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I, Kareem T Moncree-Moffett, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

It is entitled:
Educating our African American students

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“Successfully Educating Our African-American Students”

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By

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Abstract

The purpose of this empirical study was to explore the lived experiences of African American retired female teachers who have prior experience with educating urban African American students in public schools. Also explored are the experiences of active African American female teachers of urban African American students and comparisons are analyzed. The research questions explore how retired African American educators perceived and describe their experiences with urban students and how their experiences can be used to improve teacher training programs designed to help teachers adapt to school reform. Conceptually, this study was framed within the context that stories are an effective way to communicate experiences, as supported by Dewey and Erickson. Data were collected through a series of interviews. Initially, a line by line analysis was conducted on the responses of 6 respondents, 3 retired and 3 active African American women, who were chosen from a large metropolitan area based upon their designation as retirees and their willingness to participate. Each interview question was coded for specific information. Each code was derived as a result of repetitive analysis with a goal of identifying patterns and drawing out as much information as possible about the respondents' lived experiences with urban educational. The results of the study suggest that listening to retirees is an effective way to evaluate previous pedagogies and practices, from the perspectives of those who lived through them, information about how they were implemented. The retirees were eager to use their experiences to convey messages of hope and give advice to pre-service and active teachers about strategies to use when adapting to educating urban African American students. This study contributes to positive social change by providing suggestions to improve professional development programs, which could lead to better teaching experiences for pre-service and active teachers and higher recruitment and retention rates for minority educators. Suggestions from this study also introduce methods that can positively impact interaction with this generation of urban students.
DEDICATION

First and foremost, thank you, God!

This dissertation is dedicated to my sons Ikeobi, Niko, and Dare, who have traveled this educational journey with me. Without your school experiences (good and bad) and your patience and support, this would not have been possible. This dissertation is proof positive that there is nothing that you can’t accomplish with the right attitudes, prayers, and the tenacity to see it done. As long as you’re able, never believe anyone who tells you that you can’t accomplish something. In your heart and hands is all the proof that you need to be successful.

I love you so very much! Thank you for being the greatest gifts I have received.

To my mom, Wanda Moncree-Ball, you have always been my loudest cheerleader and the wind beneath my wings. Thank you so very much for all your love and support. I did it!!! This is for us!

To my late grandparents, Evelyn and Willie Moncree, who had only a high school and 8th grade education respectively, you have instilled a wonderful legacy of education within me. Thank you for smiling on me.

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From experience, I know that educating urban African-American students can be both challenging and rewarding. For those educators working diligently in the trenches to successfully educate urban African-American students, I humbly submit this work to acknowledge the ways you impact students every day!
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER | Page
---|---

I. INTRODUCTION | 1
Conception of the Study | 1
Research Problem | 6
Purpose of the Study | 12
Significance of the Study | 13
Research Questions / Hypothesis | 14
History of African-American Education | 16
African-American Teachers | 20
Teacher Education Programs | 20
Limitations and Delimitations | 21
Key Terms | 22
African-American Teachers, Pedagogy and Learning | 28

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK | 23
Motivation Theory | 24
Urban Schooling | 27
Critical Race Theory | 29
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy | 34
Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology | 40
The Experience of Knowing | 40
The Use of Dialogue | 41
Ethic of Caring | 42
Personal Accountability | 44
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race, Being Raced and Racial Maneuvering</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Maneuvering</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation of Authentic Caring Relationships</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation from Persons of Authority</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Pedagogy</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. METHODOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants and Purposeful Sampling</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired Educators</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Educators</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Procedures</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Validity</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. FINDINGS</strong></td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Themes</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme One: Building Positive &amp; Meaningful Relationships</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Two: Culturally Relevant Teaching</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Three: Lack of Teacher Preparation</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V. CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| REFERENCES                                                             | 127  |
| APPENDIX                                                              | 144  |
| Interview Questions                                                   |      |
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The disparity in academic achievement between African-American children and their white counterparts is arguably one of the most gripping of all educational problems in the United States. This gap, which appears early in elementary school, develops into differences in high school graduation rates, college attendance and completion, and ultimately, differences in income and socioeconomic status (that underlie the most critical social inequalities). Scholars in the history of education, such as James Anderson (1989), Michael Fultz (1995), and David Tyack (2004), have documented the legacy of educational inequities in the U.S. Every citizen of the United States is guaranteed the right to a free and public education with the implied assumption that upon completion, high school graduates can compete intellectually with their international peers. Unfortunately, African Americans historically have not been afforded an equal opportunity to maximize educational benefits within the United States. Public schools, as mandated by state law, must provide American youth with an equal and quality education. So why then, in the 21st century, are there continued discussions regarding a shameful American debacle: the black/white achievement gap?

A critical issue that has emerged from exploration of this tragedy is the important role that African-American educators play in the academic achievement of urban African-American youth. The seminal work of Michele Foster, Jackie Irvine and Vanessa Siddle-Walker, to name only a few, has helped to shape and focus the field of study, and implications for black teachers and their teaching are conceptualized in several important ways. This work spans the pre-
desegregation era to the present and also focuses on preschool—12th grade schools and higher education. Their research clearly supports that having more black teachers in the teaching field could potentially improve a wide range of situations and needs of black students (Milner, 2006).

Much has been written about black teachers, their experiences, their curriculum development and their teaching in public, urban, suburban, and private schools (Dixson, 2002; Foster, 1997; Holmes, 1990; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Irvine & Irvine, 1983; King, 1993; Milner & Howard, 2004; Milner, 2003; Monroe & Obigah, 2004). This same literature also speaks to black teachers’ experiences in higher education, namely in teacher education programs (Baszile, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1996; McGowan, 2000; Milner & Smithey, 2003). Agee (2004) shares that a black teacher “brings a desire to construct a unique identity as a teacher . . . they negotiate and renegotiate their identity” (p.749). Hooks (1994) makes it clear that black female teachers carry with them unique cultural experiences and perspectives that have been historically silenced and marginalized in discourses about teaching and learning. Black women teachers and their unique worldviews have specifically been omitted from discussions—even when race was the topic of discussion (Hooks, 1994). Likewise, in colleges of education, pre-service and in-service programs, there is a largely tailored but subtle effort to meet the needs of white female teachers (Gay, 2000). Black teachers, in addition to other teachers of color (both male and female) are seemingly left out of these important and relevant discussions that directly affect them and the students that they resemble.

Ladson-Billings (1994) maintains that exemplary African-American educators believe in the capacity of all African-American youth, regardless of class or gender distinctions, to learn and successfully navigate the terrain of white society. Discussing why some African-American students fail in school, Ladson-Billings also notes that these same African-American teachers
typically do not fall back on commonly held beliefs and notions about the barriers to these students’ success, nor do they define success in traditional ways. Billings contends that African-American teachers, in turn, view a student as successful if he or she is simultaneously able to achieve academically and maintain strong connections to his or her community and the people within it. Other researchers such as Henry (1998) find that exemplary African-American teachers also frown upon genetic, cultural, or economic deprivation theories, holding themselves and the schools responsible for the intellectual development of each and every black child. In a study of African-American female teachers, Siddle-Walker (2000) found that the teachers of her study worked overtime to help their African-American students learn. Tillman (2004) suggests, “These teachers saw potential in their black students, considered them to be intelligent, and were committed to their success” (p. 282). In the findings of both researchers, there was something authentic about the black teachers they researched. The black teachers saw their jobs and roles to extend far beyond the hallways of the school or their classroom. They had a mission to teach their students because they realized the risks and consequences in store for their students if they did not teach them efficiently and if the students did not learn. An undereducated and underprepared black student, during a time when society did not want or expect these students to succeed, could likely lead to destruction (drug abuse, prison, or death) (Milner 2006).

The education of black children has historically been a challenge to mainstream education due in part to the variances in cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic differences. Thus, the black/white achievement gap, according to Ratteray (1989), is a consequence of an absence of “cultural synchronization.” Many researchers acknowledge that African Americans have a unique cultural orientation with respect to effective learning, which stems from African traditions (Hilliard, 1992, 1995). Examples include beliefs about spirituality, displays of
emotion, physical movement, and individuality. African-American students engage in distinctive language patterns, styles of dress, and forms of nonverbal communication. Such behaviors and orientations are often incongruent with European-influenced school norms (Kochman, 1981; Gilmore, 1985), demonstrating how a lack of cultural synchronization between teachers and students contributes to disproportionate disciplinary action, particularly among boys. Irvine (1990) wrote, “The language, style of walking, glances, and dress of black children, particularly males, have engendered fear, apprehension, and overreaction among many teachers and school administrators” (p. 27). Given that the majority of public school teachers in the United States are white and that African Americans constitute a growing percentage of student populations in urban public schools (Irvine, 2002; King, 1993; Sleeter, 2001), the importance of understanding cultural differences is significant. Research by Ladson-Billings (1994), Mitchell (1998), demonstrates that effective teachers of African-American students align their professional practices with their students’ cultures. Such practitioners are often referred to as “culturally responsive educators” (Ladson-Billings, 1992) and “warm demanders” (Irvine & Fraser, 1998). Verbal and nonverbal interactions between teachers and students mirror patterns that exist in students’ homes and within their cultural norms.

Black teachers can have a meaningful impact on black students’ academic and social success because they often deeply understand black students’ situations and their needs. For instance, Mitchell (1998), in her qualitative study of eight recently retired African-American teachers, reminded us of the insight black teachers can have in helping us understand the important connections between the affective domain and student behavior. Building on lessons learned from black teachers, Mitchell explained that in order for teachers to establish and to maintain student motivation and engagement, they should be aware of the students’ feelings and
social needs. Students’ feelings and emotions matter deeply in how they experience education. Black students often bring a set of situations that have been grounded in racism, inequality, and misunderstanding (Milner, 2002). Racism and inequality can emerge, not only through their daily interactions, but also through institutional and structural circumstances.

Educators working within a culturally responsive framework incorporate elements of students’ home, personal, and community lives into the classroom. In practice, culturally responsive education ranges from the inclusion of specific pedagogical strategies to the construction of school environments rooted in a given cultural prototype (Nieto, 1999). When school cultures parallel home environments, African-American students are more successful than when there is an absence of continuity between the school and the home (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Teachers who work within this tradition serve as cultural mediators, activists, and supporters of students’ growth and development (Mitchell, 1998). Collectively, the three roles enable practitioners to recognize and empathize with challenges that their students face. Moreover, their commitment to nurturing cultural congruence between institutions and communities diminishes the likelihood that pupils will be marginalized because of their cultural backgrounds.

The ideology of cultural relevance moves us beyond the sociolinguistics and blaming the students and their culture to incorporating the cultural patterns of the students into the learning environment. The usage of culturally relevant teaching moves toward using student culture in order to maintain, preserve, and appreciate it. Teachers that utilize culturally relevant pedagogy successfully are seeing the benefit with their African-American population of students (Collins, 2000).
Research Problem

The teaching force in American society remains overwhelmingly white, while the percentage of K-12 students of color continues to rise. The absence of cultural awareness of urban students creates an environment where teachers may not completely understand the needs of their students, and consequently cannot educate the entire student. Despite what one may conclude from the literature, there are African-American and white teachers alike who are capable of excellent teaching of urban African-American students. Any efforts to increase test scores and positively affect the educational experiences of urban students requires looking into the pedagogy and practices of effective and successful teachers. Given the long history of the poor academic performance of African-American students, one might ask why almost no literature exists to address their specific educational needs. Ladson-Billings (1994, p.9) says that one reason is a stubborn refusal in American education to recognize African Americans as a distinct cultural group. While it is recognized that African Americans make up a distinct racial group, the acknowledgement that this racial group has a distinct culture is still not always recognized. It is often presumed that African-American children are exactly like white children but just need a little extra help. Rarely investigated are the possibilities of distinct cultural characteristics or the detrimental impact of systemic racism. Thus the reasons for their academic failure continue to be seen as entirely environmental, economic, and social. Poverty and lack of opportunity often are presented as the only plausible reasons for poor performance, and the kinds of interventions and remedies proposed are lacking any attempts to compensate for these deficiencies.

There is seemingly a mismatch between teachers and students based on race and ethnicity currently in our nation’s schools and there must be a bridge of connection, particularly to
effectively reach urban African-American students. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), who suggests that knowledge emerges in dialectical relationships rather than in the voice of one authority, meaning is made as a product of dialogue between and among individuals. This study will attempt to examine through dialogue, the knowledge of African-American teachers and how they are effective and successful in teaching urban African-American students. This research has implications for helping to supplant the overwhelming presence of white perspectives of negative stereotypes towards blacks and their learning in our nations’ schools (Sleeter, 2006).

Furthermore, the literature states that African-American teachers’ perspectives and practices are critical in helping to produce culturally competent and successful teachers of urban African-American children.

Carter (2003) challenges the belief that low-income black youth equate “acting-white” with high academic achievement. Her survey findings reveal that African-American students hold high values regarding educational achievement and job success. Ainsworth (1998), Downey (1998), and Cook and Ludwig (1998) found evidence in large scale surveys that black adolescents do not generally have more negative school-related attitudes than other groups of adolescents.

A dominant perception of black students is that they are disengaged from school, resistant and oppositional in the classroom, and disdainful of education and achievement. In general, this perception is applied to black students as a whole, regardless of socioeconomic background; however, it is sometimes characterized as most pervasive among low income inner-city African Americans (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The perception of black students as negatively disposed to school and academic achievement remains powerful in the public mind. Monroe and Obidiah (2004) state, “Specifically related to student behavior and classroom discipline, a culturally
responsive stance enables practitioners to consider possible cultural underpinnings of behaviors traditionally perceived as disruptive” (p. 259).

The achievement gap for students of color, particularly black boys can be attributed to racism and the disengagement it breeds. McMillian (2003) posits, “African-American students (males in particular) are particularly vulnerable to disengagement” (p. 28). Once disengaged, school is no longer important to them. Maton, Hrabowski, and Grief (1998) have stated, “Research on African American adolescent males has focused to a large extent on their deficits, including their academic, social and behavioral problems” (p. 640). Schools must be conducive to learning for all involved in the process particularly for students who are greatly affected by the achievement gap, namely urban African Americans. Ladson-Billings (1995) summarizes the problem: “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). Cooper and Jordan (2005) argued that African-American experiences in school will be greatly improved once traditional norms of teaching have been reevaluated and restructured. They state, “if comprehensive school reform is to serve as a vehicle to promote greater academic and social successes for African Americans, males in particular, norms about race and culture must be explicitly addressed” (p. 8).

Substantive research suggests that success is being made in the education of urban African-American students despite the overwhelmingly negative odds against them. Researcher Garibaldi (1992) argued that teachers play a pivotal role in reversing the negative stereotypes attached to African-American students although they may also be inclined to perpetuate these same stereotypes. Teachers have to begin to learn about the students they teach as well as learn from the students they teach. Likewise, Foster’s (1997) research also includes the examination of
the life history of black teachers, further supporting the importance of the role of teacher in teaching students.

Foster interjects the historical role and importance that black teachers have had in the black community and in the education of black students. Within the black community, teaching was deemed as an honorable profession. The number of black teachers increased from 15,100 to 66,236 during 1890-1910 (Foster, 1997). Black teachers historically have been and remain pillars of support for young African-American students, both academically and socially. My research will answer the poignant and relevant question, “What are African-American teachers doing to achieve success with urban African-American students, and how can we replicate these strategies in our urban schools for increased effectiveness with our students?” Are these methods of teaching present only among African-American teachers, or can they be replicated by others?

Several current problems within traditional schools can compromise the quality of education for minority students, in particular, African Americans. Students of color have historically been denied an equitable education, and now more than ever before (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1994). Examples are not limited to hidden curricula, varying types of educational experiences, and curriculum knowledge made available to students with varying cultural and social backgrounds (Anyon, 2006). Research of African-American education indicates that the educational success of African-American students can be directly related to the experiences between them and their African-American teachers. Thus, one key question arises: Do African-American teachers provide different motivational strategies for African-American students?

There is a hidden curriculum in schools that has direct consequences on everyday activities in the educational process for African-American students in urban schools (Anyon,
Two tenets not addressed in the literature comprise this hidden curriculum for urban African-American students. First, critical questions and meaningful discussions regarding race, being raced, and racial maneuvering are not posed or invited (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Second, authentic caring relationships are neither formed nor attempted with African-American students (Siddle-Walker & Snarey, 2004). These tenets are significant contributing factors to the educational difficulties African-American students face in urban schools.

The hidden curriculum perpetuates differing curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative practices that result in differing cognitive and behavioral skills for minorities (Anyon, 2006). In Ann Ferguson’s (2000) *Bad Boys*, she conducted an ethnographic study at Rosa Parks Elementary School. She concluded that schools created the “bad boy” image through racial labeling and punishment. The culture of the school made the distinction between “best-behaved” students and “worst-behaved” students, where the best behaved students were typically white and the worst behaved students were black.

In Angela Valenzuela’s (1999) *Subtractive Schooling*, she suggests schools were organized and structured formally and informally to divorce students from their cultural and ethnic identities, thereby creating social and cultural divisions among students and between students and staff. If accepted, this “hidden curriculum” in traditional schools has a major impact on African-American students in urban schools. It negatively influences the ability to dialogue about racial barriers, to foster caring relationships, and to have high expectations of students. The poor performance of African-American students suggests that not only could there be a hidden agenda in the education of African-American students, but also that if there is one, it is working effectively.
Teachers in segregated schools prior to desegregation were consistently remembered for having a mother-like or father-like demeanor, for having high expectations, for motivating students to excel, and for providing resources to address needs (Siddle-Walker, 2001). These African-American teachers were critical figures who placed the needs of African-American students at the center of the school’s mission (Siddle-Walker, 2001). The authentic caring shown by these teachers has not been enough to reduce the achievement gap for African-American students in today’s urban schools. According to Valenzuela’s (1999) *Subtractive Schooling*, few teachers, in general, actually know their students in a personal way. Very few students (of any race) believe that their teachers know them; hence, many expressed they would not ask their teacher for help with a personal problem. Committed teachers who invested time and attention to their students were deemed foolish for their efforts (Valenzuela, 1999).

In comparison to majority students, African-American students are less likely to have positive relationships with their teachers (Walker-Dalhouse, 2005). There is a disconnection among African-American students and teachers, making it difficult to foster authentic relationships. Fostering successful African-American students is not a main focus in traditional schools. The disconnect is further extended because high expectations that pertain to personal connection, cognitive ability, and performance with respect to African Americans are virtually nonexistent—leading to a widening achievement gap and consequently limited student success. Bennett (2006) notes the following:

Lower teacher expectations for particular racial or ethnic groups are based on negative racial or ethnic prejudice. Teachers, like all people, are often not aware of their prejudices; thus they may not be aware of their lower expectations for some students (p. 27).
Purpose of the Study

Qualitative research studies provide voice to marginalized populations. We need to research effective educators of marginalized students in an attempt to replicate the pedagogies and practices of these educators who have attained success. By using qualitative interviewing, this study will reveal 1) what made these participants successful teachers; 2) where they believed they failed; 3) what changes they would make; and, 4) how society shaped their teaching. The purpose of the study is to examine effective teaching for African-American students and how such teaching has helped students not only achieve academic success, but also achieve that success while maintaining a positive identity as African Americans. It is about the kind of teaching that promotes academic excellence from students despite the lack of resources and conditions that are needed for success.

This is a qualitative research study that includes in-depth interviews of retired and active educators. There has not been enough research on the pedagogy and practices of African-American educators. Groups of educators were interviewed to compare the pedagogy of retired and current educators. The overarching questions that guided the interviews are: 1) “Has the pedagogy and practices of educators changed to perpetuate the achievement gap?” and 2) “What practices among retired or elderly educators have been eliminated or altered in contemporary pedagogy or practices?”

The research relies on a theoretical framework that complements social and political issues and is based on the roles that schools and teachers play in society. This framework promotes a vision of schooling and teaching that is informed by Critical Race Theory and Afrocentric Epistemology. I also propose a specific stratagem for current and future teachers that will empower active and pre-service teachers of any gender to positively affect the students they
teach and potentially increase their motivation and academic success, rather than focusing on the failure and the academic disparities between black and white students. This study investigates teachers who are deemed “effective” and “successful” by either a principal, peer teacher, students, or parents, who defined “effective” and “successful” with words including “being able to connect with students,” “making a positive impact on the students in their class,” or “helping students effectively grow and learn in the classroom.”

