt throughout Black America” (Gordon, 2001, p.24). This same historical moment also gave birth to the African-centered school movement. The contemporary African-centered school movement “traces its beginnings to three distinct sources… Malcolm X’s Black Nationalism and later the cultural nationalist theory of Maulana Karenga, outgrowths of the Freedom School efforts of the Civil Rights movement and the effort of the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI)” (Konadu, 2005, p.53). The first of the Brooklyn Family schools emerged on the heels of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy. Its
philosophy was based in Black Nationalism built upon the knowledge and practical application of the *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles). The 7 principles are associated with the holiday Kwanzaa and represent a value system to which that those who celebrate the holiday adhere. This value system serves as an ethical and philosophical framework under which the Brooklyn Family Schools functioned. The mission of the school was, “… the development of skills and thinking necessary for nationhood and liberation from the dominant political and cultural thought and behaviors”. “In other words the aim was to create a ‘new’ African personality in America in order for African to build and create in their best interest” (Konadu, 2005, p.56).

Being a part of the Brooklyn Family Schools and part of these major historical events are significant to this study because it is within this political and socio-historical context that the seeds of the participants’ activist spirits, that were planted during childhood, began to develop. These events are also significant because they had a profound effect on the personal, political and professional decisions made by each participant. “As community members, mothers, caregivers, counselors, and community advocates African American women teachers, from slavery to present, have demonstrated a collective ethical responsibility and personal investment in the education and uplift of their communities and race” (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 1999). The participants in this study comprise a group of African American women educators who represent a continuation of this historical tradition. However, their voices and experiences have been left out of educational discussions.
Data Collection

In the recruitment letter that I sent out to the teachers, I explained the data collection procedures. Data collection involved informal interviews held a minimum of four times during a four month period with the initial interview lasting 1-2 hours. I also emphasized that the interviews would be tape recorded and that they would each have an opportunity to view the transcripts of their interview. Finally, the letter stressed that the data obtained would be summarized without using their names or the names of any of the institutions with which they are affiliated.

My primary means of collecting data was interviewing to collect the stories of the teachers’ experiences and lives. Additionally, I collected documents to analyze and maintained my own research journal in order to capture observations and personal reflections throughout the process.

Interviews

I chose an initial set of interview questions that would provide me with general background information on each teacher. I used open-ended questions (see Appendix B), to gather more details of the participants’ experiences. Interviewing means essentially, the gathering of data through direct or indirect questioning (Langness & Frank, 1981, p.43). In much qualitative work, interviews are used alongside other data collection methods, but they can also be the primary or only data source, as in this study. When interviews are used in conjunction with observation, they provide ways to explore more deeply participants’ perspectives on actions observed by researchers. They also provide avenues into events and experiences that have not been observed. When used with
unobtrusive data collection, interviews can reveal the meanings and significance of artifacts collected in the field. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify five outcomes of interviewing, abstracted as follows:

- Here and now constructions—participant explanations of events, activities, feelings, motivations, concerns
- Reconstructions—explanations of past events and experiences
- Projections—explanations of anticipated experiences
- Triangulation—verification or extension of information from other sources
- Member checking—verification or extension of information developed by the researcher (p. 268)

Informal interviews lasting two hours took place four times during a four-month period. The final meeting with each participant was held for the purpose of member checking. I chose to conduct several interviews in order to gain sufficient insight into the participants’ political perspectives and how their perspectives were manifested in their personal and professional lives. All interviews were recorded using audio-tape and field notes were taken. In this study, the interview data was triangulated with observation data that resulted from the collection of various documents from each participant. These included photographs, poems as well as historical data in the form of newspaper articles and history texts.

Collection of Documents and Artifacts

In addition to interviews, various documents were collected from the study participants. These included photographs, articles about the participants, teacher evaluation reports, lesson plans etc. These documents helped in ascertaining the historical and demographic background information related to our conversations. For example, one
of the participants provided a local newspaper article that depicted her being awarded “teacher of the year”. I also viewed pictures that chronicled the participants during different periods ranging from childhood to the present and artifacts that the participants acquired during their travels abroad. These documents and artifacts served as support for interview data thus making the findings more trustworthy. Throughout the data collection process I maintained a journal in which I recorded my reflections.

Researcher Journal

The researcher journal was maintained in order to keep track of my thoughts, ideas and experiences in the field. Huberman and Miles (2002) suggest that two keys to successful field notes. “One key to useful field notes is to write down whatever impressions occur that is to react rather than to sift out what may seem important, because it is often difficult to know what will and will not be useful in the future. A second key to successful field notes is to push thinking in these notes by asking questions such as “What am I learning?” and “How does this case differ from the last?” (p.15). My researcher journal also provided me with a way to log dates, locations, time spent collecting data, as well as descriptive data that could be significant to the study. Finally, my researcher journal was used for the purposes of self-assessing my perspectives when analyzing and interpreting data.
**Timeline for the Study**

The time line for the study is illustrated in Table 3.1 below:

Table 3.1. Timeline for the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Analyses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2009-June 2009</td>
<td>IRB Process and Recruitment</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2009</td>
<td>Recruitment and First interviews with Participant #1</td>
<td>Transcribing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2009</td>
<td>First interview with Participant #2</td>
<td>Transcribing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second interview with Participant #1</td>
<td>Transcribing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2009</td>
<td>Third interview with participant #1</td>
<td>Transcribing and Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second and Third interviews with Participant #2</td>
<td>Beginning of Data Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>Final Interviews with Participants #1 &amp; 2 Interviews</td>
<td>Transcribing and Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-3 with Participant #3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2009</td>
<td>Final Interview with Participant #3</td>
<td>Transcribing and Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2009</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Transcribing and Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2010</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Writing the findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing the findings</td>
<td></td>
<td>Data Analysis;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2010-</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Data Analysis;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2010</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Writing the findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2010-</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Writing the findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2010</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Writing the findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2010</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Writing the findings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

According to Hatch (2002), “data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others” (p.148). Furthermore, he states that” analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding” (Ibid, p.148).

Similarly, in portraiture, the analysis process combines the six characteristics of voice in the construction of the portrait. However, Davis (1997) points to voice as interpretation as the governing voice in the portraiture process. “…voice as interpretation pursues particular lines of inquiry, listens for resonance, observes carefully, and reflects continuously on the input of data, searching for and testing the strength of the coherence that will unify the interpretation. In terms of the construction of the final portrayal, voice as interpretation determines language, frames and selects images, modulates articulation, and balances the separate parts of the portrayal into a cohesive aesthetic whole” (p.113).

Armed with my voice of interpretation, I organized a plan for identifying and constructing the emergent themes from the pages of data that I had transcribed. During the data collection process, I made notes of recurring topics, key words and phrases in my researcher journal. I then organized these terms into theme categories and conducted computer word searches throughout my data files. The repetitive refrains were the most
easily recognizable emergent themes because they are clearly and persistently articulated by the actors in the setting (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). After placing sections of the data into the appropriate theme categories, I began organizing a list of metaphors that I either noted in my researcher journal or deciphered during the transcribing process. I was able to identify metaphors associated with one or more themes by triangulating sections of data. For example, the metaphor, *the spiritual is political*, emerged after examining the data related to the role that spirituality plays in the lives of the Black women teachers and noting points of convergence with the theme related to the role that their activism played in shaping aspects of their lives.

**Validity**

In portraiture, the term authenticity is used in place of validity. The portraitist hopes to develop a rich portrayal that will have resonance (in different ways, from different perspectives) with three audiences: with the actors who will see themselves reflected in the story, with the readers who will see no reason to disbelieve it, and with the portraitist herself, whose deep knowledge of the setting and self-critical stance allow her to see the “truth value” in her work (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 247). The authenticity of my findings and the strength of my interpretive stance lie in the fact that I experienced the resonance in the synergy of context, voice, relationships and emergent themes.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to extend the research begun on African American women teacher activists to include an examination of the ways in which their life experiences have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given
current educational disparities. Much of the discussion that I provided in this chapter focused on portraiture as the methodology employed in this study, I also presented my epistemological and theoretical stances and discussed my researcher positionality.

In the next chapter, I present the portraits of three Black women teacher activists and my own. They represent the unique expressions of our life experiences. I organize the portraits around themes that emerged from the life stories and examine them for meaning and resonance.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

“Black women have tended incredible, secluded gardens within the expansive wasteland of this dysfunctional democracy” (Joy James, 1999, p. 68).

The purpose of this study was to extend the research begun on African American teacher activists to include an examination of the ways in which their life experiences have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators. I was specifically interested in understanding how veteran Black women teachers describe their life experiences as activists in relation to their roles and practices as teachers. As discussed in the previous chapter, I used portraiture as a methodology because of its congruency to the theoretical paradigm that frames this study, namely Black feminist thought. In conducting this study, I found the use of portraiture to be empowering, in the sense that it provided a space for me to incorporate my own voice throughout while at the same time presenting the multiple voices of each Black woman teacher.

As I listened to the stories of these women, I also reflected on the similarities in my own experience, having grown up during the same era and having chosen a similar career path. Portraiture provided the space for me to sing along, to shout “a-men”, to give a “high-five”, while at the same time to comfort, to challenge and to exhale along with these women.
Context of the Study

In portraiture, context is employed as a way to illuminate meaning during the interpretive process. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), “…portraitists find context crucial to their documentation of human experience and organizational culture….Context becomes the framework, the reference point, the map, the ecological sphere; it is used to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding what they say and do” (p.41). Detailed descriptions of the physical setting highlighted by accounts of historical and cultural elements that contribute to the values and norms of that setting are important factors that gave shape, definition and meaning to the portraits. This along with symbols, metaphors and other aesthetic elements provided a contextual dynamism that captured the ways in which the teachers contributed to shaping the portraits. Finally, the personal context captured and incorporated the influences and perspectives that I (portraitist) brought to the research process. This use of context was crucial to my study because the familial and community environments in which each woman was born and raised, like with a portrait, literally framed it. For each of us, family and community experiences were significant factors that helped to shape our attitudes toward education, as well as our over-all worldviews. Because I had experienced many of the same things as the women in this study my understanding of and familiarity with the various aspects of the context, allowed me to visualize, anticipate and affirm as they told their stories. As an insider, I was also acutely aware of the perspectives that I brought to the research process and made note of these thoughts and actions in my researcher
journal. This awareness manifested itself throughout as I performed my role as interviewer and narrator. As an insider, I was able to use my implicit and explicit understandings of their words and gestures to initiate and stimulate meaningful dialogue with the Black women teachers. I was also able to use these insights to probe and challenge, as with Lindiwe’s reluctance to refer to herself as an activist and with Njeri’s sudden acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as her model activist.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) points to paradox as being central to portraiture and emphasizes the need to unmask the converging opposites that are explicit parts of the methodology and aesthetic discipline. One such paradox is reflected in the voice of the portraitist which is “…both everywhere in the work and is judiciously placed; it is both central and peripheral” (Ibid, p.10). In this study this paradox is reflected in my position as participant and narrator. I attempted to address this paradox of voice by placing my (self) portrait, centrally, among the findings of this study, while also insinuating reflections of my life experiences throughout the discussion of the findings. As participant and narrator, my identity, experiences and perspectives served as a backdrop to the implementation of this methodology and to my role in “…forging relationships, determining context, searching for coherence, defining expression, and balancing a unified representation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 35). As such, in the next section, I include reflections of my early life experiences.

