TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY

By

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ABSTRACT

TAMEKA NICOLE ARDREY. Transforming early childhood education through culturally sustaining pedagogy. (Under the direction of DR. CHANCE LEWIS)

Low-income African American children have been identified among the majority of children without access to high-quality early education (Barnett, Carolan & Johns, 2013). Consequently, they lack the necessary skills to successfully navigate the schooling process (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). This lack of school readiness is only exacerbated by the dissonance between the school and home cultures of these students as it forces them to navigate between the cognitive and behavioral expectations necessary for academic success and the cultural values and beliefs of their families and neighborhoods. For many young children this may be both challenging and overwhelming especially in the absence of intentional transitional support between home culture and school culture, which makes the role of early educators so important. Early educators must be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to prepare students to succeed in mainstream culture while simultaneously affirming their home cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In acknowledgement of this need, my dissertation is an auto ethnography in which I highlight my experiences as administrator implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) into my predominantly African American early education program. In particular, I examine how I used CSP to foster both student and teacher engagement in an effort to enhance the quality of early care and education that we provided for the children and families. Additionally, I examine how CSP can be merged with the normalized

predetermined criteria of quality as defined by developmentally appropriate practices in order to ensure that the cultural and developmental needs of all children are met.

This study reflects on the insight I gained about developmentally appropriate practices and the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy throughout the journey. Thus, I share my successes, my challenges, dilemmas, and epiphanies. I also provide suggestions for future research.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the beautiful brown babies whose village I had the honor of being a part. You all have made me a better educator, a better advocate and a better person. This study is just the beginning. I will continue to be a champion and change agent fighting on your behalf.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education and Culture: The Role of the Early Educator

Sitting in my Sociology of Education course during the senior year of my college career was the first time I ever questioned the equitability of the *American Dream*. I remember being overwhelmed by feelings of discomfort and disbelief as my professor began to call into question the purpose of schooling and the implications of race on student outcomes. Surely, there must be an error in the research because after all, schools are the *great equalizers.* Success, prosperity, and mobility were easily attainable to any and everyone who was willing to work hard and I was living proof. There I was a young African American woman, whose parents had nothing more than a high school education, sitting in a college classroom only a semester away from graduating from one of the most prestigious universities in the state of North Carolina. This was a moment that I worked hard for. Throughout my years of schooling I had always been on the A/B honor roll and graduated sixth in my high school class and my race had never once been an issue, or was it? There I sat with questions swirling around my head. Was I an outlier? Was my race a factor in my educational experiences? Are there really inequalities in the schooling process to the demise of African American students? It took a while for me to settle on an answer for my first two questions but the answer to the last question became alarmingly clear during my assigned fieldwork for the class.

Due to the content of the course, I went into my site expecting to find some social inequalities characterized by race, but also to discover ways in which schools help to minimize them. Unfortunately, through my observations and personal interactions with the students in the third grade classroom I was assigned, I discovered more of the former and little to none of the latter. Not only did I learn that schools solidify inequalities through daily practices, but race is often a deciding factor in how these practices are implemented. Up until this time, I never thought that there would be obvious differentiation between how students are treated based on their race alone. However, as I sat in that third grade classroom and witnessed first hand two boys, Malik, an African American student, and Austin, a Caucasian student, display the same behavior but receive two contrasting consequences; I found it difficult to maintain my allegiance to the equitableness of the educational process to the attainment of the great *American Dream*. Malik received discipline (dismissal from the class) while Austin received correction (a lecture on the importance of respect and turn taking). What message did this send to the two boys about race and consequences? Unfortunately, this was just one of many examples of the differential treatment that I observed between students of different races in that third grade classroom. The culmination of this field experience marked the pivotal moment that I realized that race and culture absolutely mattered, particularly to the benefit of White middle class students. Consequently, students of color are positioned as an inferior group and viewed according to deficit ideology. Sadly, a decade has past since that moment and not much has changed. Culture continues to be a mediating factor in the

quality of educational experiences of African American children starting during the early childhood years.

Early childhood is one of the most significant periods of an individual's life. It is typically defined as the period of human development from birth to age eight. During this transformative period, cognitive, social and environmental experiences began to shape critical aspects of a child's brain, many of which are formed even before the age of five (Keys et al., 2013; National Scientific Council, 2007; Rashid, 2009). Thus, it is imperative that early educators are intentional about the messages that they send to their students, especially as it relates to race and culture. It is also important to acknowledge that these messages are both verbal and nonverbal. Children pay just as much attention to educators' actions as they do their words, whether positive or negative, a concept I witnessed firsthand through my interaction with little Malik.

I recall one conversation with Malik in particular that not only reinforced the impact of inequitable pedagogical practices but also made me privy to his inner thoughts. Malik and I were sitting in the school library working on a reading assignment his teacher had provided. He completed it within the first ten minutes with very little assistance from me other than a few grammatical corrections, which led me to ask, "Malik, why don't you do your work like that in class for Mrs. H?" He responded, " I ain't doing nothing for her Ms. Tameka. She don't care. She don't even like me." At that moment I felt heaviness in the pit of my stomach followed by increased warmth throughout my body. I was heart broken and angry at the same time. There was this young Black boy full of potential and ability who had made a conscious decision not disengage from the schooling process because his teacher failed to take the time to nurture and encourage him. Unfortunately,

this experience is not unique to Malik; rather it is a collective experience for many African American students throughout the United States.

This is a largely due to the fact that there is a dissonance between the home and school cultures for many students of color. This dissonance forces them to learn to navigate between the cognitive and behavioral expectations deemed necessary for academic success and the cultural values and beliefs of their families and neighborhoods. For many young children this may be both challenging and overwhelming especially in the absence of intentional transitional support between home culture and school culture, which makes the role of early educators so important.

Early educators must be culturally competent and confident in their abilities to effectively educate all students (Durden, Escalante, & Blitch, 2015). Culturally relevant teachers prepare students to succeed in mainstream culture while simultaneously affirming their home cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These teachers understand that children enter the classroom with their own set of cultural values and beliefs that define who they are and where they come from. Bourdieu (2000) utilizes the concept of cultural capital to define the attitudes, values, and lifestyle of an individual. Cultural capital varies between race and class and is also influenced by factors such as family structure and religious beliefs. Therefore, it determines how an individual speaks, behaves and thinks. Effective teachers must be able to use these cultural differences to develop their teaching strategies. They must also be able to assess not only the culturally appropriateness of academic instruction but social development as well.

Problem Statement

Unfortunately, pervasive understandings of the "science of child development" have consistently failed to acknowledge culture as a key factor in child development (Pence, 2011). Perhaps the problem lies within the fact that the policies and practices that govern the early childhood education field are based on a "one size fits all" framework. This framework operates under the assumption that all children develop according to Eurocentric norms (Boutte, 2012), completely negating the cultural underpinnings that influence growth and development. Early educators are taught to celebrate diversity through superficial practices such as providing multicultural toys for children, acknowledging special holidays, and placing pictures of people from different ethnic groups around the room. In fact, during my time serving in various roles in the early childhood education field, I must admit that I myself have been guilty of implementing and encouraging cultural symbolism in the classroom. Though all of my actions were indeed for the sake of multiculturalism in the early childhood setting, my efforts were without any real depth or educational content. In hindsight, this is primarily due to the fact that I did not fully understand the role of culture in child development. I had subscribed to the grand narrative within the field of early childhood education that assumes that all children should learn a universal culture and that there is one right way to raise children for all families, regardless of their circumstances (Nsamenang, 2008).

After all, why would I have thought differently? It worked for me or at least that was my initial thought until I took a moment to step back and reflect on my early education experiences. It was not so much that the indoctrination of White middle class culture had worked for my benefit rather I had learn how to efficiently and effectively

play the assimilation game at a very early age. I can recall intentionally distancing myself from the other children from my neighborhood in the schooling environment to ensure that I would not be placed in the same category. Many of the children from my neighborhood were considered to be behavioral challenges and experienced academic failure. On the contrary, I was anything but and I wanted them to see it. However, I could not leave it up to chance so I began to behave and talk like the White students. I traded in the richness of African American English for the comfort and acceptance of Standard English. There was a time and place for everything and my parents were active participants in equipping me with the knowledge and skills I needed to display the appropriate behaviors at the appropriate time! Specifically, my parents stressed the importance of manners and respect throughout my childhood. They understood that as an African American it was imperative for me to demonstrate skills reflective of submissiveness in order to effectively navigate a predominantly White society. Consequently, not talking back to my elders and saying yes ma'am and no ma'am became a natural part of my values, a quality which made me an exemplary student in the eyes of my teachers.

Looking back I got more awards for being a good listener and a model student than academic ones. Even conversations with my mother about her experiences at parent-teacher conferences affirm this idea. For example, my mother states, " At the beginning of the conference your teachers would say you were smart, but then it would immediately turn to your behavior. They would praise things like how well you paid attention, how well you spoke, how you followed directions and how well mannered you were." These characteristics obviously were of benefit to me as I was the antithesis of the

stereotypical loud attitudinal little Black girl (Koonce, 2012). However, my passive behavior at school in no way diminished the influence of my deep African American roots and the cultural norms uniquely attributed to them in my mannerisms outside of the classroom environment. In the confines of my home, neighborhood, and church, I was loud, vibrant and expressive. I spoke Ebonics. I was unapologetically me, unapologetically African American.

In fact, some of my fondest memories involved Sunday mornings at church singing and dancing with the hymn choir. During every service, we would engage in the African American tradition of call and response. Call and response is a musical conversation in which the leader of the choir would "line a hymn" or read the lyrics of the song and the congregation would respond by singing the lyrics back. There I would stand next to my mother clapping my hands and swaying to the beat as I loudly imitated the sounds and rhythms that I heard the adults around me singing. This behavior was in direct contradiction of the young girl that my teachers and peers would describe as shy and quiet in the schooling environment. I submit that the difference between myself and so many other African American children is that I had mastered the art of code switching and was skilled in operating as a cultural chameleon. As the ancient saying goes, "When in Rome do as the Romans do."

Purpose Statement

It all seemed to make perfect sense back then but now all of that has changed. As I near the completion of my doctoral studies in an urban education program and am currently the program administrator of a nationally accredited child development center serving over one hundred families, most of which are African American, I find the notion

of cultural hegemony as a pedagogical practice to be unnerving. As a member of the African American community and the servant leader to these promising young scholars and their families, my sense of accountability and responsibility to ensuring that the cultural and developmental needs of all children are met has intensified. I am not naïve to the fact that these young African American scholars will also need to learn the art of code switching and the illusion of cultural assimilation, but I am convinced that there is an alternative culturally inclusive approach to teaching children the necessary skills and content to successfully thrive in the schooling environment as well in society in general. Students of color should not have to abandon the very essence of who they are and what they believe in order to successfully navigate the education process, rather their cultural backgrounds should be used as the foundation upon which all other knowledge is built.

Consequently, the juxtaposition of the normative standards and expectations of a nationally accredited early childhood education program with my commitment to incorporate intentional culturally sustaining pedagogy has been quite an enlightening and challenging experience. I have had to learn to operate under two overarching pedagogical frameworks simultaneously, normative developmentally appropriate practices and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Through this process, I have experienced Dubois's (1903) concept of *double consciousness*. On one hand, I am the administrator of a five-star early childhood education program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), obligating me to uphold a predetermined set of universal regulatory standards and values. However, on the other hand, I am an African American doctoral student with strong convictions about making culture central to the early childhood education experiences of young African American children. Nevertheless, I

take comfort in the fact that I am not alone in my convictions. In fact, it appears that I am amongst good company. Banks (1992) asserts that there is a pervasive belief among African American scholars that, " Scholarship should be used to improve the conditions of their people and contribute to the formation of enlightened public and educational policies" (p. 278). Aligned with Banks (1995), I acknowledge that in order for school reform to truly be effective the entire system must be restructured and not just parts. Conversely, change must start somewhere. So, why not start with those elements that I have a degree of control over, those things within my power to change? With this in mind, my research will explore the following questions:

1) As an administrator of a predominately African American early childhood education program, how do I foster a culturally sustaining environment that facilitates both teacher and student engagement?
2) In this same role, how do I reconcile the normalized predetermined criterion of quality with the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy in my early childhood education program?

These questions have become particularly important to me through my transition to the role of center director. Consequently, this paper will be a critical reflective autoethnographic exploration of my journey of self-discovery at the intersection of developmentally appropriate practices and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Framework

As previously stated, the premise of my inquiry is based on the assumption that there is an alternative culturally inclusive pedagogical approach to early childhood. This approach counters pervasive Eurocentric norms of child development; thus better

addressing the developmental needs of the African American students served by my early childhood program. Hence, I will utilize two theoretical perspectives: 1) Critical Race Theory and 2) Engaged Pedagogy. Both of these theoretical frameworks challenge the dominant perspective in an effort to gain deeper understanding of the lived experiences of individuals.

Coined in the 1970's, Critical Race Theory (CRT) seeks to challenge the notions of universalism and dominance (Bell, 1995). Universalism is problematic because it is reflective of a single perspective focused on members of the most privileged group, thus marginalizing everyone else. In particular, White middle class culture becomes the analytical lens through which all experiences should be viewed, creating a single universal grand narrative of truth to be accepted and embraced by all. Central to CRT is an in depth analysis of race. Race is critical to the analysis of universalism and dominance. In fact, Crenshaw (1989) suggests that attempting to reduce experiences to a universal norm is a distortion of that experience as it fails to truly capture the impact of mediating factors such as race, class, and gender.

Accordingly, CRT reveals the instersectionality of race and power. By positioning race at the center of analysis of acceptable knowledge and behavior it exposes the presence of racism and discrimination felt by marginalized minority groups. However, it must be noted that even the notion of discrimination and racism must be viewed critically. Discrimination cannot be definitively narrowed down to one universal experience common to all. In fact, Crenshaw (1989) submits that accepting a dominant normative standard of discrimination hinders "the development of an adequate theory and

praxis to address problems of intersectionality"(p.15), which completely negates the premise of CRT.

Additionally, CRT not only refutes this universal claim of truth but also confronts it directly. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) highlight that one of the differential tenets of CRT is that it evokes activism as it moves beyond simply exposing and understanding social ills to identifying ways to transform them. Knowledge gained as a result of the critical analysis of race and power should be used to address injustice and evoke change. For the sake of this study, the knowledge I gained from my experiences will be used as a catalyst to identify effective ways to implement pedagogical practices that meet both the developmental and cultural needs of students of color, particular African American students.

Aligned with CRT, Engaged Pedagogy is about moving beyond theory into practice. In fact, Hooks (1994) describes engaged pedagogy as a holistic and emancipatory approach to education that transforms curriculum in a way that does not reflect biases nor reinforce systems of domination. Thus, it is a collaborative learning experience between student and teacher that values student expression and allows students to take ownership of their education. Engaged pedagogy dismantles the notion of one universal grand narrative of truth and provides a welcoming environment for multiple counter narratives by creating a space for student voice and experiences to be embedded in the creation of meaningful knowledge. This is such a powerful tool for promoting high achievement and empowerment in students of color. It requires teachers to hold high expectations for their students and requires students to be active participants, both of which helps students build self-esteem, increase confidence and improve

academic performance (Brophy, 2008). Hence, engaged pedagogy is predicated on an educator's willingness to move beyond simply academics to the complete well-being of the child. In fact, Hooks (1994) asserts that teaching practices must be done in a manner that demonstrates respect and care for the very souls of students.

Furthermore, it must be noted that engaged pedagogy was birthed out of Hooks' desire to identify alternative approaches to learning and teaching. Through her own experiences as a student she admittedly struggled with professors that did not accommodate student perspective or experiences out of fear that it would interfere with the objective teaching strategies in which they found comfort. Nevertheless, considering that the premise of my study is that there is an alternative pedagogical approach to traditional early childhood practices, that more effectively address the academic and cultural needs of young African American children, engaged pedagogy perfectly frames the purpose of my study.

Context of the Study

This study was rooted in my experiences as an administrator of a nationally accredited, five-star child development center located in the heart of one of the most underserved predominately low-income African American communities. Although the center was strategically established in this particular community to meet the needs of this population of children and families, it must be noted that there is a vast spectrum of socio-economic statuses and lived experiences represented. This spectrum ranges from college educated two parent families who pay privately to teenage mothers currently in foster care receiving government assistance to pay for their childcare services.

Reflective of the community of families that we serve, the administration and teaching staff is predominately African American with a wide range of lived experiences as well. In fact, many of these experiences are similar if not identical to those faced by the families. The reality of the matter is that the staff and families probably have more things in common than things that differ, which makes the potential of the study even more powerful.

Significance of the Study

The intent of the study is to contribute to the body of literature related to culturally sustaining pedagogy in the field of early childhood education, specific to the ages 0-5 populations, as there is limited existing research. Furthermore, the findings from this study has the potential to provide valuable insight that could be used to inform polices and practices to address the issues of inequities in early childhood education and school readiness for African American children at risk of academic failure. Addressing such inequities is critical to transforming the educational trajectories and life outcomes of these students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used in this study:

Early Childhood: Term typically used to describe the first 8 years of life. However, for the purpose of this study it will refer to the developmental experiences of children from birth to five.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice: A framework of standards, based on Eurocentric norms and values, used in early childhood settings to guide educators in

practices that address established universal developmental milestones for all children (Bredekamp, 1997).

Culturally Relevant Teaching: A teaching practice that uses the culture of students as a basis for teaching course content and skills while simultaneously empowering students intellectually, socially, and emotionally (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: An alternative pedagogical practice that builds upon the tenets of culturally relevant teaching while emphasizing the importance of sustaining the cultural identities of students while simultaneously affording them the opportunity to become proficient in the dominant culture (Paris, 2012).

Intersectionality: The interconnectedness of power structures as they interact in the lives of people of color (Crenshaw, 1989).

Engage: To foster a collaborative learning experience between student and teacher that values student expression and allows students to take ownership of their education (Hooks, 1994).

High Quality: As used in this study, high quality refers to early childhood programs that utilize teaching practices that effectively address the developmental needs of young children.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

As I mentioned in chapter 1, I am both scholar and administrator. Thus, although my research is predicated on my personal experiences it is equally important that I am be well versed in existent research as well. I am not naïve enough to believe that my experiences alone are sufficient to adequately critique my administrative and pedagogical practices. Consequently, it is imperative that I ground my work in and examine it through the theoretical lens of previous scholarship regarding African Americans and schooling. Building upon this foundation will position me to critically reflect on my experiences in a way that will yield greater understanding.

Parallel to the work already done, I also desired to identify any holes or gaps in the literature surrounding the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy in early childhood settings, especially as it relates to my role as an administrator. I do not profess awareness of all research ever conducted in this area but I can suggest that the research is limited based on my review of literature thus far. However, the scarcity of such research is only the tip of the iceberg, the greater issue is the fact that practical application of any existent research has not been evident nor visible in any of the early education programs I have encountered throughout my more than 10 years of professional experience working in the early education field. Perhaps lack of awareness or understanding is why so many

early education programs continue to dwell among the ranks of those that fail to personalize the cultural needs and learning experiences of the young children and families that they serve. However, less I to be guilty of such negligence and in fail to gain a better understanding, I will contextualize my study in research related to the history of African American schooling, challenges that students of color face during the schooling process, and protective factors and strategies to ensure that both their cultural and developmental needs are met.