**Significance of the Study**

In mainstream and academic culture, more research is needed to assist with refining the educational reforms concerning urban students. From researchers such as Delpit (2006), Gay (2003), Ladson-Billings (1994), Collins (2000) and Siddle-Walker (2000) to policy makers such as President Obama and his most recent mandate for educational reform, the societal issue of the achievement gap of African Americans is a growing global concern. This study will assist with bridging historical practices, beliefs, and theories of retired educators along with the contemporary pedagogies, practices, and reform efforts employed by active educators in an effort to significantly impact the teaching and education of urban students, to reduce the current achievement gap between African-American and white students, and ultimately impact the professional development of current educators and the training of pre-service teachers.

The historical data from former educators can serve as a significant resource for those who are in a position to affect teacher programs, current teacher professional development workshops, and current and future administrator practices. This study will help to provide a counter discourse that centers race and identity of African-American teachers and the effects that the histories of their lives have on teaching African-American urban students. It is the contention of this study that the historical, socio-cultural, and political experiences of African-American
teachers and the urban African-American students they teach have been devalued in the education literature for too long. Efforts to understand the African-American teaching experience, both active and retired, must be given legitimacy and priority as an effective alternative framework by which to include policy and practice. Davis (2003) offers that “schools are critical sites for black students as they make meaning of who they are, what they are supposed to do, and how others perceive them” (p. 133); therefore, there is no reason for one not to believe that the ways in which African-American teachers practice and define their identities in the classroom to instruct black students might not be beneficial in helping to narrow the achievement gap. This study will also be significant in terms of reassessing the role of pedagogy, effective practices, and education, and it will further provide an avenue to understand the role of African-American teachers’ experiences and life histories, in addition to promoting education success by utilizing the lens of responsive, democratic, and liberating teaching.

Research Questions / Hypothesis

In an effort to positively affect the schooling of urban African-American students within our schools, all parties should be involved in this process. From conception to implementation and evaluation, reforms are less effective when the voices of all stakeholders are not considered (Zion, 2009). All teacher voices should be sought if school reforms are going to be successfully implemented. An important part of what teachers consider while teaching students includes their lived experiences. Smith (2000) studied the impact of lived experiences on the teaching styles of two science teachers. She concluded that lived experiences largely contributed to the beliefs and classroom practices of her respondents. Similarly, Herrmann (2007) found teachers were influenced by the people and events that took place around them. The informal and out of school experiences of any teachers, therefore, are critical to the interpretation and implementation of
school reforms and the effective education of urban students. One way to increase the numbers of experienced teachers in the system is to train and support new teachers so they will have a positive experience and remain in the field (Sterbinsky, Ross, & Redfield, 2006). Peer mentoring, learning from retirees, and professional development can be the means to enhance the effectiveness of novice teachers (Hargraeves, 2005; Kaasila & Lauriala, 2009; McCann & Johannessen, 2008). One way to gain access to information about what matters to African-American teachers is to encourage collaboration between in-service and retired teachers—a relationship in which the retired teachers serve as one-to-one mentors to novice teachers (Morgan & Kritsonis, 2008). Novice teachers, in collaborative relationships, could benefit from the experience of the experienced teachers (Hargraeves, 2005; Rogers, 2007). Retirees can offer an unfettered view of what they did to survive school reforms of their time (Bunting, 2006; Intrator, 2002). They do not have to worry about their images as professionals because they are no longer actively involved in everyday classroom procedures. Listening to the retirees could result in new reform efforts based upon realistic views and experiences from educators (Cordingley, 2006). Engaging retired African-American retirees in conversation about their experiences with urban African-American students may provide the opportunity to reflect upon lived experiences of a minority group of willing respondents (Cordingley, 2006; Intrator, 2002).

The purpose of this study is to give voice to African-American teachers’ practices and pedagogies and the influence on these histories on their teaching in an effort to facilitate successful teaching, learning and understanding of African-American students. To help frame the rationale for the design of the study, the overarching research questions being investigated use Critical Race Theory, Afrocentric Epistemology Theory and Culturally Responsive Teaching as a framework. I investigate the following questions:
1. How do principals, teachers, and parents define a successful teacher?

2. According to retired African-American teachers’ own practices, how does effective teaching occur for African-American students?

3. According to active African-American teachers’ own practices, how does effective teaching occur for African-American students?

4. What specific pedagogies or motivational strategies are effective for teaching African-American students?

**History of African-American Education**

To understand the significance of this study and the need to further research African-American educators, it is vital to review the history and connotation of education for the African American throughout the years. Historically, the institution of schooling did not benefit, nor was it meant to benefit, the African-American student. Lynn (2006) describes the injustice of the American educational system with regard to African Americans dating back to slavery times:

As history shows, this system of education has not served African Americans well. While ex slaves and their children were taught to read the word within a European culture that denigrated other forms of communication and learning, they were not taught to “read the world” in a Freirean sense. Schooling extended the arm of the slave master in the sense that it was a vehicle through which whites could continue to transmit Eurocentric values and morals to the oppressed, namely, African and Native Americans. More important, education and schooling
in America continued the de-Africanization or acculturation process because it forced Africans and others who were not of European descent to ignore their culture and their history and to accept Euro-American culture as their own (p. 118).

For African Americans the road towards literacy and education began in the 1800s. The message that has been consistently passed down for generations has been the importance of learning and education as a means of liberation even during times of physical bondage. Education has been symbolic for many things including freedom, opportunity, and advancement for some and concurrently disappointment, downfall, and struggle for others. Perry et. al. (2003) noted this symbolic significance:

For African Americans, from slavery to the modern Civil Rights movement, the answers were these: You pursued learning because this is how you asserted yourself as a free person, how you claimed your humanity. You pursued learning so you could work for the racial uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people (p. 11).

Learning was not an option for African Americans and the message was clear. For African Americans, learning was the key to many things—freedom, mobility, and leadership to name a few. It was not to be taken for granted. Once slavery was over, education for African Americans became a matter of contention. The next step for free blacks was to obtain equitable education. Literacy and learning for slaves and blacks was extremely dangerous; the desire for knowledge was a means to liberation for blacks.
Organized leadership among black Americans would prove extremely important in the efforts to achieve education and liberation for ex-slave communities. Black Americans were to receive a clear message that assimilation into European culture was expected when they received an education. In other words, black Americans were to take the kind of education that white Americans wanted them to have. Woodson (2005) shares:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples (p. xix).

African Americans fought for well over two hundred years for the right to an equitable education, causing black parents to oscillate between segregated and later integrated education for their children. What was extremely clear throughout history is their desire to provide their children with a positive and effective education. Black children were taught in churches and community halls. Beginning in the nineteenth century, black parents in a few northern cities enrolled their children in public schools as soon as they were available. When, as was often the case, the schooling proved disappointing, frustrated black parents attributed the ineffective instruction at the schools to one of two faulty assumptions. These were summarized by Derrick Bell (2004):

1. If the schools were all black, failure was attributed to the racially segregated character of those schools. “If whites were attending these schools,” black parents concluded, “conditions would be better” and
2. If their children were attending predominately white schools, blacks assumed that these schools were demonstrably better in physical resources and, thus, the quality of education would be better.

Important to note is the importance of black educators that were typically employed in areas of the country where there was a large population of black students and also where the schools were segregated (Foster, 1997). Many black teachers held advanced degrees and were well qualified yet limited to teaching only black children (Ladson-Billings, 2004). Siddle-Walker (1996) offers an account of a segregated community and the first-class education the students received, while highlighting the dedication of the African-American teachers and the relationships that those teachers maintained within the black community. She notes that while the conditions were inferior, the quality of education and the dedication of the teachers as well as the community were superior. “The dominant memory of students—that their teachers cared about them should not be construed, however, to mean that teachers ignored the academic content or that their efforts to engage students were always successful” (p. 126). Teachers were concerned with not only the academic learning of their students but their social character building outside the classroom. African-American teachers have historically educated the student holistically, concerning themselves with more than just the “book learning” of their students.

African-American teachers are not as populated within the teaching force as their white counterparts. In exploring the learning level of African-American students and the impact that their teachers have on them, Foster’s (1997) statement is poignant as a central theme of this study: “We needed to look at the past through new eyes in order to determine what we might learn to help address the apparently difficult educational issues of providing an excellent education for all African-American children” (p. ix). There are certainly benefits to this research
model with white teachers and African-American students; there should be other paradigms by which to examine the role of teachers in the education of African-American students. Irvine’s (2003) point is applicable in that:

Recently, researchers have begun to examine another explanation for the lack of achievement among African-American students: the quality of their teachers. However, the research on teacher quality variables has not included the perspectives of African-American teachers (p.27).

**Teacher Educator Programs**

Schools of education need to be kept abreast of trends in education that have both a positive and negative impact how students learn and how teachers can be effective in their delivery to students. Data from retired and elderly educators gives future and current teachers a glimpse into history and helps them understand the evolution of education and also realize practices that may have long been forgotten, but were extremely successful with students. This invaluable resource may not have been available to the educator if not for this research study.

**African-American Teachers**

This study of African-American teachers and the ways in which their practices and pedagogies contribute to the successful academic achievement of African-American students in the classroom is significant because of the scarcity of research in this area. Despite the scarcity, history has demonstrated that African-American teachers have continually played an important role within the black community and classroom. Teachers of all races historically have been
revered as upstanding and highly regarded citizens within their community. After the Civil War, African Americans became teachers to advance socially. Later, though integration would bring tremendous job loss and demotions, black teachers still took great pride in the work that they accomplished as role models within their communities (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Siddle-Walker, 1996). African-American educators enter the classrooms daily, with socio-historical, political, and cultural identities that affect their knowledge and practice of teaching styles. African-American teachers and their practices and pedagogies provide a unique and useful framework in closing the achievement gap and successfully educating urban African-American students. Ladson-Billings (2004) offers, “They may be more direct in their questioning, more exacting in their requirements, or more expressive in the presentation” (p. 17). Likewise, black teachers place high values and expectations on their black students in ways that warrant academic and social achievement and further study.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study follows a qualitative research approach, involving the use of in-depth interviews as the primary method. It involves a descriptive examination of the perceptions and experiences of retired and elderly educators. It will be limited to no more than six subjects because of the time constraints involved in interviewing and subsequent data collection and analysis.
Key Terms

The words black, African American, and person of color will be used interchangeably within this study.

Urban refers to a demographic within a metropolitan city; suburban refers to the outskirts of the city.

Pedagogy refers to a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations. Pedagogy is a concept that draws attention to the process through which knowledge is produced (Ladson-Billings, p. 14, 1994). Pedagogy and teaching are used interchangeably.

Epistemology investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true (Collins, 2000).
CHAPTER II
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The construction of learning environments guaranteeing academic success for all children requires theoretical and practical approaches that recognize the significance of culture in specific instructional settings, prevent stereotyping of minorities, help resolve cultural conflicts in schools, and integrate the home and school cultures. It will also stimulate the development of communicative and other skills that students need in order to participate meaningfully and successfully in the instructional process.

Many scholars have defended the role of culture as an important factor in school achievement not only at the collective (ethnic group) level, but also at the individual (content specific) level as well. The most important and influential aspect of a child’s learning is that of the child’s teacher. On average, teachers spend more waking time with children than do their parents, even with families in which one parent stays at home. With so much influence coming from the teaching staff, it seems only fair that as society attempts to produce an equitable playing field, we must attempt to enable teachers to be as prepared as possible for the most diverse student in the classroom.

The academic success of urban African-American students has been studied extensively in the research (Siddle-Walker, 2000, Ladson-Billings, Delgado & Stefanie, 2001, Milner, 2007). However, the underlying reasons for this success are still not well understood (Slaughter & Epps, 1987). Despite many obstacles, some African-American youth do succeed in school, but far too little is known about the factors that contribute to this success. As a place to start, rather than
focusing on African-American students considered at risk, research can be more useful at positively influencing policy and practice if teaching and learning variables that affect the academic success of African-American students were identified, modeled, and developed.

Few studies rely solely on the African-American experience to explain the phenomenon of African-American student achievement. Most of the research of African-American education fails to recognize the positive role that African-American teachers and others who successfully teach African-American students play in the development of urban black students. Much of the research on African-American education and students focuses on problem outcomes (e.g., school failures) and differences between African-American and white families and students (e.g., achievement test scores). The focus on failure may contribute to the generation of faulty and inaccurate images of African-American education, learning, and families in the literature and media (McAdoo, 1990).

**Student Motivation**

Parental influences are powerful indicators of student academic achievement, yet there are other factors that directly or indirectly affect students’ academic success. One important factor is self-motivation of the students. Student achievement is influenced, positively or negatively, by what goes on inside of the school and home environments (Stewart, 2006). The school environment fosters or hinders a student’s academic achievement. Schools have the power to exert their own unique influence on the academic achievement of their students, their school environment, and the attitudes of the teachers. Effective schools, often identified in terms of above-average student achievement scores, have strong instructional leadership from the
principal, closely monitor student progress, have high expectations of their students and parents, establish clear goals with an orderly environment, and have highly effective teachers. The quality of school life can also influence the adjustment and academic performance of African-American students. The academic performance of African-American students is enhanced when they perceive their teachers and other school personnel as supportive and helpful (Patchen, 1982; Pollard, 1989, Siddle-Walker, 2004).

For black students in particular, educational outcomes and disengagement are influenced by classroom environments, especially the student-teacher relations. Black students who feel understood, accepted, and respected by their teachers are likely to have positive relationships with teachers and in turn, positive relations develop into increased teacher expectations and student motivation and achievement. Also noted, negative perceptions or minimal teacher expectations and attitudes are part of a chain of variables that can lead to a negative self-fulfilling prophecy for minority students (Ford & Harris, 1996).

The quality of teacher-student relationships is especially important for African-American students for several reasons. First, African-American students are likely to be taught by white teachers, even in many urban school districts. Data reveals an ever-increasing cultural gap between African-American students and teachers, the vast majority of whom are white females (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Second, despite the cultural gap, few teachers have received substantive preparation in multicultural education, fewer teachers are trained to examine their own biases and stereotypes regarding minority students and cultural differences, and even fewer teachers live in the neighborhoods in which they teach. This can contribute to a lack of understanding of, appreciation for, and respect of cultural differences on the part of teachers. Lastly, the cultural gap affects the content and quality of curriculum for minority students. Not
many schools integrate multiculturalism within their curriculum. African-American students’ own attitudes toward school and achievement orientation significantly influence their achievement, behavior, and motivation.

In addition to the positions or approaches described previously, it is also theorized that the low academic performance of some African-American students is a consequence of the low number of African-American role models mentioned in the schools’ textbooks and also of the shortage of African-American role models serving as teachers in the classrooms (Robinson & Biran, 2006).

Teachers in the urban classrooms ultimately can have the largest influence on urban African-American student learning. Teachers affect whether students want to come to school each day, whether they will choose to learn and be engaged, even whether the students will respect the rules and make positive choices while at school. The students of today appear to have a choice of whether or not they will be respectful to classroom teachers.

There are many ways to conceptualize motivation. The theoretical framework of goal theory is prevalent. Goal theory is concerned with student and staff beliefs about the purposes for learning; it asserts that the learning goals a student embraces influence the quality of his or her investment in learning, preferred means of learning, and desired and actual learning outcomes. The goals prevalent in the school and classroom, the instructional methods used, and the socioemotional climate pervading the school, separately and in interaction with one another, influence the learning goals that students adopt (Rich & Shiram, 2005).
Urban Schooling

In order to appreciate the unique nature and challenges of urban teachers, one should understand what makes an urban school. For most, the term “urban school” connotes negative images of a dilapidated school building in a poor or rural inner-city neighborhood heavily populated with African-American or Hispanic children. This image is true only in part, as urban schools and districts are located in large central cities. Although these communities do have a high concentration of poverty, poverty is not necessarily a unique characteristic of an urban area. Poverty can be found in many schools in the nation’s rural areas. While poverty is a feature of both rural and urban districts, so is low academic achievement. Both urban and rural schools have other similarities that are not found in suburban schools. Urban schools educate many of our nation’s immigrant children, for whom English is a second language. Typically, the percentage of students classified as limited English proficient is twice that in central cities as it is in suburban schools. Many large U.S. cities educate children from dozens (possibly hundreds) of different nations.

Urban schools and districts vary also in the allocated resources available to students and teachers, although the numerous compensatory federal and state programs attempt to reduce the size of the disparities. Many urban districts also must deal with an eroding tax base, which consequently forces the district to be dependent on state and federal funding. The very nature of being dependent on outside factors further constrains urban districts. Lastly, urban districts are larger than their suburban or rural counterparts. District size does not have to be a negative and could be a positive, in that large urban districts may be able to negotiate better rates with suppliers (of computers or telephones, for example) and could solicit large-scale recruiting efforts that would be impossible for districts that hire only a handful of teachers each year. The
massive size of urban districts could also require complicated bureaucratic systems that could cause delays and indecisiveness.

Many studies have found that teachers in schools serving poor and minority students in large cities are more likely to be inexperienced, less likely to be certified, and less likely to have graduated from competitive colleges (Jacob, 2007). They also score lower on standardized exams and are more likely to be teaching subjects for whom they are not certified. The challenges facing urban schools are more numerous than those in more affluent areas, at least along easily observable dimensions. Yet, among the challenges facing urban districts, there are still “diamonds in the rough”: teachers who are effectively producing successful, highly motivated, and high-achieving students. Few studies highlight the successful teachers of urban students and their strategies that lead to their success with urban and African-American students.

The notion that equity means uniformity is only a viable defense if all students are exactly the same. Yet even when children are from the same parents, they are not exactly the same. Different children have different needs, and addressing their different needs is the best way to deal with them equitably. This mantra is the same as in the classroom. Teachers that claim not to “see color in their students” do their students a disservice. Teachers that do not acknowledge students’ racial and ethnic differences, really do not see their students at all and are limited in their ability to completely educate their students (Ladson-Billings, 1994).
Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a qualitative inquiry and is considered an orientational qualitative method. CRT seeks not just to study and understand society, but rather to critique and change society. Orientational qualitative inquiry begins with an explicit theoretical or ideological perspective that determines what conceptual framework will direct fieldwork and the interpretation of findings. As one of the most influential orientational frameworks, Critical Race Theory focuses on how injustice and subjugation shape people’s experiences and understandings of the world (Patton, 2002).

Influenced by Marxism and informed by the presumption of the centrality of class conflict in understanding community and societal structures (Carchedi, 1983; Crotty, 1998; Heydebrand, 1983), and updated in the radical struggles of the 1960’s, Critical Race Theory provides a framework—both philosophically and methodically—for approaching research and evaluation as fundamentally and explicitly political, and as change-oriented forms of engagement. “Critical Pedagogy,” as defined by Giroux and Simon (1989), critical theorists, is a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations. It can be understood as a practice through which people are incited to acquire a particular “moral character.”

As both a political and practical activity, Critical Pedagogy attempts to influence the occurrence and qualities of experiences. When someone practices pedagogy, he or she acts with the intent of creating experiences that will organize a variety of understandings of our natural and social world in particular ways. Pedagogy is a concept that draws attention to the processes through which knowledge is produced (Giroux & Simon, 1989).
According to Solarzano and Yosso (2001), CRT in education is an approach to understanding the problems in education through the lens of communities of color. These authors also argue that CRT in education begins to create a discourse that articulates the ways in which teachers of color can initiate the process of ending racial subordination. In this regard, we can begin to think directly about the possibilities for using CRT to understand and form an analysis of the emancipatory teaching practices of black social justice educators. Work in CRT in education that specifically defines the practices of black social justice educators is referred to as critical race pedagogy (Lynn, 2006). Critical race pedagogy derives from three notions: 1) the scholarship on black teachers; 2) culturally relevant pedagogy (Lynn, 2006); and 3) critical pedagogy, particularly the work of Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Barry Kanpol. According to Lynn (2006), the scholarship on black teachers and culturally relevant pedagogy examines the ways in which black teachers draw on culture as a basis for fostering the academic achievement of African-American students. In particular, this work examines the life histories of black teachers, explores their views of curriculum, pedagogy, and society, and investigates the liberatory dimensions of their teaching practices.