**Emergent Themes**

In this section, I present the portraits of three Black women teachers, framed within four
themes that emerged from our conversations. These portraits represent unique expressions of the life stories of three Black women teachers. They capture some of complexities inherent in a Black woman’s standpoint and that are embodied in the practice of Black feminist pedagogy (Joseph, 1995). Michele Foster (1991) asserts:

In the Black community, it has long been assumed that in addition to serving as role models, Black teachers play an important and unique role by reinforcing the community’s cultural norms and encouraging Black students to achieve beyond what society has expected of them. In spite of this belief however, little is known about the practices or perspectives of Black teachers (p.233).

The portraits of these women are strong and challenging. Their collective life experiences echo an epistemology that is grounded in the African American community’s historical and cultural tradition. I found it important to highlight the life experiences of these Black women teachers, coupled with their race, class and gender consciousness in order to demonstrate how their particular understandings, choices and strategies were used and shaped in educating children of color (Henry, 1992). Cozart and Price (2005) point to Shujja’s (1994) assertion that:

…the cultural orientation makes a difference in the way one critiques society’ has significant meaning when one questions how Black women’s cultural orientations dictate how they come to understand their relationship to education, and how their understanding of the role of schooling shapes their identities (p. 173).

This passage articulates my position within the context of this study. It also foregrounds my approach to examining and interpreting their life experiences.
Moreover, as a Black women researcher, my mission is to answer the call of earlier Black women scholars who declared a need for, “…reconceptualizations of Black lives, Black education, and Black family and community life that inscribe Black women’s participation in the analyses” (Henry, 1993, p.209).

After reviewing the data for recurring refrains, resonant metaphors, institutional and cultural rituals, as well as triangulating the data from the teachers’ stories, historical data, and my researcher journal, I organized the women’s portraits around themes that emerged from their stories (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The central themes chosen were those that appeared frequently and that were consistent throughout each narrative.

In the next section of the, I provide a contextual background to the study in the form of a portrait of my early life experiences. I include my story in that this dissertation centers on the life experiences of three African American women teacher activists and my own. When using portraiture as a research methodology the researcher (portraitist) is assigned the central and creative role. The identity, character and history of the researcher (portraitist) are, therefore, critical to the manner of listening, selecting, interpreting and composing the story (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 13). Thus, I found it important to include my life experience as part of the framing of this study.

Following my self-portrait, I introduce each of the Black women teachers. I speak of them within the context of their family and community environments and explore what the teachers considered significant life experiences as they relate to their own schooling, family life and community experiences. Next, I examine issues and pedagogies that the teachers believed to be essential to the success of their students and the role that activism
played in shaping their individual approaches to teaching. Thirdly, I examine the influences that their activism had on their work with students in the classroom. Lastly, I focus on the role that religion and spirituality played in their work as teacher activists. These themes are rooted in the life experiences of each woman and provide the structural framework necessary for the merging of their portraits. The stories of their life experiences demonstrate how, in a bellicose climate of social justice struggles, the strength and guidance of their families and the support of their communities provided a template for the development of a collective activist spirit that is reflected in their pedagogical approaches.

*From the Portraitist: Influence of Family, School, Community*

Hearing my father shout, frantically to my mother, “They killed Lumumba! They killed Lumumba!” left me, a little 6 ½ year old Black girl wondering: Who is Lumumba? Why are my parents so upset about his death? Is he related to us? In his thick Caribbean accented voice, my father went on to exclaim that Kasavubu must have been responsible for Lumumba’s death. My family’s connection to Africa, the Caribbean and the United States speaks to the historical drama that was the Middle Passage and reflects a family history that has remained local and global in context, since its inception. This reality inspires and guides the research that I do and defines the framework through which I analyze issues within my research.

My journey towards the development of an engaged critical consciousness is one that is layered with experiences that were guided and shaped by my race, class and gender subjectivities. Growing up in a large family of three boys, six girls, a southern-
born mother and a Caribbean-born father, contributed greatly to how I situate myself as a researcher today.

After completing high school in early 1930’s, my mother left the depression plagued, segregated south and migrated to New York City in search of work and a means to help support her five siblings and widowed mother that she left behind in North Carolina. My father, who was born in 1899, came to this country in 1919, from what is now the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. After settling in New York City, he began work as a merchant seaman. Over the next few decades, my father traveled the world and would remain at sea for months at a time. Each time he returned home, he would bring souvenirs from various places around the world. He would also tell stories of his experiences. Through my father’s stories, I received my initial exposure to the history and cultures of people around the world. Little did I know these stories, along with my mother’s recollections of her life in the segregated south, would play a significant role in shaping my professional goals.

The environment, in which I lived during the first thirteen years of my life, was one in which an abundance of political, social and cultural activities occurred regularly. Harlem of the 1950’s and 60’s was warm, vibrant and flourished with cultural activity. Living several blocks from the famous Apollo Theater and a very short distance from Spanish Harlem, enabled me to witness much of this activity. Harlem was truly a melting pot in which people of color from the southern United States, Latin America, Africa and Asia dwelled. Harlem of the 1960’s was also ripe with political activity. Walking down 125th street on any given sunny day one was sure to encounter a “soap box orator”,

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surrounded by a crowd of ‘folks’, speaking on the “state of Black America”. The size of the crowd usually depended upon the oratorical and analytical skills of the speaker. I also lived a very short distance from the Nation of Islam headquarters, whose chief spokesperson at the time was Malcolm X. I remember walking with my father to Seventh Avenue where Malcolm X would often speak in the street to a crowd of hundreds. Although I was quite young, I could decipher from his words, the tone of his voice, as well as from the comments made by people in the crowd, that race (or being a “Negro” at that time) made a difference and being other than white was a problem. Thus, the conversations that I heard in my home and community along with the events occurring in the world at that time made me acutely aware of trials and tragedies that went along with the struggle against oppression and domination.

Towards the end of the sixties, I was a junior in high school. The Vietnamese war was raging in Asia. Wars for liberation were being waged in various parts of Africa. Where I lived in Queens, New York, having moved five years before from Harlem, people were still recovering from the assassinations of Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King. Having read about the system of apartheid in South Africa in my tenth grade English class, my fellow students and I felt a desire to follow the example that was being set on college campuses across the country. As a member of the “Third World” club, we became involved in activities focusing on exposing the injustices that were occurring locally and nationally. At this time, the club’s efforts became focused on the plight of Angela Davis. Because she had been accused of being an accomplice to murder, in California (then under the governorship of Ronald
Reagan) she jumped bail and, soon after, was being sought as one of the FBI’s ten most wanted criminals. During that school year, we organized support rallies and also kept the student body abreast of news related to her case. By June, (near the time of my graduation) she had been captured, imprisoned and eventually released after being found innocent. On the day of my graduation, my oldest sister surprised me with two tickets to a victory rally that was being held that evening for Angela Davis. My mother, who had followed Angela Davis’s trial very closely, expressed the desire to attend the rally with me. The rally was held at Madison Square Garden Arena in Manhattan. I remember feeling overwhelmed by the thousands of people who had come out to show their support and solidarity. Members of various socialist organizations were there selling their newspapers and other literature. As Angela Davis spoke to the crowd of thousands, I recall feeling a sense of pride in the fact that she was standing before me alive and free and that I played a (very) small part in that victory. I also remember admiring the manner in which she spoke with a great deal of strength and conviction, in spite of all that she had gone through. These memories of my childhood parallel those of this study’s participants.

*Developing Critical Consciousness: Family, School and Community Influences Planting Seeds*

Lindiwe, Nadine and Njeri (pseudonyms), three African American veteran teachers who participated in this study are all K-12 teachers who have each taught for more than two decades. They also have an even more lengthy history of engagement in community and political activism. Each participant was born and raised in the same large
urban center located in the northeastern section of the United States. While one of the
participants now lives and works in a city located in Southeastern, U.S., they are each
still employed in the public schools.

Resonances: Njeri, Lindiwe and Nadine

The eldest of four daughters, Lindiwe was born in 1951 to teenage parents in
Brooklyn, New York. After living with her paternal grandparents for two years,
Lindiwe’s family moved to a public housing development in Canarsie, Brooklyn. The
population of her neighborhood, at this time, was predominately Italian with a small
population of Black families restricted to living in public housing. Although she was a
product of teen parents, Lindiwe reflected fondly on the efforts that her father made
toward providing for her and siblings. As she spoke, her facial expressions conveyed a
renewed sense of pride in a father from whom she had been estranged for a brief period
time as an adult. Lindiwe described her father as the family’s sole provider, very proud
and hard working:

*My father was the breadwinner. He went to work every day. I don’t ever
remember him being home sick at all. I just kinda remember him getting up and
going to work rain or shine. He was very proud, uh, even though we grew up with
very little money in the house, he refused to go on public assistance and never
asked anyone for any money. He was truly an inspiration to me when I think
about what my father meant to my family because he truly kept our family
together.*

Lindiwe also spoke proudly of her father’s position as role model and father
figure for her neighborhood friends. Many of these friends lived in single parent
households within the housing development:
I think I grew up in a pretty loving family and most of my friends, actually, who grew up in the housing development actually were part of single parent households, where their moms were the head of the household. And so my father kind of was the father for many of my friends and families because we were one of the few who had a father, I was one of the few who had a father in the household. And we were all close, you know, as daughters are generally close to fathers. He kind of doted on all of us. I don’t think any one of us ever felt that one was more loved than the other was; and so, I really had a great home when I think about it now.

Lindiwe watched her father as he took on both, the maternal and paternal role while the family coped with her mother mental illness:

My mother was very sickly when I grew up. She suffered from mental illness and so she was in and out of hospitals and during that time my father, he really did all that he could to keep the family together, cause there were family members who wanted to intervene and take care of us but he refused any of that...

This experience provided Lindiwe with the understanding that family survival was a collective effort that requires the blurring gender roles when necessary. From her father, Lindiwe learned the importance of family and community unity. She also learned pride and the willingness to work hard for the survival of the family. Similar to Lindiwe’s experience, Njeri learned many important lessons while under the tutelage of her father.

Njeri is a very proud, passionate and opinionated Black woman in her mid-fifties—proud of her family’s heritage, passionate about the education of children of color and very opinionated about the state of world affairs. I was extremely impressed with Njeri’s ability to recall details of her childhood experiences. As with Lindiwe, Njeri’s experiences with her father greatly influenced her as a child. Her stories about her experiences with her father clearly demonstrate the degree to which she was nurtured towards viewing the world through a critical lens. When sharing her stories, especially
those of her childhood, Njeri would become very animated and frequently let out a hearty
laugh. However, when discussing a topic that she was very passionate about, her facial
expressions would become stern and making direct eye contact she would learn toward
me and pause briefly making sure that I understood her point.