History of African American Schooling

Historically, education has been a priority for African Americans even amidst persistent attempts by European Americans to use it as a form of oppression. The unyielding desire for literacy and a legacy of resiliency and academic merit led African Americans to establish their own education systems. In fact, in the early 1800s prior to the creation of free public schools, African Americans had already began to establish their own schools; many founded by churches and led by Black educators within the community (Anderson, 1988). The establishment of these schools arguably influenced and impacted the development of universal schooling that later followed.

Interestingly, as highlighted by Anderson (1988), even with the implementation of universal schooling, these schools were so prominent in the African American community that many Blacks opted out of the free public schools established by Northern Whites to continue to send their children to the Black private schools. However, it must be noted that this standard of high expectations did not end there; it continued to manifest itself well into the civil rights era. During this era, African American educational excellence became evident in the fight for equality through the integration of public

schools, particularly the Brown v. Board of Education court case. This pivotal court case resulted in the unanimous ruling declaring "separate but equal" public schools for Blacks and Whites were unconstitutional (United States Court, n.d.). The *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision not only changed the course of history but it also demonstrated the effectiveness of the tenacity and integrity of the African American spirit, the same spirit that undergirds the African American education tradition of excellence. A tradition that still has the ability to transform the learning experiences of students of color even today. However, in order to fully understand the transformative potential of this tradition, two things must occur: (1) There must first be an acknowledgement of the implications of growing up in urban communities for many students of color and (2) There must be a critical analysis of the structure of the current education system and its impact on the schooling experiences of these students.

Growing up Urban

Although there are multiple economic factors that are used to characterize urban communities such as mobility, growth, and development, it must be noted that such advances are not available to everyone. Actually, they are uneven at best, marginalizing millions of families by creating wide disparities in health, nutrition, and education (United Nations Children's Fund, 2012). Moreover, the United Nations Children's Fund (2012) asserts that the urban experience for many people consist primarily of poverty and exclusion. Additionally, as the most vulnerable population, children suffer the negative impact of such disparities the most.

Childhood is a crucial period of growth and development and without the appropriate accommodations and resources developmental deficiencies are inevitable.

This is particularly relevant for many African American children across the United States. As a matter of fact, research shows that African America children under age five are the poorest group in the country and more than two thirds of them who are born poor will be so persistently for at least half of their childhood (Children Defense, 2012). Accordingly, nearly half of all poor African American children live in neighborhoods suffering from concentrated poverty which has been linked to several negative life outcomes such as social, behavioral, and academic challenges (Austin, 2013). Living in such environments magnifies the impact of racial inequities, not only within their community but also in the very educational institutions that are often said to be the great equalizers.

Urban Education and Early Childhood Education

One of the most effective ways to adequately assess the schooling experiences of students of color is to examine them through a multicultural lens. Multiculturalism respects multiple cultural perspectives and worldviews and acknowledges mainstream European culture without placing a premium on it as universal (Asante, 1991). Using this approach to examine the salient factors that systematically affect the achievement of students of color in urban schools illuminates the urgency of urban school reform. Although there are many factors that need to be addressed through reform efforts, some of the most prevalent are under qualified teachers, low teacher expectations, and overrepresentation in behavioral referrals. Contrary to popular belief, these aforementioned factors are not unique to the K-12 educational setting, they are mirrored in urban early childhood education settings as well.

In fact, these crucial early years are actually where it all begins. Early childhood is the transformative period in which children experience significant growth and development in their cognitive, social and developmental domains all of which are key components of school readiness (Keys et al., 2013; Rashid, 2009). According to the National Scientific Council (2007), “Critical aspects of brain architecture begin to be shaped by experience before and soon after birth, and many fundamental aspects of that architecture are established well before a child enters school” (p.1). Thus it is imperative that all children, especially those considered at-risk, are exposed to as many positive, healthy, and cognitively stimulating experiences as possible during the early years.

Moreover, identified as the group most likely to live in poverty (Patten & Krogstad, 2015), African American children have been associated with a preponderance of adverse developmental outcomes including health, cognitive, language and behavioral challenges (Harden, Sandstrom, & Chazan-Cohen, 2012). Although alarming, these outcomes are not surprising given the amount of risk factors these children have to face including family economic hardships, low parent education, and lack of residential mobility (Robbins, Stagman, & Smith, 2012). Each of these factors impact a child’s ability to adapt and thrive in the schooling environment and ultimately supports research findings that economically disadvantage students tend to enter schools with less academic abilities than their peers (Harden, Sandstrom, & Chazan-Cohen, 2012).

Bearing in mind the economic hardships and limited education attainment of the families of children living in poverty, it is probable that stimulating early learning experiences in the home environment are inadequate or nonexistent (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004). The absence of such experiences may serve as determinant

factors on the degree of academic success the children will attain in the future. Moreover, data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010–2011 highlights the relationship between math scores and parental education. Children whose parents had the least education scored lower than peers whose parents had more education (Mulligan, Hastedt, & McCarroll, 2012). Likewise, research on language development indicates that children from high-income families typically experience 30 million more words within the first four years of life than those from low-income families (Hart & Risley, 2004). The disparity in the quantity of words among these families is attributed to the fact that high-income families tend to have more education, engage in more conversations with their children, and spend more time engaging in literacy activities such as reading. Consequently, their children enter schools with much larger vocabularies and enhanced communication skills.

Furthermore, research suggests that all children who do not get their educational needs met in the first five years of life fall behind even before school entry (Carolan, Johns, & 2013). This is even more vital for children from lower socio-economic neighborhoods and families, especially those living in poverty, which is the case for many African American children. Accordingly, as the largest percentage (69%) of children under the age of 6 (Patten & Krogstad, 2015) living in low-income families in the United States, they are more likely to receive inadequate or poor quality early care and education (Barnett et al., 2013).

Accessibility to High Quality Care. High quality early childhood education has been identified as a significant contributor to the academic success and development of young children, especially for low-income children of color at risk for academic failure.

For these children, high quality education programs have been said to bridge the gap between home and school by providing children with continuous opportunities to learn the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for successful adaption to the school environment (Espinosa, 2002). Unfortunately, recent research findings show that most low-income students of color lack access to this type of care. In particular, Barnett et al. (2013), highlight that low-income African American children have been identified among the majority of children without access to high-quality early childhood education.

In 2005 the National Center for Education Statistics conducted a study on child care quality in the United States and found some striking differences in quality among both types of care and ethnic groups (Barnett et al., 2013). Their study revealed that Black children are more likely to attend preschool and experience lower quality care than any other group, regardless of type of program (Barnett et al., 2013; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). This trend was even present in Head Start programs that are specifically designed to address educational inequalities for at risk students. The percentage of high quality Head Start programs attended by Hispanics and Whites were nearly double that of African Americans. Actually the odds that the centers that White or Hispanic students attended were high quality were practically 1 in 2 versus 1 in 4 for African American children (Barnett et al., 2013).

Furthermore, children who are not exposed to high quality learning experiences may lack basic school readiness skills such as effective communication, excitement about learning, recognition of the alphabet, counting and knowing basic concepts (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). These skills are not only essential to their academic success but research shows that students who do not acquire these basic skills continue to fall behind their

peers throughout the schooling process (Winsler et al., 2008). Accordingly, data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey indicated that African American kindergarteners were ranked by teachers as having the least amount of school readiness skills and behaviors positively linked to higher academic achievement (Kena et al., 2015). This lack of school readiness results in African American children entering school academically behind their peers and continuing to achieve at lower levels for the duration of their attendance. These differences also have many long-term repercussions, such as disparities in graduation rates. According to national statistics, in 2014 African Americans had the second lowest percentage (73%) of high school graduates and the second highest percentage (7.4%) of high school dropouts among all ethnic groups (Kena et. al., 2016).

Cultural Discontinuity. Prior to being enrolled in an early childhood education program the primary funds of knowledge for young children are their families and neighborhoods. It is from these entities that they learn how to speak, behave, and to think, which may be very different from what is deemed appropriate and acceptable in the school environment. Consequently, many students of color, especially from low-income environments, are exposed to a to a new set of behavioral expectations and content knowledge for which they are expected to demonstrate competency in order to be successful. For many students this may be both challenging and overwhelming especially when they are not getting the support they need to transition between home and school culture. Ogbu (1982) refers to this situation as cultural discontinuity acknowledging that the expectation for students of color to conform to a school culture very different than their own will often result in a clash between their customary behavior and the expected behavior.

Kunjufu (2002) asserts that school culture is rooted in White middle class hegemony. This hegemony affects the material taught, the behavior expected, and the perception of student behavior, which often conflicts with the culture and values of Black students. In alignment with Payne's (2001) framework for "understanding poverty", he illustrates that cultural conflicts between schools and Black families have multidimensional effects on the schooling experiences of students. Payne (2001) submits that each class has its on set of hidden rules. These rules govern belief systems and social interactions unique to the members of that particular group and are based on their position in society. For example, Payne (2001) asserts that decision making for individuals living in generational poverty is driven by survival and relationship while middle class individuals are driven by work and achievement. Consequently, the rules that children from generational poverty bring into the schooling environment are incongruous with those expected within the middle class school culture ultimately creating tension between the two. Accordingly, these rules also govern how teachers perceive and interact with students.

Teacher perceptions on culture are significant determinants of what is considered appropriate or inappropriate behaviors. Gregory and Mosely (2013) suggest student behaviors are judged based on the cultural norms of their teachers. Each teacher represents their own set of cultural values and beliefs that provide the frame of reference for classroom interaction with the students. Considering that White female teachers comprise a significant percentage of the early childhood education workforce as well (Child Care Services Association, 2015), it is extremely likely that many of them have little or no knowledge of African American or other minority cultures. As a result,

student behaviors are misjudged according to White middle class standards and students of color are characterized by popular stereotypes (Boutte, 2012).

This general idea is illustrated in the research conducted on African Americans by Wade Boykin (1999) at Howard University. Boykin emphasizes the conflict between African American cultural style and mainstream cultural style by highlighting behavioral norms characteristic of African American culture that are often negatively misinterpreted by teachers. Two of the characteristics he highlights are *verve* are *orality*.

Boykin (1999) describes verve as the tendency to attend to several concerns at once in an attempt to keep oneself stimulated. For example, a Black student may be in class singing, tapping his or her pencil on the desk, and moving around in his or her chair while completing an assignment while others may be working quietly. This characteristic, although normal for Black students, is often viewed as hyperactivity by teachers consequently resulting in a child being labeled as a problem or identified as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), all because students are expected to sit still and focus on one activity at a time.

Orality is used to describe the call and response tradition, which is characteristic of the African American church. Boykin (1999) argues that Black students take this same tradition with them in the classroom and teachers tend to view this as disrespectful because students are supposed to raise their hands and wait their turn instead of just responding verbally. Students displaying this type of behavior in classrooms are quickly labeled as discipline problems and consequently face disciplinary actions just for being their selves.

These types of cultural mismatches have been widely linked to student attitudes toward schooling, motivation, and achievement (Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005). Perhaps this is due to the fact that too often teaching models claim to be neutral and based on the needs of all children but are actually established by mainstream education principals (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Likewise, Kunjufu (2002) asserts that the purpose of schools is to "mirror capitalism and produce winners and losers" (p.11). He argues that this purpose is fulfilled through school practices such as Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) and tracking, both of which are dependent upon student's ability to successfully display middle class values.

Teacher Expectations. Throughout history teachers have held African American students to lower expectations under the assumption that they are intellectually inferior and incapable of performing at a high level of achievement (Moore & Lewis, 2012). This type of deficit thinking labels the children as failures before they even get the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities, and often fosters a negative sense of self for the students. Furthermore, Boutte (2012) asserts that the term urban is often used to describe poor, misbehaving, minority students with limited academic ability which teachers often translate into low expectations and low toleration. Low teacher expectations based heavily on social class and race can have detrimental effects on students (Rashid, 2009).

Additionally, Terrill and Mark (2000) found that many pre-service teachers preferred working with students with whom they could identify. White teachers in the study expressed lots of hesitancy and reservation about teaching in urban schools composed of predominantly African American students. Their justifications for those

feelings were the distinct cultural differences between themselves and the student populations. This is not surprising, in fact, it is quite natural because familiarity is often more appealing than venturing into the unknown. Consequently, depending on the educational setting, preschool children and early educators often represent different socioeconomic status, cultures and languages (Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2010).

As mentioned previously, cultural mismatch between teacher and students may affect the quality of instruction they receive and how their abilities are assessed. For example, when compared to students who speak standard English, studies have shown that teachers tend to rate the cognitive abilities, confidence and academic success of African American students who speak African American English or Ebonics lower (Fogel & Ehri, 2006). Kunjufu (2002) stresses the fact that middle class schools expect all students to be able to communicate in the "formal register" or Standard English whereas many Black students do not (p.7). Thus, all achievement tests and all other forms of evaluation are written in Standard English positioning Black students at a disadvantage. For a young child, this can be detrimental as the language one speaks is a signifier of who they are and whey they come from. Consequently, if the language they speak is devalued then who they are as an individual is devalued as well.

Aligned with tracking practices in K-12 educational settings, misguided assumptions are used to guide the academic trajectory of students as they are tracked throughout the rest of their education process. Although not as blatant, ability groups are used for tracking in early childhood classrooms as well. These groups are said to be in the best interest of the children and very well could be if they were based solely on objective measures of student's developmental needs and abilities. However, assignment

to these groups tend to be more subjective then objective given the fact that most children placed in lower groups tend to be low-income minorities (Hallinan, 1994).

Discipline Disproportionality. Discipline Disproportionality in K-12 has been identified as a major issue in urban education across the United States, but it is also significant in the early childhood education setting as well especially in pre-kindergarten. Gilliam (2005) studied pre-k expulsions across the United States and found significant yet wide-ranging expulsion rates. Out of the 40 states that had state-funded pre-k, all but Kentucky, South Carolina and Louisiana had expulsion rates that exceeded K-12 rates. In fact, pre-k students are expelled at rates three times higher than K-12 students (Gilliam, 2005).

Additionally, the findings indicated that African American preschoolers are expelled more than any other group. Actually, African American children are twice as likely to be expelled from preschool than their Hispanic or White peers and five times more than their Asian peers (Gilliam, 2005). This not only perpetuates the issue of discipline disproportionality faced by African American students in urban schools around the country but it also has much greater implications that affect the trajectory of the education experience of young African American preschoolers even before they enter the K-12 setting.

As previously indicated, many African American preschoolers in urban settings already have several risk factors, such as socio-economic status, race and, culture that places them at greater risk of academic and behavioral challenges in the schooling environment. Low socio-economic status is consistently identified as a risk factor for expulsion (Hwa-Froelich, Kasambria, & Moleski, 2007; Skiba et al., 2011). Actually,

research shows that economic factors are a much stronger indicator than even academic ability (Hwa-Froelich et al., 2007). Children in poverty face several risk factors such as family stress and neighborhood violence, which only increases the probability that they may exhibit key behaviors, such as aggression and hostility that typically result in disciplinary referrals (Dominguez, Vitiello, Fuccillo, Greenfield, & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2011). Thus, considering the fact that African American children are disproportionately likely to grow up in poverty, they are inevitably more likely to also be identified as having emotional and behavioral issues as well (Raver, 2004).

Likewise, race also increases the probability for identification. Even independent of socioeconomic status, it has been identified as a significant contributor (Skiba et. al, 2011). Data collected on suspension and expulsion rates in schools consistently show an overrepresentation of African American students in comparison to other ethnic groups (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Furthermore, research has found that teachers tend to rate behavior, positive or negative, primarily by ethnicity and socioeconomic status rather than the actual behavior displayed (Humphries, Keenan, & Wakschlag, 2012). Skiba et al. (2011) found that discipline referrals for African American students tend to be more subjective in nature as in the case of disrespect. Disrespect is a matter of personal opinion because what is deemed disrespectful to one person may not affect another person at all, even within the same ethnic group. Consequently, different standards for the same behavior are held for different racial and ethnic groups, ultimately contributing to the current discipline disproportionality rates.

In fact, between 8-22% of preschool children are identified as having moderate to significant behavioral problems and are 38% more likely to exhibit such behaviors if they

are in poverty (Bulotsky, Shearer, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 2010). Cultural mismatch and life stressors attributed to poverty inevitably impact the schooling experiences of your children and must be taken into consideration as children transition into a classroom setting. Consequently, Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2010) assert that student behavior must be considered from a development-ecological model meaning that behaviors must be assessed in context of the child's ability to navigate and negotiate the developmental situation. They further assert that successfully adapting to the various situations in the classrooms require children to retain a hierarchy of social and emotional skills and when the child's developmental capacities do not match the required skill set behavioral problems may occur.

Many students lack these developmental capacities because they have not been taught prosocial behaviors. Consequently, it is impossible for them to demonstrate a skill set for which they do not have prior knowledge. Townsend (2000) affirms that this lack of knowledge is only exacerbated through exclusion practices like expulsion. Exclusion from the schooling environment reduces the amount of time at-risk students have to learn and adapt to the school culture forcing them to rely solely on the behavioral values and norms of their home environment, be it positive or negative. Thus, the tension between expected behavior and actual behavior continues to increase and these students fail to successfully adjust to the early learning environment.

Early problems adjusting to the classroom environment may also have long-term consequences and effects on every other aspect of the schooling process. In fact, Fantuzzo et al. (as cited in Dominguez et al., 2011) found that problem behaviors such as aggression early in the preschool year was related to lower competence, motivation,

attention, persistence and more negative attitudes towards learning at the end of the year. Additionally, early childhood behavior problems have been linked to negative social and academic outcomes such as insecure attachment to teachers, poor peer relationships, phonological problems, reading delays and language deficits (Dominguez et al., 2011). Consequently, urban students face low academic performance, overrepresentation in special education programs, high disciplinary actions and low teacher expectations (Boutte, 2012). Given these findings it is unsurprising that so many African American students disengage from the schooling process. Unfortunately, these issues are only exacerbated and perpetuated by teachers who are not prepared to confront them directly.

Under Qualified Teachers. Children attending high poverty, predominately minority schools are twice as likely to have a novice teacher (Lewis, Chambers & Butler, 2012) and more likely to be taught by teachers without a major or a minor in a field related to the subject they teach (Kunjufu, 2002). This is extremely unfortunate considering the degree of skill and content knowledge that is needed to meet the needs of diverse students. Burden (2003) emphasizes that good teachers are able to differentiate instruction and meet the needs of diverse learners by pushing their thinking beyond their level of comfort while simultaneously accommodating their individual learning styles and requiring them to become active participants. Differentiation is a skill that requires a teacher to be well versed in his or her area of content and knowledgeable about effective teaching strategies to engage and support the students, both of which is arguably perfected with experience and time.