A unified definition of race is particularly necessary. Race, as defined within the American social construct, is a mechanism that differentiates marginalized groups of people, and is significant when attempting to discuss and close the education achievement gap. Manning Marable (1992) has defined racism as “a system of ignorance, exploitation and power used to oppress African Americans, Latino, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the sole basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms and color.” Omni and Winant (1994) argue that popular notions of race as either an ideological construct or an objective condition have epistemological limitations. Thinking of race strictly as an ideological construct denies the
reality of a racialized society and its impact on “raced” (people of color) people in their everyday lives. Racism and ethnicity can be another defining lens—or orientation—for qualitative inquiry in research and evaluation (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Patton, 1999; Stanfield, 1999).

The overall goal of Critical Race Theory within teacher education focuses on the work of progressive teacher educators of color and their fellow travelers who are trying to develop a pedagogy, curriculum, and research agenda that accounts for the role of race and racism in U.S. education. It works towards the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of marginalization in education (Solarzano, 1997). Critical Race Theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, practicing, and teaching with its relation to racial subordination. CRT views this knowledge as strength and draws explicitly on the person of color’s lived experiences by including such methods as storytelling, interviews, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, chronicles, and narratives (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1989; Delgado, 1995a).

Some African-American scholars have argued in agreement with critical theorists, that schools are a battleground in the struggle for power and the exercise of authority; yet the failure of many theorists to examine adequately the special historical, social, economic, and political role that race plays in the United States makes their argument less than complete for improving the education of African-American students. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), African-American scholars have only recently begun to look at specific cultural strengths of African-American students and the ways that some teachers leverage these strengths effectively to enhance academic and social achievement. Scholars like Hale-Benson (1986) and Taylor & Dorsey-Gains (1988) have identified cultural strengths that African-American children bring with them to the classrooms that are rarely capitalized on by teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994).
Bell hooks (1994), the black American writer and race theorist, proclaimed that:

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility in that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994, p. 207).

The coexistence of educational practice with Critical Race Theory can be regarded as a theory of transgression where educators deliberately move beyond the ‘normal’ (white) boundaries of academia, including the traditional form and sequencing of content, “acceptable” teaching approaches and standard assessment methods, to challenge and displace students’ dominant epistemological and ontological beliefs about themselves and the world they share with others.

CRT begins with the notion that racism is a natural and, in fact, necessary part of a society that is founded on racist ideology such as white supremacist principles (Calmore, 1997). Within this framework, you find that the history of education for African Americans is not a story of liberation and prosperity, but one of struggle and disappointment. A critical analysis of black education starts from the notion that black education, as we know it to be, was never intended to have liberatory consequences for African Americans (Lynn, 2006). In other words, as William Watkins has argued, the intent of schools and schooling in white supremacist contexts has always been to serve and further support the unequal system of privileges conferred upon whites (Watkins, 2001). Schools are merely part of a complex web of discursive cultural and
social forces that further instantiate white culture, ideals, and belief systems. In turn, further solidified are the political, social, and economic dominance of whites at all levels of society. The educational system becomes one of the chief means through which the racist system of white supremacy regenerates and renews itself. Schools not only serve as a sorter and stratifier; they also actively subordinate the culture, language, and social, economic, and political positions of nonwhites.

Derrick Bell’s (2004) notion of the interest convergence principle—the theory that whites do not allow significant progress for racially subordinated groups to occur unless they are, in some way, served by it—is useful (Taylor, 1996). For example, this principle could be used to examine the rhetoric regarding how and why public schools were instituted in this country in the first place. Jeffersonian arguments, for example, about the need for a unifying political belief system, or Horace Mann’s passionate manifesto regarding the necessity for inculcating children with American culture and values, might be construed as a pre-postbellum response to the ensuing Negro problem (Lynn, 2006). Carter G. Woodson’s (1998) often quoted statement sums it up very well:

Taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature, and religions, which have established the present code of morals, the Negro’s mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor. The problem of holding the Negro, down therefore is easily solved. When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions . . . he will find his “proper place” and stay in it.
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Due to the changing demographics in the American school system, the K-12 student population contrasted with the population of prospective teachers, the uncertainty about teacher preparedness to meet the needs of diverse student populations remains a controversial educational issue. Teacher educators have continued to question whether pre-service teachers presently in schools, colleges, and departments of education have the requisite skills and the necessary sensitivity to meet the challenges associated with effectively teaching racially and culturally diverse students.

The primary aim of cultural relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a “relevant black personality” that allows African-American students to choose academic success while maintaining their African and African-American culture. Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The cultural references are not simply vehicles for explaining the dominant culture; they demonstrate and provide context and value to the minority culture demonstrating that their culture is also relevant, applicable and valuable to academics (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This kind of moving between and learning of two cultures lays an important foundation for a skill that students will need in order to reach academic and cultural success in the long term.

Like culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching begins with an understanding of “the self,” “the other,” and the context. First, we must recognize that we are all cultural beings, with our own beliefs, biases, and assumptions about human behavior. We need to articulate and examine the values implicit in the Western, white, middle-class orientation of U.S.
schools, such as the emphasis on individual achievement, independence, and efficiency. By bringing cultural biases to a conscious level, we are less likely to misinterpret the behaviors of our culturally different students and treat them inequitably. Second, we must acknowledge the cultural, racial, ethnic, and class differences that exist among people. A desire to be fair and impartial sometimes leads teachers to strive for “color-blind-ness” (Nieto, 1994), and educators are often reluctant to talk about cultural characteristics for fear of ignoring heterogeneity among group members and “essentializing”—seeing groups as static, monolithic, and homogeneous.

But in order to be culturally responsive, we must acquire “cultural content knowledge.” We must learn, for example, about our students’ family backgrounds, their previous educational experiences, their culture’s norms for interpersonal relationships, their parents’ expectations for discipline, and the ways their cultures treat time and space. At the same time, cultural knowledge should not be used to categorize or stereotype, or to imply a clear understanding of another’s cultural beliefs and world view (Mishne, 2000). Instead, teachers should use acquired cultural knowledge as a way of demonstrating an openness and willingness to learn about the aspects of culture that are important to students and their families. Finally, culturally responsive classroom management requires that teachers understand the ways that schools reflect and perpetuate discriminatory practices of the larger society. Teachers must understand how differences in race, social class, gender, language background, and sexual orientation are linked to power. They need to recognize and fully embrace that the structure and practices of schools (e.g., rigid tracking, unevenly distributed resources, standardized testing) can privilege select groups of students while marginalizing or segregating others (Billings, 1994).

With these fundamental understandings, teachers can begin to reflect on the ways their classroom practices promote or obstruct equal access to learning. This is an ongoing, long-term,
and often discomforting process, in which cultural inclusivity becomes a lens through which teachers view the tasks of classroom management. These tasks include 1) creating a physical setting that supports academic and social goals, 2) establishing expectations for behavior, 3) communicating with students in culturally consistent ways, 4) developing a caring classroom environment, 5) working with families, and 6) using appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems. In the following sections, each of these tasks will be examined from a culturally responsive perspective.

When teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds, planned efforts to cross social borders and develop caring, respectful relationships are essential. From the very first day of school, teachers can set the tone by greeting students at the door with a smile and a warm, welcoming comment. Greeting second language learners with a phrase in their native language can be especially affirming. Teachers can also forge positive relationships with students by sharing stories about their lives outside of school, learning about students’ interests and activities, inviting them to make choices and decisions about class activities, and listening to their concerns and opinions. It is critical that teachers deliberately model respect for diversity—by expressing admiration for a student’s bilingual ability, by commenting enthusiastically about the number of different languages that are represented in class, and by including examples and content from a variety of cultures in their teaching (Gay, 2003). Finally, it is important to remember that caring also involves communicating high expectations and holding students accountable for high-quality academic work.

Self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness are imperative to improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color. Cultural critical consciousness is an understanding of self, others, and the world and a commitment to addressing issues of cultural
relevance in society. It involves thoroughly analyzing and carefully monitoring both personal beliefs and instructional behaviors about the value of cultural diversity, and the best ways to teach ethnically different students for maximum positive effects. Corresponding behaviors have to be changed to incorporate more positive knowledge and perceptions of cultural diversity.

To engage in these continuous critiques and efforts to make teaching more relevant to diverse students, teachers need to have a thorough understanding of their own cultures and the cultures of different ethnic groups, as well as how they affect teaching and learning behaviors. Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection is challenging to teacher education students, but it can be accomplished. A natural place to begin the learning process is by being aware of the obstacles that can interfere with the process. Some of these have to do with challenges of self-reflection in general that prospective teachers face; others are specific to ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity.

Culturally responsive teaching involves using the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of African-, Native-, Latino-, and Asian-American students as filters through which to teach them academic knowledge and skills. Other critical elements of culturally responsive teaching are unpacking unequal distributions of power and privilege, and teaching students of color cultural competence about themselves and each other. Culturally responsive teaching is necessary because 1) multicultural education and educational equity and excellence are deeply interconnected; 2) teacher accountability involves being more self-conscious, critical, and analytical of one’s own teaching beliefs and behaviors; and 3) teachers need to develop deeper knowledge and consciousness about what is to be taught, how, and to whom. These premises are supported by scholars such as Danielewicz (2001), Gay (2000), Ladson-Billings (2001), Palmer (1998), Schon (1983), Valli (1992), and Zeichner & Liston (1996). They explain that teachers
knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and
questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for
instructional effectiveness. Critical racial and cultural consciousness should be coupled with self-
reflection in both pre-service teacher education and in-service staff development.

Teachers who practice culturally relevant teaching believe that all of their students can
succeed. They help students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural, and
global identities. These teachers can also be identified by the way they have their classrooms
structured. Their interactions with their students are fluid and flexible and often extend beyond
the classroom. In modeling how they connect with their students, they expect students to interact
with each other in the same manner—with connectedness, respect and collaboration. Lastly,
these teachers have unique ideology about knowledge; they contend that knowledge and learning
is constantly re-created and shared by teachers, students, and parents alike. They often use
scaffolding for learning. The interviews of the educators in this study will explore the values and
practices of those that engage in (or have since retired from practicing) culturally relevant
teaching and had success. Is culturally relevant teaching an innate practice, or is it learned and
perfected over time? Is the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy replicable for teaching pre-
service teachers?

In the United States, the social institutions that legitimate knowledge, in addition to
Western epistemologies that they uphold, constitute two interrelated parts of the dominant
knowledge validation processes. In general, scholars and other experts represent specific
interests and credentialing processes, and their knowledge claims must satisfy the political and
epistemological criteria of the contexts in with they reside (Kuhn, 1962; Mulkay 1979). Because
this enterprise is controlled by elite white men, knowledge validation processes reflect this
group’s interest. Although designed to represent and protect the interests of powerful white men, schools, government, the media, and other social institutions, need not be managed by white men themselves. White women, African-American men and women, and other people of color may be enlisted to enforce these connections between power relations and what counts as the truth (p. 253; Collins, 2000).

The experiences of African-American women educators illustrate how individuals who wish to rearticulate a black women’s standpoint through black feminist thought can be suppressed by the prevailing knowledge validation process. Black women with academic credentials who seek to exert the authority that their status grants them to propose new knowledge claims about African-American women face pressures to use their authority to help legitimate a system that devalues and excludes the majority of black women educators. African-American women academicians who persist in trying to rearticulate a black women’s standpoint also face potential rejection of their knowledge claims on epistemological grounds.

Black women scholars may know that something is true—at least, by standards widely accepted among African-American women educators—but be unwilling or unable to legitimate their claims using prevailing scholarly norms. For any discourse, new knowledge claims must be consistent with an existing body of knowledge that the group controlling the interpretive context accepts as true (Collins, 2000). An experimental, material base underlies a black feminist epistemology, namely, collective experiences and accompanying worldviews that U.S. black women sustained based on their particular history and life experiences. The historical conditions of black women’s work, both in black civil society and in paid employment, fostered a series of experiences that when shared and passed on become the collective wisdom of a black women’s standpoint. Basically, a set of principles for assessing knowledge claims is now available to those
having shared experiences. Collins terms these principles that pass into a more general black women’s wisdom, black (Afrocentric) feminist epistemology.

**Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology**

The theoretical framework characterized by Patricia Hill-Collins (1991) as an “Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology” will be utilized here. This epistemology is characterized by the following tenets: 1) the experience of knowing; 2) the use of dialogue; 3) an emphasis on caring; and 4) an emphasis on personal accountability.

Epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge (Harding, 1987). It investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true. Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape what is believed and why. The level of epistemology is important because it determines which questions merit investigation, which interpretive frameworks will be used to analyze findings, and to what use ensuing knowledge will be put (Collins, 1991).

Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.

—G. K. Chesterton

**The Experience of Knowing**

The utilization of Collins’s ideology of Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology as a framework for this research is applicable on a number of significant levels. Within this epistemology, there is made a significant and poignant distinction between simply having knowledge and gaining wisdom as two different types of knowing. Often, within American
society, we fail to make a distinction between the two or we fail to even accurately acknowledge that one of them exists. Interviews of retired educators substantiate Collins’s distinction, as retired educators will have transcended from simple knowledge to having wisdom on how to effectively educate African-American students.

For the purpose of this research, “wisdom” is defined as knowledge plus experience. In Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology, knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate (Collins, 1991). In almost every society, more validity, trust, and credence is placed with those individuals who have lived experiences. Their claim to be experts is based on what they have experienced, making them more believable and creditable; besides, they usually are the elders of the community. This study depends on the concrete experiences of the retired educators of African-American students. Their experiences have primacy over theories. Teaching is explained by those who teach well (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination.” –bell hooks

The Use of Dialogue

Another tenet of Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology is the use of dialogue. Historically, African Americans have been a communal population with knowledge being shared within the community of elders and rarely without individual isolation. A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge of the validation process
(Belenky, et. al., 1986). This ideology of connectedness and the use of dialogue within the African-American community have deep African roots and a historical culture of oral traditions from which our community has strayed.

To adequately educate African-American students, we need to reinstate the dialogue of connectedness. People become more human and empowered in the context of a community, and only when they “become seekers of the type of connections, interactions, and meetings that lead to harmony” (Asante, 1987). The power of the word generally, and dialogues specifically, allows this to happen effectively.

Collins states that when African-American women use dialogues in assessing knowledge claims, we might be invoking ways of knowing that are also more likely to be used by women (Collins, 1991). Since the primary educators of urban and African-American students are women, it is purposeful to interject those experiences with African-American female educators.

**Ethic of Caring**

Trust is a silent covenant, often assumed to be understood between the teacher and the students, yet if never established, or recognized as being absent; it makes the journey of teaching arduous, frustrating, and sometimes an exercise in futility. However, if established and acknowledged, it becomes the unspoken key that unlocks the heart and mind. Successful educators of African-American students establish significant trust and with that, emotional bonds with their students that can sometimes transcend a parental relationship. Students are most responsive to those teachers that do for them not out of obligation but by choice.

This research will prove that trust and the ethic of care is by far the most important characteristic of successful teachers of African-American students. The theme of “talking with
the heart” is central to the ethic of caring, another tenet of the Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology of successful African-American teachers. The ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process.

Three components are interrelated with the ethic of caring—the value placed on individual expressiveness, the capacity for empathy, and the appropriateness of emotions. These components are evident as characteristics of successful teachers of African-American and urban students. Each individual is emphasized and valued for the uniqueness that they bring to the learning community. In African customs, each individual is thought to be a unique expression of a common spirit, power or energy inherent in all life. The ethic of caring also involves developing the capacity of empathy. This is the most important component. Students need to trust and believe that their teachers feel regret for their circumstances, if needed, but not pity, and that the student is capable of rising above them and being successful. Lastly, the ethic of caring concerns the appropriate use of emotion in dialogues. Emotions demonstrate that the speaker believes in the validity of what they speak of. This is parallel to the trust that students need to establish with their teachers, enabling them to open up and perform successfully within the classroom.

Collins (1991) identifies the centrality of Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology to black women’s lives and scholarship. The ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process. She believes that black female teachers demonstrate a unique ethic of care with their African-American students (p. 262). According to Collins’s black feminist epistemology, the components of the ethic of caring—the value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy—reappear in varying combinations throughout black civil society (p. 264).
Personal Accountability

It is not enough that individuals develop their knowledge through dialogue and present them in a trusting style that establishes concern for their ideals, but according to Collins’s Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology, they are also expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims. Knowledge claims made by individuals respected for their moral and ethical connections to their ideas will carry far more weight than those offered by less respected figures. For students in particular, assessments of an individual’s knowledge claims simultaneously evaluate an individual’s character, values, and ethics (Collins, 1991).

American history has been colorful in the education (or lack thereof) of marginalized peoples. Because elite white men controlled Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervaded the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship (Collins, 1991). As a direct result, the pedagogy and practices needed to effectively educate all students has never been recognized as even being useful and consequently never been fully developed, causing teacher training programs to be ineffectively graduating teachers who lack the cultural inclusivity to effectively teach students different from them. We have potential solutions to minimize the American racial achievement gap, and it is time we begin to utilize a different methodology to produce a different result for our students.

Race, Being Raced, and Racial Maneuvering

The history of African-American education is deeply rooted in struggle, declaration, and resiliency. During slavery, African Americans risked death in order to be educated. After slavery was abolished, teachers in the African-American community utilized their own personal resources to help educate freed people (Williams, 2006). Following the Civil War, African
Americans created schools designed to benefit the ideas and interests of their community and culture. Within these schools, African Americans were explicitly taught about race and racism in the U.S., what it means to be raced, and how to do racial maneuvering. The benchmark case, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, was meant to unmistakably unlock the doors to educational opportunity and mobility for African Americans in this country.

However, at present, students of color are more segregated and denied than ever before (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), African Americans represent 12 percent of the U.S. population, but they are the majority in twenty-one of the twenty-two largest urban school districts. Not only did the Brown decision fail to desegregate schools, the desegregation of schools altered the essence of education for African Americans in a variety of ways. According to Hanley & Noblit (2008), desegregation first separated education from racial uplift and religion. Then, desegregation destroyed the black teaching force, meaning African-American students were now being taught by whites who inflicted the beliefs of the dominant culture upon them. Thirdly, school desegregation meant that African Americans were now subject to a key historical logic of public education in the U.S. that entails assimilation. The African American community now had no means of formulating a method to deal with the barriers associated with race and being raced. Such a drastic change in environment, for minority groups, greatly heightened the risk of failure. Some form of discussion concerning coping methods to handle the challenges (e.g., poor teacher-student relations, negative perceptions, low expectations) never got established. Unfortunately today, the places where African-American students are finding success are not in the confines of school walls (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
One way to help African-American students to obtain educational success is to create spaces where they are overtly taught about race and racism in the U.S., where they can critically examine the ways in which they are being raced and their responses to being raced, and where they can learn in explicit ways about racial maneuvering. Students as well as administrators or authoritative personnel are aware of the inconsistencies in traditional schooling, where minority students are silenced or “othered” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). African-American students receive different educational experiences and curriculum knowledge.

Classroom behaviors and personality traits are also treated and rewarded differently (Anyon, 2006). For example, teachers perceive the behavior of African-American males as being more “aggressive” and “severe” than that of white males (Walker-Dalhouse, 2005). African-American males who misbehave in the same manner as white males are more likely to be punished, resulting in suspensions and expulsions (Walker-Dolhouse, 2005). The covert fear some white Americans have when involved with African Americans aid in the exaggerated, forceful, and insensitive approaches—especially in traditional environments. Students are aware of the unfair disciplinary approaches enforced by some teachers, and this in turn can affect the way students further interact with that teacher, other teachers, other students, and in other classroom environments.

Affording students the opportunity for naming race and dialoguing about being raced is the beginning stages of establishing an environment where various options to respond to race and being raced can be entertained. That is, naming race and dialoguing about being raced provides the foundation for students to be educated in racial maneuvering.