Njeri’s parents represented the union of two similar, yet diverse cultures. Her
father immigrated to this country from Guyana after serving in the British army during
World War II. Her mother was born and raised in New Jersey. From an early age, her
parents taught their children skills necessary for them to think critically and to take on
leadership roles.

*My parents raised us to be free thinkers, to think about what we were doing, not
to be followers. My mother was--I would say--a kind of a bohemian. Uh, she
believed in expressing yourself; not dressing like everybody else and encouraged
us to be the same way.*

Njeri’s father was politically astute and very much involved in political activities
in their Harlem neighborhood and at work. His co-workers also very well respected him
for his leadership within the union ranks. Njeri’s father considered himself a Black
nationalist and a Pan-Africanist. This implied that he viewed the plight of Black people in
the United States as being connected to that of Black people throughout the African
Diaspora. Njeri points to her father as one of the persons in her life that contributed to her
developing political perspective and critical consciousness. She was able to recall several
conversations and experiences with her father that had a profound effect on how she
came to view the world as she does. One such experience occurred when she was about
six years old. It was just after Fidel Castro succeeded in over-throwing the government in
Cuba and proclaimed it a communist state. Njeri recalled playing with two friends outside of her apartment building only to have the fun interrupted by news that Castro was in Harlem. Along with observing crowds of people walking quickly in the direction of 125th street, this news ignited such fear in them that all three children stopped playing and fled home to their apartments.

Listening to this story stirred-up my own memories of this period and the tense atmosphere brought on by the media’s portrayal of Castro and the “threat” that he posed in representing the potential spread of communism throughout the North American hemisphere. I had a vague memory of running home from school after a rapid dismissal, upset over hearing talk of missiles aimed at the United States and that Castro had threatened to declare war with Russia backing him up. As mentioned in chapter one, my home was a place where current events were routinely discussed. The news was always on in my home. Whether hearing the news on the radio that stayed on throughout the day or on the television as my family gather each evening to watch Walter Cronkite’s news reports, my family was always up-to-date on world affairs. I recalled being relieved to find out that my parents were not as upset as others were over the situation with Castro.

They seemed angrier over the U.S. governments bullying of this tiny Caribbean nation. My father, who had traveled to Cuba as a merchant seaman expressed the feeling that someone needed to “clean-up that place” and if Castro was going to do it, so be it.

Njeri’s memories of this period were more up-close and personal:

*I remember running into the building and we had our backs up against the door, holding the door to keep the communists out (Chuckle) “The communists are coming!” (Chuckle) “The communists are coming!” My friends lived on the first*
floor and they ran into their house. I went running up to my house. I slammed the door, and I locked it. I was standing up against the door and my father, he was off that day, and he was saying- “What’s the matter with you?” I said, “Daddy, the communists are coming; the communists are coming! He sucked his teeth and goes to get dressed. A few moments later, he comes over to me and he says, “Come on”...

Njeri found herself standing in the midst of the crowd of people that she had seen walking towards 125th street earlier. She soon found out that everyone had gathered outside of the Theresa Hotel to hear Fidel Castro speak. As her father picked her up and placed her on his shoulders, he instructed her to listen. As Castro spoke in Spanish, Njeri’s father paraphrased the words of an interpreter:

*My father was saying that he [Castro] was talking about fixing this world... making the Caribbean strong so they do not have to depend on the Yankee dollar. In other words, producing their own things, you know like Guyana makes bauxite?--making their own aluminum, instead of having the bauxite come from there and then having to buy the aluminum from the United States; so that, the people in the Caribbean could live by their own means.*

Njeri recalled another occasion, shortly thereafter, when she accompanied her father to a meeting held in a large auditorium that was full of Black people, mostly Black men. She recalled sitting on her father’s lap playing with a doll that she had brought with her only to have her father snatch the doll away from her and direct her to pay attention to what was being said.

*My father said that they were talking about how one day, your skin will be your passport. As I said, he was a Pan-Africanist, and he was saying that no matter where I went in the world, I would be able to go to Ghana, Nigeria; I would be able to go to Trinidad, Guyana; I would be able to go to Barbados (pause) you know, just being who I am. Just being an African. So, he was saying that’s because your skin color would be your passport because these were Black countries.*
The roles that Lindiwe and Njeri’s fathers played in their lives counter the deficit and matriarchal models of analysis that dominate research on the roles played by African American men within the Black family. In her article entitled, “African American fathers: A decade review of the literature”, Cochran (1997) asserts that these models have been overused and do not necessarily reflect the totality of Black fathers’ family experience. Cochran asserts that there is a need for a more comprehensive understanding of African American men’s parenting experiences that considers, among other things, the diverse roles African American fathers hold in the family system. These women’s stories suggest the same.

Lindiwe applied the lessons learned from her father, regarding responsibility, working hard and being proud, in caring for her younger siblings, as well as to her early school experience. From a young age, she was well aware of the racial and gender biases that existed in her predominantly Italian-American community. Lindiwe described her experiences attending schools that demographically, reflected the population of her community as difficult to remember because her experiences from elementary through high school were not pleasant ones. She recalled feeling like an outsider throughout her entire school experience because of her race:

*I went to public schools that were predominately white and what I remember about that educational system was that there were always conversations about why Blacks were in the school—whenever the community felt threatened by the number of Blacks that were in the school. So, I grew up not really liking the schools that I attended. I loved the educational piece. I always liked to read. I was always involved in learning but when I think about friends of mind who can remember who their first grade teachers were, I sometimes have to really think about that because I didn’t really have great experiences in my elementary, middle or high school years.*
Because of her mother’s frequent absences from the home and her father having
to take on the role of both mom and dad, Lindiwe lacked the support that she needed with
her schoolwork. She recalled having to work very hard to do well in school. She also had
to contend with discrimination on the part of her teachers, an experience that she noted
other schoolmates of color shared as well. Lindiwe remembered being seated in the back
of the classroom and watching her white classmates, routinely, receive praises in spite of
the tremendous effort she made to produce quality work and to participate in class
discussions and activities.

*I think one of the things that helped me in the elementary school and middle
school years is that I was able to relate to many of the Caucasian students. So,
even though I was African American, I was really able to get along with a lot of
the students in my class; and in most cases, I was one of maybe three of four
African American students. I aligned myself with some of the brighter students in
the class. And so, we did a lot of projects together and worked a lot together and
even though I always felt I put in as much effort as they did, when the team was
acknowledged I always felt like the Caucasian students were given most of the
accolades for the projects that we worked on.*

bell hooks (1994) describes similar experiences after racial integration of schools
required that she attend a predominately-white school:

When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools, we left a world where
teachers believed that to educate Black children rightly would require a political
commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons
reinforced racist stereotypes. For Black children, education was no longer about
the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school. The classroom
was no longer a place of pleasure or ecstasy. School was still a political place,
since we were always having to counter white racist assumptions that we were
genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn (pp. 3-4).

Although still a young girl, Lindiwe was able to assess the discriminatory nature
of her school experiences. She was also able to utilize the values that she learned from
her father at home as source of strength and motivation to advocate for herself and to persevere. Like Lindiwe, Nadine used the homeschooled lessons as a source of strength and training for her future activist activities. Unlike Lindiwe, the source of these lessons was her mother.

Nadine is a Black woman in her late fifties who currently teaches at a high school in the neighborhood where she was born and raised. A child of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, she continues to wear her hair as she did in those days, natural and in twists—when not wrapped in an African gele-style headdress. Nadine is a “Bedford Stuyvesant girl”, a description of herself that she proudly uses, establishing place within a particular Black community that is known for its legacy of achievement.

Nadine is the second oldest of three daughters. She grew up poor in a household where her father worked in a factory and her mother stayed at home and took care of her and her sisters. Although her father was the sole breadwinner for the family, there were times when he did not work due to being laid-off. On those occasions, Nadine’s mother managed to obtain public assistance in order to make ends meet while her father took on whatever side jobs he could find. Nadine reflects upon her father’s strong commitment to the well-being of his family with pride as she laments over his premature death from cancer:

[My father] worked for this company that made chandeliers. He was one of the old timers, in fact all the old timers died from the same type of cancer, because they refused to put on a mask. They felt that they didn’t need that mask then, but it was all types of chemicals and they were all smokers so they all later died from the same form of lung cancer, one by one.
Nadine learned many lessons from watching her father struggle to provide for his family, among which was respect for working hard and doing what’s necessary for the family’s survival. Although her parents struggled, financially, Nadine didn’t “feel the poverty”. She attributes this to watching her mother successfully navigate around their impoverished condition to make ends meet, as did other poor Black mothers around her.

The community in which Nadine lived provided all that was required for her to conclude that she had a well-rounded childhood. Her memories of her community were so vivid that, as she spoke, I could visual a young Nadine moving about a neighborhood that engaged its children in many ways. Nadine referred to it as “a real Black community” and went on to describe what she meant:

Well, it was a type of Black community that had two churches on my block. One Across the street from my house and one on the corner... When school was over, if we were not involved in an after school program, we could just go to one of the churches that had a band that played with them and they’d let us play with the instruments. We also had a community theater, the Kismet. The whole neighborhood would go; the parents didn’t have to come because it was in walking distance. We would go to see the movies at the Kismet because you get to see two movies and you could stay and get to see them over and over again...We didn’t stay, for the most part, because we had other activities and Tompkins Park was about a block away from the Kismet. Everything was in a five to six block radius, and Tompkins Park had a library that was like the hub of at least our block on Hark Street. It was the hub of the block because we were really interested... well, the whole neighborhood was interested in books, even those that you think wouldn’t be. Yeah, so we used to go and get our little books and then we’d play in the park and then we’d go back. But before we even did that, we had to go home and change our clothes, because in those days, you did not play in your school clothes. You would have to change into your jeans and sneakers...

Nadine also had vivid memories of her school experiences, beginning with her mother, who served as her first teacher.
I have two sisters and I’ll always remember my mother went to the second hand store and brought these three school desks. And that’s where we got our lessons and by the time we entered kindergarten we knew how to read, write and we knew a lot about numbers; so we were more than prepared when we entered school.

Her mother, who was known for making frequent and unannounced visits to her classroom, had established a reputation as a very involved parent and strong advocate for her children. Witnessing her mother’s active involvement in her daughters’ education, Nadine learned some early lessons regarding being an activist.

…the first time they took me out the one class was because I was having problems with spelling. I think it was in the third grade and the teacher tore up my paper. That just shocked me so much that I just put spelling out my mind. I was shocked at the number of words that I got wrong. So, after that incident spelling was no longer a priority to me. You know I was an avid reader, but spelling… I just kind of shunned away from it because she yelled and screamed at me. Fortunately, one day my mother happened to be making one of her school visits. She used to just drop in and she happened to catch the teacher yelling and screaming at me. Of course, apologies were made.