Additionally, many teachers in urban schools are under qualified and unprepared to teach culturally diverse students. Effective teachers must be able to use these cultural

differences to develop their teaching strategies. Lewis, Chambers and Butler (2012) found that in urban schools White female teachers still comprise a significant percentage of the workforce. These teachers enter urban classrooms with their own cultural, racial and linguistic identities that may make developing effective teaching strategies for culturally dissimilar students extremely challenging. Terrill and Mark (2000) refer to this notion as teachers being culture bound. They suggest that if teachers are unfamiliar with the culture of their students then there are limitations to their ability to effectively interact with them. Moreover, Boutte (2012) argues that one of the biggest challenges in altering urban education is preparing a White workforce to desire to effectively educate students of color. Many White teachers feel that teaching is culturally neutral and thus do not feel it necessary to alter their teaching styles or adjust their expectations (Sanders & Downer, 2012). However, it must be noted that racial and cultural differences are not the only factors that influence a teacher's ability to effectively address the needs of culturally diverse students, socioeconomic status can also be a contributing factor.

A great misconception is that ethnic minority teachers are automatically culturally competent. Unfortunately, many have assimilated into the majority group and no longer affiliate with their heritage culture (Flores, Casebeer, & Rojas-Cortez, 2011; Kunjufu, 2002). Kunjufu (2002) suggests that Black middle class teachers fail to see the inequities in the schooling process because it has proven to be beneficial in the advancement to their current socioeconomic status. On the contrary, perhaps it is not a failure to see at all , rather a decision not to acknowledge, ultimately resulting in failure to advocate for practices that are in the best interest of students of color.

Subsequently, it is not surprising that students of color continue to be labeled as low performing in urban schools; especially considering the fact that research has confirmed that teacher effectiveness does indeed impact student outcomes. Sanders and Rivers (as cited in Payne, 2008, p.72) found that even if students start with the same test scores, students who are exposed to highly effective teachers three consecutive years will outperform those exposed to ineffective teachers three consecutive years by 50 percentile points. This is a substantial difference in achievement that could ultimately determine if a child is labeled at risk or proficient.

The issues plaguing urban schools and students of color are not isolated to one geographical region or area code it appears to be universal. Actually, a variety of scholars across the depth and breadth of the United States have documented their existence in schools and impact on African American students across the country (Kunjufu, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Michie, 2012; Moore & Lewis, 2012). Although, all of the accounts are alarming and overwhelming, it is even more disheartening when it seems to be in your own backyard. To witness the very disparities and inequities that I have learned and read about throughout my doctoral programs unfold right before my eyes in my own program and other programs around the state of North Carolina has made it personal for me.

Urban Education and Early Childhood in North Carolina

North Carolina has an impressive reputation of innovation and success within the early childhood education field. In particular, North Carolina was the first state to offer universal full-day kindergarten; pioneer the first comprehensive early childhood initiative know as Smart Start; and develop a widely used comprehensive evaluation instrument to

assess the quality of preschool programs (North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, 2016). Nonetheless, all of these accomplishments do not exempt young students of color from the critical issues plaguing urban education.

In a report on the cost of childcare, Child Care Aware of America (2016) found that in North Carolina the average annual cost for full time child care of a four-year-old is over $7,000 and over $9,000 for an infant or toddler. Although there are government assistance programs designed to support families with significant financial needs, there are more families that need it than actual funding available to assist them all. As a result, many families who are eligible for subsidized childcare still remain unserved. In the state of North Carolina alone there are already an excess of 28,000 children on the waiting list for assistance (Landry, 2015). Consequently, if families are not already participating in the subsidy program, the probability of receiving assistance for their child is highly unlikely.

Similarly, there continues to be significant numbers of preschool age children, eligible for enrollment in government funded public pre-k programs that go unserved each year. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were 164,019 children living in poverty and eligible for Head Start services yet only 23, 312 were actually enrolled into the program (National Head Start Association, 2015). At this rate, low-income families, already experiencing financial hardships, will be unable to access the high quality childcare that North Carolina has worked so hard to create.

Furthermore, in alignment with the racial disparities between teacher and students found in K-12 urban schools, White female teachers still comprise a significant percentage of the workforce. Actually, research shows that more than 50% of the early

educators in the state of North Carolina are White females (Child Care Services Association, 2015). Although, North Carolina's data on childcare enrollment by ethnicity is unavailable, it must be noted that African American children (ages 0-4) represent the second largest group of children in North Carolina's population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). Thus, given the fact that this group of children has also been identified as the group most likely to be enrolled in an early childhood education program in the country (Child Trends, 2014), it is highly likely that they represent a large percentage of the children participating in early childhood education programs in North Carolina as well. Thus increasing the likelihood of cultural mismatch between educator and student, which may contribute to the expulsion rates.

North Carolina was among the states with the highest amount of expulsions for pre-k children, identified as exceeding 10 expulsions per 1,000 students (Gilliam, 2005); and although demographics were not provided by ethnicity it is highly likely that African American children represent a large percentage of those students. Perhaps, the issue lies within North Carolina's behavioral policies for early childhood education programs. While there may be slight variations in the presentation of discipline polices among early education programs across North Carolina, there are a set of behavior management laws, established by North Carolina's Division of Child Development and Early Education (NCDCDEE), of which all licensed child care facilities must abide. These laws outline specific requirements for both policies and practices. According to the requirements, each program must develop written policies describing the methods and practices they will use to discipline children. Practices must be developmentally appropriate and must not incorporate any form of corporal punishment, physical discipline or anything else that

may cause children harm. Additionally, discipline cannot involve or be administered due to anything related to food, rest, or toileting.

Though the laws are very clear and concrete about what cannot be used as discipline, it does not set strict boundaries about what should be used instead. However, they do provide some possible strategies providers can use when children are misbehaving including redirecting to more appropriate activities, ignoring minor misbehaviors while praising positive behaviors, allowing logical and natural consequences to occur, and as a absolute final resort, timeout. Interestingly, expulsion is never mentioned yet given the findings it obviously one of the most widely and frequently used. Perhaps the fact that it is not addressed is the issue. Without specific boundaries and requirements, the interpretations of the laws are at the discretion of program administrators, which makes discipline disparities such as the overuse of expulsion so prevalent in pre-k programs across the state. Additionally, it suggests that there may be a disconnect between the behavioral expectations held and the actual population of children being served.

Two of the primary pre-k programs utilized in North Carolina are the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten program (NC Pre-K) and Head Start. NC Pre-K is a state funded community based early education program designed to meet the developmental needs of at-risk four-year-olds. Eligibility for the program is determined by risk factors such as family income at or below 75% of the state median income or 200% at or below federal poverty guidelines, identified developmental delays or disabilities, chronic illness, limited English proficiency, or having parents on active military duty (State of Preschool, 2012). Likewise, the federally funded Head Start preschool program is designed to meet

the needs of at-risk three and four year olds and their families. Eligibility is based on whether or not a family's income falls below the federal poverty level and if extreme circumstances such as homelessness occur (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Given the target population of both programs it is inevitable that they serve a large percentage of students of colors whose families are facing economic hardships and whose home cultures are very different from the cultures of the pre-k programs they are attending, all of which are factors that increase the potential for behavioral problems that will result in disciplinary action.

Consequently, there must be a re-evaluation of these discipline policies to meet the needs of these students. Townsend (2000) notes the importance of structuring rules in schools to foster positive learning environments for all students rather than forcing socialization. Arbitrary rules that focus more on socializing minority students into white middle class culture only perpetuate the cultural divide between the groups and prevent disciplinary actions from being distributed fairly. Rules must be evaluated according to whether or not they are essential to creating nurturing, safe learning environments for all students. However, a re-evaluation of discipline policies is just a small part of a much larger reformation that needs to transpire in urban early childhood to ensure that all developmental needs of young children of color are sufficiently and equitably met.

The Urgency of Urban Early Childhood Education Reform

Developmental disparities and differential school readiness levels stemming from low socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, emerge in the early stages of child development with young black children scoring lower on assessments of proficiency and cognitive development (Children defense, 2012). The concept of school readiness has

become a universal measurement of how prepared children are to successfully navigate all aspects of the schooling process. However, there is not a definitive universal definition of school readiness, in fact it continues to change and evolve with the implementation of new national education policies. Unfortunately, school readiness criteria often fail to address the inequities of life experience and opportunities among students ultimately leaving them with the blame of academic failure (NAEYC, 1995).

Accordingly, most economically disadvantaged students of color enter schools lacking the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in the school environment. A child's level of school readiness has a significant impact on how they adjust to the classroom setting, master course content, and engage in pro-social behaviors with their peers and teachers. Moreover, low-income minority children whose educational needs are not addressed in the first five years fall behind prior to kindergarten (Barnett et al., 2013). Consequently, Black students typically enter kindergarten with lower levels of school readiness than their white peers and unfortunately continue to fall behind as they progress through the schooling process, widening the perceived achievement gap (Children Defense, 2012). However, Barnett et al. (2013) argue that the achievement gap is less about academic ability and more about lack of opportunity. Perhaps it is not the students that are failing but the ineffectiveness of the current curriculum and traditional teaching methods to meet their needs (Boutte & Strickland, 2008).

Disparities between the achievements of Black And White students have been identified as a critical issue in urban education across the United States. In fact, it has been identified as a national crisis (Seaton, 2010). Consequently, the focus of much educational research has been conducted on the causes and effects of the achievement

gap as it relates to middle and secondary education whereas minimal in regards to elementary or early childhood education (Boutte, 2012). Unfortunately, this may be a tremendous oversight in educational research, given evidence of cognitive disparities among children in the early years.

Burchinal et al. (2011) define the achievement gap as a developmental process that emerges during the early years before children even enter schools, finding that a gap was present among children by the age of three. Likewise, Loeb and Bassok (2007) also emphasize that gaps in achievement exist prior to school entry highlighting research showing that evidence of the gaps has been found as early as 18 months. In further support, The Early Childhood Longitudinal study found significant differences in cognitive scores with high socioeconomic status performing higher than lower socioeconomic students and Whites performing higher than Blacks upon school entry (Loeb & Bassok, 2007). Hence, it is imperative that the challenges surrounding urban education be addressed before African American children step inside a K-12 classroom. Furthermore, early childhood education may be an invaluable tool in transforming urban education and ensuring all developmental needs of all children are being met. However, equally important to the transformation is the acknowledgement of the inner strength and motivating factors that push African American Children to succeed in spite of the obstacles that they face.

Resilience and the African American Child

Throughout history, resilience has been the nucleus of advancement and achievement for African Americans in the midst of adversity. In spite of societal barriers such as political, economic, and educational oppression, African Americans have still

managed to thrive in every area. Research on African American resiliency consistently emphasizes the role of African American culture. Masten (2001) defines resilience as “good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (p. 228). Although faced with risk factors such as poverty and low parental education in conjunction with the critical issues plaguing urban schools, there are still some African American children that manage to excel in the academic arena. This is indeed an example of resiliency considering that the barriers they face are often indicative of low academic achievement and poor social adaptation.

Several researchers have examined resiliency in African Americans and have identify several distinct cultural practices of the African American community that foster resiliency for African American students and families (Brown, 2008; Caughy, O’Camp, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002). Two of the primary practices are the establishment of social support networks and racial socialization. Brown (2008) suggests that social support networks provide African Americans with an additional coping tool that empowers them to overcome adversity. These networks are extensive and consists of family bonds both biological and fictive, religious support such as the African American church, and support of the community as a whole (Brown, 2008). Each of these entities contributes to the overall well being for African Americans. In particular, research shows that having such support systems alleviates anxiety (Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Zappert, & Maton, 2000), promotes academic achievement (Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003), and facilitates better mental health (Dressler, 1985). These support networks are also instrumental in child rearing of African American children, particularly as it relates to socialization.

Caughty, O'Camp, Randolph, and Nickerson (2002) describe racial socialization as a parenting practice used by African Americans to equip their children with critical life skills to thrive in the midst of the unjust social, political, economic and cultural climates that they will inevitably encounter as African Americans in the United States. Accordingly, Peters (1985) asserts that racial socialization is the "responsibility that Black parents have of raising physically and emotionally healthy children who are Black in a society in which being Black has negative connotations (p.161)." Thus, socialization serves as a protective factor that counteracts the negative effects of life stressors and societal pressures.

Thornton (1997) suggests that there are three types of socialization used by African Americans: the mainstream, minority experience, and the Black cultural experience. He describes the mainstream experience as an emphasis on achievement, values, equality and positive self-image. The minority experience underscores the awareness of discrimination and inequality with an acceptance of being Black. Similarly, the Black cultural experience promotes racial pride with and emphasis on Black history and tradition. Each of these socialization processes has the power to transform the lives of African American children for the better. In fact, research suggests that home environments rich in African American cultures are associated with greater factual knowledge and well-developed problem solving skills, both of which can positively affect school achievement. Accordingly, Boutte and Hill (2006) assert that these types of socialization practices can be used as powerful affirming tools to inform "best practices" for African American students. Thus, this type of approach positions culture at the center of curriculum and instruction as opposed to simply a bridge to learning Eurocentric

content and norms. Unfortunately, this is exactly the type of approach missing in the early childhood field.

The Intersection of Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In 1986, NAEYC developed a framework of standards, known as *Developmentally Appropriate Practices* (DAP), to use in early childhood settings to ensure that educators of young children were utilizing practices deemed proper for their specific age and in accordance with previously established developmental milestones (Bredekamp, 1997). It was also a measure taken to protect children from unrealistic and potentially harmful academic expectations (Zeng and Zeng, 2005). Overall, DAP has been found to have some really great benefits, especially as it relates to the disposition to learn (Zeng and Zeng, 2005). In particular, children attending DAP programs were identified as more likely to be creative thinkers, have greater verbal skills and higher levels confidence than students who did not. Additionally, children attending programs that did not use DAP were found to be more anxious about the learning process.

Nonetheless, there is on fundamental flaw. DAP is rooted in societal assumptions about childhood and characteristics of European American culture such as the valuing of individualism, upbringing in a responsive permanent two parent household, and provision and access to multiple resources and material goods (Penn, 2002). The culturally specificity of these assumptions leave little room for neutrality in addressing the needs of children from diverse cultures and undermines the importance of cultural experiences on the development of young children.

Lee and Johnson (2007) describe culture as the most significant system within human development as it reflects the cultural ideas, understandings, and social practice shared by individuals in a community. Consequently, not giving the proper consideration to a child's culture is essentially a devaluing of his or her entire frame of reference and knowledge base, which can have detrimental implications on the child's learning and development. Moreover, culture structures various dimensions of development for children including parenting, daily routines and environments, and child rearing practices (Nsamenang, 2008). Thus, in order to make theories concerning early childhood development applicable to all there must be an allowance for cultural influence.

Consequently, Nelson and Rogers (2003) emphasize that the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices unaccompanied with some form of multicultural practice is inadequate as they are indicative of normative behaviors of White middle class children, subtly rejecting the cultural norms of students of color. Thus, they suggest that educators strive towards implementing culturally appropriate practices consisting of culturally relevant materials, culturally responsive instruction and culturally fair assessments that eliminate bias. For early educators, this just simply means acknowledging the unique cultures of the children they serve in every aspect of instruction.

In response to the cultural limitations of DAP, Hyun, Marshall & Dana (1995) developed what they refer to as Developmentally and Culturally Responsive Practices (DCAP). DCAP is a teaching strategy that places culture at the center of the educational experiences of young children. Hyun, Marshall & Dana (1995) founded DCAP on four core pedagogical approaches:

- DAP, which focuses on the developmental needs of children to determine the content that is taught and the most beneficial and effective way to teach it.
- Multicultural Education, which emphasizes empowerment and equal opportunity by encouraging children to embrace their own cultures while exposing them to other, cultures as well.
- Anti-Bias Curriculum ,which challenges inequalities by confronting pervasive stereotypes while supporting the development of positive self identity and promoting critical thinking and advocacy skills.
- Culturally Congruent Critical Pedagogy, which utilizes the cultural identities and person experiences of the children as the catalysts for learning ultimately making students active participants in their own education.

Incorporating this framework creates a meaningful experience for the students and enhances educators' ability to address the needs of diverse learners. Frameworks such as DCAP also have the potential to transform educational experiences of students of color in a very powerful and empowering way, which why I am determined on incorporating some semblance of it in my early education program.

Deconstructing Early Childhood Education Practices Through Transformative Pedagogy

Although such transformative pedagogy was developed to address the needs of Blacks and other students of color, the reality of the situation is that all children can benefit from a culturally responsive environment. Dominant ethnic groups can learn security without the need to feel superior while minorities can become secure in their identity, navigate between home and dominant culture and learn how to defend themselves against injustice (Flores et al., 2011). Pedagogical practices such as

multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy are collective approaches to education with the capacity to empower and promote a tradition of academic excellence for all. In particular, culturally relevant teaching and nurturing relationships have been identified as successful strategies for supporting the academic achievement of students of color.

As the foundation of CSP, culturally relevant teaching directly aligns with the tenets and values of engaged pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant teaching as oppositional pedagogy devoted to collective empowerment, which is comprised of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness to challenge the status quo. Boutte and Strickland (2008) reinforce the power of culturally relevant teaching by highlighting its ability to create a foundation of student strengths and cultures, make necessary core content engaging, and expand children's current knowledge to a more in depth global context. These approaches are child centered and focused on strength and empowerment, a necessary combination to ensure that students of color are prepared to succeed in mainstream culture while still maintaining the integrity of their home culture (Flores et. al, 2011). This is also a powerful approach to teaching because it provides students of color with a sense of agency by requiring them to be active participants in their own educational process as well. It also helps to foster a positive racial identity in children, a key protective factor from discrimination as well as a buffer from negative stereotypes (Seaton, 2010).

Research on African American students consistently highlights the importance of positive nurturing relationships for student achievement and engagement in schools (Tobin & Vincent, 2011). Through the establishment of trusting relationships, educators

are able to easily create and maintain culturally sensitive learning environments that are conducive for engaged and culturally relevant pedagogy. In fact, Noguera (2008) asserts that establishing these types of relationships is a continuous process in teaching and learning that requires teachers to commit to getting to know about their students in a way that defies stereotypes. By taking this approach to relationship building, all children are treated as equals and valued as individuals. This is extremely important for students of color because educators can influence the level of protection they feel as well as promote resiliency when they have formed strong bonds. Accordingly, positive interventions at critical moments can neutralize negative repercussions of external life events that they may experience (Evans-Winters, 2007).

Making Culture Central to Early Childhood Education Practices

Although research has shown that engaged pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, and nurturing relationships are effective processes to promote academic excellence in students of color, there are some salient factors that must be addressed in order to effectively implement them; hence the necessity of re-evaluating current education practices. However, it is impossible to adequately address early childhood education reform for students of color without addressing race. As a matter of fact, Michie (2012) declares that race must be positioned as a central theme in the process of school reformation in urban schools. An attempt to take a color-blind approach to the issues plaguing urban schools today is a denial of the existence of institutional racism and systematic inequalities and a perpetuation of the culturally hegemonic status quo within education. Accordingly, Darling- Hammond (2005) emphasizes that systematic inequalities must be acknowledged before policies can be effective for all students.

Otherwise, they will continue to fail students of color by identifying them as the cause of their own failure.