African-American students and their ability to properly maneuver race to afford economic and social mobility should be viewed as a critical component in gaining access to
opportunities in society. This concept is particularly critical for students who have not developed the accepted language to communicate across racial barriers. Students unable to express frustrations into the language of dominant society are of greatest concern. These students generally give up or become rebellious in order to express opposition to schooling that is deemed as mainstream beliefs or practices. Unfortunately there are notable differences between students who have successfully attempted maneuvering race and those who have not, especially with regard to assimilation.

“Assimilation” is the process of consistent integration whereby members of minority groups are absorbed into a majority community. From the beginning of desegregation, the majority’s educational goal for African-American students has been that they become part of the dominant culture to which they do not belong. The true meaning of education, cultural and racial uplift, as viewed through the eyes of African Americans, was divorced from the educational system. After desegregation, much of the educational process had shifted to assimilation in efforts to show intelligence and capability. This shift makes it difficult for students to cope in order to successfully master social mobility without anger, resistance, or confusion. The decision to accept or reject the process of assimilation has a direct correlation to school experiences (Ogbu, 2004). Students who experienced schooling as an uncaring, uninviting, and unfair environment are more resistant to assimilation, one method of racial maneuvering that affords social mobility.

Factors within the schooling process can perhaps sway one’s decision about the benefits of assimilation and to what degree one assimilates. Assimilation has many shades. One version is for people to divorce themselves from their cultural norms and practices and adopt that of the majority. Another form of assimilation is for people to master moving in and out of varying
environments adjusting one’s language, dress, or demeanor while simultaneously maintaining a positive authentic self-identity. Each shade of assimilation may bring benefits and losses. For example, individuals’ attempts to manage assimilation, while maintaining the distinctiveness of their culture, may result in feelings of alienation, anxiety, and loss of identity (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995).

**Formation of Authentic Caring Relationships**

Mainstream ethics of care are considered universal ways of caring, which can be problematic in a traditional school environment where there are different cultures and backgrounds. Mainstream ethics of care promoted by philosophers like Gilligan and Noddings are derived from white, middle class, and heterosexual conceptions which do not resonate with all students’ notions of caring (Siddle-Walker & Snarey, 2004). Contrary to mainstream ethics of care, Siddle-Walker and Snarey (2004) argued that there is a difference in love languages that resonate with students from different cultural backgrounds. For example, a young African-American lady spoke of the “love language” between her and her mother. She said her mother showed that she cared and loved her by providing a roof over her head, providing food to eat, checking to make sure she did her homework, and spending quality time with her. She stated that, although unspoken, it was clear her mother loved her through not only the things she did for her but their genuine interactions (Siddle-Walker & Snarey, 2004). The claim seems simple and concise—the more one is shown to be cared-for, the better the response. Research on caring claims that students with different cultural backgrounds are impacted by how teachers display caring.
Child-centered caring for African Americans is contrary to what mainstream methods of care represent (Siddle-Walker & Snarey, 2004). Siddle-Walker and Snarey (2004) contended that mainstream child-centered caring fosters children’s innocent stances toward the world by not imposing adult knowledge onto them. In black traditions, children are made aware of the world. In a sense, blinders are removed to help foster cultural and political growth (Siddle-Walker & Snarey, 2004). The nature of black traditions is to inform children of the world in which they live; to guide, direct, and make them aware of the truths about how and why society is structured the way it is; and to share the importance of being aware of systems that are designed to make achievement difficult for people of color.

To care for children in black traditions is to take the blinders off and prepare them for the road ahead. Unlike the minority experience, it is a much less complex world for majority groups to become familiar with. The worries, concerns, and barriers of life can be approached from a childlike sense of curiosity, trial and error, and minimal caution. Life can easily be a journey of discovery and self-declaration with racial judgment, barriers, stereotypes, and perceptions not being at the root of most life decisions. Mainstream tactics are fortunate to allow children to live in a world divorced from harsh realities for as long as it takes to ensure they discover who they are and how they want to fit into the world in which we live.

Caring in present-day schools caters to majority students and generally does not cater to minority students. Inconsistencies are noticed by those paying attention, but actions by those in places of power on an individual or multi-structural level are not taken. Noddings (2003) stated that one role of teachers in caring is to initiate relation and connectivity that pertains to the welfare of students. Teachers’ overt sentiments are essential to caring, for it conveys to students either acceptance or rejection. If this initial stage is not positively established, it will continually
undercut any additional advances in the student-teacher relationship thereafter. In essence, a genuine trust needs to be fostered within a student-teacher relationship, which the traditional system does not allow to flourish.

For example, foster children who meet their new foster parents for the first time represent a fundamental stage that can determine how receptive the children will be in forming an authentic and trustworthy bond with the parents. Children’s abilities to trust someone have to be earned or proven worthy. This simple example parallels the process in traditional schools. At the beginning of the year, children are dropped off at school, unfamiliar with their new teachers, hopefully greeted and then expected to trust and believe their teachers have their best interests at heart.

With regard to African-American students, practitioners have yet to master relating to them in caring ways. For African-American children over the course of the school year there are few genuine advances on behalf of teachers to uncover the layers of the students’ “essential self.” Students are still left to their own inner devices to succeed in a structure designed to fail them. For some students, this lack of authentic caring relationships in the school environment may not affect their personal growth and ability to function and learn, due to varying reasons such as class, social, or cultural capital (e.g., resources, knowledge, and support aiding in a person’s ability to flourish), but for others who lack social or cultural capital in the traditional school environment this can be restrictive and debilitating.

Research has shown that authentic caring relationships are key factors in forming positive self-identities, self-worth, and self-motivation critical for students to flourish academically and socially (Valenzuela, 1999). Such a caring relationship is one of several factors that must be addressed in order to change African-American students’ receptivity of assimilation into a
society seemingly unsupportive of and disconnected to them. The other factor is teacher expectation. There seems to be a misconception that African-American students have a lower level of cognitive and behavioral ability (Hernstein, & Murray, 1994). Ferguson (2000) describes the making of “bad boys,” not by members of the criminal justice system or by being associated with criminal or belligerent activity, but in and by schools.

**Expectation from Persons of Authority**

Expectation is a critical component in growing student interests and self-images in education. Teacher expectation is directly linked to school performance. This is alarming for African-American students, because teachers’ expectations have a more powerful impact on them than for white students—African-American students tend to value the thoughts, beliefs and expectations of their teachers more than others (Diamond, 2004). The traditional schooling system for African Americans is seemingly at times unequipped to nurture or even possess positive images about these students. Many negative images and negative labels associated with African Americans are prevalent in traditional schools.

The structure of society is built on labeling practices—from race, age, gender, class, or sexual orientation to height, attractiveness, ability, or education. This society focuses endless resources, time, and money; because people determine better ways to categorize and label individuals. Sleeter & Grant (2007) state:

> Individuals label others to group and categorize people for their own personal gain, and to determine whom they view as being like themselves in beliefs and otherwise.

Unfortunately, for groups like African Americans who have not been privileged to
possess a positive label but instead inherit a label designed to take away from their intellectual or social abilities, it has been a relentless battle to disprove charges (p. 43).

Negative labels so commonly associated with the African-American community interfere with pedagogical and institutional practices and structures. From body language and attitude to clothes, hair, language, and cultural norms, African-American students are restricted by negative labels that have lasting effects for students in traditional environments. For instance, certain articles of clothing have become identified as signs of rebellion, promiscuity, and gang activity (Ferguson, 2004).

African-American children are often automatically labeled as problems if they walk in a classroom with attire that has been associated with negativity and low academic performance, even though they may be academically bright and motivated. Thus, if students do not possess positive self-images about their academic abilities, teachers with negative perceptions of them have instantly contributed to their failure. It is interesting that certain appearances that are associated with particular cultures can either be deemed acceptable ("kids are just being kids") or threatening and unintelligent just by mere association.

It is problematic entering an environment where teachers, administrators, and even parents doubt one’s academic ability. It is suggested that teachers’ low expectations reduce students’ academic self-images (Diamond, 2004). Some teachers’ sense of academic responsibility is connected to their personal, societal, or institutional beliefs about what is attainable for students of certain backgrounds. In predominantly low-income African-American schools, teachers emphasize student shortcomings and have a reduced sense of responsibility for the quality of their students’ academic successes (Diamond, 2004). Many African-American students are affected by the beliefs their teachers have in regard to their academic ability. African
Americans feel continual pressure to prove they are worthy of being a part of the academically competent. They often perceive that they go above and beyond normal practices and expectations in order to demonstrate cognitive ability and drive. However, if African-American students fail during this period of evaluation, teachers deemed their negative perceptions confirmed and that African-American students are academically inept.

**Black Pedagogy**

Black pedagogy, according to hooks (1994), is an approach that goes beyond the classroom in order to reach students and to build the necessary relationships where teaching and learning can begin. In essence, black pedagogy is designed primarily to help urban, inner-city children attain excellence in reading, writing, and arithmetic notwithstanding their experiences with racism, poverty, and discrimination. It is geared to a specific, local urban context of black struggle.

Ultimately, black pedagogy serves as a remedy to educational malpractice found to exist among instructors of African-American children. Historically, black pedagogy has been used to teach African-American children how to defend themselves against law enforcement agencies, how to think critically, and how to succeed academically and spiritually (Irvine, 2002; Murrell, 2002). Black pedagogy has the potential to be a powerful tool for pre-service teachers and teacher education programs (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Siddle-Walker, 1996, 2000) regardless of race. Many theorists, such as Darder (1996) and hooks (1994) have explored ways to create a hospitable and productive learning environment that addresses the needs of a racially diverse student population. Black pedagogy encourages teachers to always be mindful of the students, their learning, and their potential for growth. Additionally, teachers are persuaded that
they must be resourceful, creative, and possess the overall capacity to not only accept, but expect student success. Additionally, black pedagogy acknowledges that education is not neutral, thus teachers must find the space to discuss and initiate dialogue with their students as it concerns structural inequalities.

As a way of understanding black pedagogy, two perspectives are significant. First is the political or triune engagement perspective. The term “triune engagement” refers to the capacity to integrate the past, present, and future (Bartolome, 1994; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). The second perspective, communal caring, refers to the intentionality and holistic development of students, by teachers, for the specific purpose of community and racial uplift (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Siddle-Walker, 2000). The two perspectives presented here are by no means all-encompassing of the literature on black pedagogy.

The cultural relevance aspect of black pedagogy focuses curricular content, lessons, and classroom activities that students encounter in the classroom setting within the cultural knowledge base that children bring to the formal educational context (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). While cultural relevance takes into account values, lessons, and historical knowledge, political relevance pinpoints the explicit need and demand for educating black children on social and political realities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Gordon, 1993).

Both perspectives, triune engagement and communal caring, demonstrate a legacy of education self-determination, grounding in history to direct future endeavors, and a commitment to racial advancement (Anderson, 1988; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, 2002; Foster, 1997; Gordon, 1993). For this, triune engagement and communal caring cannot and should not be
overstated as to their significance to pre-service teachers, teacher education programs, and education as a whole must not be underestimated.

**Black Pedagogy: Triune Engagement.** According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) and Bartolome (1994), one way to view African-American teaching is through its ability to extend itself beyond the effective teaching of literacy and numeracy to the ability to engage students in “psychological and political processes of seeing themselves as deserving of first-class citizenship” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, p. 707). Triune engagement, due to the literature’s focus prior to 1954, highlighted three liberatory pedagogical practices used for teaching black children: 1) political history; 2) assisting students in understanding how history has created current predicaments; and 3) future directions for students (Siddle-Walker, 1996).

Triune engagement can be potentially viewed as a combination of each of these practices. The political process of achieving first-class citizenship is directly tied to students’ understanding their political history as African Americans, the relationship between past and current social structures, and a keen focus on future aspirations. When working with students in this triune manner (historical, current, and future), teachers create a unique form of teaching predicated on the lived experiences of students and society’s political realities. Utilization of black pedagogy, and specifically the aspect of the triune engagement, views educating black students with their past, present, and future in mind. By acknowledging the history of African Americans in this country, students are prepared to fully participate in the current society as well as lend their knowledge and skills for the betterment of future society.

**Black Pedagogy: Communal Caring.** Black pedagogy, with its emphasis on engaging students in a politically triune manner, is also noted for its tremendous capacity to promote
caring within its domain. The communal caring aspect of teaching extends beyond an individualistic and very current approach to caring for students and includes the community and a future focus on black people as a whole (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Foster, 1997; Siddle-Walker, 1996). The communal caring aspect of black pedagogy draws on an intrinsic notion of care for black people. The form of caring is not learned or taught; it springs from an innate foundation of pedagogical practices (Siddle-Walker, 1996; 2000). Teaching that incorporates communal caring promotes an understanding that at times most students will be disruptive, yet the sanctity of teaching and the students’ capacity as learners is not based on their behaviors. This form of caring is not individualistic nor is it conditional to specific students.

Communal caring appears not to be comprised of merely simple rhetoric, but tangible actions seen in and out of school settings. Researchers, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) and Siddle-Walker (2000) reveal how caring impacts students’ overall cognitive, social, and emotional development. This holistic approach, in turn, establishes connections and allows teachers to not only use kinship terms, but also find familiar ways to assist and reinforce necessary survival skills. Additionally, African-American students are provided with a social education that will assist them in mediating exigent life situations.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Historically, education has been viewed by African Americans as a means to liberation and freedom. African-American teachers who have been deemed successful in teaching urban African-American students have critically reflected and utilized their life experiences to gain valuable insight into effectively teach and understand black students’ learning and experiences.

The purpose of this study is to give voice to African-American teachers’ practices and pedagogies and the influence on these histories on their teaching in an effort to facilitate successful teaching, learning, and understanding of African-American students. To help frame the rationale for the design of the study, the overarching research questions being investigated use Critical Race Theory, Afrocentric Epistemology Theory and Culturally Responsive Teaching as a framework. This study investigates the following questions:

1. How do principals, teachers, and parents define a successful teacher?

2. According to retired African-American teachers’ own practices, how does effective teaching occur for African-American students?

3. According to active African-American teachers’ own practices, how does effective teaching occur for African-American students?

4. What specific pedagogies or motivational strategies are effective for teaching African-American students?
This chapter begins with an explanation of the research design for this study; next, a description of the participants of the study; then a discussion of the data collection and data analysis procedures; and lastly, an introduction to the educators interviewed in the study.

**Research Design**

This study employs a mixed qualitative methodology to examine the pedagogies, practices, and life histories of selected African-American teachers, specifically seeking to capture their perspectives on the education success of urban African-American students. The qualitative method is appropriate because it gives participants an opportunity to speak freely, elaborate on questions as they choose, and share stories of their teaching and also their life’s beliefs. According to Creswell (2003),

> Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive. This means that the researcher makes an interpretation of the data. This includes developing a description of an individual or setting, analyzing data for themes or categories, and finally making an interpretation or drawing conclusions about its meaning personally (p. 183).

Critical Race Theory calls for a research methodology that is democratic in process and liberatory in effect. It seeks not merely for the researcher to study the participants and their setting from a traditional ethnographic or phenomenological lens, but rather for the researcher and the participants to engage in an iterative process of action and reflection and emancipatory dialogue (Friedman, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001a). With this, the researcher and participants are immersed in a process of collaborative inquiry as both strive to gain a better understanding and alter the existing sociopolitical conditions for and with the oppressed. For
this, a qualitative design that utilizes the method of in-depth interviews, observations and literature are employed for the purposes of this study.

The rationale for the qualitative study is multifaceted. This project 1) is an attempt to understand a specific situation in greater depth, unlike quantitative studies that are suited for studies that cover breadth; 2) seeks to comprehend the phenomenon from a naturalistic and holistic perspective; and 3) entails the use of intensive interviews, ongoing conversations, observations, and analysis of documents (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Stake, 1995). As Patton (2002) contends, the purpose of a qualitative inquiry is to take the reader into the setting, the experiences, the feelings, and the worldviews of the participants. To do so, a qualitative researcher must provide a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973; Guba & Lincoln, 1981) of the complex system under inquiry, including the context in which the study is situated, the participants’ perspectives and experiences, the interactions that emerge, and the changes that occur within the process of discovery (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

This goal of this study is to inquire into the philosophy, practices, and pedagogy of retired teachers in comparison to the same of active teachers. Comparison will demonstrate variance over time and provide knowledge and practices that may be replicable for current and pre-service educators and administrators. This study looks for the employment of culturally relevant pedagogies in their descriptions and the ethic of care practices in their experiences. With regard to culturally relevant pedagogy’s three-pronged components of academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness, it looks to see if retired teachers discuss any or all of the components as being significant to their philosophy and practices.
Since the experience of the teachers is vital to this study, a qualitative research paradigm maintains the legitimacy of these experiences and voices and the importance of sharing. Use of a narrative design allows their stories to be told. According to Clandinin & Connelly (2000), “Narrative is a way of understanding experiences. It is the collaboration between the researcher and the participants, over time, in one place, or a series of places” (p. 21). The narrative structure is an efficient means to learn about teachers’ lives as it involves them sharing their personal experiences via conversation.

According to Paxton (2002), open standardized interviews allow participants to answer a question and expand on their answers, making a much-needed contribution to teaching African-American students. Standardized, open-ended interview questions are carefully worked and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same wording (p. 342). Sharing the stories of African-American teachers, in particular how they shaped the understanding of their African-American students, further validates the importance of using a narrative lens. Atkinson (1998) reiterates this idea by offering:

Stories can affirm, validate, and support our own experience in relation to those around us. They enforce the norms of a moral order and shape the individual to the requirements of the society. Stories help us understand our commonalities with others, as well as our differences. Stories help create bonds, while fostering a sense of community; by helping we understand the established order around us. Stories clarify and maintain our place in the social order of things (p. 10).
The narrative researcher makes available the voices of those seldom heard in educational research (Creswell, 2005). As teachers reflect on the stories of their lives they may begin to relate their individual stories to their teaching philosophies with specific attention to particular beliefs, expectations, identities, and actions they hold in their classrooms. This is the reason that the life history approach is a valuable method to enlighten the education profession on the unique experience of African-American teachers.

**Participants and Purposeful Sampling**

In pursuing participants for this study, school administrators were contacted first, such as principals and vice principals at two elementary schools within a Midwestern urban school district. In addition, parents and current teachers were solicited for their recommendations of African-American female teachers that could be interviewed; the only criterion given was that the teachers had “successes” with their students. No person was provided a definition of “success” when making this request. Only after the teachers’ names were given and the participant interviews were initiated was their definition of success explored.

The responses were varied in the wording but each person used words like, “good with students,” “popular with the staff and students,” “was firm but fair with the students,” and gets the students to respond.” At no time was wording that described grading, standardized scores, or academic measurements used to describe these teachers as successful. Retired teachers were referred by current educators as potential participants. Based on the guidelines of purposeful sampling (Paxton, 2002), initial contact was made with six participants who responded with eagerness and a willingness to meet to further discuss the project. The active teachers met for an interview at the end of the school day once they completed teaching. The retired teacher
Geraldine Robinson was met at lunch; Carly Brown was met after tutoring school hours, and Hattie George at her home. Interestingly, the most willing and eager participant was Hattie George, who is 94 years young.

Stratified purposeful sampling was used for the participants within this study. All are educators within urban school districts, and all were observed in their classrooms (active teachers) or while tutoring within an urban school, before being selected for an interview. Purposeful sampling selection, according to Maxwell (2005), is “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be obtained as well from other choices” (p. 88).

Parents, principals, peer educators and students were each asked for their definition and suggestion of “successful” teachers. Principals defined successful teachers as those educators that had an excellent interaction with both students and parents and were able to utilize that positive relationship to move students’ score from one category to another.

Parents defined successful teachers as those that they could trust and count on to effectively teach their children. One parent defined a successful teacher as “someone that is just like me, but in the classroom, I know and trust that they are gonna make sure that my son learns what he is supposed to and won’t let him get away with anything.” Peer educators saw successful teachers as those who were able to reach students and parents, all of which resulted in increasing test scores. Both the active and retired teachers are highly regarded in their schools and among their peers, parents, and students.