The Role of Othermothers

Also significant to the childhood experience of two of these women are the roles played by the “othermother” figures in their lives. Collins (2000) points out that “Other mothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood”(p. 180)… “Children orphaned by sale or death of their parents under slavery, children conceived through rape, children of young mothers, children born into extreme poverty or to alcoholic or drug-addicted mothers, or children who for other reasons cannot remain with their bloodmothers have all been supported by othermothers… “Young women are often carefully groomed at an early age to become othermothers” (Ibid, p. 180). In Lindiwe’s
case, her mother’s mental illness caused her to be frequently absent from the home. Lindiwe found herself having to step into the role of othermother and teacher to her younger siblings who were nine and ten years younger than she was. From the time that they were born, Lindiwe cared for them and later took on the responsibility of preparing them for school and mentoring them academically. Another person that was significant in helping to shape Njeri’s critical consciousness was an older woman who took care of Njeri after her mother started working. Unlike many other children in her neighborhood, Njeri did not attend nursery school or kindergarten. She began school in the first grade. Because her school was over crowded, the first-graders were forced to attend either morning or afternoon shifts. Njeri would spend her mornings with Mama Eva until the afternoon school shift began.

Mama Eva was more than a babysitter; she was the othermother in Njeri’s life. Under her care, Njeri learned many life lessons that influence her thinking and helped to shape the woman that she is today. Mama Eva had migrated to New York City from South Carolina. During that time, many young Black men and women eagerly left the south in order to escape racist and discriminatory practices in the form of segregation, Jim Crow laws, and lynching. Shortly arriving in New York City, Mama Eva entered nursing school. However, this endeavor came to an abrupt end due to a medical condition that caused her eyesight to begin to fail. Like Njeri’s father, Mama Eva ceased many opportunities to school her on the facts and realities of life. In particular, Mama Eva shared stories about her experiences growing up in the south.
She [Mama Eva] used to get so angry cause of how they used to portray...uh...show Black people on TV, you know, living in those shanty houses (chuckle), and she found it offensive cause she said, “We didn’t live like that!” You know, she was saying that, you know, on either side of her home there were white people, you know, there was a white family living on one side of her and a white family on the other. She said that as children, they played together and then as they got older, I guess when they started school, that’s when the demarcation came. They no longer played together.

Beauboeuf-LaFontant (2002) contends that “in order to understand the caring demonstrated by African American women teachers, it is critical that we contextualize their thoughts and actions within their particular cultural and historical legacies” (p.280). In addition, recent studies on Black women teacher activists have highlighted their sense of responsibility and political commitment stemming from a tradition of struggle for upliftment of the race (Casey, 1993, Henry, 1998, Dixson, 2003). While I intentionally sought out Black women teachers who demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and political commitment to teaching Black and other diverse student populations, the question regarding how this sense of responsibility and political commitment developed still lingered. Dixson (2003) suggests that experiences of Black women are influenced by multiple factors and that a history of struggle against oppression should not be viewed as an exclusive factor. As I listened to the teachers’ childhood stories about the roles played by their fathers, mothers, and othermothers and examined them within their socio-historical context, the synergistic nature of their roles as activists became apparent. Here you have four Black women educators, including myself, who were all born in the early nineteen fifties. The fact that this was also a time when movements for social justice within this country and globally had been initiated had a profound effect on each of our
families and us and helped to shape our individual journeys towards developing critical consciousness in the unique ways described above. As I examined the stories of their childhood experiences and mine, it became clear that it was also within our family/community relationships and interactions that the seeds of activism were planted. Surrounding each of us were examples of efforts made toward family and community survival, challenges to the status quo, as well as to obstacles to our advancement. Lindiwe was taught lessons in perseverance, unity and collective responsibility. Nadine came to view community life as an extension of family life as she learned to use family and community resources to advocate for self and family. Moreover, Njeri and I were taught to view the world critically, linking our lives and struggles to the lives and struggles of people in other parts of the world. I am suggesting that the combination of social and historical phenomena, the lessons taught, behaviors modeled as well as the provision of opportunities to practice those behaviors and understandings by and within the families and communities represent the planting of the seeds of critical consciousness that we carried into our young adult lives. We took on the responsibility of tending the grounds in which these seeds began to take root as we each sought to establish our place and purpose in the world.

*Extending the Activist Tradition: Watering/Fertilizing*

The oppression of Black women has been structured through the exploitation of labor, the denial of their political rights and privileges and the socially constructed and perpetuated controlling images of Black women that originated during the era of slavery
This fact suggests that Black women in America collectively face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely belittles women of African descent (Collins, 2000). Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this neither means that individual African-American women have all had the same experiences nor that we agree on the significance of our varying experiences. Thus, on the other hand, despite the common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women’s group knowledge or standpoint (Ibid, p. 25). Collins describes a Black women’s standpoint as collective wisdom on how to survive as Black women that emanate from common experiences fighting against the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender that predisposes them to a distinctive group consciousness (pp. 24-25).

Among the core themes that constitute a Black, women’s standpoint are the role and tradition of Black women’s activism. Collins (2000) makes a point of noting that, “prevailing definitions of political activism and resistance misunderstand the meaning of these concepts in Black women’s lives. Social science research typically focuses on public, official, visible political activity even though unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization may be equally important” (p.202). She offers Rosalyn Terborg-Penn’s definition of resistance as “women’s involvement in the organized struggle against slavery, peonage, and imperialism. Strategies included open and guerilla warfare, maroonage, slave revolts, and peasant revolts” (Ibid, p. 202).

However, Collins (2000) notes that Terborg-Penn’s definition of resistance is limited in that it doesn’t include the less visible forms of Black women’s resistance.
As activists, the women in this study nurtured the seeds of critical consciousness implanted in them during childhood as they set out to challenge the contradictions and oppressive structures existing around them. As I examine the manner in which each woman engaged their critical consciousness in order to confront the challenges to their race, class and gender subjectivities, as well as to their group survival, I will focus on the positive and liberating aspects of our activist experiences (Dixson, 2000).

*From The Portraitist: A Tradition of Activism In/Through) Education*

In the fall of that year, I began attending a local city college after being recruited by the coach of the women’s basketball team who had observed me play while in high school. However, I ended my membership with the team after my first (successful) season because the basketball team occupied an enormous amount of my time. My attempts at having a “normal” college life was constantly interrupted by my need to address political concerns that I had. There was a great deal of political activity occurring on, as well as, off campus and I sought to become a part of it all. In addition, I had become engrossed in the subject matter of a course in Contemporary Civilization that I was required to take during the first two semesters of my first year. During this time, I was introduced to the writings of W.E.B. Dubois, Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral and Walter Rodney, among others. Reading this literature greatly contributed to my developing a critical consciousness that changed the way in which I analyzed historical developments and human interactions, in general. I began to understand the exploitative nature of the socioeconomic system under which I lived, as well as the role that the quest for profit played in the destruction of civilizations in Asia, Africa and the Americas. The
struggles waged by African Americans against racism and for equity and social justice became clearly linked in my mind with the struggles against apartheid and the vestiges of colonial domination in Africa and the Caribbean. I also came to understand why they killed Lumumba and why my parents were so upset.

My college years were also a time during which people with whom I interacted began to turn away from western standards of identity. Most of my friends and associates began to change their names to those of African origin. I joined them as they began to dress in African attire and wear natural and traditional African hair styles. By rejecting western standards of style and beauty, we sought to affirm our humanity by taking a stand against centuries of being associated with ugliness, ignorance and inferiority because of our dark skin and nappy hair.

As a woman of African ancestry, I came to understand my unique position within the global struggle against oppression and domination, which, according to Collins (1990) reflects a matrix of multiple levels of oppression and resistance to oppression (p.536). Furthermore, Collins states:

The existence of Afrocentric feminist thought suggest that there is always choice and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be. Viewing the world as one in the making raises the issues of individual responsibility for bringing change. It also shows that while individual empowerment is key, only collective action can effectively generate lasting social transformation of political and economic institutions (Ibid, p. 546).
Most significant to my political and ideological development, at this time, was the fact that I became interested in the role that women in Africa were playing in the struggles for liberation from colonial domination. Women, in what are now the nations of Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and the Republic of South Africa, had begun to take on leadership roles in their struggles for national liberation. At this point, I began to show my support by actively participating in a coalition of groups working to support African liberation.

Activism/Educational Resonances: Lindiwe, Njeri and Nadine

Njeri was clearly influenced by her father’s political affiliations. Like her father, she embraced a Pan-African political philosophy. During college, Njeri became actively involved in various organizations that also embraced this philosophy. Many of the leaders and members of these organizations started out as members of the civil rights movement of the nineteen-sixties. They eventually became involved in organizations that supported a more radical approach after becoming disenchanted with the Civil Rights Movement’s focus on integration. Organizations such as the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party began to have a significant influence on Black high school and college students, beginning in the mid-nineteen sixties. Beginning in high school, Njeri would attend their meetings and programs to show her support. Njeri considers her activism to be less of a choice and more of the way she was raised to be. She believes that choosing not to become an activist would have meant disassociating herself from how she was raised and all that she learned growing up. Being an activist also influenced the reason for deciding to become a teacher.
I wanted to go into teaching and work with my people, with children that had problems, with learning and what not. I wanted to build up their self-image so they would be properly armed because this is how you build...I wanted to build revolutionaries. I wanted to build thinkers.

Within the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s many Black Women activists found themselves in the awkward position of having to fight against racial discrimination and oppression alongside Black men while, at the same time, having to struggle against the sexism that was rampant within many of these organizations. Those Black women, who were courageous enough to take a stand against gender discrimination from Black men, became the objects of severe criticism, ridicule and hatred. In her essay entitled, “Double jeopardy: To be Black and female”, Frances Beale (1970) analyzes the situation of Black women in America. She points to the capitalist system and racism as the sources of the oppression experienced by Black men women and children. However, while acknowledging Black women’s role alongside Black men in the struggle against racial oppression she also addresses the views of many Black men, at the time, who believed that their oppression to superseded that of Black women. It was also suggested that Black women were complicit in the oppression of Black men. The tensions that resulted from this type of thinking led many Black women activist to begin to organize around issues of gender discrimination and to challenge the sexist attitudes of Black men.

Njeri actively participated in certain organizations despite feeling that they were a little too dogmatic. Her main issue with some of the organizations that she supported centered on the treatment of their women members. Although they were able to articulate
what they considered progressive political and ideological perspectives, these perspectives were not reflected in the roles that women played in their organizations.