Furthermore, Boutte and Strickland (2008) suggest that teachers must acknowledge the sociocultural realities of being minorities in the United States and how they impact their schooling experience. In the case of African Americans, Boykin and Toms (1985) describe these realities as a negotiation of three different experiences simultaneously including the mainstream, the minority and the Black cultural experiences. Each of these experiences possesses their own unique set of requirements that these students must address. The mainstream experience refers to adhering to White middle class values and personal achievement; the minority experience encompasses the recognition of discrimination and the acceptance of being Black; and the Black cultural experience addresses racial pride and tradition. Boutte and Strickland (2008) express the same sentiment by affirming that African American children must be viewed through Afrocentric lens including acknowledging the sociocultural realities of being Black in the United States and how that impacts their schooling experiences and behaviors.

The acknowledgement of these multiple realities exemplifies the views of postmodernism, which emphasizes that all knowledge must be contested and that knowledge must be deconstructed in order to identify truths. One of the ways in which this can be done is by the breaking down of grand narratives to create spaces for multiple realities and truths, rather than institutional regulation of human thinking. For that reason, it is important that all teachers are reflective of their practices and intentional in honoring the ethnic identity and heritage of their students through culturally sustaining pedagogy (Sanders & Downer, 2012). Teachers, regardless of culture and economic

status must be willing to do honest and in-depth introspection. Han and Thomas (2010) suggest that in order to become culturally effective and responsive, teachers must be aware of their own personal biases and assumptions, be knowledgeable about the children they serve, and be able to implement culturally appropriate practices consistently. Hence, the important of my role as administrator. Not only do I have the obligation to ensure that the children served by our program receive developmentally and culturally inclusive learning experiences but I have the responsibility of ensuring that my teachers are adequately prepared to effectively implement the necessary curriculum and strategies.

Summary

The literature review has not only helped contextualize the pertinence of my research but it has solidified my commitment to utilizing critical autoethnography as my research approach. First, in order to address the needs of the African American children that I serve, I must first acknowledge the critical issues plaguing urban schools and the impact they have on students of color as situated within the broader scope of the literature. Next, I must embrace previous scholarship highlighting successful teaching processes and practices that effectively address both the developmental and cultural needs of African American students. Finally, I must be cognizant of the impact personal biases and assumptions about race and culture, held by both my staff and myself, can potentially have on the implementation process of culturally sustaining pedagogy at my center.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this study is to use autoethnography to my implementation of culturally relevant practices as a means to transform the educational experiences of the young African American children enrolled in my early childhood program. Furthermore, the use of an autoethnographic approach will support the investigation of my experiences at the intersection of developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive practices and the tension it has created in meeting the needs of these African American children. Although I will draw from my collective experiences as an early childhood education professional, the heart of the study will focus on my most recent experiences as the administrator of a highly accredited early childhood education program located in the heart of one of the most underserved predominately low-income African American communities.

Moreover, characteristic of qualitative research, my current role as an administrator of an early childhood education program will allow this research to occur in a naturalistic setting. This will strategically place me in a position to capture naturally occurring behavior, create meaning, develop understanding and describe multiple realities to add to the richness of my study (McMillan, 2008). Thus, the interpretation of my data will be contextual and situated in perspective rather than dependent upon the direct observation of a uniform world as suggested by quantitative research. Likewise,

the pairing of autoethonography with a participatory action approach directly aligns with the intent of my study as it allows me as an education stakeholder to not only utilize my personal experiences as my frame of reference but to become an active participant in the creation of meaning and understanding in regards to critical issues pertaining to learning and teaching (Gay, Mills & Airasion, 2012). This chapter will provide details about the methods of my research study by addressing the following sections: (a) research questions, (b) research design, (d) research site, (e) data collection methods, (h) data analysis, and (i) ethical considerations.

Research Questions

There is an undeniable dichotomy between my responsibility as an administrator of a nationally accredited early childhood education program and the obligation I feel as an African American educator and scholar. In my administrative role I must adhere to normative regulatory guidelines and standards that strive to universalize early childhood education for all children. Contrastingly, as an African American educator and scholar I am compelled to tailor the early learning experiences within my program to meet the cultural needs of the African American children and families I serve. Consequently, in order for me to effectively provide the high quality early childhood education experiences they deserve, the incongruence of the two must be investigated and reconciled. Thus, I will pose the following questions to guide my research:

1. As an administrator of a predominately African American early childhood education program, how do I foster a culturally relevant environment that facilitates both teacher and student engagement?
2. In this same role, how do I reconcile the normalized predetermined criterion of high quality with the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy in my early childhood education program?

Research Design: Critical Reflective Auto-Ethnography

Autoethnography is a research method that allows a researcher to describe and analyze cultural norms based on personal experience (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). By positioning the author at the center of the research process, ethnographic research embraces subjectivity and emotionality as opposed to minimizing or ignoring their influence on the research process (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Thus, through the acknowledgement of the personal perspective and the influence it has on the author's position within the context of the research, ethnographic research creates a space for multiple truths. In particular, Jones (2005) describes autoethnography as a "personal text that moves writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into a space of dialogue, debate and change" (p. 764). Hence, the research is not stagnant but ever evolving.

Aligned with the tenets of Critical Race Theory, autoethnography also challenges perceptions of dominance and hegemony. In fact, Adams, Ellis, and Bochner (2011) suggest that autoethnography is oppositional to the dominant middle/upper-class, White, masculine, perspective that traditionally characterizes conventional research methods. Thus, as I seek to challenge and deconstruct the universalism of culturally hegemonic

Eurocentric norms of child development from the perspective of an African American female early childhood administrator, the scope of my research fits neatly into the precepts of autoethographic research. However, it must be noted that the ability to use my personal experience as the analytical lens operates in dual roles. It allows me to construct a counternarative to normative standards of child development and early education but it also compels me to be introspective about my role within my early childhood program and my contribution to the early childhood field as a whole.

Toyosaki (2012) refers to authoethnography as a process in which researchers "critically engage in the doing of their identity" (p. 249). Similarly, Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) assert that it requires the researcher to engage in in-depth self-reflection as they probe the intersectionality of self and society. By utilizing this approach, I am able to critically reflect on my experiences as an early educator, technical assistance provider and current administrator to position myself within my study as what Hooks (1990) refers to as an "indigenous ethnographer." Likewise, Banks (1992) acknowledges the dilemma of the African American scholar to adhere to a westernized paradigm of educational research that celebrates scientific objectivity while feeling a commitment to advocate for his or her own race. How do I effectively illustrate the experiences of my people without exploration of my own thoughts and experiences as a member of the race? After all, being a scholar does not completely negate the implications of my skin color or cultural background, although it may in fact soften the blow. Thus, I am intricately involved in my research. I am my research and with what small degree of privilege my scholarship has afforded me, I am obligated to use it to empower and enlighten my fellow African Americans in an effort to cushion the blow of injustice and inequality for them as well.

As I aspire to not only gain understanding but to also evoke change as well, the autoethenographic approach positions me to engage in action research as well. Johnson (2011) asserts that action research is an invaluable tool for school administrators to use to address complex educational problems while simultaneously examining their own professional practices and improving student learning and achievement. In my case, the problem I want to address is the disconnect between home and school culture. I want to explore how culturally sustaining pedagogy can be used to bridge this gap and promote student engagement especially as it relates to the development of school readiness and scholarly identity.

Research indicates that African American children are more likely to enter kindergarten unprepared both socially and academically (Barbarin, Downer, Odom, & Head, 2010). Consequently, it is both my desire an obligation as an African American scholar and program administrator to present my young scholars as living counternarratives to the deficit perspective of African American students in the educational system. However, in order to effectively do so I must be intentional and confident about my own professional practices to ensure that effective and efficient pedagogical practices are being implemented for both staff and students. Furthermore, Ferrance (2000) submits that engaging in action research in a educational setting increases relationship among educators but also increases sharing and collaboration as it becomes embedded in the school culture.

Research Site

This study will take place at a nationally accredited, five-star child development center located in the Southeast. This particular child development center is located in one

of the most underserved predominately low-income African American communities. The center has fourteen classrooms serving students ages 0-5. The majority of both the staff and the families served are African American. Additionally, most of the families receive some form of government assistance whether through subsidized childcare or enrollment in the Head Start or early Head Start program.

Data collection

Data collection took place over four weeks. Considering that I worked a full-time job in addition to my other religious and community responsibilities I knew I had to be strategic in the planning and execution of my data collection procedures. Thus, each week consisted of the following:

- An hour and a half or reflective journaling each morning before getting ready for work.
- Small group discussions with eight of my preschool teachers for and hour every Wednesday concerning the implementation of CRT into classroom practices.
- Hour long classroom observations in each classroom throughout the week to observe and provide technical assistance as needed.

Reflective Journaling

I spent an hour each morning before work to reflect and journal about my observations and experiences. Ortlipp (2008) asserts that reflective journaling enables a researcher to utilize his or her experiences, thoughts, and feelings as an integral part of every aspect of their research design, including analysis and interpretation. Additionally, Phelps (2005) acknowledges reflective journaling as a valuable approach to both research

and learning. In fact, she suggests that it is through the process of constant self- reflection and evaluation of experience that we become aware of knowledge gaps and subsequently the need to seek new information. My entries focused on the following topics: 1) My early learning experiences as an African American girl; 2) The evolution of my thoughts and beliefs on the role of culture in the education process including my educational experiences; 3) My professional experiences working in early childhood as an African American woman; 4) The implementation of the Scholars on the Rise summer camp; and 5) My experiences with the implementation of CRT at the center. Thus, my journal entries served as an instrument of inquiry into my experiences with developmentally and culturally appropriate practices in an attempt to build my knowledge base of effectively addressing the cultural and developmental needs of young African American children within the confines of early childhood education. Futhermore, utilizing a semi structure approach in my journal writing helped me to focus my data collection in a way to help me to stay committed to my analytic agenda and effectively address my research questions during this ethnographic process (Anderson, 2006).

Informal Group Discussions

Additionally, I collected data from small group discussions with my staff. This method is particularly effective in gathering information about how people think, feel and respond to a particular topic (Freitas, Oliveira, Jenkins, & Popjoy, 1998). These discussions would take place once a week for an hour as part of the professional development for my preschool teachers. Thus, they became a normal part of our program and the teachers felt comfortable in participating openly and honestly. These candid conversation provided me invaluable information about how effective I was in conveying

my goals and expectations surrounding culturally sustaining pedagogy as well as my level of effectiveness in providing sufficient support for the implementation of it at the classroom level.

Observations and Field Notes

Lastly I conducted classroom observations and completed field notes. Observations allowed me to see the teachers' interpretation of culturally sustaining pedagogy as translated through their classroom practices and lessons. Throughout the observation I jotted field notes to capture my thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Coffey (1999) describes field notes as a "textual space for the recording of our emotions and personal experiences" (p.119). By utilizing this strategy I was able to capture the very essence of my thoughts and feelings at the time that they occurred ultimately adding to the authenticity of my research.

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I adopted Hancock's (2003) analytical system for narrative analysis. There are four steps in particular that guides his systematic approach, which includes:

1. Collect a broad selection of data and stories.
2. Create a visual to categorize the data.
3. Identify the specific narratives to identify key themes and conduct a preliminary narrative analysis.
4. Engage in an analytical questioning process.

In regards to my study, the first step resulted in the collection my data through journaling, informal group discussions, classroom observations and field notes. Each

method yielded a wealth of information. As a result, after the four weeks of data collection, I was easily able to move to the second step of the data collection process.

During step two I read over all of the collected data and stories and began to organize them according to their level of relatedness, connection and their position in the process. For example, stories that addressed the need for the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy were put in one group, while stories related to the actual implementation process were placed in another. After all of the data was sorted accordingly, I created a flowchart to document my journey of the implementation of Culturally sustaining pedagogy from start to finish.

Thirdly, I read through the narratives to identify those that I felt were most effective in addressing the goals of my research. Then I classified each of the identified stories according to key themes in order to begin my preliminary analysis. By utilizing both an autoethnographic and action research approach contextualized in Critical Race Theory and Multiculturalism I was able to embed myself at the center of my analysis. Every aspect of who I am influenced my analysis and contributed to its authenticity.

Lastly, I used the analytical questioning process to help me contextualize my data in the research and to ensure that I was effectively addressing the purpose and scope of my research. Some of the questions I utilized included:

- What am I trying to convey about my experiences through this narrative?
- How does this narrative correlate to existing research?
- What does this narrative reveal about race and culture?
- What grand narratives about race, culture, or education can this narrative deconstruct?

- How does this narrative contribute to the purpose of my study and the intent of my research questions?

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA AND ANALYSIS

Setting the stage

I stood there gazing out the large picturesque glass windows overlooking the hustle and bustle of the heart of the city. Towering skyscrapers, busy parking lots.. and then, at the prompting of my professor, the scene started to transform right before my eyes. "You're in this program for a reason. It's bigger than you. Who is waiting on you to finish? Whose life is depending on you completing this program?" As he spoke tears began to roll down my cheeks and through my blurry eyes I saw them, several little Black children, boys and girls who appeared to be no more than three or four years of age. Behind them stood their village including their mothers, fathers, grandparents, etc. The kids had the biggest smiles and the brightest eyes filled with hope, but then I noticed some of the looks on the adult's faces. Although they too wore a smile, their eyes told a different tale. I saw hope mixed with fear, sprinkled with desperation. This scene pulled at my heartstrings and then I remembered the biblical scripture that I have always heard throughout my life, " To whom much is given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48, New International Version). I also recalled how my beloved grandmother would always say, "Mek, you never know how God will use you. You're the answer to someone's prayer!"

Honk! The blaring sound of the horn of the car behind me jolted me from my walk down memory lane. I was sitting at a traffic light that had apparently transitioned from red to green as I reflected on the visualization exercise my professor had us do on the first night of class. Less than a block away from the center it all became so real. I was about to start my first day as an early childhood program administrator.

Standing in the lobby of the center I had the opportunity to greet families for the first time as the new director. In was the beginning of January, so families were transitioning quickly in and out of the building to escape the cold chill of the winter air. Most parents were warm and welcoming but there were a few that seemed a bit aloof. I remember thinking perhaps it was my age. Maybe they thought I was too young to run a center of that magnitude or maybe they just really loved the previous director so much that they had a difficult time accepting the change. Nonetheless, I had the opportunity to really observe the similarities and differences of the families that I would be serving.

I noticed four African American and Caucasian composed biracial families, about six White families, and countless African American families. Some children were being dropped off by their father, others by their mother, some by both, and even some grandparents were involved. Some parents entered the doors a bit frantic and frustrated. In particular, one parent and child entered the building hand in hand. The young child had tears streaming down her face and was beginning to sob uncontrollably. Consequently the mother says, “It’s too early in them morning for all this. I gotta go to work and I told you to leave it at the house anyway. You know you can’t bring toys to school. You betta shut up all this fuss before I give you a reason to cry. Do we need to go to the bathroom real quick?” The little girl immediately stuttered, “No” through shallow breaths as she slowly

tried to regain her composure. The mother then bent down to face the crying child and replied, " Then hush" as she gently wiped the salty tears from her little ones face. The pair rejoined hands and proceeded to walk to the little girls classroom.

At the start of the interaction between the mother and daughter the administrator in me wanted to immediately intervene as I knew that the "something to cry about" was the threat of an impending spanking that could not occur at the center. However, as an individual reared in an African American family I completely understood. I knew that though it may have sounded harsh to outsiders that this mother was not being malicious in her intent, rather she was correcting her child in love as evident through her gentle stroke of her child's moist cheek. Accordingly, Hill (2001) highlights that race is the core determinant of the African American experience. Consequently, one of the primary challenges of African American parents is to equip their children with the skills, knowledge, and wisdom to counter pervasive erroneous negative and demeaning stereotypes about African American people.

Additionally, Thomas and Dettlaff (2011) assert that, as evident through historical patterns, the stakes of child rearing are even higher for African American parents in a era where they are fearful of their children being victimized through violence, racially profiled by law enforcement, or ending up in the criminal justice system. Moreover, in light of all the tragic deaths of young Black men and women at the hands of low enforcement, I would dare say that the stakes have gotten even higher. African Americans are arguably held to higher standards. Behaviors that would be viewed as slightly disobedient or permissible if engaged in by Whites would have much greater implications and consequences for an African American (Kelley, Power, & Wimbush,

1992). Consequently, African American parents often engage in parent practices that reinforce obedience.

Kelly, Power, and Wimbush (1992) assert that one of those practices is physical discipline. The practice of physical discipline has deep roots in the African American culture. In fact, it can be traced back to the slavery era as slaves used strong physical punishment with their children to reinforce docility, submission and guarantee that their children were well behaved in order to avoid harsher more deadly punishment from the owners (Lassiter, 1987). This could be easily contextualized in the African American experience with the law enforcement field today. However, it must be acknowledged that there is a distinction between the physical punishment traditionally used by many African American families and abusive corporal punishment that inflicts physical injury or harm. Thomas and Dettlaff (2011) make the distinction as child-centered and parent-centered. Child-centered refers to the use of physical discipline in a purposeful and controlled manner out of the genuine belief that it is in the best interest of the child whereas parent-centered is rooted in anger, rage or loss of control. Accordingly, child-centered physical punishment is a normative practice throughout African American culture. Throughout my life I have most often heard it justified through scripture. Actually, the scripture, “Spare the rod, spoil the child,” (Proverbs 12:24, New International Version) are words to live by in the African American culture. Hence, this simple interaction demonstrates that culture inextricably influences every aspect of our lives even when we least expect it serving as a powerful affirmation for pedagogical practices that are culturally inclusive.

Moreover, between some parents and children there was very little conversation other than a few directives such as, “Come on” or “Say Good Morning.” This was

primarily due to the fact that the children were consumed by the video playing on the tiny cell phone screen being held in their little handles. I hate to admit it but I instantly began to judge these parents by assuming that they used technology to pacify their children. In fact, I was confident that these children were sat in front of the television screen as soon as they got home. I made a mental note to find some information about the appropriate use of technology with young children to distribute to the families. In hindsight, although my intentions were good, I was guilty of casting the same judgment on these families that I fight so hard to protect them from. This is definitely a reminder that I have to check my own biases daily to maintain the authenticity and integrity of my work.

Whether we realize it or not, each of us has some implicit biases characterized by stereotypical beliefs about a particular group of people that automatically and unconsciously influences the way we judge and interact with them (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). These biases are directly correlated to several characteristics such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation and determine our perceptions. Accordingly, those groups who we tend to view more positively will be held to higher expectations and are extended more favor while those viewed more negatively are judged more harshly and critically.

However, it appears to me that implicit bias can be a double edge sword depending on how an individual chooses to deal with it. On one hand, if an individual refuses to acknowledge an address its existence, he or she is likely to perpetuate the cycle of discrimination that only exacerbate inequalities (Gilliam et. al., 2016). Contrastingly, on the other hand, an individual who acknowledges it may overcompensate in their interactions with the target group of their biases. For example, in the classroom

environment, Kunjufu (2002) characterizes these types of individuals as liberal teachers that go to the extreme trying to compensate for negative risk factors Black students may face by lowering expectations and not enforcing boundaries. Although, in my transparency, I have to admit that at one point in my life I have been at both ends of the spectrum, I can honestly say that I no longer to subscribe to either. I am deliberate about identifying my biases and determining the source, much of which is usually traced back to media influence or past experiences. Hence, I have to be intentional about dismantling preconceived notions in an effort to create genuine and meaningful interactions with others. This is a practice that will undoubtedly prove beneficial in my administrative role.