According to Creswell (2005), purposeful sampling involves selecting people who will best help to understand the research problem as well as answer the research questions.
Furthermore, convenience sampling was also employed when choosing participants. “In convenience sampling, the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied” (Creswell, 2005, p. 149). Each of the participants displayed a style of teaching that is demonstrative of culturally relevant pedagogy, and all of the educators were interested in the study and agreed to participate upon being asked.

As is typical in qualitative research, the sample size is small, yet large enough to obtain extensive responses (Creswell, 2005). Stratified purposeful sampling, used in this study, is an illustrative characteristic of particular subgroups of interest; to facilitate comparison (Paxton, 2002; p. 244).

In qualitative inquiry there is no rule to sample size. Sample size depends on what it is that you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources. This study selected the subgroup of African-American teachers with a selection of three active and three retired African-American teachers. The sample size may be considered small for a qualitative inquiry study, yet according to Paxton (2002), it is necessary to place these small samples in the context of probability sampling.

Paxton further states that a qualitative inquiry sample *only seems small* in comparison with the sample size needed for representativeness when the purpose is generalizing from a sample to the population of which it is a part (p. 244). The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size (p. 245).
The six participants selected, all African-American females, have taught in urban predominantly African-American elementary schools in varying grade levels and subjects. I’ve included a brief description of the participants with retired educators being listed first and then active educators.

Retiree Educators

**Hattie George** describes herself as a “keeper of the culture.” She is frail and soft-spoken, and seems far younger than her age of 94. She reminds one of a wise old great-grandmother. She is a retired teacher and has been retired for many years. When she speaks, she has a wonderful country accent and the posture of a schoolhouse teacher from old times. She has the unique ability to make you feel at ease and comfortable with her nurturing demeanor and ladylike grace and style. Until recently, she was the active Director of the African American Heritage Day on Fountain Square in downtown Cincinnati.

She willingly shares stories of having grown up during a time of inequality, overt segregation, and the Civil Rights movement. She is a walking history book, steadily optimistic about the future of our youth. She has taught in both the South and Midwestern states and admits that all her friends are now gone and she is a widow with no children, but when asked about her family, she shares that she has raised many within the community. Her body has slowed physically, yet her mind is crisp and alert.

**Geraldine Robinson** is a five foot two inch small-framed woman who admits she was often mistaken as a student throughout her teaching career, even being kicked out of the teachers’ lounge until they realized that she was small and mighty. She is a light-skinned woman
who one would have imagined could have easily “passed” as a white woman back in her young years. She is a soft-spoken woman who has aged extremely well. She keeps herself active and busy by returning to the schools and tutoring students as needed. She admits that she loves teaching but cannot teach “this generation” of students.

She believes that if she had continued to teach and evolved with the students, the transitioning generational values would have been easier for her to accept. To her, times have evolved, society has evolved and she believes that teaching also needs to evolve with the students’ values. She was raised by two parents who were educated and valued education for their children. (Her father was the first African American to receive a doctorate in music.) She spent the majority of her teaching career within the same urban school district. She is a mother of two adult boys and grandmother to several.

**Carly Brown** is a short, plump, nurturing educator. Her smile is wide and her voice is soft-spoken and gentle. She is eager to share. She chooses to return to the schools and tutor elementary students where needed. She presents as a “grandma figure” that can be trusted and always has a story. She believes that teachers are not trained but born and nurtured. Carly Brown doesn’t blame this generation of kids but sees the solution within the society and school systems. Carly Brown shared that she doesn’t believe in the word “discipline,” but that children’s behavior is to be “managed” by the teacher. Carly Brown believes that if you label a child’s behavior as “manageable,” then it is something that the teacher can learn to control and with that there is always hope. She has taught in many school systems with the Midwestern and Northern states.
Active Educators

**Kristen Ford** is an energetic, athletic, and sassy educator. She presents as a trendy aunt figure with no children of her own and a lot of fashion sense. She admits that she came into teaching late in her career, but this is not noticeable by her appearance or teaching style. Her admission of having been in the workforce shapes her philosophy on teaching. She believes that schools should be agents to affect the social conditions that students now face. Kristen Ford admits that she is glad that schools are including health centers in the school buildings. Perhaps her ideology stems from her non-traditional pathway into teaching.

She was an employee in corporate America when she came across a program offered by the local urban school district affording the opportunity for people to take an accelerated pathway to a teaching certification. She admits that teaching has been great with the utilization of her workplace experience. Also an admitted benefit has been her ability to share with her students the non-traditional career pathways that she chose. She believes “kids need to understand that it can end up okay if you don’t go straight to college directly following high school and I provide them that example.” Kristen Ford says that “kids today want proof of everything; they want to know and trust that you know what you’re talking about.” She is an excellent example of positive proof that a non-traditional journey can lead to success.

**Laverne Nelson** is a trendsetting, youthful teacher full of energy and style. At first glance, one may mistake her for a college student herself, which pairs well with her ideology that “successful teachers have to know the culture and current events of their students.”
Laverne Nelson is a mother of young children and she believes that she understands the value of education firsthand. Being a math teacher, she shares, “I try to get students to like math just as much as I do and to like it, you have to understand it, so my job is to make them understand it better in hopes that they learn to like it. Once they understand it, they may even realize that they’re good at it too!”

Laverne Nelson embraces the spirit and “wacky-tacky” days at her school, even knowing the lyrics to songs that her students are singing. She sends her own children to the same school that she teaches at and shares, “you can’t just teach, you have to be fully engaged within the school and community. What better way than to send my own kids to my school? This tells the kids that I trust the school for my own kids and I trust the teaching and learning that’s going on.”

Laverne Nelson has gone the traditional route to teaching but admits that most of her learning to teach urban students has been via “on-the-job training.” She feels that her teacher education program prepared her for generalized teaching, but not to teach the unique needs of urban African-American students.

Ariel Roddin is a petite teacher who could pass for a trendy student. Upon first glance, she is nurturing and extremely caring but not at all a pushover. She works with special education students and those that need extra support and she finds herself extremely busy. She tried to provide support for her students and staff, and she admits that there are times when she has to “teach” other teachers. She admits that she listens in on lesson planning and classroom instruction and states that her students may need to have things taught differently but that they can learn almost anything. When asked about her opinion of urban students’ learning, she
quickly asserts that her students (and all students really) “can pretty much learn anything; you just have to find the right way that they learn and teach it to them that way so that they understand it better, and it may change with every lesson.” Ariel Roddin is a mother of three young girls. She too sends her school-aged children to the school at which she teaches, admitting that she wants her girls close to her and that she trusts the school and the staff teaching.

Table 1

Description of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Role at School</th>
<th>Years in Teaching</th>
<th>Educational Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K. Ford</td>
<td>Af. American</td>
<td>Middle school teacher</td>
<td>17+ years</td>
<td>Master Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Roddin</td>
<td>Af. American</td>
<td>7th/8th Grade Math</td>
<td>5 years+</td>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Nelson</td>
<td>Af. American</td>
<td>7th/8th Grade Math</td>
<td>5 years+</td>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Robinson</td>
<td>Af. American</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>31 years+</td>
<td>Master Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Brown</td>
<td>Af. American</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>21 years+</td>
<td>Master Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. George</td>
<td>Af. American</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>32 years+</td>
<td>Master Degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection Procedures

According to Maxwell (2005), the method used is the means by which the research questions are answered. Therefore, the type of data collected for this study was in the form of structured open-ended interviews. According to Paxton (2002), open-ended interviews permit the respondents to describe what is meaningful and salient without being pigeonholed into standardized categories (p. 56). Paxton also goes on, “Inductive analysis begins with specific observations and builds toward general patterns. Categories or dimensions emerge from open-ended observations as the inquirer comes to understand patterns that exist within the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 56).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Schensul et. al. (1999) state, “questions on a semi structured interview guide are pre-formulated, with the answers to those questions are open-ended, they can be fully expanded at the discretion of the interviewer and the interviewee, and can be enhanced by probes” (p. 149). The semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to listen to the teachers as they chronicle their stories and to ask for clarity when needed. After each interview, the participants reviewed the transcribed interview and provided oral feedback. The advantage of this type of data collection is that is affords the opportunity to have the participants read their responses and elaborate on anything they see fit or make any changes or clarifications they would like.

Data Analysis

Riessman (1993) asserts, “Taping and transcribing are absolutely essential to narrative analysis” (p. 56). Data collection was completed in April 2012. Data sources included one
interview with each participant. Analyzing each interview was an iterative process with the following steps: 1) transcribe each interview and return the transcription to the participant for review and acceptance; 2) code and reanalyze the data for preliminary themes and findings; 3) listen to interview tapes and make note of potential relationships (Maxwell, 2005). Reading the transcriptions multiple times helped to be able to read past the content. Riessman (1993) recommends reading from the inside from the meanings encoded in talk and moving outward, which privileges the experience of the participant. The data was organized in several different ways, using a chart with all the participants, their backgrounds and preliminary themes, each participant interview individually, and lastly, with the major themes that emerged. Intersecting the data in varying ways allows the interviewer to read past her perceptions of what was being said to what the participants were sharing in common. Atkinson (1998) reminds us that our purpose is not to judge, but to make connections.

The transcribing and evaluating process helps bring about an appreciation of the wisdom of Siddle-Walker as she speaks about the African-American teachers. One starts out as an interviewer and ends up as a student learning from the history of educators both past and present. Milner (2006) offers, “They [the teachers] saw their jobs and roles to extend far beyond the hallways of the school or their classroom. They had a mission to teach because they realized the risks and consequences in store if they did not teach and if students did not learn.” The stories had an authenticity and richness. According to Holland et. al. (1998), “people bring a history to the present in an important aspect of what is usually an untidy compilation of perspectives; some [of which are] developed into symbolized identities” (p. 46). African-American teachers may be drawn together by varying parts of their history, which in turn affects identity.
“Coding” is the main categorizing technique in qualitative research. Through coding, arranging things into like categories will help in developing theoretical concepts (Maxwell, 2005). Connecting themes from each category provided an understanding of the situations, the participants, and the ways in which they perceived their roles in the lives of African-American students. The review of the interviews revealed the many commonalities in their experience and thinking.

Findings will be represented in a discussion format. Learning about the lives of individuals through the stories they share allows me to fully examine the commonalities that African-American teachers share about becoming teachers and how they understand their students. Exploring teacher practices and pedagogies from the past and present experiences offers an informative contrasting perspective on the essence of successful urban African-American teachers.

Limitations and Validity

Fieldwork is more than a single method or technique. Multiple sources of information are sought and used because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective on the study. By using a combination of observation, interviewing and document analysis, the study is able to use different data sources to validate and crosscheck findings. Each type of data source has both strengths and weaknesses, and can be compared and validated through a process called triangulation. Through triangulation, validity is increased as the strength of one approach can compensate for the weaknesses of another (Marshall and Rossman 1989: 79-111).
Limitations of observations include the possibilities that the observer may affect the situation in unknown ways, and that program staff and participants may behave in atypical manners when they know they are being observed. Interview data limitations include possibly distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness since interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee. Interview data are also subject to recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving responses. Documents and records also have limitations. They may be incomplete or inaccurate. Client files maintained by programs have the potential to be variable in quality and completeness, with expansive detail in some cases and virtually no data in others. Documents can provide a behind-the-scenes look at the program that may not have been shared in an interview or seen in an observation.

By using a variety of sources of data and resources, the evaluator/observer can build on the strengths of each type of data collection while minimizing the weaknesses of any single approach. It was my intent during this study to share the purpose of the study with those interviewed and make myself available for comments and questions. Maxwell (2005) also states:

Validity is a goal rather than a product; it is never something that can be proven or taken for granted. Validity is also relative; it has to be assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstances of the research, rather than being a context-independent property of methods or conclusions (p. 105).

Reactivity is defined as “the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). The interviewer must be cautious not to ask leading questions
or make assumptions when conducting interviews. She must be in control of her facial expressions during the interview, not getting animated or expressing any reaction.

In addition, respondent validation (member checking) is another technique used to ensure that participants’ information was not misinterpreted. Maxwell states:

Respondent validation is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstandings of what you observed (p. 111).

My intention for this study was to be a precise and thorough novice researcher. Therefore I explicitly addressed potential problems, misunderstandings, or vague statements by asking participants to elaborate on questions when data was elusive or unclear to me.

**Summary**

Six African-American educators were interviewed. All participants were eager and willing to share their experiences and histories me a deep and personal level, and the interviews yielded very rich data. It is difficult to identify problems that teachers of color face because of the discourse of teacher education (Agee, 2004). Teacher education does not always explore the issues and problems of teachers of color, specifically African-American teachers. This study allowed teachers to not only recount their stories through their life histories, but also to verbalize the challenges that come along with being an African-American teacher.

This chapter has reviewed the methods used in this research in order to solidify the importance of African-American teachers’ practices and pedagogies with respect to the teaching
of urban African-American students. The subjectivities as a researcher and potential for biases, along with methods of addressing them, were also discussed. The participants were introduced within this section. Data analysis and validity throughout this study were discussed in order to clarify the process.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

Urban African-American student education stories are often overshadowed by stories of violence, drugs, abuse, substandard resources, and unqualified teachers. Still, some teachers make valuable contributions to students’ lives while offering significant insights on how to effectively teach African-American students. The intent in researching best practices is not to produce easy solutions that can be conveniently replicated like a recipe, but to examine instructional practices that take culture, relationships, and teacher perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about their students into consideration as a way to engage African-American students and ensure their academic success in an urban school environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was multidimensional. First, this study seeks to illuminate the ideologies and best practices of retired African-American educators who advanced the learning and achievement of African-American students. Second, this study will illuminate the ideologies and best practices of current African-American educators teaching urban African-American students, to discern similarities among the retired and current educators’ best and most effective practices. Lastly, this study will provide educators and administrators with relevant stratagems to increase the achievement of their urban African-American students. Examining the practices of highly effective, experienced retired teachers and current teachers will begin to build a profile of
effective instructional best practices that can be utilized in teacher preparation programs and professional development for active educators and administrators. This can potentially produce a residual catalytic effect in the reversal of school failures and ultimately the reduction of the academic achievement gap.

**Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the growing literature on effective teaching for African-American youth. It describes useful ideologies and strategies that can be a resource to current and pre-service teachers and administrators who work with African-American students in urban schools to advance their overall learning and success. This study is also designed to determine the practices of highly effective, experienced, and respected teachers of African-American students. There is current literature on reasons for low academic achievement by students of color, yet the literature can be expanded to include the voices and practices of retired African-American teachers and those African-American teachers that are currently effective with African-American students despite the potential reasons for low achievement. Therefore, this study is significant in that it adds to the literature linking research, practice, and application.

The linkage of research, practice, and application contributes to the ongoing search for effective ideologies and practices as it pertains to the narrowing and the eventual closure of the black/white achievement gap and the promotion of high academic performance for urban students. The significance of this study is that it examines the instructional practices that facilitate high expectations and performance with their relationship to teacher expectations and how they serve as a mediating factor in student achievement, specifically with urban African-American students.
The purpose of this chapter is to present qualitative data collected in response to the main research questions. The following sections analyze and interpret the data collected from research participants in the study. Common themes for best practices emerged out of the data presented by the participants, who had been identified as effective teachers by school administrators and their peers. The following were the three main sources of data: 1) participant interviews; 2) participant observations; and 3) records reviews. The analysis of notes from audio recordings were done to make comparisons in the validity of the responses and to reveal the correlation between what the participants said and what they actually practiced. Active teachers were observed and interviewed, while retired teachers were interviewed and observed in after-school tutoring.

Qualitative inquiry was used to examine the factors that impact the effectiveness of teachers who teach African-American students. Specifically, this study examines the practices of both retired and active teachers and how they positively affect teaching and learning for African-American students. This study is intended to provide student teachers, current educators and school administrators with strategies they might utilize to increase the achievement of African-American students.

**Review of Main Research Questions**

The findings are presented in correlation to the themes that were apparent in the data. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do principals, teachers and parents define a successful teacher?

2. According to retired African-American teachers’ own practices, how does effective teaching occur for African-American students?
3. According to active African-American teachers’ own practices, how does effective teaching occur for African-American students?

4. What specific pedagogies or motivational strategies are effective for teaching African-American students?

Each of the questions is discussed based on similarities and differences between retired and active teachers. The data is presented in the participants’ direct words. The following three major themes were identified:

1) Relationship building between teacher and students;
2) The use of culturally relevant pedagogy;
3) Lack of teacher preparation to teach urban students.

This research study provides a foundation to salient issues and trends related to African-American educators teaching in urban schools and their effective education of African-American students. It is significant to research the pedagogy of African-American educators for two main reasons: the ideology that teacher variables account for some of the academic failures that minority students experience (Orstein & Levin, 1989). And the theory that minority teachers, having overcome intercultural communication difficulties themselves, will be more sensitive to the needs of minority students (Jackson, 1992).

Much can be learned from successful pedagogical practices of African-American teachers in terms of the effective education of African-American and all other students. It is important to note that, when speaking of an African-American teaching philosophy or pedagogy, it is not to be implied that any one teaching philosophy or set of absolute components of teaching practice exists. Franklin (1990) noted that historically, the largest group of African-American
professionals to provide leadership within the African-American community has been its educators. Historically, throughout the 19th and first half of the 20th century, African-American educators . . . have held themselves responsible and accountable for the educational achievement of the children and adults attending their schools (Franklin, 1990; Neverdon-Morton, 1989), and have valued education as a method to achieve individual enrichment as well as social progress (Weiler, 1990).

Bell hooks (1994) presented an interesting perspective regarding her learning from a black professor versus a white professor:

A more progressive black professor . . . would have brought to the class that unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing—that is, a privileged standpoint. It cannot be acquired through books or even distanced observation and study of a particular reality. This privileged standpoint does not emerge from the “authority of experience” but rather from the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance.

Upon conducting this study with six African-American female educators, many themes emerged, yet the most poignant is that each of them shared themselves with their students in an effort to relate and identify with them on a personal level, and it was within the exposure of their sharing and trust that they believed contributed to their success in teaching urban African-American students.

**Participant Interviews**

The initial step in the data collection process was to interview retired and active African-American female educators to gain insights into the ideologies and effective practices used by these participants. The data collected from these participants would be used to triangulate the
data observed in the classroom and information supplied by the school administration. Selected dialogue is provided under each theme to substantiate the practices within the classroom, observations and notes, validate themes, and summarize the data that support the findings of this study.

Data analyzed from interviews and observations are the themes found in the participants’ perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about what their students can be and are able to do, the participants ability to build positive and meaningful relationships with their students, and teachers’ use of culturally relevant pedagogy in teaching.

The interviews conducted with the participants are utilized to gain a deeper awareness and understanding of the practices and pedagogies utilized that were effective with urban African-American students. Data collected from the participants’ interviews affirm the common themes identified within this study. Selected quotes will be utilized to affirm the observations that led to the formulation of the common themes presented. Consistent with each interview; the participants display great passion and enthusiasm about their role and responsibilities of being teachers of urban, primarily, African-American students. The interviews were open-ended and the participants were encouraged to express themselves freely and openly; the strategies and practices that continually emerged to the forefront were teacher perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about the learning of the students, teacher relationships, beliefs and attitudes about the students they teach and the teachers’ use of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The analysis of all interviews produced a plethora of rich data with three consistent themes. The data, as it pertains to teacher relationships with their students, was mentioned in all interviews as significant in not only gaining trust with students but also in allowing the students
to view the teachers themselves as approachable and trustworthy. Each participant, in their own way, noted that the establishment of a relationship between teacher and students was critical, crucial, and significant in terms of opening the door for success with African-American students.

The practices and strategies that emerged from the data are: greeting upon entry, smiling, storytelling, compliments, physical affection, joking, learning contemporary music and verbiage, sharing of personal experiences, expressing interest in student activities, encouragement, genuine responses to feelings, acknowledging challenges in school and family settings, listening intently to students, accessibility to students outside of class, demonstrating genuine care for students, praise, helping with extra-curricular activities, respectful manners and requests toward students, and maintaining consistency in the classroom.