*I had problems with the Black Panther Party, with how they used to treat the women. In the organization, the women were like beasts of burden. They did the work, but could not think...they were very narrow in their scope... of how they saw things.*

Nadine’s activism began at a local community college that she enrolled in after graduating from high school. This is where she claims to have learned how to be an activist. Upon enrolling, Nadine quickly sought out membership in one of the Black student organizations on campus. One of the first issues that she found herself confronting was the sexist attitudes of the Black males that she encountered. Because of these attitudes, the Black women students who had previous been part of the organization had renounced their memberships and had formed their own Black women’s organization. The Black women students were mainly dissatisfied over the fact that they were forced to do most of the work in the former organizations and were afforded no opportunity to hold positions of leadership. Nadine had entered college with an understanding of gender discrimination and patriarchal domination. Although not naming it as such, she set out to challenge these obstacles in order to create a space of equality and establish a voice for Black women in the leadership of the main Black organization on campus. During this period, Black college students’ across the country were confronting a variety of issues related to equity and social justice in educational institutions. One of the foremost issues that Black students on many college campuses
fought for was the institution of Black studies programs. Such programs were linked to the advancement of Black people as a race. According to Harry Edwards (1970),

Black studies programs are designed to investigate and examine the sources of problems faced by Blacks in this nation and to aid in the solution of those problems. The more oppressive the obstacles facing Black people become—the more critical their problems—the more revolutionary the means of removing these obstacles and solving these problems must become. These programs are relevant, for they seek, in addition, to acquaint Blacks with their rich cultural heritage and thus to augment their sense of identity and assurance as a people (p.205).

Nadine and the other Black women students decided that trying to instituted a Black Studies program should be their primary focus at that time and in order to succeed, the Black students on campus needed to be unified. They decided to begin by trying to bring all of the small Black student organizations together as one large unified coalition:

We decided to call the organization, in the end, Black Unity. Now, one of the biggest and major arguments that we had was who was going to be on the officer board. So we made it clear that you’ll have the same situation that we had before with the Black women forming their own organization if we didn’t have, at least two women on the officer board. They agreed and we proceeded on equal footing from that point on.

During this same period Lindiwe’s interest in what was going on politically began to peak. The year that she graduated high school, 1969, was also a time when the Black Power Movement had begun to intensify. She had also just studied about the Civil Rights Movement around this same time. The legacies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X had left a profound impression upon her and she had begun to attend lectures and conferences about education, specifically, about how Black children should be educated. During this time, Lindiwe also decided to stop straightening her hair and she began to wear a natural hairstyle. She also began to wear African-style clothes, which she made
herself. Lindiwe surrounded herself with people who were committed to community outreach and became a member of the Black student union organization at the community college that she went on to attend after graduating high school. Similar to Nadine’s college experience, Lindiwe became involved in protests and other actions aimed at forcing the college’s administration to begin to look at the kinds of courses that they were teaching.

[I] became a part of the Black Student Union and worked hard in that organization. [I] was expelled from the school after we took over the school’s administration building... when I graduated from K...In fact, I’m not really sure how that happened for me because some of the other members of that organization were not allowed to graduate as a result of their involvement in the takeover of the school administration building. [I] went on to study at C... State College, which is a teacher’s college and also became politically active- well, not so much politically active, but involved in the Black Student Union organization on campus at that school as well.

As Lindiwe and the other women in this study became more focused on establishing a career in teaching the nature of their activism changed and was redirected toward the education system and their work with the students in the schools in which they taught.

*From Activism to Engaged Pedagogy: Planting Roots*

Black women’s activism is represented in their struggle for survival, in particular the survival of their children (Collins, 2000). Historically, education was viewed by Blacks as a vehicle for the advancement and survival of the race. However, Joseph (1995) asserts that, “The educational system orchestrates an internecine relationship between teachers and students. This relationship, which results in miseducation, misguided, misinformed youth and adults (leaders) who use disinformation’ tactics and chicanery,
operates today with maximum success in keeping the inequalities and hierarchies that characterize capitalist America” (p. 464). The Black women in this study recognize the unequal nature of the education system and how it operates to maintain the status quo. As educators, they used their classrooms as battle grounds on which they fought to effect change.

In her book, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (1994) bell hooks provides tangible examples of Black feminist pedagogy in her discussion of engaged pedagogy. Based on Paulo Freire’s concept of “conscientization,” hooks translates the term to mean critical awareness and engagement (p. 14). As a pedagogical strategy, hooks calls it “engaged pedagogy”. In her book *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom* (2010), hooks argues that there is a dire need for the use of engaged pedagogy in the classroom. She asserts that children lose their natural desire for knowledge and predisposition toward being critical thinkers when they encounter a world that emphasizes obedience and conformity as opposed to critical thinking. She advocates for the use of engaged pedagogy as a teaching strategy to counteract this reality. hooks (2010) defines engaged pedagogy as a teaching strategy that aims to restore students’ will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized. The central focus of engaged pedagogy is to enable students to think critically (pp. 8-9).

Critical thinking is a subject that Njeri discussed with great passion. It was a recurrent topic of discussion throughout the course of our interview sessions. Expressing opinion on the role of today’s teachers Njeri suggests that they are less savvy and unaware of what they should do when they first enter the classroom. As a teacher, Njeri
believes that her job is to open the minds of the children with whom she comes into contact to read and to understand the world around them. She also wants them to know that there are forces out there who don’t want them to succeed and that they can defeat those forces and succeed by being proactive.

First of all, I find a lot of the teachers are not savvy. They’re not aware of what they should do. As a teacher, the students that I come in contact with, I try to teach them how to think critically; through opening their minds to read, and to understand the world around them; that there are people out here who don’t want them to succeed. That drive has to come from within them; not for them to rely on other people to make them feel good, to help them do well in school. They shouldn’t even depend on me to do that. If they run into people that do help them, by all means, utilize them. But it has to be an internal drive that forces you to want to do well. That’s what I try to bring out from within them.

Njeri’s drive to achieve success with her students can be compared to that of a mother fighting to save the life of her drowning child—“You just do what you gotta to do.” Her commitment to the achievement of her students sometimes supersedes administrative directives and school policies.

At times, Njeri takes a somewhat passive-aggressive stance when it comes to dealing with school administration, especially when it affects meeting the needs of her students. Her confidence can be mistaken for arrogance. However, her passion for and commitment to the well-being of her students was evident. The tone of her voice became very stern as she began to speak to me as if I was no longer the interviewer, but had somehow transformed into a novice teacher whom she sought to advise.

Instead of sitting up there listening to these APs and Principals telling you what you need to do, know your craft! Know your craft and do what you gotta do! I’m not going to sit down there and argue with my AP and Principal. I might say to them, Well I think this, that and the other and they say, “Well the district wants you to do this...” okay? In the back of my mind, I’m saying that I’m going to go
back into my room and I’m going to operate the way I see fit because I was trained, you know, I’m a professional. So, I’m supposed to be able to look at my students and assess what they need and provide for them.

This moment resonated with me as I had a flashback of a time when as a school guidance counselor, I operated in a similar manner. I arrived at work one morning only to be cornered by an administrator who handed me a long list of students whom she wanted me to “counsel out” because “they’re not going to pass the tests anyway.” Assailing such attitudes and practices, Delpit (2003) argues:

When we strip away a focus on developing the humanity of our children, we are left with programmed, mechanistic strategies, designed to achieve the programmed mechanistic goal of raising test scores. Nowhere is the result more glaring than in urban classrooms serving low-income children of color, where low-test scores meet programmed, scripted teaching. The reductionism spawned has created setting in which teachers and students are treated as non-thinking objects to be manipulated and “managed” (p. 14).

Delpit goes on to refer to a comment by civil right leader Victoria Adams-Gray, who stated that, “…we educators must become ‘seed people of the world’ (personal communication, 1999)—those who prepare the ground and plant the seeds of the future…” Delpit further asserts, “We have forsaken our crops and we have abandoned our seedlings to attempt to fain nourishment from the poorest of all possible soils” (Ibid, p. 14). My response to the administrator’s directive was to reach out to those students and parents involved and inform them of their rights regarding this matter. I also provided them with options, in the form of community-based and other programs aimed at providing academic support for students who were at-risk of dropping out of school.

Njeri began her teaching career in the early nineteen-eighties. At that time she possessed with strong desire to teach children who were low-performing and in the most
need of help. Her early teaching experiences took place in a community that was suffering from many ills. The neighborhood in which her school was located was suffering from a crack epidemic and a problem with homelessness. Many of Njeri’s students lived in homeless shelters and had to navigate their way to school through a maze of addicts and drug dealers who not only lined the streets, but who also took over the schoolyard. Often, the school safety officers would have to go into the school yard before lunch time and ask the drug dealers to clear the yard so that the students could come out and play.

Njeri was initially assigned a third grade class. Although she expected to work with students who were low performing, Njeri was shocked and over-whelmed by the poor academic skills and the lack of both home and school support that the students had. However, in spite of these problems she worked hard to establish a classroom environment that was stimulating and conducive to learning. Reflecting back on the African-centered pedagogical approach of the independent school that her niece had attended, Njeri decided to incorporate elements of the independent school’s philosophy by building a collective consciousness among the students. Njeri began to emphasize such values as collective work and responsibility, having faith and trust in self and one another, and cooperation.

*I tried to drum into them that we were in this together; that we were a family-more than they were at home. You know, because we were together five days a week, for at least, seven hours a day. We were like a family and we have to work together as a family; Because that’s what families do. We help each other. And it’s their responsibility to pull each other up. Either we’re going to survive together or we’re all going to drown together.*
Operating under such a philosophy, Njeri paired students who were less advanced with those more advanced and used a variety of group work strategies that required each student be held accountable for the success of the group. Njeri also stress the development and use of critical thinking skills. When teaching math, a great amount of time was spent on getting the students to discuss and explain the processes involved in getting the answer rather than just showing the answer.

*Instead of saying “this is wrong, that’s wrong,” you’d want the child to work the problem out, say what’s to be done; how they did the problem; how they arrived at that answer. What I would do is put them in groups and let them do that and then each group would present how they did the problem; explain how they did the problem. Then we would decide which one was correct. You know which was correct and why it was correct. So, that is developing reasoning and thinking skills.*

Finding ways around the existence of poor and inadequate resources Njeri came up with alternative ways to teach her students the skills needed to be successful academically. Where they lacked readers, Njeri would make full use of the public library. She also enrolled the class in book clubs that rewarded teachers and their classes with books for their school library if the students ordered over a certain number of books. This yearly, collective project involved students and parents and aimed at building up the school’s library resources.

Nadine advocates for her students with the same passion and commitment that her mother did for her three daughters. She is concerned that her high school students will not be prepared to for life after school. Like Njeri, Nadine emphasized the need to produce students that are critical thinkers. Her goals as an educator are very clear:
When I started thinking about being a teacher, my thoughts were about what I wanted to produce. What type of child that I wanted to develop as a result of my teaching. One of the things that I was clear about is that I wanted to develop thinking children that questioned and know when to question society. I want them to have compassion. I want them to understand ethics. I also want them to know, clearly, that how they carry themselves and what they do in life affects the whole community.