Nonetheless, the observed interactions that excited me the most in the lobby my first day were those parents and children who packed the five minutes of the check in routine with laughter and conversation. It delighted me to see how much language and social development was occurring in such a short amount of time. Although I heard numerous conversations that morning, one of the most memorable was a conversation between her mother and her son about the fish aquarium in the lobby. The large aquarium is strategically placed at the children's eye level filled with a variety of colorful fish and is undoubtedly the main attraction and the centerpiece of most conversation both during arrival and departure. Upon entering the building the little boy ran straight to the aquarium. "Mommy look at the fish. He's over there," I heard the little boy say. " Yep, I think he is hiding from you. Tell him I see you Mr. Fish!" In the cutest little two-year-old voice the little boy repeats his mother, "I see you Mr. Fish!" The mother then says, "Ok. Tell him bye bye so we can go to your room." "Bye, bye," the little boy calls out then grabs his mother's hand as they proceed to the classroom. These interactions were

not exclusive to one specific race or socioeconomic group of parents and students but reflective of them all, already presenting a counternarrative to negative perceptions concerning the quality of parent-child interactions for some of the families we serve.

Later on in the morning, I had the opportunity to become an active participant in one of these verbal exchanges between parent and child. A mother walks into the center with her young daughter trailing behind her I made sure to greet them both and introduced myself to the mother in detail. Following our brief conversation, the mother immediately turned to her daughter and said, " J, this is Ms. Tameka." The little girl then inquired, " Ms. Tameka? Who is Ms. Tameka?" Mom replies, " Ms. Tameka is your new director. Remember how Ms. Hope was at the center making sure everything was ok? Well, now she is gone and Ms. Tameka has to do it." "Ok," responded J as she gave me a big smile and wrapped her little arms around my waist. It was in that moment I knew that my window experience had arrived sooner than expected. My purpose in this PHD program was tied to each and every one of these little people and their families that I had met that day and I was excited to find out exactly how it would unfold. However, at that moment I had no idea the resistance I would encounter on the way to fulfilling my purpose but I was soon about to find out.

The Confrontation

I was sitting at my desk completing some paperwork when I received a call from my administrative assistant informing me that a parent wanted to speak to me. Being that it was still within my first month at the center this occurred rather frequently and considering all the paper work that consumed most of my days it was a much welcomed distraction. Consequently, without hesitation I instructed my assistant to send her back. I

had to admit that in the case of this particular parent I was beyond curious as to what she had to say. Within the first few days at the center my administrative staff had given me a profile of several of the parents at the center and she was one of them. Mrs. White was a Caucasian whose husband was African American. She had one child enrolled in the center, a two-year-old son. I was informed that she was a very involved and protective parent and her son had been enrolled in the center since infancy.

As she entered the room I stood up to greet her, we exchanged pleasantries and both took our seats. She stated the conversation, "Well, I just wanted a chance to talk to you because I mean it's almost been a month and I don't know what your vision is. What is your vision for the center?" My initial instinct was to go on the defensive and ask her, "Who are you supposed to be and who do you think that you are talking to?" But, I quickly realized that would only make things worse because she would simply reduce me to the stereotypical angry Black woman who does not know how to handle confrontation in a professional manner. So, I took a deep breath, smiled and replied, "Well, as I stated in this month's family newsletter, my goal is to enhance the quality of care we provided to all the families we serve by ensuring that the care and instruction we provide is intentional and individualized to the needs of each child. Now the full plan for the process I cannot give you because I am still in the assessment/observation phase. So, for me to even attempt to do so would be premature. It would be like a doctor giving a diagnosis before identifying the symptoms. However, what I can tell you is that I am working closely with the administrative team and teaching staff, spending time in the classrooms observing, interacting with the children, and having candid conversations like this with parents to help me make informed decisions."

There was a brief pause in the conversation and then she responded, "Well, I have some specific concerns. First, the center has changed so much since Head Start came. I mean the classes are bigger and the behavior of the children is worse. Joey has been bitten several times and we didn't have these issues before. He had a set group of friends that he moved to each classroom with but now there are other kids. New kids. Don't get me wrong; I'm not blaming them because they have no control over where they come from or what they see. But the problem is that they are seeing violence in their homes and neighborhoods and then turning around and bringing these behaviors into the classroom and it's affecting my son and the other children in the classroom who are not accustomed to such behavior. It is not fair to our children." For a split second I almost subdued the professional scholar in me, who saw this as a teachable moment, to make room for the "Angry Black Woman" whose little cousins, nieces, nephews, and godchildren could easily be representative of the children to whom she was referring.

There I sat a bit stunned. Did she really just say that? First, how dare she assume that because a child is a Head Start participant they are exposed to violence? Secondly, how did she manage to equate student behavior in the classroom to this perceived violence in their homes? After all, we were talking about biting in a two-year-old classroom. Not only is it very common but also it's also very typical for this age group regardless of the child's cultural or socioeconomic background. My mind instantly went back to Ricky and the third grade teacher. A common age-appropriate behavior is viewed as a serious offense simply because of the color of the skin of the child engaging in it. I felt that same heart breaking feeling. I knew young Black boys had it particularly tough compared to other groups but the thought of its implications for even a toddler took my

breath away. It was as if he was given a sentence before he even had a trial an all to common experience for African American males. The average Black male is most commonly portrayed negatively in the media and ultimately stereotyped to be aggressive, threatening and uncooperative (Godsil &Johnson, 2013). Unfortunately, these portrayals become embedded into the believe systems of many and becomes the criterion by which these young men are unjustly judged. This is even present in the early education system evident in the fact that African American boys are expelled more than any other group of Pre-K students, often at rates three times higher than K-12 students (Gilliam, 2005).

As in the misidentification of many young Black boys, this mother's assumptions were not only bold but extremely erroneous because not a single child in her son's classroom was even affiliated with the Head Start program, which made me begin to question exactly from which characteristics she had drawn her conclusions. Was it socioeconomic status, race, or were they synonymous to her? At that moment it became personal for me because I truly believe where a child comes from does not affirm who they are or where they will ultimately become. I came from a neighborhood that had a reputation for violence and crime but look at me now. I am in the process of completing a PHD program.

Additionally, I found myself wondering if this mother realized that there are many individuals that will view her biracial son the exact same way that she viewed the little Black boys in her son's classroom. It's not going to matter that he has a mother that is White when they see the darkened hue of skin. My mind began to race as I felt saddened by the fact that an individual one would expect to be open-minded and welcoming of diversity ,being that she is in an interracial relationship, was actually being just as

judgmental and stereotypical as a White woman not accustomed to interacting with African Americans. I guess White privilege does not have diversity stipulations. The more I replayed the conversation, the more enraged I became. What made the Black males in her life any better than any of the fathers or boys at the center? Black males already face so much negativity on a daily basis from society that this was just too much. I felt protective. I felt responsible to ensure that the center would be a safe place for them all. If they did not feel valued and celebrated anywhere else, they would at my program.

The mother ultimately withdrew her child from the program to send him to a preschool located in an historic White church. It broke my heart to see the little boy leave because I knew the disservice she was ultimately doing him. Not only was she removing him from a place of familiarity, comfort, and security but she was also denying him the opportunity to embrace the beauty and diversity of the backgrounds and experiences of the families at the center. He was also being denied exposure to expression of a culture that is partially his own. Furthermore, what message was she sending him about the type of people acceptable to be around?

Ironically, shortly before the family left the center, I recalled a conversation with the little boy's father in which he expressed that his only concern was whether or not the center would be getting a music program back that we previously had. In particular, he expressed that the thing he liked about it was its incorporation of African culture, which was important to him because it exposed his son to his heritage. If that is how he truly felt, why did he not speak up for the African American children in his son's classroom that his wife was unfairly judging? Or did he view African culture as different from African American culture? Perhaps, African culture seemed more refined and

sophisticated while African American culture had a more negative and inferior connotation. It definitely made me think of Kunjufu's (2000) assertion that many middle class African American teachers tend to distance themselves for African American culture as a means of assimilating and distinguishing themselves as being among the successful Blacks. Although he was speaking of teachers, I cannot help but imagine that this is applicable to middle class African Americans in general. African Americans constantly feel the need to prove themselves and disprove negative stereotypes on a daily basis, which may contribute to the separation from aspects of African American culture known to have a negative connotation. Conceivably, maybe this was the father's perspective as well.

Although I knew I would never know the answers to my questions, one thing I knew for sure was that I needed to change the narratives of deficit ideology concerning African Americans not only for my children but for the parents as well. The belief that African American children are inherently inferior and can be characterized by popular stereotypes would not be permitted in my program. The mother of this little boy was so adamant about knowing my vision. If only she had stayed a little while longer she would have seen it live and in living color.

Write the Vision

Around the middle of February while sitting in the conference room with the vice president and chief program officer for our organization I was presented with the expectation that for the first time ever the center would have a summer camp. At first mention I felt extremely overwhelmed because I already had so much to do to get the center up to par during the regular school year so I could not fathom thinking about an

additional program the that moment. Needless to say by the end of the meeting I was charged to create a name for the camp, identify a theme, and develop a framework for what the camp would look like. During the conversation we discussed a focus on school readiness and being a prevention of summer loss for the Head Start students. Low-income youth have been found to lose at least two months of growth in reading achievement by the end of summer vacation (McLaughlin & Smink, 2010). The young children served in our program are just beginning to learn the foundations of reading such as letter recognition and phonemic awareness so imagine how detrimental this loss will be to their level of school readiness.

As I returned to my office I did a quick Google search to see some of the popular preschool camp themes. However, nothing stood out to me. I wanted something different, something unique. I began to think about the population of my students and what I could do that would be meaningful and exciting to them and then it hit me! This was my opportunity to officially introduce and implement Culturally sustaining pedagogy to my staff and families but first I had to convince the vice president and chief program officer of its value. I needed them to be equally convinced that this was an awesome idea.

The next day I went to the vice president's office and as I walked in I declared, "I got it! I know what we are going to do for the summer." She turned her chair to face me and replied, "Ok girl! What chu got?" Being that both she and I are African American, her response was not surprising as we tended to effortlessly switch back and forth between African American English and Standard English; a skill that we not only value but one that we also know is imperative for the African American children to master in

order to successfully navigate the schooling process and society in general. "Scholars on the Rise Enrichment Program will be the name of our summer program. I chose this name because I really want to see our babies view themselves as scholars because scholarly identity is so important."

Scholarly identity refers to the identification of oneself as an intelligent and competent learner in the schooling environment (Whiting, 2006). This is an important aspect to academic achievement as it directly relates to an individual's belief in his or her ability to achieve and succeed in the schooling environment. Research shows that schooling practices are important factors in the development of academic identity of students (Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2012). School practices communicate specific cultural norms and expectations that typify what a successful students and scholars should look like. Unfortunately, these norms and expectations often differ significantly from those of African American children. It is for this reason, that Culturally sustaining pedagogy would be used as an intentional tool in the development of positive scholarly identity. This would be a way to address the school readiness component as well.

I could tell that she was on board because of the large smile spread across her face, but that smile slowly began to fade and was replaced with a puzzled look as I began to explain the theme. I explained to her that theme of the camp would be *Because of Them, We can* and that each week the children would learn about a prominent African American scholar whose life's work has positively impacted the lives of all of us. These students would learn how these scholars had paved the way for all generations behind them to have the quality of life they currently have and how they can follow in their footsteps and make their own difference on the world.

The vice president paused for a second and then she responded, “I like it. I really do…but, what about our non-African American families? How do you think they’re going to feel about it? I’m just concerned about it not going over well or making them uncomfortable.” “I hear your concern. I do,” I responded. “However, with all due respect, does anyone ever express the same concern when African American go to school and are only taught one aspect of history or only hear about the accomplishments of individuals reflective on their own race and ethnicity once a year in February?” She replied, “Honestly, no. Never even thought about it.” “So why is it fair,” I asked. “Why is it ok for Black children to learn the history of Whites but not the reverse? Not to mention they will be learning about individuals who not only impacted the lives of African Americans but people of all cultures and ethnicities. Therefore, this learning experience will be beneficial for us all.”

The smile returned and she responded, “You’re right.” We discussed moving forward with me pitching it to the chief program officer next. Although, I walked away feeling victorious, I must admit that I was also a bit apprehensive as well. What if after I introduce the summer program to the staff and parents some of them felt the same way that the vice president initially felt? How would the non-African American families feel? Was I about to rock the proverbial boat? Should I be more subtle in my approach to Culturally sustaining pedagogy for now? Perhaps I should just add more materials in the classroom featuring African Americans because I did not want to upset anyone.

Lost in my thoughts, it took several minutes before I heard one of my preschool teachers frantically trying to get my attention. As I walked towards the classroom the teacher informed me that one of the four year old boys in the classroom would not sit still

in circle so he was asked to leave and had become upset and started throwing things around the room. I could hear the sound of a child crying and toys crashing to the floor. I soon saw the source of the chaos with my own eyes. There he was, a petite little Black boy walking through the room pushing over every shelf in his path while his classmates sat on the carpet with the other teacher watching in disbelief.

"Ms. Tameka! Ms. Tameka! Look at Mekhi! He being bad! He knocking down the toys," a little girl informed me as soon as she saw me walk through the classroom door. I hate to hear children respond to themselves or others as bad out of fear that they will truly believe that about themselves and become the victim of a self-fulfilling prophecy so I knew that it was imperative that I take a few seconds to address it for his sake as well as his audience of peers. Thus, I looked at the little girl with a smile on my face and replied, " Mekhi's not being bad. He is just really upset and not making a good choice right now."

I then turned my attention completely to Mekhi who was now kicking some of the things he had already thrown on the floor and in a firm voice requested him to stop, which he did. He stood there crying and upset so I began to walk towards him. I kneeled down at his eye level and inquired why he was so upset. He began to yell, "I want to go home. I don't like school. I ain't coming back no more." In response I said, "It really makes me sad to hear you say that because we love having you here. Can you come and talk to me so we can see try and figure out how to make it better?" I reached for his hand and he accepted my invitation by grabbing my hand in return. I explained to the teacher that we were going to my office for a few minutes but would be returning to clean up the mess.

Once we were seated in my office I encouraged him to tell me what happened and how he was feeling. He revealed to me that he did not like school because it was boring and that he felt like the teacher always yelled at him even when other children were talking too. I assured him that I heard what he was saying and understood how he was feeling. I also explained to him that his teacher and I would work together to figure out a way to make school fun for him but he had to do his part by making sure he followed classroom rules so that he and all of his friends could learn in a peaceful and safe environment. I took him back to the classroom and helped him to start cleaning the mess he had created. For me this was confirmation that the Scholars on the Rise Enrichment program was a must and I was ready to move forward no matter the consequences.

The Final Approval

A week later I met with both the vice president and chief program officer to discuss the summer program. Sitting at the large oak conference table I began to lay out the details of my plan highlighting the fields of study and respective African American scholars that we would be discussing as well as a sample schedule. The entire time I was speaking the chief program officer continuously nodded her head and smile and once I was finished she replied, “I LOVE IT! Tameka, I really do.” Relieved and in need of a bit more affirmation I replied, “You sure?” “ Absolutely, the reality of the situation is that the demographics of our center has changed. We are a predominantly African American center and we need to embrace it,” she replied. Jokingly I responded, “Don’t tell me that! I will turn the center all the way Black!” We all immediately begin to laugh and then she rebutted, “ Turn it Black,” which made all of us laugh even harder.

Once we regained our composure she continued, “ What you are planning on doing and the population of kids we serve reminds me of the Freedom School. Are you familiar with Freedom School?” “Absolutely,” was my response. Freedom Schools is a summer reading enrichment program for children representative of underserved populations designed to address summer reading loss and disparities in student achievement (Children Defense Fund, 2017). I actually had the opportunity to visit a Freedom School site last summer with one of my classmates who was actually working with the program. In particular, I had the opportunity to experience their morning meeting, which they referred to as *Harambee*. Harambee is a term in the Kiswahili language that means, “ pull together” (Freedom School Partners, 2017). It was an awesome experience and definitely left a lasting impression on me. The counselors led students in songs that had rhythms and beats a kin to those found in rhythm and blues and African American gospel music genres. The kids sang and danced, chanted and cheered. Undoubtedly, it left and equally lasting and memorable impression on the chief program officer as well as she eagerly agreed that we should incorporate a similar experience as part of our summer program.

My first step was to identify a name for our morning assembly. I thought about it for a few days and researched some African words but was unsuccessful. Then one night I had an epiphany. I recalled a paper I had written during a previous semester on early childhood in Africa for my globalization class. During my research I came across the word *Ubuntu,* a South African word that means “I am because we all are” (Thompsell, 2017). I knew instantly that this would be the perfect title for our morning assembly as it supported everything we were trying to accomplish for the summer. Over the next few

days I shared it with the vice president and chief program officer, both of which expressed approval and excitement. Thus, the foundation for Scholars on the Rise had been laid and now it was time to train the builders.

Preparation for the Journey

"The work is plentiful but the laborers are few"

Now that the foundation for the summer program was established, I had to determine the most effective way to equip and empower the staff. The staff consisted of twenty-eight women ages twenty-five to sixty five. Out of the twenty-eight: twenty-four were African American, one was Puerto Rican, one was African, one was Greek, and one was Caucasian. Although not extremely diverse, there were a variety of cultures represented so I felt pretty confident that getting teacher commitment to CSP would be difficult.

During our March staff meeting I excitedly shared with the teachers the details for the summer program. I was a bit caught off guard because although I shared the details with much enthusiasm, I was greeted in return with a room of blank stares. Nevertheless, that is when it clicked and I decided to survey the room. "Raise your hand if you've ever heard of culturally relevant teaching." In a room of twenty-eight early educators not a single hand was raised. I cannot say I was completely shocked but I was secretly hoping that at least one of two of them had, especially those currently enrolled in school. During a previous semester I had the opportunity to do some research on teacher preparation for early educators and speak with a member of the childcare commission. Currently in North Carolina there is not specific requirements for early childhood educators to complete coursework or training related to culture or diversity. In fact, the minimum

requirement for an individual to be qualified as a lead teacher is that he/she completes one course, EDU 119 Introduction to Early Childhood. This course is one semester and covers at least 5 different topics ranging from curriculum to career options. Given the expansiveness of the material but the brevity of the semester, it is highly unlikely that each of the topics are covered thoroughly. Additionally, although course descriptions do indicate that topics will include creating inclusive environments they do not explicitly address diversity or culture as a focus. However, even if it is discussed, it is improbable that there is enough time in the semester to do an analysis of culture and classroom dynamics in-depth enough to impact teacher attitudes and evoke change.