The analysis of interview data as it pertains to teacher utilization of culturally relevant pedagogy/practices identified the practices of promoting optimism, connecting to students, displaying concern with students’ personal and academic development, caring in a cultural context, empowering students intellectually, emotionally, socially and politically, and establishing and maintaining connections to broader social and political contexts. The interview data reveals that strategies and practices of the participants are strongly influenced by understanding the value of their students’ cultural experiences. The data demonstrates that the participants utilized the value of alternative ways of assessment and did not rely excessively on written tasks to assess students’ understanding. The participants commented that classrooms need to be learner-centered by highlighting the strengths the students bring to the classroom while nurturing to promote student achievement. The participants understood and examined their own cultural biases. The participants stated that it was important to connect the curriculum and instruction to the students in a way that was meaningful and familiar to the students themselves.
The participants in this study felt that it was their responsibility to foster a culture where all students, regardless of their cultural or socioeconomic background, are welcomed and supported to have a better opportunity to learn.

**Common Themes from the Participants**

From the overabundance of data that was obtained from the participants, three pervasive themes are evident illuminating their effectiveness as teachers of African-American students: 1) the participant’s ability to build positive and meaningful relationships with their students; 2) the participant’s use of culturally relevant pedagogy/teaching and 3) the lack of teacher preparation are the common themes that emerged from the collected data. The researcher will present descriptive data that will clarify the meaning of each theme including varying sub-themes that emerged.

**Theme: Build Positive and Meaningful Relationships with Students**

Building positive, meaningful, and authentic relationships with students is suggested by participants as the key to unlocking the door to success for effective outcomes for African-American students. The participants of this study agreed that to be effective with their students involved establishing a relationship between the teacher and the student. For this study, a relationship is defined as a connection or similarity between two or more people and their involvement with each other. Teachers made an active effort to find an affinity with their students and made that affinity known to the student in an effort to establish trust and a bond. This was active on the part of the teacher and often unassuming on the part of the student. There are many facets to relationship building and the African American teachers of this study
demonstrate meaningful relationships in varying ways as well. This study has shown that there are those that express care and empathy, those that provide outward affection, nurturing and ‘mothering’ and those that establish a relationship with students by identifying with them. Positive relationship, between students and teachers are likely to produce an increase in black students’ acceptance and also an increase in student motivation and achievement.

**An Ethic of Caring**

Relationship building with the students extends to identifying with the students and possessing a unique “ethic of caring” towards the students. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes a version of an “ethic of care” as talking with the heart. According to Collins’s Black Feminist Epistemology, the theme of “talking with the heart” taps another dimension of an alternative epistemology used by African-American women, the ethic of caring. The ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process. According to Collins, three components make up the ethic of caring: 1) individual uniqueness, 2) the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues and 3) the capacity for empathy. The African-American teachers of the study exhibited at least one of these components.

Rooted in a tradition of African humanism, each individual is thought to be a unique expression of a common spirit, power, or energy expressed by all life (Collins, 2000). This belief in individual uniqueness is illustrated by the value placed on personal expressiveness in African-American communities. Active teacher Laverne Nelson says that students need to have varied and sometimes individual attention as part of their instruction. She admits that often there is at least one student who just doesn’t get the lesson as prepared or even as she alters it, but she is determined to leave no student behind:
You have to be quick, witty, and flexible and you cannot be like, “This is what I’m going to do and that is it, we are only going to do it this way today. If it’s not working you have to be able to flip and come up with something different right at that minute, even if it’s for one student. Urban students are not all the same and nothing works for even the majority of them; lessons almost have to be unique.

Carly Brown, a retired teacher, is very clear in her summation, which supports the ethic of caring. She claims, “One size does not fit all!”

A second component of Collins’s (2000) ethic of caring involves the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues. Emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument. Expression of emotion does not have to be an outward cry or even a physical expression. Here, Collins is referring to genuine care and concern for another. The teachers expressed genuine concern and compassion for the students they taught. This concern extended outside the walls of the classroom and into the communities of the students. The teachers acknowledged that their students may not have ideal living situations or even parental exposure, but if the students had something going on within their community that adversely affected their learning within the classroom, the teachers understood that in order to get the students to learn they had to deal with the societal issues at hand. When describing a student who had hygiene concerns in the classroom, Kristen Ford says that she didn’t ask questions as to why the student had an odor; she simply took care of the issue at hand so that she could continue to teach the student and her class. She explains,

I have been able to pretty much sit them down and talk to them and find out what they need. I was able to go to the closet and get some things and then I got some things
supplied by an outside agency and gave to that student. I was able to give him his bag of stuff and he could take it home and actually he elected to leave his bag at school so that he would have it again if he needed it. The student was so appreciative and grateful and I just went on about my lesson.

Kristen Ford expressed a sentiment that is common of African-American teachers. Sometimes, the academic learning takes a back seat to the immediate needs of the students.

A third component of Collins’s ethic of caring involves developing the capacity for empathy. Laverne Nelson shares a different sentiment. She expresses the need for teachers to care about their students, get to know them, and make sure they know that she cares about them, but she shares that as a teacher, there are times when it becomes evident that you’ve established a relationship with your students because they show you they care. When she experienced a loss of a family member,

> The students really showed me that they loved me and that they cared for my well-being. That’s when you know that you are truly in a relationship. The good, the bad and the ugly—you’ve become like family.

The parallels between the Afrocentric expression of the ethic of caring as described by Collins (2000) and those advanced by feminist scholars such as Noddings (2002) are noteworthy. The emphasis placed on expressiveness and emotion in African-American communities bears marked resemblance to feminist perspectives on the importance of personality in connected knowing. Separate knowers try to subtract the personality of an individual from his or her ideas because they see personality as biasing those ideas. In contrast, connected knowers see personality as adding to an individual’s ideas, and they feel that the personality of each group
member enriches a group’s understanding. Similarly, the significance of individual uniqueness, personal expressiveness, and empathy in African-American communities resembles the importance that some feminist analyses place on women’s “inner voice” (Belenky et. al., 1986).

Nel Noddings is closely identified with the promotion of the ethics of care and offers the argument that caring should be a foundation for ethical decision-making. Noddings’ argument starts from the position that care is basic in human life—all people want to be cared for (Noddings, 2002). She also starts from the position that while both men and women are guided by an ethic of care, “natural caring,” a form of caring that does not require an ethical effort to motivate it, can have a significant basis in women’s experiences. Natural caring, thus, is a moral attitude or a longing for goodness that arises out of the experience or memory of being cared for (Flinders, 2001). On this basis, Nel Noddings explores the notion of ethical caring as a state of being in relation, characterized by receptivity, relatedness, and engrossment (Noddings, 2002). What caring means definitively and all that it entails is not easy to establish. Nel Noddings’ approach is to examine how caring is actually experienced (or a phenomenological analysis). Noddings is cautious in incorporating “empathy” in her definition of an ethic of care because empathy is considered “peculiarly western and masculine” (Noddings, 2002). Instead, Noddings prefers to incorporate “sympathy” as more nearly capturing an affective state of attention in caring. The teachers in this study more closely align with Collins’s ethic of care than Noddings, yet both are present. The teachers demonstrate aspects of an ethic of care that incorporates critical acknowledgement of the circumstances of their students, being affected and reacting emotionally to minimize the emotional and long-term risks to the students, and they were empathetic towards their resolutions and interactions. These teachers viewed their caring as a profound commitment to the well-being and survival of black children and black people. The
caring lens they brought to their teaching powerfully connected their personal relationships with students to an active engagement with social reality. For some students, the parental involvement for developing social and emotional skill is negligible or lacking. Rather than combat a social debacle that is immense, the African American teachers of this study chose to make a large impact with the limited resources available to them and reach out to their students in a maternal capacity.

Maternal relationships

In both lay and academic analyses of exemplary teachers committed to social justice, the maternal image is particularly visible in the pedagogy of African-American women teachers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2002). Getting to know students encompasses such things as becoming involved in their community events, sharing stories, and finding at least one thing to compliment them on during the day, but most importantly, maintaining respect for students and authority in the classroom. These women viewed the maternal as a profound commitment to the well-being and survival of black children and black people. The maternal lens they brought to their practice powerfully connected their personal relationships with students to an active engagement with social reality. African-American teachers often see themselves as “othermothers” or women who, through feelings of shared responsibility, commit themselves to the social and emotional development of all children (Collins, 1991). “Othermothering” has also been described as a “universalized ethic of care” or a “collective social conscience” (Case, 1997, pp. 26, 36) in which the caring that othermothers engage in is not simply interpersonal but profoundly political in intent and practice. A public example of such teaching is that of Marva Collins, the founder of the renowned Westside Preparatory School in Chicago, Illinois. Over the past 30 years, Collins has drawn out “extraordinary” capabilities from her students, who are considered “at-risk” for
school and social failure because they are poor African-American children living in the neighboring housing projects. While her successes are clearly significant and have garnered the attention of many Americans wanting to see improvements in our public schools, notable about her work is the maternal sensibility she brings to her pedagogy, much like the educators interviewed in this study. The jacket of her book, “Ordinary” Children, Extraordinary Teachers (1992), reads:

Marva Collins embodies all that is meant by that hallowed word . . . teacher. She gives of herself tirelessly so that those whose minds are supple may grasp knowledge and power through her love. Indeed love, like that of a mother for her children, is the essence of the Marva Collins Way . . . love of learning, love of teaching, and love of sharing.

Such a connection with a maternal form of caring is also evident in the interviews of the study participants. Not only did each participant find their academic success with their students directly link to the relationship they forged with their students, each of them described a “maternal” type of relationship with their students. Exemplary African-American women teachers use the familiar and familial mother-child relationship as a guide for their interactions with students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2002). Retired educator Carly Brown supports the practices of Marva Collins by offering that the role of a teacher is to be a role model, inspire students, build close relationships, and mold students. For some urban students, their interpretations of a mother may be skewed from the mainstream ideology of a mother. Someone that is a protector, places others needs above their own, offers compassion and support when needed (and sometimes when not needed), a person who is a confidante and someone to be respected and held in high esteem. In order to do this, she says,
Students should see teachers as a “mom” or “other mother” and someone who nurtures them and believes in their ability. Students have to trust you as a teacher in order for you to get them to learn.

Getting to know students is paramount to relationship building for the teachers in this study. In order to gain the trust and acceptance of students, teachers must invest in patience and time while steadying the course towards academic learning, social and emotional growth, and progression. When charged with being a teacher and another mother, this is a responsibility not taken lightly by any of the participants. The teachers describe their responsibility as a duty not only to educate students academically but also viewed their maternal role as a teacher and community leader. While other participants did not use the words “mom” or “other mother”, the sentiment was equally portrayed. Kristen Ford, shares that students need to trust you just as they would a parent. Students need to trust and believe that you will protect them and that in your classroom they are safe. She shares,

Sometimes students feel helpless, they don’t have enough examples of success for them to see which can make them feel helpless. When teachers share themselves with students this helps them feel connected and when students are connected they release their walls and trust teachers. This trust helps schools to be safe spaces.

Establishing trust is key. The same type of trust that a child has for his parent when they know their parent will protect them at all cost. Whether the student has a stable, two-parent household or a parent that is incarcerated, students need to gain the trust of the teacher to perform to their high academic standards, once this is achieved, according to the participants, there is nothing the students will not do for that teacher.
Identifying

Part of building relationships with students, as described by the African-American educators, involves sharing personal stories with students. Sharing personal stories and allowing students to do the same solidifies teachers’ entrance into a “quality world,” a term educator Geraldine Robinson coined to describe the experiences of students. She states that students have a dimension about themselves that is guarded by social and experiential barriers that students protect very closely. With established trust and a belief that the teacher genuinely cares about the well-being of the student, students will begin to release the barriers and allow teachers to enter into their “quality world.” She believes that:

*Relationship building makes kids work harder and you have to share yourself with them in order to build a relationship. Students will eat you alive until they find out that you are fair and care about them. Once I gained their trust and their acceptance, then I could teach. As I taught, I learned that students have a ‘quality world’ within themselves and if a teacher can gain entrance into their world then the student will do anything for that teacher, but in order to get into that world, students have to trust you to let you in. You have to rub elbows and get to know the kids outside of the subject areas you teach.*

Pang and Gibson (2001) maintained that “Black educators are far more than physical role models, and they bring diverse family histories, value orientations, and experiences to students in the classroom, attributes often not found in textbooks or viewpoints often omitted” (p. 260-61). Carly Brown, a retired teacher, believes that all students have the ability to learn on any level and expresses that it is the responsibility of the teacher to inspire students. She says that in order to
inspire students, they must look to teachers as a nurturer and someone they trust. Teachers should aspire to achieve this kind of relationship with their students:

- **Students have to trust you as a teacher in order for you to get them to learn. Teachers must make an effort to make students feel important and capable of learning. It has to be intentional and deliberate but go unnoticed by the students. Teachers must be willing to learn and love their students.**

The degree of teacher caring determines if students leave the class feeling good about themselves and about one another. Teacher involvement determines if there is a strong communication link between the school, the classroom, and the home.

Thus black teachers, like all teachers, are “manuals” themselves, but these teachers’ text pages are inundated with life experiences and histories of racism, sexism, and oppression along with those of strength, perseverance, and success. Consequently, these teachers’ texts are rich and empowering—they have the potential to help students understand the world (Freire, 1998; Wink, 2000) and to change it Milner (2006).

Building and maintaining a relationship with students involves sharing one’s experiences, good and bad, and letting students know that you care about them and their experiences while maintaining high expectations. The African-American teachers interviewed express that building a positive relationship with their students directly contributes to establishing trust and care with students, which in turn allows effective teaching and learning to occur. Kristen Ford says that sharing her experiences with her students provides an example or role model of what they could become. Her pathway to teaching was non-traditional, going into teaching after a corporate
career, but she makes certain to tell her students that even if your plans to enter college directly after high school change, your goals should never change—only the pathway to achieving them:

_ Sharing my background and relating to the students has helped me be successful with my students. I share with them that I didn’t follow a direct pathway to being a teacher and it helps them understand that they can also start on a path and if they get diverted then they can still fulfill their goals; they don’t have to give up just because their circumstances change. I like to make sure that they know there is always “hope.” Especially with middle school students because they are so impressionable, when you share yourself with students, you build a relationship with the students and they begin to trust and look up to you. It’s encouraging when teachers share with kids because sharing helps students to be connected to the teacher and when students are connected they release walls and trust teachers. When they trust their teacher it also helps schools to be safe spaces for kids. Sharing with the students also gives them examples of success stories that they can tangibly relate to because sometimes they feel helpless and don’t have enough examples of successes for them to see and feel._

These teachers understood the important connections between the students’ home situations and school, and they were able to build on and learn from those out-of-school experiences and situations in their teaching. The black teachers of this study seem to understand that many of their students were doing drugs, living in poverty, and were acting as adults in their homes in terms of bringing in money to support their families. However, the teachers did not use these realities as an escape. The teachers still put forth the effort necessary to teach and teach well. Hattie George, a retired teacher having lived and taught during Jim Crow, segregation, and integration, maintains that regardless of a student’s outside life, teachers must maintain hope that
they will be able to learn. She admits that their exposure level may be limited, but is clear that if teachers get to know their students, then we can move them in the direction to learn. She shares this:

*Until teachers walk in students’ shoes and travel students’ paths, then teachers will not understand them. Always identify with students to understand them, which will build a good relationship and enables education.*

Ariel Roddin, an active teacher, offers a slight variant from the other interviewees. It could be the fact that she is an active teacher, young herself, and has found that to vary how she interacts with the students—connecting with students via media and social means is the most effective method for her. Her experiences with teaching urban students leads her to offer that staying current in the cultural world of her students is the most effective way to relate to them and gain their acceptance and trust. Her practice of establishing a relationship with her students is aligned with Agee (2004), who explains that “A black teacher brings a desire to construct a unique identity as a teacher . . . she [or he] negotiates and renegotiates that identity” (p. 749) to meet their objectives and to meet the needs and expectations of their students. Ariel Roddin also stated that

*Teachers cannot “disconnect” from students. Teachers must always keep up with what’s going on in the lives of their students and the community that the kids live in. Teachers have to be continually learning about academic and social things to bring into the classroom to keep the student’s interest.*
Consistent is the theme of building a relationship with students to positively affect their learning. Many of the teachers interviewed found that, regardless of the teachers’ age, they needed to find a way to connect and identify with the students on any level possible.

Hattie George, a retired educator in her 90s, views the role of a teacher of urban students as that of a community leader. She admits that the lives of students can vary greatly from the experiences of the teachers, but this disparity is no excuse for learning not to occur on the part of the teacher:

*We must take them from where they are (within their differences) and take them where you want them to go. Learning must be gradual, which takes time, patience and a relationship in order to be successful with the students. This is true education. Teachers may never be exposed to the life and experiences of their students but we must put ourselves in our students’ shoes to identify with our students. The Indians have a saying, “Walk a mile in my moccasins.” We have to do this with our students too. Until teachers walk in students shoes and travel the students’ paths then we teachers won’t understand them.*

**Role Models**

Given the important role that teachers play, they must represent the best role models, as educators and as community shapers. Teachers can be powerful forces in terms of the amount of control and level of influence they have over their students and their communities. Repeated by each participant is the need to know and understand the student and the social ills that students may have to manipulate. Teachers have to be flexible, caring, and informed. Ariel Roddin
describes the teacher’s role as an advocate between the student, parents, and the community. In order to be an advocate, one must be informed. She offers:

*Teachers cannot “disconnect” from students. Teachers must always keep up with what’s going on in the lives of their students and the community that the kids live in. Teachers have to be continually learning about academic and social things to bring into the classroom to keep the students’ interest. The role of a teacher is to be an advocate between the student and the parents and in order to advocate for someone you have to know everything about them—the good, the bad, and the inside and out.*

Recognizing the extreme and unfamiliar experiences of their students, these teachers continue to maintain high academic expectations for their students’ learning. This is concurrent with the research findings of effective African-American teachers. It is easy for teachers to grant students “permission to fail” (Ladson-Billings, 2002) when they consider the complex and challenging lives of their students outside the classroom. However, successful teachers of black students maintain high expectations for their students (Siddle-Walker, 1996) and do not pity them but empathize with the students (McAllister & Irvine, 2002) so that students have the best possible chance of mobilizing themselves and empowering their families and communities. For black students in particular, educational outcomes and disengagement are influenced by classroom environments, especially student teacher relations. Black students who feel understood, accepted, and respected by their teachers are likely to have positive relationships with them, and in turn, positive relations increase teachers’ expectations and students’ motivation and achievement (Ford & Harris, 2006).
**Parental Involvement**

Relationship building with students involved acknowledgement that the students’ parental involvement could be lacking or nonexistent; yet regardless of where the parents’ involvement was found, teaching did not cease and in turn, the external support would increase. In spite of finding negligible parental involvement with many students, the teachers in this study did not let this deter them from maintaining high expectations for their students and holding the students accountable. Geraldine Robinson acknowledged that she assumes that all parents love their children as much as she loves her children and that parents are doing the best that they can. Regardless of what the parents do or don’t do, as a teacher, she needs to reach the student in spite of their parents’ actions. She shares,

“For parents that don’t or can’t put a priority on that, it’s not the kids’ fault and to me, I try to reach my kids in spite of the parents.”

The lack of parental involvement meant that Geraldine Robinson had to step into that vacant space and provide supplemental care for the students that needed it. Another perspective is from Carly Brown, a retired teacher, agrees that parents are not as involved as when she began her teaching career, yet she offers a possible explanation and her analysis is still the same. She states,

*Well, it’s more difficult now then it was when I first started because parents are younger now than they were and I think that the population here has parents between 17-20 or so, so that in itself is more challenging, but teachers still have to reach the students.*

If school failure is a result of a “relational breakdown” (Ward, 1995) between teachers and students, where both groups see little in common or shared in purpose, then the academic success of poor, immigrant, and minority children lies very much in the quality of the
relationships that their teachers establish with them (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). It is evident that exemplary African-American women teachers use the familiar and familial mother-child relationship as a guide for their interactions with students. The teachers gave students numerous opportunities to learn collectively and cooperatively, made few assumptions about students’ prior knowledge, and worked to develop critical thinking skills. They also viewed teaching as an art, believed that all students could succeed with care, nurture, and direction from the teacher, perceived themselves as a part of the community, and viewed teaching as a way to give back to the community. The teachers believed that knowledge is reciprocal and shared by students and teachers. The degree of teacher caring determines if children leave the class feeling good about themselves and about one another. Teacher involvement determines if there is a strong communication link between the school and the parent.