Referring to her students as her children, Nadine speaks passionately about wanting to develop children who are thinking people, who understand the issues of today. She insists that too many young people today are being taught not to think and definitely haven’t been taught to think critically. Nadine is also very critical of the new teachers who are entering the profession, suggesting that they themselves lack the ability to think critically. She declares, “I can see this in some of the new teachers coming in—you know, cause if you don’t know how to do it, you don’t know how to teach it!”

Nadine believes that good teachers should have the freedom to teach the way that they need to teach. She also believes that a gifted teacher’s style of teaching is not going to fit into any cookie cutter situation because the needs of the students she teaches determines her style. Nadine argues that one can spot a gifted teacher by observing her students. “If she has a clear and effective way of teaching you can see the results in the children’s enthusiasm an eagerness to learn.” She often encounters students that lacking in reading and/or writing skills but who prove to be great thinkers. They are often unable to convey their ideas clearly because their over-use of slang words. When Nadine encounters such a student, she does not dismiss him or her because she is not able to understand the slang words. Nadine listens carefully, so as to let the student know that she is interested in what’s being said and then drawing on what she knows about the
cultural background of the student, she finds a way to get the student to understand the necessity for speaking in a more coherent manner.

*I remember I had this one young man. Every time I asked a question, his hand would go up. I remember the first time he spoke; he introduced some new slang that I hadn’t been exposed to yet. So, I let him speak so that I could get a feel of what he was trying to say and what he was saying was really profound. So when he finished, I’d say “translate it.” He said, “What do you mean?” So I said, You do realize that I didn’t understand everything you were saying because of the slang.” I asked, “How would you say the same thing to your mother or grandmother?” Even though it was a struggle for him, he got through it because I allowed him to say it the way he wanted to say it first. After that, when he spoke in class it became less and less of a struggle for him.*

Nadine went on to talk about a student who she considers one of the most profound critical thinkers that she has ever had in her class. Although this young lady had a vocabulary that was very poor, she had the ability to take complex information and break it down into simple terms so that her classmates could understand. Nadine points out that many times children like this are pushed aside and this is why she maintains that you have to look at each child individually to discover his or her gifts.

Of all of the teachers in this study, Lindiwe’s role as a mother had the greatest impact on her teaching. This was because her approach to teaching her students was the same teaching approach and experience that she sought for her own children. Not only was she concerned with having her children receive a quality education, she also wanted them to learn about their African culture and develop pride in it. This led Lindiwe to make certain career choices that resulted in her becoming a teacher in an independent African-centered school that her children also attended. This decision came about as a result of a series of events that occurred after she graduated from college and that
culminated in an unexpected pregnancy. Lindiwe was faced with a serious decision to make. All along, she had been preparing herself to continue her education by pursuing a Masters degree in a historically Black university in the southeastern United States. Since elementary school, all of Lindiwe’s education had been in predominately white schools. Therefore, she really wanted to experience a predominately-Black educational institution. After completing undergraduate school and being accepted in the graduate school program of her choice, Lindiwe went home to spend the summer prior to going south. However during the summer it was revealed that she was pregnant with her first child. This news led to her decision to put off attending graduate school so that she could stay in her hometown and have her son. Upon making this decision, she began to look for work in the public school system. Being pregnant, she was not going to apply for a permanent position in the public schools, but decided, instead to work as a substitute teacher. After having her son, Lindiwe spent the next two years teaching algebra at an alternative high school where she worked with girls who were pregnant, unwed teenagers.

When Lindiwe’s son came of age to start school she began to think seriously about the type of education that she wanted him to receive. She was not happy with the public school system and had decided that it was not a place where she wanted her children to be. Her main issue with the schools in her neighborhood was that she did not think the quality of education was good. Therefore, she made the decision to enroll her three-year-old son in an independent African-center school located near her home.
Lindiwe felt that the teachers at particular this school were really invested in teaching students, not just the curriculum but teaching students their African connections:

I always felt connect to my African history. Even as a child growing up, you know, in my parents’ home my father was always talking about African men and/or women who were great in history. He prided himself on knowing African history. And he talked to us a lot about it. And so, I began to really feel connected to the history and always really wanted to learn more about it. Which is probably why I became so connected to the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement too? I mean I just learned so much about our history during those periods and I felt that my children needed to know about it as well.

Lindiwe felt the public schools should have been doing more to teach students about their history since the majority of the students in the schools were of African descent.

However, when she learned about this particular independent African-centered school she saw it as a great opportunity for her children to receive a well-rounded education that included African history.

Lindiwe’s personal teaching philosophy stresses the fact that students must, not only develop critical thinking skills, but they must also develop skills that will make them productive citizens of the world. As such, she views the role of teachers today as crucial to providing the students with the skills that will help them survive. While Lindiwe clearly understands that teachers are responsible for improving their students’ academic achievement she strongly believes that this responsibility transcends just teaching students to read and write. It also includes teaching them the skills necessary to become good and productive citizens of a world that requires that they possess knowledge in many areas.

They[students] have to learn how to be technology savvy in this world; they have to know how to be critical thinkers; they have to be able to read and understand
texts; they have to know how to ask important questions and so, I think teachers have an awesome responsibility today.

Lindiwe suggests that teachers require a great deal of preparation in order to fulfill all of their role expectations. She insists that a teacher’s main role is to be respectful of their students. This means they have to be aware of the learning styles of their students and be able to connect to the children emotionally. They also have to set a tone in their classrooms where children feel comfortable enough to be able to ask questions and to participate and engage in activities.

The spirit of mothering was apparent throughout my conversations with each of the three teachers. Historically, Black women’s roles as mothers and community othermothers laid the foundation on which the activities of Black women educators rest. Since the period of slavery, Black women viewed education as a powerful tool for liberation and engaged in many forms of resistance in order to secure an education for the children of their communities (Collins, 2000).

Nadine often referred to her high school students as “her children”. Njeri made it clear to her students that “we are a family”. She spoke maternally of her hopes for her students futures and beamed with maternal pride when she talked about her encounters with former students, years later and hearing their stories of success after high school. Lindiwe, directly associated her role as a mother with her role as a teacher. As most parents she is invested in her children’s success in life. She insists that what she wants for her children she truthfully want for all children. This meant all of the children that
entered her classroom: “I felt like I didn’t just want one or two of my students to be successful, I wanted them all to because I felt like they were all mine.”

Lindiwe points out that as a mother she always conveyed the message to her children that they possessed the power to control their own lives and that they could do whatever they wanted to do, as long as they prepared themselves properly for it. Lindiwe’s expectations of her students mirrored those of her own children. She conveys similar messages of success to her students. Lindiwe believes that each of her students possesses their own gifts and that they have the potential to make changes in the world. She tries to create a classroom environment in which the students feel respected and understand that the expectations are high. She also encourages them to take part in changing the world and to show compassion and courtesy toward one another. Lindiwe believes that encouraging these behaviors and values in her own children have helped them to develop into responsible young men with families. Her aspirations for her students are very much connected to those that she have for her children and reflect the investment that Black women teachers have made in the success of Black youth in general: “I’ve mentored several students along the way and I’m very proud of them when they come back to school to visit. I’m proud of the directions that they’ve taken over the years”.

For Black women teachers, their work as educators was associated with motherwork and connected to Black women’s collective struggle for group survival. Black women teachers felt morally and socially responsible for continuing the activist mothering tradition of imparting politicized understandings upon their students for the
purpose of survival (Collins, 2000). This sense of responsibility on the part of Black women teachers links education to a spiritual mission. In the next section, I explore my final research question concerning the role that spirituality plays in the teachers’ work as activists.

*The Spiritual is Political*

My spiritual understandings are the result of a life story that spans two centuries— the birth of my maternal grandmother in 1885 until her death in 1992 at 107 years old. Grandma’s life reflected the pages of a history book. Having been born in South Carolina not too long after emancipation, she lived through most of the significant historical events experienced by Black people since the end of slavery. Grandma was the source of spiritual strength for our family. She kept us grounded in the spirit! Each Sunday, my siblings and I would meet her at church and sit with her in a pew that was designated for her, being one of the elder church mothers. Church involved more than attending weekly services. It was a place for social gathering and the headquarters for community service. For the most part, the women of the church engaged in working with the children who attended the church and who lived in the community. They taught Sunday school, tutored, and organized activities and trips on the weekends and during summer vacation. They sold dinners to community, visited church members who were homebound or hospitalized, collected scholarship money for young adult members attending college and rescued those church member families, who for various reasons, had fallen on difficult times economically. Along with my grandma, my mother and my siblings, I participated in many of these activities with the understanding that this is what
we do. And what we do, supported the church and the community. And that’s what it was all about.

Resonances: Njeri, Lindiwe, Nadine

What emerged from my conversations with the three Black women teachers was a clear connection between their spirituality and their approaches to teaching. While Nadine does not consider herself a religious person and, at this point in her life, does not attend church services, she made it clear that she is not an atheist. She emphasized the fact that she adheres to the values of the Christian religion and also respects those of other religions. Nadine believes that it is important to embrace those characteristics and values of various religions that contribute to building good character. She cited Buddhism’s eightfold paths as an example. Nadine’s position on religion, in general, is connected to her role as a teacher. As a high school history teacher Nadine makes a point of teaching about the role that religion has played, historically. She does this by having her students examine the role that certain religions and their leaders have played in the destruction of civilizations, as well as in the oppression of groups of people. Her concern is that her students come to understand that religion can be used as a tool to oppress, as well as to do good.

Although raised by a father who was an atheist and a mother who was a very infrequent churchgoer, as a child Lindiwe attended church from time to time with some of her neighborhood friends. When her mother did go to church, she attended a Baptist church. However, when Lindiwe went to church with her friend, she attended a catholic
service. Religion played an inconsistent role in Lindiwe’s life, although she acknowledged the desire to find a spiritual connection that was purposeful. Later, the lack of a political connection to religious services that she attended eventually discouraged Lindiwe enough for her to become leery of religion altogether, although she acknowledged that she continued to follow the tenets of Christianity during that period.

For a brief period, as a young adult, Lindiwe became interested in the Muslim religion and would go to a mosque from time to time with someone who she grew up with in the public housing project and who had become a follower of Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam. Lindiwe even contemplated becoming a member of the Nation of Islam. However, she soon became discouraged about joining. This was during the period between the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, a time when she was becoming very politically active.

*If you were Muslim then you really couldn’t become politically engaged and that really turned me off. But, I did like the whole idea of becoming, you know, self-sufficient, owning your own businesses, a lot of the concepts that the Nation of Islam espoused, I really felt connected to.*

Lindiwe then disassociated herself from religion for a fairly long time. Although she continued to believe in a higher power, she didn’t see a connection between believing that there is a God and being a part of a particular religion. She lived through her twenties and thirties feeling leery of organized religion. Though she continued to adhere to the tenets of Christianity, she chose not to go to church.