There are so many different components to establishing a culturally sensitive and responsive classroom environment that the topic alone could take a semester, or longer, to fully unpack. First educators must be willing to embrace diversity; next they must be willing to be introspective and have a solid understanding of their own culture; then they must examine how that culture influences their practices as a teacher and be willing to change any that are biased or insensitive; and finally they must have an awareness of how student culture impacts the classroom dynamics and be prepared to find ways to support and incorporate them into the classroom environment. Considering that nearly 50% of lead educators in North Carolina have less than an associate degree (Child Care Services Association, 2014), it is highly likely that EDU 119 may be the only teacher preparation they received before entering the classroom. This fact along helps reinforce the necessity of evaluating whether or not the current education requirements for early educators in North Carolina are effectively equipping them to empower diverse learners in their classrooms.

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that minimal education requirements for early educators were undoubtedly implemented with the best interest of young children in mind as it ensures that, at the very least, all lead educators have a very basic understanding of child development. However, basic child development is necessary it is not sufficient alone nor does it ensure that the diverse needs of all children are adequately addressed. Basic child development is most often representative of the normative behaviors of White, middle-class children (Nelson and Roger, 2003), and as previously stated, the specificity of these norms leaves very little room for the acknowledgement of alternative cultures. Thus, unless the minimal education requirements be re-evaluated and amended, the consequences of cultural mismatch will continue to plague early childhood programs across North Carolina. Young children of color will also continue to be at risk of entering early childhood classrooms with educators who are unable to meet their cultural needs.

With all of this in mind I reached out to the member of the childcare commission to advocate for cultural diversity requirements in teacher preparation of early educators in North Carolina. Speaking with this member was probably one of the most frustrating experiences I have had in a while. The board member appeared to oscillate between ignorance and dismissiveness of the importance of having well-educated teachers for all children and the importance of teachers being able to cater to diverse children and families. In fact the member suggested that the current educational requirements were already unnecessary for some teachers because an individual does not need an education to care for groups such as infants. Furthermore, he implied that “urban people” tend to be the ones working in early childhood programs in urban areas so there is no diversity

because the children and teachers are already the same. I was speechless. What were "urban people"? Is this really an individual who helps to create policy for early education? How could he possibly advocate for all children when he doesn't fully understand the necessity of educated and qualified staff for all age groups or the significance of acknowledging culture and diversity regardless of the racial/ethnic makeup of the teaching staff and children? Does he even know what high quality care should look like? Needless to say as long as people such as himself are serving on the board the prospect of early education reform addressing cultural discontinuity is highly likely. Nevertheless, I do not regret having this conversation with him, as it is my obligation as an educator to advocate on behalf of young children. Although policy change is the overall goal, it will take time for the policy process to be completed. However, we do not have to wait for completion, there are measures that can be taken quickly at the program and classroom levels to ensure that the cultural needs of students are being met but this requires program administrators and staff to take personal responsibility for to preparation of their teacher.

Hence, I knew that I would have to take my own advice and equip my staff with the necessary knowledge and skills necessary for culturally sustaining pedagogy if I truly wanted Scholars on the Rise to be a success. As an introduction to culturally sustaining pedagogy I took the last fifteen minutes of the staff meeting to play a YouTube clip of Dr. Gloria Ladson Billings discussing the premise and benefits of culturally relevant teaching. Immediately after the video I asked the teachers to share their thoughts. One stated, "I can see how it's important to talk about the children's culture." Another said, "But ain't we already doing it with the multicultural pictures and dolls and stuff?" All I

could do is smile because I too had the same misguided belief until I was taught differently. To help her to think through her own question to further her own understanding I replied, "I don't know. Do we? Talk to me about how you use the multicultural materials in your classroom to create learning experiences for your children." She was quiet for a second and then responded, "I mean ima be honest. I don't do nothing special with the stuff but we do use them. Like the dolls, we talk about taking care of the babies." To push her even further I inquired, "So, through that activity with the dolls, what do the children learn about themselves and others? How does it connect their own cultural and home experiences to enhance their learning?" " Ms. Tameka, I don't know. I ain't never think about all that," the teacher admitted. I smiled and responded, " I know you haven't but we all have to start for the kids sake. And we are going to work on it collectively so don't worry." We wrapped up the meeting with a few reminders and dismissed. As we dismissed the room was filled with the sound of conversation I could tell that some of it was about the video we had watched although I could not tell if it was positive or not. I remember feeling both anxious and excited at the thought of how things would unfold as we moved forward in the implementation of CRT.

During the April staff meeting I had the teachers engage in an exercise to help them identify some of their own biases. I displayed several pictures on the smart board to which I instructed them to write down the first thing that came to mind. I intentionally selected stereotypical images as well as images that reflected some families that we serve. Next, I asked them to look at the initial impressions they had written down and to identify how it may affect the way they interact with the family or care of for the children. I then opened the floor to allow those who wanted to share to do so. As expected a teacher

immediately stated, “Well, I don’t see color when I’m working with my students. I treat everyone the same.” I could not hold my response back and immediately stated, “I know that’s what we would like to believe but that is simply not true. This should not offend you because if what you say is true then you are doing a disservice to the families we serve. To say that you do not see the color of a child’s skin is to say that you do not see the essence of who they are nor the societal pressures that they will inevitably have to face or the privileges they will inherently earn as a result of it.”

I used this moment at a transition to introduce the “Unequal Opportunity Race,” a short film created for the African American policy forum. This short film uses a race between African Americans and Caucasians to illustrate some of the many obstacles African Americans encounter that hinders their social, academic, and economic advancement while Caucasians continue to excel and prosper. In particular, the video highlights issues such as slavery, wealth disparities, discrimination, and inequitable schooling experiences. When the video was finished I instructed the teachers to take a few minutes to reflect and process what they had just watched.

As I scanned the classroom I could not help but notice the reaction of one of my teachers specifically. She was visibly affected by the video as she had a slight frown on her face and was rapidly tapping her foot on the floor. I was both concerned and intrigued. Concerned about her feelings as a Caucasian woman watching a video that directly confront racial issues but intrigued about her perspective on what she had seen. I desperately hoped that she would share when I asked for reactions. Consequently, I was beside myself with excitement when she was the first staff member to speak, “I think the video was racist towards White people. It made it seem like all White people are rich.

Shoot, I ain't rich. I mean I know because I am White I do not have certain benefits but not to the degree of the video. I'm more comfortable around Black people. I mean really, my kids are black. Honestly, when I am around a lot of White people I have to convince myself that I am good enough."

Before I could respond an African American staff member reacted, " I hear what you're saying but the stuff in the video was facts, like they had the dates in history that it happened. I don't think it was about all White people being rich or bad but about what has and is happening to Black people at the hands of some White people throughout history and today." "Well for me it was hard to watch because it was true. I know how hard it's been for me in my life and it makes me think about the struggles my children will still have to face in 2017 just because of the color of their skin," interjected another staff member as her voice cracked and her eyes began to fill with tears.

I remember being in awe at the level of vulnerability and openness that these teachers displayed as well as the amount of sensitivity and respect that they had shown one another. The video had indeed done what it was supposed to do; it struck a nerve and generated the type of candid conversations that early education professionals must have before authentic and intentional Culturally sustaining pedagogy can truly take place. Nevertheless, it was important for me to end the meeting on a high note. So I started by thanking each staff member who shared for being brave and transparent in the sharing of her thoughts and feelings with us and validated their feelings by ensuring them that they were both heard and understood. Next, I wanted to empower them so I reminded them of the power of our role as early educators. We help shape the minds, the beliefs, and the values of the young children we teach on a daily basis. We can bring about the change

we so desperately want to see if we are intentional about getting this early education and Culturally sustaining pedagogy thing right. We can help them see the importance of judging people by their character and not their skin color. We can teach them to advocate for themselves and for others. We can equip them with the skills necessary to navigate some of their barriers of equality they will inevitably have to encounter. Lastly, I challenged them to commit to the process of transforming our pedagogical practices from just DAP to DCAP. The room was filled with lots of smiles and approving nods, which conveyed to me that many of them were on board. And so the journey officially began….

Parent Approval

Now that the teachers were aware of the program I now had to ensure that the parents were prepared and informed as well. Although I was convinced that I was doing the right thing for the children in our program I still had reservations about the parent response. This concern resulted from the fact that in order for this summer program to be most successful I needed the support and investment of the parents as well. Without question, I acknowledge parent involvement to be beneficial to the learning and development of young children. In fact, McWayne, Cheung, Wright, and Hahs-Vaughn (2012) identified family involvement in children's education as a key protective factor for low- income ethnic minority children and youth that often serves to bridge the settings of home and school, especially during early childhood. Accordingly, family involvement is an invaluable component of Culturally sustaining pedagogy. A child's culture is inevitably defined by the values, beliefs, practices and traditions established by their

family unit. Thus, in order for the children to find the content of the summer enrichment program meaningful, the parents must first find it meaningful.

I debated about the most effective method for getting information about the program out to the parents about the program. I initially considered calling a parent meeting in the evening but quickly decided against it after reflecting on past participation or lack thereof. I have attempted to schedule evening meetings in the past only to have four or five parents to attend at the most, all of who are already actively involved in the center and typically well versed in the intended subject of the meeting. Additionally, these also tended to be the parents who can afford to pay for their child care out of pocket. In this case, although it was important to get this information out to all parents, I really wanted to get my Head Start parents involved because their children are among those who could potentially benefit the most from the summer enrichment program.

Thus, I opted to develop a flyer highlighting the key components of the summer enrichment program including the purpose, topics, and schedule (see Appendix A). The purpose of the flyer was to grab their attention in hopes that they would get excited and want to know more about the program with the intention of enrolling their children. The flyers were distributed to all families at the beginning of May. Within the first week of distributing the flyer I received a variety of responses from the parents. Most parents thought it was a great idea but were concerned about the cost, especially Head Start parents without a voucher to subsidize the expense of childcare. However, there were a few parents that had some reservations about the content of the program.

“ Ms. Tameka, can I speak with you for a minute about the summer program?” asked an African American parent of a three-year old girl as she stood in the doorway of

my office. “Absolutely. Come on in.,” I responded. She entered my office and took a seat in one of the plush chairs in front of my desk. “What’s on your mind?” I inquired. “ Well, I was just reading over the flyer and it looks like a really great program but I am concerned that it may be too much for Aja,” she replied. “Really, how so?” I asked. “ Well, I know you all will be talking about African American history. I see the different topics but I mean…I guess I just want to make sure that’s all you all will be discussing. How far exactly are you all going back? Like y’all aren’t going to be talking about slavery or anything when y’all talk about Africa? I mean I know it’s important but I think maybe she is too young to learn about it. I guess. I don’t know,” she responded. I sat there for a second to gather my thoughts because out of all the concerns that I thought a parent potentially might have I honestly did not think it was this one. To be completely honest, I did not expect any of my African American parents to have any real issues about the content at all.

However, in the seconds I thought about it I think this mothers issues were more common than not. The debate over how old children should be to discuss issues such as racism, slavery, and discrimination has been around for some time now. However, the reality of the matter is that the early childhood years are the optimal time to address issues surrounding race and ethnicity and can be a valuable period to transform negative perceptions and foster acceptance of diversity. During this period children are impressionable and have not been overwhelmed by cumulative experiences of failure as they would during later years (Boutte, 2012). Contrary to the beliefs of many that race and cultural disparities are irrelevant in the lives of very young children, Sanders and Downer (2012) highlight the fact that by the age of five children are able to identify

different ethnic groups according to physical appearance as well as distinguish positive and negative attributes related to them. Unfortunately for Black students, the most negative attributes are directly attributed to themselves and their families.

Furthermore, Justice, Lindsey, and Marrow (1999) found that preschool students attribute more negative than positive characteristics to Blacks then White. These perceptions can be directly attributed to messages conveyed both directly and indirectly through mainstream cultural beliefs and practices. Actually, by the time Black children enter kindergarten they have already been exposed to media images of negative stereotypes about themselves and their communities, which are only reinforced by school resources such as books and curriculum (Boutte, 2012). Machado da Silva (2005) suggest that children's literature often portray African Americans negatively but are often overlooked by most readers because they are viewed as innocent children books. For example, in many books, African American children are often characterized as the class clown seen disrupting the classroom. The perpetuation of such negative stereotypes can have detrimental effects on the psyche of African American children. Research shows that perceived racial discrimination by students negatively impacts their motivation, engagement and academic achievement (Seaton, 2010). As a result, Boutte (2012) suggests that the early childhood years are crucial four countering negative societal messages about people of color, urban settings and people in poverty. Consequently, it is important for teachers to confront social injustices and negative perceptions of Black students instead of pretending they do not exist.

Out of respect of the mother's feelings, I wanted to make sure that my response was both empathetic but informative at the same time. Over the past few months as center

director, I had learned that just as with the children, if you wanted parents to receive any information that you were trying to convey to them during time of concern or conflict, if you were trying to give them you must first acknowledge and validate their feelings. So, I gave the following response, “ I completely understand your concerns Mrs. Garris. I get that you want to make sure that Aja is not exposed to any thing that could negatively impact her mentally or emotionally and I completely respect and agree with that. However, let me assure that no matter what subject we teach at the center we will always make sure that is appropriate and sensitive to the age and development of the children. We will also make sure to approach it in a tactful and intentional manner. Now to answer you question more specifically. No, we will not discuss slavery this summer, but we will be discussing issues of racism and discrimination during our week on education when we talk about Ruby Bridges.” She looked at me and I could see the concern still on her face. After a few seconds she queried, “But Ms. Tameka, you don’t think that’s to much for a three year old?”

“ Honestly, no,” I replied. “Let me tell you why. Aja and all of her peers are at the age where they are beginning to notice and articulate differences in skin color. They are also at the age where they began to notice and internalize all that they hear and see around them. Unfortunately, we are living in a day and time where racism and discrimination are not only pervasive but also blatant. So although, your family may not discuss it in your household around Aja, her exposure to it is inevitable. It is in the media, on TV, on the news. It’s in our communities. It’s everywhere. You can only try and shield her from it for so long but the beauty in being proactive and discussing it with her now is that we can control the message she receives about it. Our message will be one of

empowerment. That although there are people who will not like you, not want to be your friend, not be nice to you because of how you look and the color of your skin, it doesn't matter. You are not less than. You are still awesome. You are still smart and you can be whoever you want to be as long as you believe in yourself. The only person that can stop you is you."

"Wow! Ms. Tameka, I never thought about it like that. Never. I guess that is why you are the director," she said as we both began to laugh. "I trust you and I trust your vision. I do. I just never heard of a preschool doing the things that you are trying to do at the center. So it's new. It's exciting but unfamiliar. So I really appreciate you being willing to answer questions we parents may have about it. I don't ever want you to feel like I was questioning you in a negative way. I just really wanted to understand." " Well, I hope I was helpful," I replied. "Absolutely, what you said made perfect sense. I think this summer is going to be good for all of us." "I do too. I really do," I responded. "And please do not hesitate to ever come to me with any questions or concerns. We are in this thing together! I need you all to keep me accountable. I need your input." She thanked me for taking the time to speak with her and we parted ways.

This conversation with mom was even more confirmation for me that the implementation of Culturally sustaining pedagogy was a necessity for the children and families that we served at our center. It was our obligation and moral duty as educators and as part of their "village". In my opinion, the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child", personifies the partnership between parents and teachers. Whether early educators realize it or not we do more than just teach children academics, we instill morals and values. Thus, by avoiding the difficult issues we are doing them a disservice.

Boutte and Strickland (2008) affirm that if educators are not challenging the status quo by addressing negative messages or perceptions of people of African descent they are reinforcing it. The status quo is representative of traditional teaching strategies that ultimately set up a stratification system complementary to that already present in society. Giroux (2001) argues that schools have a dual curriculum, one hidden and informal and the other overt and formal. The formal is academic in nature and is transmitted through course content, but the hidden is the messages conveyed to various students dependent on their race or class under the pretense of preparing them to successfully thrive in society. However, culturally relevant teachers can be instrumental in dismantling this pedagogical approach and that is exactly the type of teachers I needed my teachers to be.

Being that my teachers were not familiar with culturally sustaining pedagogy and some still struggled with exactly what I wanted them to do. I took on the responsibility of creating group lesson plans for the summer. However, I did not let them completely off the hook. There were parts of the lesson plan for which they still had responsibilities and input. For example, prior to the start of the summer program, I provided each teacher with a list of the themes and assigned them the task of identifying learning center activities that could be incorporated in the classroom related to each. Each teacher was also responsible for selecting the books that they would read to their children, the vocabulary that they would highlight, the questions they would ask, and the activities they would incorporate to reinforce the things they have learned from reading the book. Additionally, I also gave them autonomy in how they chose to implement the lesson plans. My goal was not to have a cookie cutter summer program in which all the classrooms looked the exact same way and everyone did the exact same thing at the same

time. It was important for me that the teachers were afforded the opportunity to express their own creativity and teaching styles, as I knew from past personal experience that it would make them more invested, at least that was the case for me.

In my time as a teacher in a public pre-kindergarten program we utilized a comprehensive scripted curriculum. It absolutely laid out every aspect of our daily practices and routines including the learning activities that should be implemented, the books that should be read and the specific words the teachers should say while doing so, the songs that should be sung, and even the transitions that should be used to move from one activity to the next. I must admit that when I first started with the program I struggled with not having any autonomy in my classroom. It was hard for me to get excited about the learning activities in my classroom because I was so focused on making sure that I complied with every stipulation and expectation as outlined by the curriculum. However, after my first year of teaching I had become familiar with the curriculum and understood the foundation of all the activities, the purpose and goals behind the wording of the scripts, and how they all connected to child development. I began to see the value in the curriculum but most importantly I began to see how to make it my own by tailoring it to the needs and interest of the students in my classroom, which made it more exciting and meaningful for all of us. In hindsight, I realize that the implementation of a research based scripted curriculum provided me with the necessary skills and knowledge to be a good teacher and I will be forever grateful for that, but my passion and cultural background is what helped me to make the learning in my classroom both meaningful and engaging.

In fact, I can recall a pivotal interaction during my second year of teaching with the state evaluator that I was assigned as part of the requirements for my birth-kindergarten license. I had just completed story time with my students and we were proceeding to head outside for recess. Once we had arrived at the playground, Dr. Mingo turned to me and said, “Ms. Ardrey, do you know how amazing a teacher you are? From start to finish I was just blown away. The language you used with the kids, the way you used music to teach, and the way you made the lesson personal for them. To see the kids dancing and singing, laughing and smiling, all while learning.. you just don’t know what that did for me. I have been to a lot of classrooms doing this job and I don’t see this often at all. It is rare and what you have is even more unique because it’s you. It’s natural. It’s clear that you are doing what you love. Your heart shows. Your passion shows. I really hope your families know what a gem they have in you.” I was absolutely floored because this was literally my second year of official teaching and I felt like I had so much to learn so hearing an individual that I had perceived to be an expert in the field was both humbling and exciting for me.