Building a positive and meaningful relationship between the teacher and the student is a consistent theme of the participants. How this was implemented varied between those interviewed. Each of the participants understood that they were coming from unfamiliar experiences than the students they would teach and further recognized that because they did not have a point of reference. They needed to learn from their students. None of the teachers expressed giving any leniency with respect to the academic goals they set forth for the students; yet the teachers were cognizant that there were external factors that directly affected the academic learning of their students. Many of the factors affecting the students could not be controlled by the teachers, such as absentee parents, or socio-economic conditions, but where possible, the teachers sought to remedy conditions that would enable the student to trust them and understand that school, namely the teachers’ classroom, was a ‘safe zone’ for the student to learn. Some teachers found that being an ‘other mother’ figure facilitated trust and a positive
relationship, while others found that sharing their life experiences proved enough to demonstrate to the student that the teacher was trustworthy and others would pass out snacks to help with hunger pangs and enable focus and concentration. The African-American teachers of this study worked diligently to establish trust and build a positive relationship with their African-American students.

**Theme: Culturally Relevant Teaching (Pedagogy)**

The importance of recognizing students’ race, culture, and ethnicity was at the center of the teachers’ pedagogy. Some theorists suggest minority teachers are particularly adept at motivating and engaging minority students because they often bring knowledge of student backgrounds to the classroom that enhances students’ educational experiences (Foster, 1995; Irvine, 1990a). The teaching approach emerging from this knowledge is often referred to as culturally relevant pedagogy (Mitchell, 1998). Originally coined by Cazden and Leggett (1981) and later popularized by Geneva Gay (2000), “culturally responsive teaching” generally embodies the same core principles as “culturally relevant, sensitive, centered, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, [and] synchronized” teaching (p. 29). In short, culturally responsive teaching (or pedagogy) is an approach that uses “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” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) described it as a “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (pp. 17-18). Ladson-Billings (1994) also suggested that “this kind of moving between two cultures lays the foundation for a skill that students will need in order to reach academic and cultural success (p. 18).
The data from the participants supports the belief that minority teachers often bring to the classroom cultural understanding that informs their pedagogical approach and improves their ability to work effectively with African-American students. Culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes the primacy of the academics but also acknowledges the significance of cultural competence and critical thought. Culturally relevant pedagogy is based on the premise that the relationship between the teacher and student is crucial to inform best practice pedagogies. Positive teacher-student relations can help to establish an environment that is conducive to learning. Students, particularly urban students, tend to learn more and have fewer disciplinary problems when they feel that their teachers take them seriously.

Hattie George, who lived during Jim Crow, segregation, and integration, continues to maintain hope in teachers as a resource to preserve history and African-American culture. She responds:

*Schooling has to be different for African-American students because they come from a different environment with different objectives and ways of living and making a living. African-American culture is different with a different way of life.*

Hattie George’s ideology likely stemmed from her varied experience as a teacher throughout American history. During the time when Hattie George began teaching, the education of black students was a necessity for further existence and continual survival, despite laws prohibiting a quality education for black students. Her perspective of teacher education aligns more with Tillman (2004), who suggested, “These teachers saw potential in the Black students, considered them to be intelligent, and were committed to their success” (p. 282). There was something authentic about these black teachers. They saw their jobs and roles to extend far beyond the
hallways of the school or their classroom. They had a mission to teach their students because they realized the risks and consequences in store for their students if they did not teach them and if the students did not learn. An undereducated and underprepared black student, during a time when society did not want or expect these students to succeed, could likely lead to destruction (drug abuse, prison, or even death) (Milner, 2006).

The retired educators repeatedly describe aspects of the students’ neighborhoods that did not foster academic and social development, but rather caused instability in student lives and in some ways negatively affected student orientations toward school. The teachers in this study recognize that some students are more adversely affected by community problems than others and that the students’ communities included positive aspects as well as negative influences. Gay (1990, 2000) explains why changing school demographic trends are creating a significant “social distance” between students and teachers, and how this may further complicate making schooling relevant to the personal lives of ethnically, culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students. She predicts that these social, cultural, and experiential gaps will make “achieving educational quality even more unlikely in the existing structure of school” (1990, p. 61; Gay, 2004, p. 40).

Geraldine Robinson describes the social ills affecting students’ learning as “baggage,” meant to characterize anything extra that prevents students from learning effectively. Geraldine Robinson, also a retired educator, responds to teaching a diverse population of students and the challenges that are faced in the classroom setting as:

*Students from the inner city and urban schools tend to come with more baggage; however, the students’ experiences are a direct reflection of society’s economy, drug usage, and other stuff. If you understand the culture and experiences that students bring*
with them into the classroom then you can understand why a certain day or time might not be the best time to push that math lesson.

For teachers that have no point of reference, it is difficult to imagine how external influences can preclude learning, which warrants the need for teachers to learn the culture of the students they teach in order to understand their students. Hattie George shares that teachers simply cannot teach students until they understand them. In her view of understanding students, she states,

*It is important to get to know them; you have to know something about the kids before you can teach them. We have a different culture from whites, a different way of life, different race, and different income. You have to really put yourself in their shoes.*

Teachers must know, value, and embrace ethnic diversity, understand how it may exacerbate general developmental changes during adolescence, and adapt instructional practices to incorporate cultural pluralism. These skills are essential to developing genuine culturally responsive teaching and developmentally appropriate educational programs for culturally diverse students.

Villegas and Lucas (2004), state that the connection between the students’ cultural experiences at home and school are significant and need to intertwine. They state, “Children’s prior knowledge and experiences are recognized as essential resources for learning. Effective teaching, by extension, has been redefined to mean helping learners build connections between what is familiar to them and the new content and skills to be learned” (p. 73). The retired teachers I interviewed stated similarities with Villegas and Lucas. Kristen Ford offers that

“*Schools and home work together so teachers must know about the culture of their students.***
Foster (1999) argues that African-American educators, because they typically are able to express cultural solidarity and communicate with African-American students in styles that are genuine and/or familiar, are better equipped to recognize the historical, political, and economic realities that shape the education opportunities and resources available to black students. She further contends that quality black teachers exhibit a strong sense of commitment to black youth that is fueled by a keen understanding of the context in which these students are being educated. This results in a sense of urgency that compels these educators to view education as a tool for transforming not only the minds but also the lives of their African-American students.

In understanding certain aspects of student behavior as consequences of their backgrounds and social structures, the active teachers in this study demonstrated an awareness of the larger, underlying problems in the students’ lives and the need for the teacher to be exposed to and understand what their students are exposed to daily. Their understanding often helps them respond to the various situations with appropriate sensitivity and enables them to provide support to help students better negotiate the demands of home and school. One teacher, Laverne Nelson, speaks of the need to connect with students in ways that they can relate to and understand:

*Teachers need to stay on top of what is current in students’ worlds. We need to read what they are reading, listen to their music, know their TV shows and what is trendy to them, incorporate this into their learning to reach them and use examples from their everyday life for them to understand our lessons. Teachers cannot afford to get disconnected from students by not being quick, with-it, up on vocabulary, current within their students’ society.*
Specifically referring to the concept of meeting the needs of the student and speaking to the notion of culturally relevant teaching, Laverne Nelson confirms the ideology of Ladson-Billings (1995) as she refers to “the problem of discontinuity between what students experience at home and what they experience at school in the speech and language interactions of teachers and students. Billings (1995) also suggests that if a student’s home language is incorporated into the classroom then students are more likely to experience academic success” (p. 159). Laverne Nelson contends that teachers must work equally as hard in learning the extracurriculars of the student as in teaching the academics. She states that for the teacher this must work congruently:

"Teachers have to be creative and flexible, otherwise teachers will get drowned in the vocabulary of the students and not know what is being said and have no idea what is going on. Most importantly, the students will not connect with the teacher and they will tell you quickly and classroom management will be negatively affected!"

Each of the participants found that utilizing the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy would increase their effectiveness in reaching their African-American students. Their application of culturally relevant pedagogy varied by circumstance; the goals remained consistent in the need for the teacher to understand and immerse themselves into the culture of their students not only to build an effective relationship but also to allow the student to gain trust and connectedness with the teacher. Such findings have implications for the role of culture in closing the achievement gap between black and white students. They also have implications of pedagogy and school policy (Whaley & Noel, 2012). It appears that identification with African-American culture provides African-American students with a sense of community “embeddedness” and exposure to a collectivist orientation that gives purpose to their academic achievement efforts (Oyserman et. al., 1995). The participants knew that effective teaching and learning occurred in a
culturally supported environment that was learner-centered and worked at identifying the strengths of students. Student strengths are identified, nurtured and utilized to promote student achievement. The participants created environments that fostered a culture where all students, regardless of their cultural background, were welcomed and supported. The retired teachers in this study gravitated towards the historic ideology of Carter G. Woodson about education and realized that if black children were, indeed, to succeed in the white, racist world, they would have to be educated well beyond the basic three R’s: Students have to understand who they are (self-efficacy), where they came from, and their personal, political, social, and economic histories—but most of all, their personal worth. Perhaps the retired teachers embraced and internalized this ideology by way of their age and wisdom gained from years of teaching. The active teachers, not having experienced segregation, continued to impart the need for providing a holistic education for their students to effectively educate them. This leads to a later ideology by Woodson (1933/1990) in which the problem was not, per se, who was teaching the children but what they believed about the children they were teaching. Active teachers in this study believed that their African-American students were capable of achieving high academics in spite of their social standards. They themselves achieved their success in spite of their cultural deficits or social standards. The retired teachers focused on the environmental culture of the students, being a negative deterrent of their students’ academic achievement and the active teachers focused on the societal areas, such as hip hop music, social media, social trends, as being the culture that teachers need to learn more about to engage students. This disparity could be a generational variant as society evolves, and in time, this will transcend beyond race.

The work of Foster (1990, 1993), King (1993), Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994), and Villegas (1996) describes the practical and theoretical underpinnings of culturally relevant
pedagogy. In her exploration of pedagogy incorporating aspects of the students’ culture into the schooling process, Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994) found that teachers who were family-oriented and cultivated relationships beyond the classroom encouraged collaborative learning through building a community of learners, and created an atmosphere of trust and support were successful with African-American students, largely because of the greater match between these teaching techniques and the cultural background of the students.

Because of cultural dissonance, teachers may not understand the needs of their students; being prepared to teach is not equivalent to being prepared to teach students of color (Watson, Charner-Laird, Kirkpatrick, Szczesiul & Gordon, 2006). The dividing line between successful and unsuccessful multicultural educators may be those who are willing to challenge their assumption with those who are not, regardless of their own background, for the sole purpose of reaching their students. This transformation is called becoming culturally competent, and is defined simply as being able to work effectively with students who come from cultures other than one’s own. This transcends race, since an African-American teacher can have a completely different cultural experience than the African-American students she teaches. Also important to note, the need for cultural competence is not singularly reserved for teaching African-American students. Each student has cultural norms that have nothing to do with race but more to do with societal norms, customs, and practices. Furthermore, it entails mastering a complex set of awarenesses and sensitivities, various bodies of knowledge, and a unique set of skills that underlie effective cross-cultural teaching (Diller & Moule, 2005). It means “broadening what you already know, gaining specific cultural knowledge and remaining vigilant as to the cultural appropriateness of various tasks, methods, and perspectives you might routinely take for granted” (p. 187).
Theme: Lack of Teacher Preparation

The teacher education program is the single most important preparation that a pre-service teacher can experience. Each of the participants both retired and active expressed their beliefs about the preparation that they received in their schooling in being effective with urban, African-American students. During the interviews, each participant also shared suggestions for future teachers and teacher education programs. It is a natural assumption that teachers would be adequately prepared to teach students and learn the necessary skills within teacher education programs of study. The institutions of higher learning within our society that produce masters and doctors of education should be places of learning that also graduate holistic teachers. The most realistic place to begin the radical transformation of school curriculum is in schools of education. Teachers cannot lead students’ exploration of important issues without “an incredibly rich breadth of knowledge that we do not demand of any other specialists” (Noddings, 2006, p. 245). Teacher education courses should, according to Noddings, “emphasize connections to other disciplines, to the common problems of humanity, and to personal exploration of universal questions of humanity.” Teacher candidates are likely to continue teaching in the way that they were taught. Restructuring the curriculum will require close collaboration between schools of education and the arts and sciences. As evidenced by the data from this study, both retired and active teachers report that their schools of education prepared them to be teachers, but not adequately for teaching African-American urban students. The lack of preparation transcends time as both the retired and active teachers express that they were ill-prepared to teach urban students. Many teacher education programs claim that they are preparing teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. While some programs have been successful in
preparing prospective teacher still lack confidence in their ability to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse learning environments (Taylor & Sobel, 2001, Siwatu, 2007, 2011). This is not to say that schools of education do not attempt to address multicultural education with pre-service teachers, there is limited exposure to courses and student teaching. This is meant to exploit the fact that even African American teachers, who share, at the bare minimum, an affinity or being African-American with their students, are finding that they are ill prepared to teach urban African-American students. If African-American students are ill prepared and are requesting more knowledge and experience, then it is understood that their counterparts would need the same.

Hattie George, having lived and learned in a time preceding standardized testing and teacher-specialized exams, remembers a time when to be a teacher meant that you went to college, learned your subject matter to teach, and were expected to deliver what you’d learned to students. She agrees that teachers were not held to the extreme standards as they are today. What was consistent and required was the desire to teach and make a difference in the lives of students. She says,

*We learned the basics of the three R’s: Reading, wRiting and ‘aRithmatic, and that was all. Back then, you didn’t need any special test to be able to teach. You had to have the desire to teach and that was what got you through all the classes. Things are different now, but I still think that you have to want to teach and make a difference with our children in order to be a good teacher. I didn’t learn all that I know from any school.*

The practical aspects of learning to teach are overwhelmingly valued by teachers as the most important part of their preparation. Unfortunately, many of these field experiences occur in
white middle-income communities that offer a different set of challenges and opportunities from those that teachers can expect to encounter in the urban classrooms populated by African-American students. Thus, when new teachers enter urban settings, they experience a mismatch between what they expect based on their pre-service preparation and what they find in urban schools (Billings, 2000). This was the experience of Geraldine Robinson, who admits that she was completely taken aback when she began teaching and was extremely ill-prepared in her teacher education program:

*I had no training; all of it was on-the-job training. I was not prepared for the behavior and the interaction with inner-city kids. I knew my material but I had no idea of why the kids behaved the way they did or even why I didn’t have everything that I thought I needed to teach. I firmly believe that teacher training should be with people who have come out of the classroom recently and were successful. I also believe that secondary teachers (those that teach the teacher) and administrators should have to go back into the classroom every three or four years to stay current. What they are teaching right now to our teachers is already outdated methods taught by people who haven’t been in the classroom in decades.*

Carly Brown shares a similar sentiment, but admits that it takes time to learn how to teach urban students:

*My teaching program did nothing to prepare me for working with urban or inner-city students. I think you almost have to just get in there and know the culture. If you’re from the culture it makes it easier but it’s still not easy. New teachers can learn about our*
urban students but it [the teacher’s learning] emerges once you’re in the school but it takes longer than a semester or year.

Through research, theory, and practitioner experiences, Gay (2002) suggests that by preparing pre-service teachers with guidance on implementing culturally responsive teaching ethnically diverse students will experience greater academic success. Gay (2002) makes a case for educating pre-service teachers in culturally relevant practices through the examination of five culturally relevant teaching elements: “Developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communication with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction” (p. 106). Carly Brown, a retired teacher, supported this ideology when she shared this sentiment in her interview:

*My teaching program did nothing to prepare me for working with urban or inner-city students. I think you almost have to just get in there and know the culture. If you’re not from the same culture as your students it’s going to take time to learn their culture, but once conquered within the urban school that teacher can teach anywhere. That teacher will know and understand the challenges faced in an urban school. Once you’ve dealt with the deficit, you can easily teach in a suburban school.*

One would ask the question “Is learning the culture of students enough to positively affect the teaching of African-American students?” According to the teachers in this study, the answer is “No!” The teachers of this study did not see their lack of preparation to teach urban students as simply a lack of cultural competence. They shared that the problem was much more entailed to include dealing with discipline, lack of resources, inconsistent administrators, and
societal influences. Kristen Ford attributes much of her lack of preparation to her non-traditional route to teaching, but she observes that there were lessons she wished she’d learned prior to being in the classroom,

*Because I did not go a traditional route into teaching, I guess that I should understand why I didn’t receive enough preparation and training in my teacher education program. I did not learn how to teach urban students at all. I learned basic teaching skills but didn’t learn the skills to effectively teach urban students. Things that I would have loved to be prepared for are the lack of consistent administrative support, lack of school resources, behavior and discipline concerns, how to get parents involved, and how to be prepared if they’re not, things like this. For me, I think that my experiences are what helped me relate to the students and earn their trust.*

Focus is placed on the teacher’s accountability while teaching in the classrooms, but little attention is directed toward preparing pre-service teachers to be critical cultural pedagogics for all students, especially urban African-American students. Moving away from the predictability of the classroom with its rules, routines, and rituals, prospective teachers may recognize that limited access to goods and services, poor health care facilities, economic disparities, and unsafe and dilapidated playgrounds all work against students’ willingness to participate in school tasks. Laverne Nelson, an active teacher, shares the same sentiment regarding her lack of preparation to teach urban students. She believes that more professional development would have been helpful for her:

*I did learn in my teacher education program about collaborative learning which I learned how to really get it right for my African-American students that I teach, on my*
own. I did learn the process in school. While I was in school, I did not learn the importance of relating to my students and the necessity to be current with my students. All of this was on-the-job training for me. When I began teaching, there wasn’t even any professional development on how best to teach urban African-American students. I wish that it had been taught, or at least introduced, in school. Then I would have at least had an idea that I needed to be prepared for this. I wish I’d learned about the need to stay current, understanding my kids that I teach and where they are coming from and the fact that teachers need to stay up on the urban vernacular. It’s important and helps with trust.

According to Billings (2000), no single course or set of field experiences is capable of preparing pre-service teachers to meet the needs of diverse learning. Rather, a more systemic, comprehensive approach is needed. Work that uses autobiography, restructured field experiences, situated pedagogies, and returning to the classrooms of experts can each provide new opportunities for improving teaching.