Just prior to relocating to a city in the southeastern United States, Lindiwe began thinking through her attitude about going to church. She started attending a local church
where she described the services as more political than religious. She liked that aspect of
the church and concluded that there must have been something missing for her to begin to
start looking at organized religion. More recently, she was able to find a
spiritual/purposeful connection when she became involved in a Pentecostal church that
provides social services to its surrounding community through its various ministries. The
minister of the church is female as are many of the elders in the church. Lindiwe
regularly attends services and is actively involved in the ministry for people who are
infected with HIV and AIDS. She has done a great deal of work within that ministry.

I like the community activism aspect of church. I like churches that are really
involved in community activities and this church kind of fits that bill, somewhat.

Lindiwe still wrestles with the idea of being totally committed to organized
religion. She considers herself more spiritual than religious. She believes in being
respectful towards people, doing what is considered right for people and helping people.
She attends bible study and reads scripture, but admits that she is not totally convinced of
the biblical stories that she reads however, she is more open to trying to understand them
than before.

I believe in a divine spirit. I believe that this spirit, that controls the universe, is
so much more powerful than myself. I acknowledge that.

Although she has embraced the Christian religion Njeri, like Lindiwe, does not
consider herself to be in sync with other Christians.

I don’t see myself being in sync with everybody else. A part of being a Christian is
that you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and that once you do that,
you become saved and then you can go to heaven. Well, I have a problem with
saying that and being a part of that because I do not feel that people who are
Buddhist, Hindu or whatever are going to hell because they did not choose Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Njeri believes God to be omniscient and omnipresent and that there are more similarities than differences among many religions. She claims that if we look at what is common among various religions instead of what is uncommon, the world would be a better place. Njeri’s respect for other cultures and religions is something that she learned and has maintained since childhood. She has little tolerance for those who ridicule and debase other religions. According to Njeri, her acceptance of Jesus Christ automatically means love and acceptance of others. She views Jesus as the model activist and cites many stories from the bible that support her belief. Njeri’s faith serves as a platform for her political activism.

God said, “When you follow me, I will provide for you.” And that means doing His work! That means feeding the poor; educating the uneducated; healing the sick; providing homes for the homeless...That to me is political! That’s what it should be about! Go to where the people are. Do not judge them! Paulo Freire said, you go down where the people are. You don’t tell them, “Oh, you need this; You need that. Let them tell you what they know. Let them tell you what they need; and you help them organize to deal with their needs. That’s what it’s about! That’s activism!

For Njeri, being an activist is an obligation. She attempts to impart this sense of obligation to her students by telling them, “we are family” and that the principles that held them together as family were the Nguzo Saba—The Seven Principles. The Seven Principles represented values that Njeri instructed her students to adhere to and use as a guide for how they should treat each other.

What also emerged from my conversations with the women was the fact that they
each rarely, if ever, referred to themselves as activists. Each viewed her activism as part of who she is and what she does. In fact, upon questioning Lindiwe about her history of activism she struggled with the idea of referring to herself as an activist. Lindiwe explained that when she graduated from college and moved back to her home town, she became somewhat connected to her community and found herself working with organizations that were community based and that were working toward improving the educational system within her community as well as working to provide a voice for African Americans. When she began teaching at the independent African-centered school, she became connected to community members who were speaking out against the injustices in South Africa and in other African countries. They were also dissatisfied with conditions in the local public school system that employed teachers who were mostly Caucasian and whom many felt did not understand the cultures of the students in their classrooms. Lindiwe went on to question whether this qualified her to be viewed as an activist. I was somewhat puzzled by her reluctance to be called an activist because her choice to work in an independent alternative school that had a history of engaging in political and community activist causes seemed to indicate that she was. As a mother and a teacher, Lindiwe had taken a stand against the poor system of education in her neighborhood schools by putting her children in the independent school where she also became employed shortly thereafter.

*I wanted them to be in a school where culture was definitely great and the teachers who were at the school were teachers, who I felt understood my children and would provide them with strong images of what a strong African male looks like and what a strong African female looks like. I wanted them to get the kind of education that they needed, one that wasn’t just going to help them become strong*
in reading and mathematics but one that would help them become conscious citizens who not only knew their African roots but who were also conscious and knew what was right and what was wrong.

Upon further questioning Lindiwe began to recall activities involving her work organizing the tenants in the apartment building in which she lived. She appeared somewhat bewildered over the fact that she had forgotten about these activities.

*You know you spend so much time in the community. After a while you feel like you’re doing because that’s just who you are and that’s just what you do. And one of the things that I felt very strongly about was trying to bring a since of consciousness to who I lived around in my apartment complex.*

Lindiwe described how she organized a group of tenants who worked hard to create and maintain a safe environment for the children of families who lived in the building. The group started a tenant’s organization, which met monthly. They raised money to hire a security guard to monitor the building. During the holidays, they decorated the building with symbols related to Kwanzaa so that the children in the building and the adults would learn about Kwanzaa and what the symbols meant. Under Lindiwe’s leadership the tenants association began to focus on organizing fundraisers and other activities within the building that provided the tenants’ children with options to playing on the sidewalk in front of the building after school and on the weekends. Lindiwe started inviting the children out. Sometimes they would go bowling, skating or take trips to museums. She was always trying to teach the children what she thought they needed to learn and to understand about their African history, current events, or just being respectful of others. As we continued to dialogue and Lindiwe continued to recall and describe her activities in her community, she paused a couple of times to interject that she
had forgotten about some of the activities discussed. As Lindiwe turned her head from side to side with a gesture of disbelief, it appeared that she began to, gradually acknowledge her identity as an activist. This was significant because it represented a moment of resonance.

Summary of the Findings

In this chapter, I reported findings, through portraiture, related to the four research questions that I posed at the beginning of this study. The aim of the study was to extend the research begun on African American women teacher activists to include an examination of the ways in which their life experiences have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given current educational disparities. The first question sought to identify what the teachers considered significant life experiences that related to their own schooling, family life, community and community lives. The experiences considered most significant were those that contributed to the development of critical consciousnesses on the part of each teacher. These experiences also provided the impetus for the teachers’ eventual social and political activism.

The second research question looked at the issues and pedagogies that the teachers believed to be essential to the success of their students. Each singled out the need to teach critical thinking skills, as well as the social skills necessary for students to be able to maneuver successfully in the world as productive citizens.

The third question explored each teacher’s understanding of her role as an educator. I found that the teachers incorporated their roles as activist into their teaching.
Secondly, I found that each teacher evoked either a mother or an othermother spirit in enacting her role as a teacher.

The last research question focused on the role that religion and spirituality plays in their work as teacher activists. What emerged from my conversations with the teachers is that their work as teacher activists is spiritually grounded and that their spirituality is politically based.

*The Essence Of The Portraits: Rooted Pedagogies*

The overarching research question that frames this study is: How has the life experiences of African American teacher activists informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given current educational disparities? Toward this end, the inquiry sought to examine the following sub questions:

1) In relation to their own schooling, family and community lives, what life experiences do Black women veteran teacher activists consider most significant?

2) What issues and pedagogies do the teachers believe to be essential to the success of their students?

3) How has their work as activists influenced their work with students in the classroom?

4) What role has spirituality played in the teachers’ work as activist?

The findings of this study resulted in several conclusions. First, an interesting outcome of the research is the teachers do not refer to themselves as activists. They live it, echoing Njeri’s words, “You just do what you have to do.” Lindiwe, at first, questioned being labeled an activist, arguing, “This is just what I do.” Through their work in their schools, communities, churches and other organizations, they continue their
roles as teachers. The philosophical, ideological, cultural, spiritual and practical approaches of all three teachers represent an extension of the Black women’s activist tradition. Their collective focus on Black survival and preparing their youth to be productive citizens of the world is reflective of the endeavors of those Black women educators that were part of a vanguard of Black women activists who, in the face of racial, economic and social oppression, built institutions of learning and assisted their people in gaining access to education.

Secondly, the teachers in this study provided exemplars for fostering student achievement through the teaching of critical thinking skills. This also relates to their goal of preparing students to be able to effectively deal with social justice issues. These teachers linked critical thinking to survival, as well as to the ability to take on leadership roles in preparation for society’s future demands.

Third, the teachers in this study claimed their positions as citizens of the world. They emphasized their global identities as people of African descent and voiced their connection to African people throughout the African Diaspora. As their parents did when they were growing up, the teachers seek to motivate their students to achieve through enhancing their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. They do so by establishing an African-centered family-like environment in their classrooms and applying the Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles) as a framework of values.

Fourth, the teachers in this study associated their spirituality with their work as activists. They tend to disassociate themselves from organized religion and use their faith
as a source of strength and as a platform for their activist work. For these teachers, their activism is part of a spiritual obligation.

Finally, I end this chapter by attempting to name the work that we, as Black women educators and activists do. I call it Rooted Pedagogies. Rooted Pedagogies are teacher practices, dispositions and ways of knowing that emanate from the unique and combined aspects of Black women’s life experiences. This includes Black women’s spirituality, as well as our historical legacy of activism. Rooted Pedagogies acknowledge the connections among Black feminist pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching and incorporate their focus on cultural competence and cultural knowledge, on critical thinking and critical consciousness, on self-reflection and self-actualization, as well as on academic achievement, success and empowerment. Using the metaphor of a tree planted, taking root and growing to maturity, the rooted pedagogies are comprised of the following components:

1. *The Planting of the Seeds*
   Rooted pedagogies are grounded in the family, school and community experiences of childhood. They consist of experiences shaped by the social and historical context of the period, the traditions and survival lessons taught and learned, as well as the behaviors modeled and practiced. This stage represents the planting of the seeds of critical consciousness that shape the spirit of activism.

2. *Watering/Fertilizing*
   Rooted pedagogies represent the extension of Black women’s activist tradition of struggle for group survival and institutional transformation.

3. *Planting Roots*
   Rooted pedagogies reflect the use of education as a vehicle for the advancement and the survival of the Black race. They are approaches to teaching that reflect a way of life and that aim toward providing children with the necessary knowledge and skills to understand and survive in a just world as productive citizens.
4. *Spiritually Grounded*

Rooted pedagogies link education to a spiritual mission. As with the sun, spirituality serves as an energy source that drives Black women activist teachers’ commitments to fight for social justice through their teaching.

Rooted Pedagogies reflect the synergistic nature of Black women activist teachers’ life experiences. That is, the totality of experiences that we bring to the teaching profession. It also includes those intangible and un-theorized aspects of Black women’s understandings, which might explain why “We just do what we have to do,” without naming it. As seen with the teachers in this study, Rooted Pedagogies extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom and school to incorporate students’ families and other institutions within their community environment. In Chapter 2, I presented existing theories, models and strategies geared toward promoting effective teaching and achievement, especially for students of color. Rooted Pedagogies incorporate all of those and more.