“Oh my goodness. Dr. Mingo, I don’t know what to say. Thank you.” I replied. “ No! Ms. Ardrey, thank you! We need more teachers like you in our field that’s why I was going to ask you to be a mentor teacher for the program. New teachers, you know in their first through third year can learn so much from you,” she continued. My initial response was laughter. I was a bit shocked. “Wait, why are you laughing,” she inquired with a smile on her face. “Dr. Mingo, you do realize that this is just my second year of teaching right? I can’t be a mentor. I probably need one,” I responded as I continued to laugh. “ No, are you serious? I just knew you had been doing this a while, at least four or five

years. I mean I'm sure that's on my documentation somewhere and I just didn't remember or forgot once I seen you action. Shoot, you are better than some of my veteran teachers," she replied. Needless, to say by the time she left that day I felt both encouraged and inspired. She provided me with confirmation that I was indeed working in my purpose. I can still vividly remember the way I felt on that day and want to instill that same confidence in my teachers. It was my hope that by providing them with a scripted curriculum for the summer that I would be providing them with a blueprint for intentional and Culturally sustaining pedagogy that they can build upon and ultimately make their own.

The Blueprint

Scholars on the Rise summer enrichment program began on June 13th and ended on August 12th, lasting for nine weeks. I aspired for it to be meaningful, engaging, and of course fun for the students. I also knew that parents of my rising kindergarteners would also want emphasis placed on school readiness skills as that had been a consistent topic of conversation throughout the school year. As a result, my first task was to create the blueprint that I would use to empower my teachers to effectively implement CSP. Hence, the development of the Early Childhood Framework for Culturally Engaging Practices (ECCEP). Figure 1 is a visual diagram of the ECCEP framework.

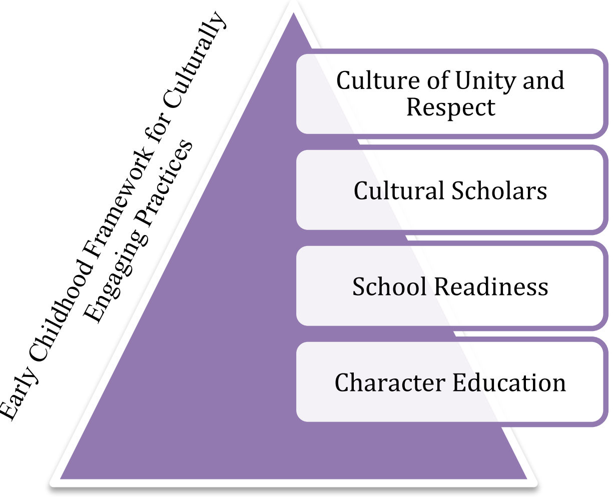

Figure 1: Early Childhood Framework for Culturally Engaging Practices

While contemplating how to blend my aspirations with the parent's desires, I identified four guiding principles: 1) The fostering of a school culture of unity and respect, 2) The study of scholars whose cultures reflect those of the teachers and students represented in the program, 3) An emphasis on school readiness through the reinforcement of essential academic skills such as emergent literacy and mathematics, 4) and the inclusion of character education. In correspondence with these principles, I also identified four main objectives I desired to achieve through the utilization of this framework:

1. The students would learn about prominent African American scholars and the impact their work has made on the world.
2. The students would strengthen their academic skills through a variety of literacy, math, and science activities.
3. The students would enhance their social skills and learn positive character traits through collaborative service projects and field trips.

4. The students would develop a positive cultural and scholarly identity.

Next, I went through each objective to identify specific strategies for each of them to ensure that they were being met. For the first objective, I researched African American scholars that were known for being among the first of notable accomplishments in their specified fields. Unsurprisingly, I found a wealth of prominent African American scholars, but given the time restraints and the age of the children, I knew I had to narrow it down to just a few. My selection criterion was three fold. I wanted to introduce the children to a variety of scholars, some that were well known and some that were not but I also wanted to expose them to fields of study and careers to which they had a small degree of familiarity that could serve as a foundation for learning. Additionally, I wanted there to be a direct connection between the work that the scholars had done and the everyday lives and experiences of the children. Consequently, I settled on the fields of education, aviation, medicine, technology, science, arts, and politics. For each of these fields with the exception of education I focused on two scholars, one male and one female, in order to give both the boys and girls and individual to identify with at an even greater level beyond ethnicity to gender.

For the second objective, I was intentional by identifying theme related activities that specifically targeted the areas of literacy, math, and science. Some of the activities were incorporated into the learning centers for children to explore individually. However, others were whole and small group activities that were more teacher directed. Although the primary focus of the activities were to strengthen the academic skills of the children, I also intended to sharpen the teacher's pedagogical skill set by introducing them to new

strategies for them to incorporate in their classroom practices. One such activity was the KWL chart, a popular graphic organizer that teachers use to actively engage their students in the planning and implementation of their own learning experiences by highlighting what they know, what they wanted to know, and what they learned as a result of the study. This strategy directly aligns with the principles of Culturally sustaining pedagogy and engaged pedagogy by giving the children a voice and empowering them to take ownership of their own education while facilitating the development of scholarly identity simultaneously.

For the third objective, I identified locations and sites throughout the city that related to the theme of the week for us to visit. Each of these field trips were selected because they would either enhance the children's understanding of the field of the study or of the individuals of focus. For example, during the aviation of week, we visited the aviation museum. Additionally, when we discussed a popular artist, we visited a park that was named after him. The collaborative projects consisted of a series of community outreach projects and special events. The purpose of the service projects was to teach the children the importance of service and showing kindness to others and consisted of activities such as making get well cards for children in the hospital during medicine week. The special events served as reinforcement to what the children had been learning throughout the week and consisted of activities such as a science fair during the week of science and a center election during politics week.

The fourth objective was ultimately addressed through objectives one through three. The emphasis on African American scholars allowed children to learn about prominent individuals who had significant academic accomplishments and achievements

that actually looked like them. It was my hope that by being exposed to scholars representative of their own culture and race, that they would make the connection that they could also succeed in scholarly pursuits.

The Main Event: Scholars on the Rise

After weeks of planning and preparation, the first week of Scholars on the Rise had finally arrived. I was both nervous and excited. The planning process was filled with a combination of reaffirming and questionable moments. Although the reaffirming moments were by far the most impactful, the questionable moments are among the most lasting. There were times during some of the staff meetings while communicating the goals from the camp and highlighting research on CRT when some of the teachers would look at me with a blank stare which I could not tell if they were processing, uninterested or just disapproved. Furthermore, there were a few families that withdrew from the program over the summer, some of which were White families. Although, summer withdrawal is typical for reasons such as older siblings being home to provide care allowing families to save money or the desire for their children to experience an actual summer camp environment, I would be dishonest if I said that it did not cross my mind if the focus of our camp was a motivating factor in this decision. Nevertheless, I took solace in the fact that there were many more families that stayed than left. Not to mention the fact that each family was asked to complete an anonymous exit survey upon departure of which families are typically brutally honest. Majority of them had nothing but great things to say about the center and none of them mentioned anything at all about the summer program.

The focus of the first week was Africa. During this week we discussed the continent of Africa as the origin for African American people. In preparation for this week several of the teachers had been collaborating on a secret project. They provided me with a list of materials that they needed in advance but whenever I asked them what they were going to do they told me I had to wait and see. Early Monday morning as I was conducting my routine morning walk through I noticed one of the teachers place two rows of chairs in the hallway. I was not sure what she was doing but rather than question her I decided to just wait and see and proceeded down the hall to visit the other classrooms.

After my classroom visits were completed and I proceeded back up the hallway I begin to see exactly what she was creating. On the wall beside the chairs was now were several images of windows overlooking a series of clouds. Each chair now had ribbons attached on each side that could be tied together in the middle to simulate a seat belt. The classroom door was adorned with a sign that said “Welcome to African Airlines” and a list of flight locations and times. I was beside myself with excitement so I entered the classroom to compliment the teachers on bringing the theme to life.

As I walked into the classroom I saw one of the teachers sitting in a chair dressed in a white coat, wearing a stethoscope around her neck, and a toy doctor’s kit on her lap. In her hand was a toy syringe and in front of her was a line of children. “Ok, who’s the first patient? Who’s ready to get their vaccination before they get on the plane?,” asked the teacher. “Me, me, me!,” yelled the children almost in unison. Another teacher who had a clipboard full of papers in her hand looked at the first child and said, “Ms. Pendergrass, the doctor is ready to see you now,” and gently pushes her towards the

classroom doctor. The doctor gently grabbed the first child by her hand and pulled her closer. “Good Morning, Ms. Pendergrass. How are you today?” inquires the teacher. “Good,” replied the little girl with a huge smile on her face. “That’s great,” the doctor responded as she looked down at the sheet of paper the nurse had just handed her. “I see you need some vaccinations to travel. Where are you going, ma’am?” “Africa!” the little girl yelled with the huge smile still plastered on her face. “I’ve always wanted to travel to Africa. I heard it was a beautiful place. Ok, I am about to give you two different shots. It’s going to be a quick sting but then it will be fine. Are you ready?” the teacher queried. The little girl nodded her head in affirmation. The teacher pressed the toy syringe against the little girls arm and then opened a Band-Aid and placed it over the location of the pretend shot. “You were so brave. Not one tear. Your shots are now up to date. Enjoy your trip to Africa,” stated the teacher. “Thank you,” responded the little girl as she turned and walked away to show her friends her Hello Kitty Band-Aid.

Both teachers begin to repeat the entire process on the next child in line and I decided to ask the children patiently waiting in line a few questions to determine whether or not the children understood what was really going on. Although it was a very creative and interactive experience it was meaningless if the children did not understand what they were doing or why they were doing it. “ Hey Donnovan, what are these vaccinations you all are waiting in line for?,” I asked. “We gotta get shots, Ms. Tameka,” he replied as he jumped up and down. “Why do you need shots,” I asked next. “Cuz we going to Africa today,” he answered. By this time we had gained the attention of many of the other children in line who had began to crowd around me as well. “ Yea,” another child had chimed in “We going on the airplane.” “Well, I know you all are traveling to Africa on an

airplane but that does not tell me why you all have to get shots. I went to Florida on the airplane but I didn't have to get any shots before I went," I countered. Donnonvan looked at me for a second as if he was in deep thought and then he said, "Well, Mrs. Soni said we had to get shots so we wont get sick because Africa is far far away and some times people get sick when they come back." "Oh, I see," I reacted. "It's like the shots we have to get when we were babies and sometimes now too though when we go to the real doctors so we wont get sick, but it's just different kinds of shots," another child stated. "Well, I got a shot from the doctor and it didn't' hurt. Well, a little bit it did but I didn't cry I was brave," another child added. At this point I was beside myself with excitement and eager to see what else was going on in the classroom.

At a table across the classroom, I noticed another teacher sitting at the table working on an activity on the table. On the table were crayons and markers and in front of each child was what appeared to be a small booklet. When I got close enough to the table I asked, "Hey friends. What are y'all doing over here?" "Drawing," said one child. "I wrote my name," said another child. "Yeah, but tell Ms. Tameka what you are making. What are these called?," the teacher asked holding up one of the booklets on the table. "A passport," yelled one of the children. "That's right, " replied the teacher with a huge smile. "Oh wow," I exclaimed. "That is pretty cool. Why are you all making passports?" "Because we're going on the plane, " said the same little girl who had informed me that they were making a passport. "A plane?" I asked. "Where are you traveling to on the plane?" "Africa," several of the children chimed in almost in unison. "How exciting. Can I come too?" I inquired. "Yes!" said one little girl. "But, you gotta make your passport and get your shots first." "Ok," I responded. I will make my appointment with the doctor

and be sure to bring my passport." "You already made one," she inquired. "No, but I have a real one that was made for me," I responded. The little girl opened her mouth wide as if she was surprised and then asked , "You been to Africa, Ms. Tameka?" "No, not Africa. I want to go to Africa one day though. I went to an island called Jamaica," I informed the little girl. "Jamaica? What's Jamaica," she asked. "Jamaica is a beautiful island in the Caribbean. It's surrounded by lots of water so it has a lot of beaches," I responded. "Oh! I been to the beach but my daddy drove us there," she replied and proceeded to finish coloring her passport.

I was thoroughly impressed and wanted to make sure that I expressed it to my staff before I left the room. So as I prepared to exit the room I simply said, "Awesome Job ladies! I love how you are bringing the lesson plan to life. I am sure the kids wont forget this one." "Thank you," each teacher replied. However, as I turned to walk away one teacher said, "Ms. Tameka, you aren't going to visit Africa with us?" "What do you mean? There's more?" I asked. "Yep," she replied with a huge smile on her face. "Alright then. When is the visit," I asked. She looked at the clock and then answered, "Flight leaves in ten minutes." "See you in ten," I confirmed and left the room.

When I returned ten minutes later I was greeted at the door by one of the teachers and noticed a group of students standing in a line in front of her. Each child had a bag in one hand and a slip of paper and the passport in the other. The teacher begin to speak, "Good Morning and welcome to Africa Airlines. We are delighted to have you traveling with us today. We will begin to board the plane as soon as the pilot arrives. Please make sure you have your ticket and your passport available." A minute later, I saw one of the students dressed in a pilots uniform and a cardboard cut out shaped as a plane's steering

wheel walking towards the opened classroom door. The teacher instructs him to take his seat in the front of the plane and then continues to speak, “Ok, we are now ready to board. If you are in zone one you may now enter the plane.” Then she instructed the children to look at the tickets they were provided to see what number was on it. She repeated the process until she got to zone four and both she and I assisted the children that were having some challenges identifying their numbers throughout the process. Once everyone was seated the teacher then instructed everyone to make sure they had fastened their seat belts and informed them that she would be coming by to help anyone who needed assistance.

Once everyone was seated, she gave the children an estimated arrival time and told them to enjoy their trip. Finally everyone was ready for the trip so she told the pilot that they were ready to take flight. The little boy began to turn the steering wheel back and forth after about two to three minutes or so the teacher announces, “ After a very long flight we have finally arrived to the beautiful continent of Africa. We are about to land so please remain seated until I let you know that it is safe to take off your seat belts.” The teacher then instructed the little pilot to let her know when the plane had stopped. He immediately responded, “Ok. We’re here!” The student passengers began to clap and cheer and the teacher announces, “You may now remove your seat belts and began to exit the plane when I point to your row.”

Once everyone was off the plane, the teacher escorted them to the classroom next door. To all of our surprise, the classroom teacher who was previously playing the role of the doctor was now dressed in African attire and was talking with an accent as she welcomed us all to Africa. In the background was the sound of African drums. As I

entered to room I noticed that the teachers had created different centers around the room. In the art center were materials such as plastic bottles, paper towel rolls, beans, stickers, construction paper, markers, and colorful tape for children to make their own instruments. In the science area there was an outline of the continent of Africa with pictures of different animals, landscapes, crayons, glue and scissors for children to make their own pictures of Africa. In the block area were different pictures of homes from African for children to use as models for their block structures. In the music area was a variety of drums. In the dramatic play area was a variety of African attire, Kente cloth, and jewelry for the children to use for dress up. In the manipulative area, was a matching game of children from African and other continents around the world. In the library area was a variety of picture books about Africa as well as pictures of the African kings and queens that we had discussed during Ubuntu that week.

All I could say was, “Oh my goodness. You all have really done a great job.” Before I knew it, tears had begin to fill my eyes. “Ms. Tameka, are you about to cry?” asked one teacher with a huge smile on her face. I immediately tried to gain my composure and convince them that I was not by calmly saying, “No, I’m good.” However, my efforts was pointless as a tear began to run down my cheek. “Aww, Ms. Tameka. Why are you crying?” inquired one of the teachers. I responded, “Because this is what I’ve been waiting on. This is the high quality, culturally relevant, intentional learning experiences that I have been preaching and teaching about since I came here. These children deserve this. Thanks for rising to the occasion and accepting my challenge to proving you are the awesome high quality teachers that I believed you could be.” “ No,

Ms. Tameka. Thank you for pushing us and holding us accountable even though we didn't always like it. We get it," responded one of the teachers as we all began to laugh.

Although in that moment, I was crying tears of joy. I must confess that I was a bit in shock. I did not recognize that classroom or those teachers. Nothing about them seemed the same. When I first transitioned to the role of center director, I was in disbelief at the teaching staffs lack of intentionality and implementation of engaging lesson plans. In fact, some teachers were not even completing them. The same lesson plan would be posted for weeks at a time as evident by the completion date. Walking down the hallway or through the classrooms there was no indication of what the students were learning or what the teachers were teaching. However, even in the classrooms where a current lesson plan was posted there were no visible activities or materials present in the classroom that actually reflected it. There was many days that I remember thinking*: This is a five star center with NAEYC accreditation. The highest recognition for high quality care a center can receive and my teachers aren't even completing lesson plans! In what world is this acceptable. What makes them think this is ok? Did the previous administration not hold them accountable? How are the parents ok with this? Was this something that had just started or was it a pattern?* Consequently, I often found myself consumed with anger and disbelief. On second thought, I wasn't in disbelief at all. Sadly, this type of behavior was very familiar with me. In my role as a technical assistance provider, I had learned that contrary to popular belief, a five star rating was not synonymous to high quality care at all. As a technical assistance provider my role was to support child development centers with quality maintenance and enhancements. In particular, I helped centers prepare for their state quality assessments, which required me to learn the definition of

high quality care as well as the process through which it was assessed. It was also through this work that I realized its shortcomings in addressing culture and diversity. Although, the standards and criteria developed to indicate high quality care has some inherent value, its omission of cultural influences on child development is a definite weakness.

High Quality Early Education Defined

Understanding the process of high quality care is imperative to contextualizing the expectations attached to the normalized standards of developmentally appropriate as well as its limitations to adequately attending to the cultural needs of students of color. Quality is typically assessed under two categories: *process quality* and *structural quality* . Both types are integral to the establishment of high quality childcare, but neither are sufficient alone. In fact, Cryer (1999) suggests that the core necessities of high quality early childhood programs are the promotion of safe and healthful conditions, developmentally appropriate stimulation, positive interactions, and the facilitation of increased social and emotional growth, which is represented by both categories. There are some key indicators that typify both high quality process and structural care. All of these characteristics are essential to the creation of high quality learning experiences. Thus neither of the aspects of quality in isolation, is a sufficient determinant of program quality for any type of early education program.

Process Quality

Process quality addresses the procedures used to facilitate learning in a program including adult child interactions, physical environment, and daily activities provided for the children (Cryer, 1999; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Rashid, 2009). It essentially

describes the quality of care and activities that children experience on a daily basis including safety and health provisions. In high quality programs, process quality is characterized by warm and nurturing relationships between teacher and students, adequate materials and supplies to create significant learning experiences, and ensuring a variety of educational opportunities such as art, music/movement, science, math, block play, sand, water, and dramatic play are offered daily. Children are encouraged to communicate, think critically and problems solve and parent involvement is highly encouraged (Espinosa, 2012). Process quality is most often assessed through classroom observations and most often measured using an Environmental Rating Scale (ERS).

Environmental Rating Scales. Although there are many assessment tools, the most widely used to assess early childhood programs are the ERS. The original ERS, known as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), was developed by researchers from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill as a comprehensive evaluation instrument to assess the quality of preschool programs. It was designed to assess how well childcare providers address the developmental needs of the children they serve in a safe, sensitive, stimulating, and nurturing environment (Burchinal & Cryer, 2003). However, as more infants and toddlers began to be enrolled in child care programs and alternative forms of child care such as family child care homes, similar assessment tools were developed to address the specific needs of infant and toddler classrooms and family childcare homes (Environmental Rating Scale Institute, n.d.). These scales are known as the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale and the Family Child Care Environmental Rating Scale. All three of the scales remain among the most widely used assessment tools used in the early education and care programs today.