Ariel Roddin, an active teacher who focuses on special education students, felt that her preparation in teaching special education students was adequate, yet she still was not prepared to deal with the diverse behavior issues of urban students. She states:

*In my pre-service teacher education program, I did not learn how to teach urban or African-American students. I did learn how to effectively deal with students with special needs. I was really prepared for my students with special needs, perhaps because there is a big trend socially to educate students with special needs. I didn’t have enough psychology related issues or ways to handle those type of issues. As a teacher of special education students, I deal with more special needs issues than education concerns and I*
Ariel Roddin introduces an important point. She explains that her preparation to teach special education students was adequate, yet the preparation to teach urban students was lacking. She passively attributes this to the current societal trend towards the unique needs of special education students, yet the unique needs of African-American students has been going on for decades and still teachers are ill-prepared to teach urban African-American students. Billings (2000) suggests that schools and teachers treat the language, prior knowledge, and values of African Americans as aberrant and often presume that the teacher’s job is to rid African-American students of any vestiges of their own culture. While I understand her perspective and find tenets of it as valid currently, we must move past the historical research that negates the existence of societal race and active, institutional racism that we know is acting upon African-American students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The participants experienced a lack of preparation in their teacher schooling for effectively teaching urban African-American students. They understood that what was effective with relating and effectively teaching their students was to learn about the students they would teach while exercising flexibility, identification, and the sharing of themselves in an effort to reduce any disparity between them and their students and provide an effective bridge for academic learning. The participants made certain to encourage students and put the needs of the students first while maintaining high expectations for them. Students connect to the heart of the teacher. They are extremely aware that if your care and expectations of students are genuine and sincere, students will aim for the fulfilling those high expectations in order to meet the challenges that are set before them.
While there is concern for white teachers being able to effectively educate urban African-American students, it is equally challenging for African-American teachers to do the same. African-American teachers who decide to enter teaching may face the same chilly climate. We, as student-teachers, bring our experiences into the classrooms from our in-school and out-of-school lives that impact the way we think about ourselves and the world around us. “Prospective teachers do not easily relinquish beliefs—developed as a result of their own cultural and educational experiences—about themselves or others” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp130-131). However, pre-service teachers are expected to acquire the knowledge and skills (that may be contrary to personal beliefs) necessary to be effective in the classroom. Consequently, African-American pre-service teachers question the validity of their formal curriculum presented in college as it conflicts, in many cases, with their own perceptions (and perhaps experiences) of school (hooks, 1994), thereby leaving teacher-educators largely responsible for the quality of life and subsequent devotion to profession of urban African-American students in teacher education (Berry, 2005)
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

Introduction

Urban schools are faced with the continual challenge to educate an increasingly diverse student population. However, the diversity of teacher candidate pools failing to keep pace with changing school demographics is a dilemma that schools are continually faced with having to address. Stories of success for African-American students are often overshadowed by the reports of violence, abuse, neglect, and drugs. But some teachers make significant contributions to student’s lives while offering significant insights on how to best teach African-American students. The intent of this study is not to approach best practices as being easily modified simply with additional professional development or with approaches that can be conveniently replicated like a recipe, but to examine instructional practices that take culture, relationship, and teacher perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about their students into consideration as a way to engage African-American students and ensure their academic success in schools. Engaging in professional racism is not the goal of this study. Gay’s (2000) perspective sees the danger in assuming that black teachers carry all the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to successfully teach African-American students. To the contrary, there is a huge range of diversity even within groups, and we cannot oversimplify the characteristics of any group of teachers. This study finds and seeks to illuminate the effective pedagogical stratagem of effective African-American teachers.
The findings of this study are based on participants who taught elementary grades 5-8 in urban schools with a high minority population in a Midwestern state. This Midwestern state and district has a significant achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students, much like other states within our nation. Armed with this fact, it is necessary to investigate the practices of effective teachers of African-American students so that current and future educators can be exposed to, learn from, and utilize their best practices in an effort to increase the academic success for urban African-American students and therefore reduce the achievement gap.

This study presents only a small portion of reality for students, therefore, suggestions for further research will be provided along with recommendations for teachers, principals, and pre-service teacher education programs.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was multi-fold. First, this research attempted to give voice to a marginalized population of education professionals who have effective best practices with urban African-American students. Second, this study sought to explore and exploit the best practices for educators and administrators so they might utilize the findings to increase the achievement of their African-American students in order to increase their students’ overall engagement, connection with school, and learning outcomes. By examining the practices of highly effective experiences and well-respected teachers, the researcher attempted to build a profile of effective instruction best practices by teachers of color, which could be used in teacher preparation and professional development programs. Utilization of the identified best practices can ultimately
play a significant role in improving relationships between teachers and students, increasing a positive presence of teachers within the urban community and improving the academic success of urban African-American students.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory was the primary theoretical framework that provided the lens through which this data was analyzed. For the researcher, whose primary focus was to identify effective teaching practices for African-American students, race could not be omitted from the research. A critical analysis of urban education was forced to include race as a primary construct by which to critically analyze this focus on practices that are effective with African-American students. The researcher must challenge the dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and merit. Racism is a permanent part of American society, and the research must recognize the experiential knowledge the researcher possesses in order to analyze this phenomenon.

Race, as a construct that may impact the success of African-American students, was consciously viewed and taken into account in some capacity by the participants. Each of the African-American participants, whether retired or active, was conscientiously aware of the impact that race had on her own personal life and how she benefited from it or was oppressed by it. The participants said that a teacher should not attempt to negate or discount race and that a teacher should educate students about race and provide them context and reference in order to address it socially, politically, and justly to the broader context of society. A teacher should assist students to gain meaning and understanding about race so they can positively affect change.
within themselves and their community. Each of the participants said that their own experiences with race, as a construct of how they view the world, helped with the effective education of their African-American students. No matter how color blind we think we might be when it comes to dealing with individuals from different races, we see color initially if we do not have a clear understanding of how race impacts us daily, and we are apt to return to only our experiences, especially those that have been negative, when interacting with others from a different race. With this in mind, a critical analysis of race must be accomplished.

Three themes emerged and aided in the researcher’s ability to answer the research questions: 1) Relationship Building Between Teacher and Students, 2) The Use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and 3) The Lack of Teacher Preparation to Teach Urban Students.
Discussion

Relationship Building between Teacher and Students

The results of this study found that the relationship between a teacher and her student is critical to the academic success of African-American students. Absent a positive, meaningful, and authentic relationship, the gateway to academic success remains closed and the achievement gap large. The participants in this study demonstrated:

- Connecting to their students outside of the classroom environment
- Being flexible and creative with integrating knowledge gained from the students into the classroom
- Being intentional in understanding the lives of students
- Sharing information about oneself with the students and families
- Building a relationship is significant in the effective education of the students and reaching the parents

These findings are supported by research that presented the importance of building relationships with students (Bacon et. al., 2007; Decker et. al., 2007; Gay, 2000; Hill & Hawk, 2000; Jordan-Irvine, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rey et. al., 2007). This study also found that teachers, who demonstrate genuine concern and care for their students, also have high quality performance expectations and will not negotiate for anything less (Gay, 2000). Pang and Gibson (2001) maintained that “Black educators are far more than physical role models, and they bring diverse family histories, value orientations, and experiences to students within the classroom, attributes
often not found in textbooks or viewpoints often omitted” (pp. 260-61). Therefore, black teachers, like all teachers, are “texts” themselves, but these teachers’ text pages are inundated with life experiences and histories of racism, sexism, and oppression, along with those of strength, perseverance, and success. Consequently, these teachers’ texts are rich and empowering; they have the potential to help students understand the world they live in (Freire, 1998; Wink, 2000) as being diverse and unique as the students themselves and to change it.

The participants in this study demonstrated their personal involvement with students by advising students about educational and societal restraints, showing compassion when needed, understanding their students and their culture, and showing genuine concern and care for them individually. Many researchers (Bacon et. al.; Gay; Ladson-Billings; Landsman & Lewis; Rey, et. al.) hold the same premise. Bacon, et. al., make the distinction that white teachers focus more on setting boundaries for students and being involved in extracurricular student activities, while African-American teachers focus more on being personal with students, being protective of students, and being involved in family issues of students. All of the participants in this study focused on being personal, protective, and involved in family issues of their students.

Critical scholars such as Ellsworth (1989), hooks (1989), and McLaren (1989) have posited theoretical, conceptual, and research possibilities for situated pedagogies that consider race, class and gender. By addressing the specifics of the diverse communities, the literature avoids the platitudes and unsubstantiated generalities of generic pedagogical perspectives. This ideology forces the teacher to think more succinctly about the relationship with the community in which they are located and the school populations that their students belong to. The participants in this study connected with the communities of their students as a means to connect and interact with their students. Being African-American teachers and of the same race as their community of
students helped make interaction with the community easier and form partnerships with parents and those community members.

Black teachers can have a meaningful impact on black students’ academic and social success because they often deeply understand black students’ situation and their needs. For instance, Mitchell (1998), in her qualitative study of eight recently retired African-American teachers, reminded us of the insight black teachers can have in helping us understand the important connections between the affective domain and student behavior. Building on lessons learned from black teachers, Mitchell explained that in order for teachers to establish and to maintain student motivation and engagement, they should be aware of the students’ feelings and their social needs. Students’ feelings and emotions matter in how they experience education; black students often bring a set of situations that have been grounded in racism, inequity, and misunderstanding (Milner, 2002). Racism and inequity can emerge not only through their daily interactions but also through institutional and structural circumstances. Much like the Mitchell study, each of the educator participants in this study stated that in order for them to be effective with their students they have to establish a relationship and identify with the students they interacted with regularly. The teachers in this study were critically aware of the experiences of their students, both in and out of school, and of the contexts shaping their experiences.

The teachers were able to connect with the students because they understood that the students’ behaviors (whether good or bad) were often a result of their out-of-school experiences. The outside forces directly affected learning in the classroom. Each educator interviewed, succinctly understood the important connections between the students’ home life and the school, and they were able to allow the students to acknowledge, build on, and learn from those out-of-school experiences and situations without judgment or condemnation. The black teachers
understood that many of their students were doing drugs, living in poverty, or acting as little adults in their homes in terms of bringing in money to support their families, yet the teachers did not use these realities as an excuse for less than effective learning and teaching. The teachers continued to put forth the effort to teach and maintained high expectations for the students learning.

It can be easy for teachers to grant students the “permission to fail” (Ladson-Billings, 2002) when they consider the complex and challenging lives of their students outside the classroom. According to Siddle-Walker (1996), successful teachers of black students maintain high expectations for their students and do not pity them but empathize with the students (McAllister & Irvine, 2002), so that students have the best possible chance of mobilizing themselves and empowering their families and communities. This idea was confirmed in the interviews with educators in this study. Also poignant is a point made by Foster (1997) that African-American educators, because they typically are able to express cultural solidarity and communicate with African-American students in styles that are familiar, are better equipped to recognize the historical, political, and economic realities that shape the educational opportunities and resources available to black students. She further contends that quality black teachers exhibit a strong sense of commitment to black youth that is fueled by a keen understanding of the context in which these students are being educated. This results in a sense of urgency that compels these educators to view education as a tool for transforming not only the minds but also the lives of their African-American students.

Ladson-Billings (1994) maintains that exemplary African-American educators believe in the capacity of all African-American youth, regardless of class or gender distinctions, to learn
and successfully navigate the terrain of white society. Also important is her theory that such teachers typically do not fall back on commonly held beliefs and notions about the barriers to these students’ success, nor do they define success in traditional ways (also evidenced in this study). According to Henry (1998), exemplary African-American teachers also frown upon genetic, cultural, or economic deprivation theories, opting to hold themselves, other teachers, and the schools responsible for the intellectual development of each and every black child. Foster (1997) adds that such teachers encourage all of their students to aspire toward excellence no matter what. The teachers who were the focus of this study held that the purpose of the teacher was to “mentor, be a role model, ‘mother,’ educate, and provide social support” for their students in addition to the state mandates of curriculum. African-American teachers act as “other mothers” or “Ma Dukes” within the community of students they teach. The retired teachers of this study noted that they formed nurturing relationships with their students in an effort to gain trust and enhance student performance. Henry (1998) also contends that African feminist pedagogues act as the ‘other mothers’ for their black students, while consistently providing them with positive reinforcement, promoting collective responsibility and sharing, and encouraging their academic, intellectual, and cultural development (p. 400).

Significant to note is that Ladson-Billings supports that African-American woman teachers’ emancipatory practice is based on what critical theorist Patricia Hill-Collins (1991) terms an “Afrocentric feminist epistemology” (p. 201), which stems from three factors: 1) African-American women’s experiences with oppression, 2) their dialogical engagement with each other concerning the nature of African-American people’s domination, and 3) a sense of caring that leads to a commitment and a collective struggle to overcome oppression. The works of Lynn (1999), Foster (1993), and King (1991) support this thesis. Lynn argues that progressive
African-American male and female teachers alike believe that because racism, sexism, and elitism are endemic to American society, they must teach a liberatory pedagogy that focuses on the development among black students of an African cultural identity and an awareness of social inequality. Individual teachers’ beliefs about society and the nature of schooling have vast implications for the ways in which they develop and practice these liberatory pedagogies.

Clearly, teachers from any ethnic background can be effective and successful teachers of black students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). As Gay (2000) stressed, “the ability of teachers to make their instruction personally meaningful and culturally congruent for students account for their success, not their (ethnic) identity per se” (p. 205). However, much was learned from this study about the ways in which black teachers engage and empower black students. Teachers provide learning environments that foster student learning, and many black teachers, historically, have succeeded in fostering optimal learning opportunities for students, especially for black students. The loss and reduction of African-American teachers has been detrimental to the overall success of African-American students. Hudson and Holmes (1994) explained that “the loss of African-American teachers in public school settings has had a lasting negative impact on all students, particularly African-American students and the communities in which they reside” (p. 389). More than anything, Siddle-Walker (2000) concluded that because of the hard work and dedication of black teachers, “students did not want to let them down” (p. 265). The students put forth effort and achieved academically and socially.

This study found that the participants, both retired and active, were intentional about understanding the lives of their students and sharing information about themselves as well. They valued students’ perspectives and encouraged them in the directions the students set for themselves or helped them by exposing options available to them based on their experiences.
Hill and Hawk (2000) held that teachers who are effective value student perspective and encourage the future direction in life the students have set for themselves. The participants demonstrated their willingness to make themselves available to get to know their students outside of class, build relationship, build trust and mutual respect with their students and at times their parents, and took the time to learn about the community of the students they taught. Hill and Hawk support these effective practices. The participants’ focus was on the whole child, in spite of the social or economic conditions in which they found themselves. Researchers (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) posit building relationships can assist with meeting the needs of the whole child. Getting to know their students provides inroads for teachers to individualize their instruction and bridge the divide of trust which in turn will increase academic success for students.

**The Use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

The results of this study demonstrate that effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally supported environment that is learner-centered with the identified strengths of the students being nurtured, supported and used to promote student achievement as supported by research (Gay & Howard, 2001; Howard, 2001a; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Richards, *et. al.*, 2007). The study found that the participants educated themselves about their students’ communities in order to gain insight into the external experiences and social and economic conditions that affect the learning of their students. Researchers (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001a; Ladson-Billings; Saffold & Lonwell-Grice, 2007) support this notion as well. The participants in this study held that providing culturally relevant teaching connects students in a way that is meaningful and familiar to students. They found that when learning takes places in an environment where culturally relevant teaching occurs, the potential for learning is enhanced. This is also supported by
research (Gay; Howard, 2001a, 2001b; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings; Lemons-Smith, 2008; Nieto, 2004). If educators do not have some knowledge of their students’ lives outside of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then they cannot accurately know their students’ strengths and weaknesses (Delpit, 1995). This theme is also echoed by Pedro Noguera, who concludes that in order to engage urban students, teachers must adapt their teaching to the way in which those students learn rather than the reverse (expecting students to adapt their learning to the way they are taught). Therefore, teachers need to know how to make ideas and knowledge meaningful to urban students and how to use students’ culture and interests as tools by which to teach (2003). The participants in this study demonstrated their ability to connect to students and engage them in this manner.

Culturally responsive (or relevant) teaching has been described as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 382). What this means is that teachers make standards-based content and curricula accessible to students and teach in a way that students can understand. To do this, teachers must incorporate relatable aspects of students’ daily lives into the curriculum. Such familiar aspects include language (which may include jargon or slang), prior knowledge, and extracurricular interests such as music and sports. Once students feel comfortable with how a teacher talks and discusses academic material, they will feel comfortable enough to focus and try to learn the content. Participants each described how teachers need to be genuine and gain the trust of their students. Retired teachers also shared that their students demonstrated keen senses as to the sincerity of adults and once students know intrinsically that they can trust you then teaching and learning can begin.
Lack of Teacher Preparation to Teach Urban Students

Teacher preparation is culpable in the failure of teachers to effectively teach African-American students. Most teachers report that their pre-service preparation did little or nothing to prepare them for today’s diverse classrooms (Siddle-Walker, 1992). Reviews of the literature on multicultural teacher education (Duarte & Reed, 2004; Sleeter, 2001) indicate that most pre-service approaches rely on individual courses and diverse field experiences to satisfy legislative and professional association calls for meeting the needs of diverse students (Billings, 2000).

Teacher preparation programs have the greatest impact on the foundation of learning received from future teachers of urban students. Teacher preparation generates the outcomes and achievement gains that students will achieve. Future teachers that enter into intuitions of higher learning with a limited background of diversity should be able to experience those deficits within a schooling environment.

Teachers are vital to the outcomes of students in the classroom and must be prepared to teach and educate all students. When this preparation is lacking, teachers find additional stress in learning how to teach a population of students to whom they’ve had no prior exposure and no foundation for understanding their social and economic experiences. This is what the participants of this study demonstrated.

The tragedy is that too few teachers have been exposed during their teacher education programs to appropriate conceptualizations of teaching for students from groups that we as a society have marginalized and normalized. This study has found some starting points for current teachers, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators, to re-conceptualize teaching and to modify
teaching processes to systematically improve schooling for all our nation’s children and our urban African American students.
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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographics

Name

When were you born?

Where were you born?

Where did you grow up?

Have you lived in other places?

Family Background

Tell me about your family (I will ask this question without follow up. First see what they will tell me, before I follow up with...)

Tell me about your parents

Parents’ Education level

Mother ___________ Father ________________

Tell me about your Siblings

How many siblings do you have?

Males ___________ Females ________________

Educational level of siblings

(1) ___________ (2) ___________ (3) ___________

(4) ___________ (5) ___________ (6) ___________

Were (are) any of your family members teachers? If so, tell me about them. Where did (do) they teach? What did (do) they teach? What did they tell you about being teacher?)
**Childhood Years (6-12)**

Tell me about your childhood experiences. What do you remember during your early years? What was your community like?

Tell me about your schooling experience?

- Where did you go?
- How did you get there?
- How many classes were there?
- How many children were in the classroom?
- Did you have a favorite teacher? Tell me about him/her.
- What was discipline like at school? (Punishments)

**Adolescence Years (13-18)**

Tell me about your adolescence experiences. What do you remember about these years? What was your community like?

Tell me about your schooling experience?

- Where did you go?
- How did you get there?
- How many classes were there?
- How many students were in the classroom?
- Did you have a favorite teacher? Tell me about him/her.
- What was discipline like at school? (Punishments)

**Higher Education**

Tell me about your teacher education program.

- Where did you go?
- How did you get there?
How many students were in a typical class?
Did you have a favorite professor? Tell me about him/her.
How well do you think your program prepared you to become a teacher?
Is there something you add or change? If so, what?

**Work Experience**

Before becoming a teacher, did you have other jobs? If so, tell me about them?
How long have you been a teacher?
Why did you decide to become a teacher?
What did your family tell you about teaching?
In your career, how many schools have you worked in?
What grade levels have you taught?

**Teaching experience**

Tell me what you value most about teaching?
What challenges, if any, do you face as a teacher?
What opportunities, if any, do you have as a teacher?
Tell me about your relationship with your co-workers.
Tell me about your relationship with your principal(s) or head.

**Philosophy of Education**

**Purpose**

What is the purpose of education?
What knowledge do you believe is most worth having?
What is your role as an educator?
What is the role of the teacher in the community?
What role, if any, should religion play in schools?
Students and Learners

What are your goals for your students?

How do you believe children learn?

Do you believe all students are capable of learning?, Why or Why not?

Do you believe all learners have something to contribute, or is this the role of teachers only?

Do you believe that boys and girls learn differently? If so, how?

Are children innately curious or empty vessels to be filled with wisdom by teachers, or from a textbook?

What role, if any, should parents play in their child’s education?

Curriculum
Tell me about a school’s curriculum.

- Who should design a school’s curriculum?
- How important are state standards?
- Should schools have a common body of information that all students should know.
- Should schools prepare students to solve social problems they will face beyond the classroom?
- Should schools develop students’ analytical skills and/or critical thinking skills?
- Should schools help students recognize social injustices and create projects to address social inequities?
- Should schools teach about ethnic, racial and sexual differences to promote positive group relationships?
- Should schools promote academic rigor or should students freely learn what and when they are ready to do so?
- Should schools promote democratic decision making and encourage self-reflection?
- Should religion be included in the curriculum?
- How should schools assess students’ learning?
Teaching Methods
What method(s) do you use to accomplish your goals?
- Lectures
- direct instruction
- cooperative groups
- problem-solving
- Worksheets
- ability grouping

What have you read or experienced that supports your belief?