In chapter 5, I will discuss the implications of this study for teaching and teacher education. I will also offer suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest several possible directions for future research and practice in teacher education. First, one of the implications was the need for additional studies that focus on the cultural diversity among Black people. Changes in the United States population in terms of race ethnicity, social class and other differences have helped to shape the educational experiences of all students in our schools (Nieto, 2005). The changing demographics in this country is also reflected in the teachers that are found in our schools. The United States, being a multicultural society, consists of Black families that reflect a blending of cultures from different parts of the African Diaspora. For example, Nadine and I had fathers who were born and raised in the Caribbean, while Njeri’s father was born and raised in South America. This fact lends itself to question, “What cultural and ideological influences do Black women activist teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds contribute to education in the United States. Since the population of Black students also reflects this diversity, we might also investigate the ways in which we identify Black students whose heritages emanate from different parts of the African Diaspora and the ways in which we should structure our approaches to teaching in order to address their needs.

Secondly, Banks (2009) points to the importance of linking multicultural education with global education. He also suggests that there is need for students to begin to view issues and concepts globally so that they can develop a cosmopolitan perspective. In order to foster this, perspective teachers, as well, must demonstrate an understanding
of the relationship among cultural, national and global identification. The teachers in this study demonstrated such an understanding as they laid claim to their identities as people of African descent. They incorporated African-centered values and teaching strategies that build directly on the practices of culturally relevant pedagogy. Schools of education can aid in the effort to link global education and multicultural education by developing courses that explore the global cultures and subcultures that exist within diverse communities in the United States. Further research is also needed in this area, so that the complexities of diverse communities in the United States can be adequately represented in the literature. For example, research that compares the perspectives of African American activist teachers and activist teachers of Latin American descent regarding their roles as teachers would serve to link multicultural education and global education while also contributing to the literature on teacher activism.

Thirdly, the findings revealed a recurring emphasis on the importance teaching critical thinking skills. The development of critical thinking skills was viewed as a vehicle for achievement and as a way to effectively prepare students to deal with social justice issues as well as for future survival. This suggests the need for the development of curricula within teacher education that actually prepares teachers to do activist work. Activist work in the classroom involves teaching students to thinks critically (hooks, 2010). By engaging students in learning activities that promote such critical thinking skills as problem-solving, identifying contradictions, gathering information and evaluating, preservice teachers will come to understand the dialectical process of critical consciousness-raising.
Fourth, the findings of this study yield an important implication for practice related to activist work and teaching for social justice. The activist worked involved in teaching critical thinking skills is also associated with the students developing ways to effectively deal with social justice issues. Teaching for social justice and teaching critical thinking skills, both require the teacher to have critical awareness of issues related to power, privilege and oppression. This suggests that schools of education provide coursework that adequately address these issues. This also suggests that teachers allot time and (safe) space for discussions of these issues to take place.

Finally, this study links the concept of spirituality with the Black women’s activist tradition and the work of Black women activist teachers. The findings suggest that Black women teacher activists view the work that they do as a spiritual obligation. Incorporating a spiritual foundation into one's teaching approach can begin with a focus on building a sense of community in the classroom. This would involve teachers taking definite steps to get to know her/his students, as well as their family and community backgrounds. These steps can include making home visits, attending community affairs and visiting various institutions within the students’ communities. Based on the knowledge gained, teachers will be able to establish a set of guiding principles that establishes a classroom culture that is safe and just; that promotes healthy and positive relationships among students and teacher and that builds on the strengths and talents of its students.

The community-building aspects of portraiture (intimacy, empathetic regard) facilitated the development of researcher-participant relationships that were close and
personal (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1987). The participants in this study shared very personal thoughts and experiences. They were also very open to revealing these aspects of themselves. I believe that the use of portraiture as a methodology played a key role in facilitating the success of this study and I would advocate for future research into the relationship between the choice of research methodology and the nature of the research.

**Final Thoughts**

Close to three decades ago Dr. Bettye Collier-Thomas (1982), in an article entitled, *The impact of Black women in education: Historical overview*, posed several questions regarding Black women’s contributions to the field of education, among which was, “Is there any evidence that Black female educators developed a philosophy of education which was distinctive from that of Black males, white females and white males? (p. 174). Since then, responses to this and similar questions have been varied but framed for the most part within accounts of Black women’s struggles against oppression, social and economic discrimination, and unequal educational opportunities. Recent studies of Black women teachers have provided perspectives that, while different, are interrelated (See Chapter 2). Findings from these studies highlight the cultural and political knowledge, dispositions and commitments that Black women bring to teaching, along with their sense of mission and ethical visions.

In this study, I have attempted to address the need for additional studies that examine the perspectives of Black women teachers and that look at the ways in which teachers are influenced by larger social factors. By examining the life experiences of the
Black women teachers, I sought to realize the purpose of this study, which was to explore the ways in which the life experiences of veteran African American teacher activists have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given current educational disparities. I also attempted to examine their perceptions of the role that spirituality plays in the work that they do. A significant part of this discussion focused on how these women construct, justify and maintain their identities as activists, and how they adapted their activism over time.

In order to illuminate the lives and voices of the Black women teacher activist, this study was conducted using portraiture as a methodology. The data that I collected was rich, complex and layered. While I sought to do justice to their individual stories, I was often left concerned about which story to tell and whether I chose the best story. In narrating their stories, I was concerned about using language that not only related their stories accurately but also captured the nonverbal—the emotions, facial expressions and nuances of their voices. These are examples of elements that distinguish portraiture from other forms of qualitative inquiry and that guided me on a journey towards capturing the “essence” of each participant. Early in this study, I argued that the contributions of Black women educators to the development of theoretical frameworks and models for educating Black and other marginalized people are limited. It is my hope that this study will contribute to on-going discussions and research on Black women teachers and the work that we do.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: Recruitment Letter
Recruitment Letter

Date

Dear

I am developing a research project to examine the ways in which African American teacher activists have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators given current existing educational disparities. This project represents partial fulfillment of the requirements for my Ph.D. degree in Education Teaching & Learning.

I would like to solicit your participation in this study. As a participant in this study you will engage in a dialogue about your experience. Data will be collected a minimum of four times during the course of the study. Data collection will involve informal interviews held a minimum of four times between June 2009 and March 2010. The initial interview will last 1-2 hours. Follow-up interviews of 30-45 minutes will be scheduled if necessary. Participation in this study is voluntary; you may chose not to continue at any point. Interviews will be tape recorded and you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts. The data obtained will be summarized without using your name or the name of your institution in the findings of my dissertation. Only general information regarding the type and size of the institution (public, private, grad level, etc.) will be included.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to engage in a dialogue about your experiences as they relate to teaching, your own schooling, family life, activist
experiences, etc. Issues to be addressed will include your professional. If this makes you uncomfortable you may choose to discontinue your participation in the study.

If you are willing to participate in this study please return the attached form indicating your availability. I will then provide you with a consent form that will outline further information about this study and your role in it.

I value your participation in this study and thank you in advance for the commitment of time, energy and effort this will require. If you have any questions about the study or your participation please contact me at or. You may also contact my dissertation committee chair, (office) or at

Thank you for your assistance.
Yvette Pierre
Ph.D. Candidate
The Ohio State University
APPENDIX B: Participant Response Form
Participant Response Form

I, _________________________________ am willing to participate in your study examining the ways in which African American teacher activists have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators given current existing educational disparities. I will be available for an interview on the following dated between June, 2009 and March, 2010.

________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________

I can be reached by telephone at the following numbers:

________________________________________
________________________________________

My mailing address is:

________________________________________________________________________

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE

Yvette Pierre
Ph.D. Candidate
The Ohio State University
APPENDIX C: Telephone Recruitment Script
Telephone Script

“Good Morning/Good Afternoon. My name is Yvette Pierre and I am a Ph.D. candidate at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio where I am developing a research project that focuses on African American teacher activists and I am calling to request your participation in the study. Would you be interested in hearing more about this study?”

[If No]: “Okay then, thank you for your time. Have a good day.”

[If Yes]: “Thank you, I appreciate your interest in this study.”

“This project represents partial fulfillment of the requirements for my Ph.D. degree in Education The goal of the study is to extend the research begun on African American women teacher activists to include an examination of the ways in which their life experiences have informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators given current existing educational disparities.”

“As a participant in this study, you will be asked to engage in a dialogue about your experiences as they relate to teaching, your own schooling, family life, activist experiences, etc. Data will be collected a minimum of four times during the course of the study. Data collection will involve informal interviews held a minimum of four times between June 2009 and March 2010. The initial interview will last 1-2 hours. Follow-up interviews of 30-45 minutes will be scheduled if necessary.

“Do you have any questions, thus far?”
[If Yes, Listen to question(s)]

[If No]: “Let me emphasize that as participation in this study is voluntary; you may chose not to continue at any point. Interviews will be tape recorded and you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts. The data obtained will be summarized without using your name or the name of your institution in the findings of my dissertation. Only general information regarding the type and size of the institution (public, private, grad level, etc.) will be included.”

“Would you be interested in participating?

[IF NO]: “Okay, then. Thank you for your time, good-bye”.

[IF YES]: “Thank you; we appreciate your interest in our research”. “Can you provide me with at least three dates and times that you will be available between June 2009 and March, 2010?”

[IF NO]: renegotiate date, day and time

[IF YES]: “Great! When we meet, I will provide you with a consent form that will outline further information about this study and your role in it. The day before our initial meeting, I will contact you by email as a reminder.

In the meantime, if you have any questions about the study or your participation please contact me at or . You may also contact my dissertation committee chair, at (office) or at .

“I look forward to meeting you on [initial meeting date and time]. Thank you very much again for participating in our study”
APPENDIX D: Sample Interview Questions
Sample Interview Questions

1. Let’s start with talking a little bit about your background and family history.
2. Can I ask what time period would this be that you began school, what decade?
3. What were the demographics of that school of that time that you attended?
4. In terms of your family’s socio-economic status at that time, how would you categorize them?
5. Did both of your parents work when you were in school?
6. What type of work did your father do?
7. How would you describe your community growing up?
8. Where people in the community, your mother, your father and other family members concerned about safety issues?
9. Tell me about your educational experience, as much as you can recall from elementary thru junior high school?
10. What was the racial makeup of the teachers that you had in your school?
11. Did your mother or father do homework with you at home during your early school years?
12. How would you compare your experiences with your white teacher compared to the hand full of Black teachers that you had?
13. Did religion play a significant role during your childhood?
14. How did you come to desire a career in education and specifically teaching?
15. What were you interested in teaching?
16. Being that you attended high school and college during the sixties, were you influenced by all of the social and political activity? If so, How?
17. How were you influenced as a Black women?
18. What was your college experience like?
19. What do you believe a teachers role should be?
20. Describe your teacher training experience.
21. How would describe your experience as a beginning teacher?
22. Is there an educator that you would say influenced you greatly or who influences you now?
23. Do you believe that you gender plays any significant role in how you approach teaching?
24. Do you feel that there any distinction between Black males that you have observed teaching and the approaches of Black women teachers.
25. You’ve had a long career in education as a teacher. Could you speak to some of the successes that you’ve had with your student specifically?
26. Are the majority of your students, students of color?
27. Do you consider yourself an activist?