The ERS is a voluntary assessment that must be requested by childcare providers. It consists of a one day, three to five hour observation of the classroom routines followed by a teacher interview. In order for the assessment to be completed it must be a typical day meaning that children engage in classroom activities and routines as indicated by a daily schedule. It also requires that more than half of all enrolled students and normal staff are present so that assessors can get a realistic assessment of the quality of care that the program provides on a daily basis. Most often two trained assessors conduct the ERS simultaneously to increase reliability of the scores; however, it is not uncommon for there to just be one. Programs do not receive feedback on the day of assessment, it is mailed on a later date after the assessors have completed a thorough report identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the program as determined by the programs performance on the ERS. Once programs have completed the ERS, they typically do not have to be reassessed for three years. However, programs that score less than a 4.0 on the scales have the option of being reassessed for free. Additionally, programs that score higher than a 4.0 but are still unsatisfied may request reassessment at their own expense (North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project, 2013).

Each ERS assessment is divided into subscales and indicators that directly address the classroom environment and experiences provided to the children. These subscales include personal care routine, space and furnishings, language reasoning, peer interactions, staff-child interactions, learning activities, and program structure (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2006). For each of these subscales, programs receive a rating that will ultimately help determine their overall level of quality.

The ratings range from inadequate to excellent care with minimal and good in between (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2006). Inadequate care describes low quality and refers to poor sanitary conditions and supervision, lack of warm and nurturing interactions and absence of developmentally appropriate experiences. Minimal care is slightly better and meets the basic needs of children, incorporates some positive classroom interactions and provides basic learning experiences. The highest ratings of good and excellent identify high quality care that can be defined as the best practices that facilitate language, intellectual, social, and physical development, all of which are vital for the success of children in the mainstream schooling process (Cryer, 1999). Ratings are then averaged to determine a final quality score, which indicates the overall level of quality that the program delivers.

Structural Quality

Although equally important, structural characteristics have a more indirect and less apparent influence on quality than process features. Structural quality refers to the infrastructure of a program such as staff to child ratios, teacher qualifications, and class size (Cryer, 1999; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Rashid, 2009). Consequently, rather than being assessed by universal scales such as the ERS like process quality, it is mostly regulated through state licensing requirements. Nonetheless, research has shown that these characteristics can have significant influence on the quality of care children receive. For example, smaller class sizes and lower teacher to child ratios are likely to foster more intimate, supportive and nurturing relationships that promote social competence and academic success. Similarly, highly qualified teachers are more likely to efficiently

provide differential learning experiences based on individual needs of the children in their care (Espinosa, 2002).

The Star Rated License System

North Carolina currently uses the Star Rated License system to identify the level of quality childcare programs are providing. The star rated system is a point-based method in which stars are accumulated as points increase, with the premise that the more points and stars a program has the better quality care it provides. As shown in figure 3, each star level has a corresponding range of points.

All programs automatically receive one star for meeting minimum state childcare laws. However, they can apply to increase their stars, possibly earning up to five, depending on their staff education and program standards. These two areas are evaluated and programs are awarded between one to seven points, which is determined by how well they are meeting the standards of each area. Programs are also offered an opportunity to receive a quality point for meeting additional education or programmatic criteria. The points are then totaled to indicate the final star level (North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education, n.d.). (See Appendix B)

Program Standards as a Measure of Quality

Program standards refer to the *structural quality* and *process quality* of an early education program. To determine points based on process quality for a program, early education providers have the option of going through the Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) Assessments. The higher the score, the more program points the early education program can potentially earn. For programs that choose to participate, these scores characterize the quality of care they are able to provide and can also provide feedback on

quality areas that may need improvement. However, for those who opt out of the ERS, there is no standard measurement to use as evidence of quality. Additionally, programs can earn program points by meeting additional voluntary standards such as completing operating and personnel policies; increasing the number of activity areas in classrooms; increasing square footage per classroom; and reducing staff child ratios. All of these aspects are considered in determining the total number of programmatic points a program is to be rewarded.

Assessing Quality Through Education Standards

Likewise, the level of education attainment is also a provider decision. Education standard points are based on the education levels of the staff as well as their years of experience. Although many teachers have higher, such as public pre-kindergarten teachers with bachelor's degrees, the minimum requirement for lead teachers in early childhood programs is the North Carolina Early Childhood Credential or its equivalent. Courses for this credential are offered at every community college in North Carolina and consists of one early childhood curriculum course and four semester credit hours including: Becoming an Early Childhood Professional; Understanding the Young Child - Growth and Development; Understanding the Young Child - Individuality, Family and Culture; Developmentally Appropriate Practices; Positive Guidance; and Health and Safety (North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education, n.d.); for which programs will earn minimal educational points.

However, programs can earn more points for education if they have staff that have associate degrees or higher in addition to years of experience, ideally meaning that these teachers have more academic training and knowledge to utilize in the classroom

environment. Equally, the more years of experience a program's staff has, the more points can be earned. These differing educational qualifications and experience levels may potentially jeopardize the quality of instruction and learning experiences that many children are receiving; ultimately reinforcing educational opportunity gaps.

Defining a Quality Point

To further enhance their accumulated point values, childcare operators may choose to meet additional education or programmatic criteria to earn one quality point. A quality point can be earned in both the program and educational areas by receiving special certification, reducing child-to-staff ratios, and using an approved curriculum. It should be noted that only four and five star programs that serve four year olds are required to have approved curriculums, thus it is merely an option for other programs that can be utilized to gain an additional point.

The Limitations of the North Carolina Rated License Process

Although the rated license assessment is a well-organized systematic approach to assessing quality in early childhood, it is not all encompassing. It has been my experience that rather that a true depiction of the quality of care centers provide on a regular basis, it is merely an indication of the quality of care the center has the potential to provide. Moreover, the environmental rating scales are simply snapshots of one day of operation for a program, and although centers are not aware of the particular day they will be assessed they are informed of a thirty-day window of time for when it will occur. Additionally, the center is allowed to select five blackout dates for when the assessors cannot come. This ultimately give centers time to prep and prepare for the impending visits, which usually consists of the purchasing of new materials, the revision of daily

schedules and a month worth of well thought out preplanned lessons and themes. With everything in place, the center staff is prepared to put on one of their best performances. In fact, I have had numerous center owners and directors say to me something along the lines of, "I can't wait until this assessment is over because we are not going to be doing all of this stuff everyday. It's too much."

Similarly, when I would correct a teacher after observing them engaging in practices that were not appropriate for the developmental needs of the children many would often respond, "Oh, I know Tameka. I wouldn't do that if the assessor was here. I know how I am supposed to do it. No worries I will do it the right way when they come." I cannot even began to quantify how many conversations I have had with teachers and directors about how doing "the right thing" is not just about performing well on the assessment but about ensuring that you are providing consistent high quality care for the children and families you serve on a daily basis. Furthermore, I noticed that these responses were not unique to a teacher with a specific level of education either. I had just as many with bachelor's degrees as those with credentials express the same sentiment. Thus, a teacher with a degree does not guarantee the provision of high quality care. Teachers can have the content knowledge but unless they are intentional about translating that knowledge into action it is meaningless. Accordingly, programs may have a high score on the educational standard and still not personify high quality care.

Additionally, although diversity in early childhood settings Environment Rating Scales (ERS) have an item that specifically addresses promoting acceptance of diversity (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005), it only addresses diversity from a surface perspective. This item evaluates the degree to which different races and cultures are represented in the

classroom through pictures, books, toys, music, activities, and family involvement with scores ranging from inadequate to excellent. These practices are a basis for a great foundation for a multicultural education; however, more focus must be put on teaching practices. Considering the fact that, culture has been shown to be essential to the learning and development of young children, this is an area that just cannot be overlooked.

Bearing in mind all of the aforementioned limitations, it is imperative that administrators of early education program assume accountability and ownership of the quality of care and education they provide for their students and family. It is not enough to earn five stars. Administrators should ensure that the teachers are maintaining the very pedagogical practices that earned them the five stars on a daily basis. As a matter of fact, as part of the NAEYC (2007) accreditation criteria, the organization has identified several competencies essential to an early childhood administrator. One competency in particular is *Early Childhood Education and Skills* under which it states that, "Administrators need a strong foundation in the fundamentals of child development and early childhood education to guide the instructional practices of teachers and support staff" (p.4).

However, in order for an administrator to effectively do so he/she must be committed to his/her own growth and development, which requires ongoing professional development, self-reflection and evaluation. This is why this study is so important to me. It is also why I believe my doctoral studies in Urban Education are an invaluable addition to my toolkit for being a successful administrator. Additionally, I realize that my staff will most likely never get to the level of education that I have attained and will consequently never be exposed to the content of material that I have received throughout

my doctoral studies, especially as it relates to the education of students of colors. Thus, it is my obligation to share all the knowledge I have gained with my staff as a method of empowerment and enlightenment.

The teachers who had worked so diligently to bring the African theme to life, confirmed that my efforts were not in vain. I was being heard even in those moments I felt like it was going in one ear and out of the other. Not only had these teachers used the theme of Africa to expose the African American children to knowledge about their own heritage but they also used the entire process to help all students draw connections to their own lives. For example, the little girl was able to make a connection to the immunization shots she has to get for school with the vaccinations that people have to get to travel in Africa. So much learning, affirmation and empowerment happened in that one day through the use of both developmentally and culturally relevant practices.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, INTERPRETATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

As a prelude to the discussion of my final thoughts and findings, I believe it is imperative to first reflect on the experiences that sparked my interests in urban education and its bearings on implementing Culturally sustaining pedagogy in my early childhood program. I must admit that although I verbalized the desire to pursue a doctoral degree, I had no real intent of enrolling. Honestly, I just knew it sounded good to others especially considering the fact I am perceived to be so smart by many of those around me. It appears that at almost every family function or church social I would get asked, "So, what's next?" to which I would automatically reply, "Oh, I am going to go get my PHD." The truth of the mater is that I knew that they were alluding to the timeless marriage and kids conversation, which I was completely over having at this point. Pursuing a PHD seemed like a good enough alternative or at least served as a great distraction and effective strategy to change the course of the conversation. Little did I know that I was in fact prophesying over my own life. Growing up in the Baptist church I have always been taught that my words have power and this was only confirmation.

Working as a child development specialist providing technical assistance afforded me the opportunity to visit lots of different early education settings. Much like K-12 schools, both the staff and the population of students served in these centers were reflective of the

communities in which they were located. Additionally, I noticed differences in the resources and in many cases the quality of teachers and instruction depending on the predominant ethnic groups being served. Particularly, programs serving primarily Caucasian children and families tended to have newer facilities with fancy indoor and outside play areas, special rooms designated for the arts or technology, and special accommodations such as cubbies in the lobby made specifically for car seats. Additionally, extracurricular activities such as soccer, gymnastics, Spanish and music were offered. The conversations and interactions between teachers and children were normally centered on the experiences of the children often including vacations, shopping trips, and time spent with family and friends. Most of the children were very articulate and had a large vocabulary. However, none of this is surprising considering the fact that an individual's level of articulation is predicated on the mastery of Standard English, a language that these children have been immersed in since birth. Moreover, emphasis was most commonly placed on academic skills and abilities such as writing and reading.

Conversely, the predominantly African American centers were most often located in low income or underserved neighborhoods. Accordingly, the classroom materials were often scarce or in disrepair. Extracurricular activities were typically limited to a visit from the local librarian. There were lots of positive interactions between staff and students that centered on common interests and things that had occurred in the classroom. Overall, the children were very talkative and very confident in expressing themselves to their teachers. Most rooms were warm and inviting and it felt more like a family, which I have come to view as both a blessing and a curse. I often refer to this classroom atmosphere in predominantly African American centers as the "village syndrome;"

drawing from the African American proverb, " It takes a village to raise a child." It has been my experience that in situations where both students and teachers are African American, teachers tend to treat the children more like their biological children, nieces and nephews and the children respond to the teachers the same way they would their mothers or aunties. Hence, it is not surprising to hear meaningful conversations in which both staff and students switch back and forth between African American and Standard English. Additionally, although academics were present there tended to be a greater emphasis on compliance and obedience, which I would argue is a direct correlation to the social ills attached to being Black.

Although I absolutely love the familial feel found in most African American centers, I cannot help but feel that many of them are partially missing the mark when it comes to maximizing the learning experiences of the children they serve. Without a doubt, African American children attending these centers are receiving high quality nurturing and socio-emotional support as the teachers are emotionally invested in their well-being. However, the academic aspect is very basic and abstract without any personal connection to the children. Thus, each time I left one of these centers I was overcome with mixed emotions.

I would return to the office and vent to one of my African American coworkers about how our children deserved more and questioned teacher preparation practices for early educators. This ultimately led me to researching teacher preparation programs that led me to the Curriculum and Instruction Urban Education program in which I am currently enrolled. As I read through the description of the program and saw its emphasis on social issues such as cultural diversity, stratification, and inequalities plaguing urban

schools particularly as it relates to race and ethnicity, I felt compelled to apply. I was searching for answers. I wanted to know how I could effectively support the African American centers that I was serving to ensure that the children and families they served received the highest quality of care possible. I desired for the teachers to be empowered to teach and the students to be inspired to learn. Nevertheless, I knew that my current knowledge alone was not sufficient. Nothing I had learned during my master's coursework addressed cultural differences or racial disparities nor did it provide teaching strategies to minimize their affects.

Conversely, the urban education doctoral program provided me with everything I needed by exposing me to concepts such as Critical Race Theory and Culturally Relevant Teaching. Everything I learned I took back to my agency and even convinced them to sponsor a conference for early educators that focused on cultural competency. Additionally, transitioning into the role of program director allowed my efforts to be more concentrated and intentional on a specific group of staff, children and families. Although I truly believe that all my efforts were meaningful, the opportunity to implement all that I have learned about Culturally sustaining pedagogy in a center that I am directly responsible for made it personal for me. Hence, the formation of this study.

This study has been both a rewarding and eye opening experience for me. I have learned so much about my program culture and myself. Additionally, I have gained some invaluable insight about developmentally appropriate practices and the implementation of Culturally sustaining pedagogy that I could not learn from simply reading a book or a research article as I witnessed my center began to transform beyond my eyes. In this chapter, I will highlight this journey by providing a research summary in which I will

give a quick overview of the first three chapters of my study as they serve as the foundation. Next, I will discuss the findings of my research questions and powerful conclusions I have drawn from each. Last, I will discuss implications and suggest further research considerations.

Research Summary

In review, I started Chapter I with a flashback of my experiences in a sociology college course. These experiences were the catalyst for transformation that has ultimately brought me to the place that I am today. The content of the course challenged whom I was an individual particularly as it related to my beliefs and perceptions about education. I had wholeheartedly subscribed to the notion of meritocracy and believed it to be a fair an equitable process for all, independent of race or ethnicity. However, the opportunity to vicariously relive aspects of the educational process through the experiences of a third grade African American male helped me to realize the naiveté of my line of thinking. In the brief amount of time that I was able to spend with Malik in his third class, the illusion of the *American Dream* began to be dismantled. For the first time in my life I understood that there are some very real barriers preventing some students from successfully navigating the process.

However, if it had not been for the forthrightness and commitment of my professor to bring such issues to the forefront I would have probably set in that third grade classroom completely oblivious to what was transpiring between this African American child and his White teacher. Ashamedly, I would have most likely cosigned with the teacher and blamed Malik for his own demise. Nevertheless, I am grateful that my professor had equipped me with a new analytical lens hinged on the scholarly

endeavors of those who came before me. This lens has only grown stronger and wider through my lived experiences and the knowledge I have gained through my doctoral studies. In fact, my doctoral studies exposed me to an even greater sphere of research that directly addressed the needs of African Americans students like Malik, which leads me to chapter II of my study.

Chapter II provided a synthesis of relevant and seminal research that ultimately shaped and informed my study. Thus, it was imperative that I started my literature review by highlighting the historical significance of African American schooling. Throughout history, education has been a priority to African Americans so much so that they established their own schools (Anderson, 1988), which complete contradicts the deficit ideology that often plagues the academic success of young African American children. The tenacity and determination African Americans have shown in pursuit of the opportunity to be educated also suggests that lack of interest cannot be an adequate explanation to their academic failure. Hence, there must be some barriers and obstacles hindering their progress ultimately beyond their control, which is why the next portion of the literature examined the implications of growing up in urban communities as well as provided a critical analysis of the structure of the current education system and its impact on the schooling experiences of these students. Nevertheless, there are some children who manage to excel in spite of all of these factors as a result of various protective factors both intrinsic and extrinsic. Additionally, there are some teaching strategies such as Culturally sustaining pedagogy that have been shown to positively impact the academic achievement of students of color, all of which is explored in detail in the final sections of the literature review.

Utilizing the research documented in Chapter II, I was able to establish my positionality and ultimately solidify both the type of study and methods I would used to conduct the study as outlined in Chapter III. By taking a critical reflective autoethographic approach I was able to position my lived experiences at the center of my analytic lens. A lens that was used to critique the universalism of Eurocentric norms of child development and the role I play within it while simultaneously identifying and analyzing cultural norms within my early childhood program (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). This research design proved to be beneficial as it yielded a wealth of findings about the implementation of Culturally sustaining pedagogy in program, which I will discuss next.

Findings and Implications

In consideration of my desire to contribute to the body of literature related to Culturally sustaining pedagogy in the field of early childhood education and provide valuable insight that could be used to inform pedagogical polices and practices beneficial to the early learning experiences for African American children, my research focused on two key questions:

1. As an administrator of a predominately African American early childhood education program, how do I foster a culturally relevant environment that facilitates both teacher and student engagement?
2. In this same role, how do I reconcile the normalized predetermined criterion of high quality with the implementation of Culturally sustaining pedagogy in my early childhood education program?

Thus, the summary of my findings will follow the order of these questions. In acknowledgement of my positionality as administrator, I begin by examining the practices and strategies that I utilized to foster an engaging culturally relevant environment for both teachers and students. Next, I examine how I managed to merge these culturally relevant practices with normalized developmentally appropriate practices without compromising the developmental or cultural needs of the children. Accordingly as I report my findings, I will elaborate on the ways in which they support or contradict the current literature.

Fostering Student Engagement

Student engagement was the primary focus for implementing Culturally sustaining pedagogy into my early education program. In accordance of the young ages of the population of children we serve, I describe engagement as eager participation, attentiveness and enjoyment. The pedagogical strategies we used in particular were setting the tone for the day through our morning celebration known as Ubuntu, focusing on African American scholars as our content of study, and by collaborative planning among children and teachers utilizing a graphic organizer known as a KWL chart.

Ubuntu. Ubuntu served dual roles. It set the tone of academic excellence for the day but also severed as a powerful teaching tool for our students. In alignment with the African origin of the phrase itself, the Ubuntu celebration was an acknowledgement of the historical roots of our ancestors in an effort to bridge the gap between what they were learning about and experiencing today to things that originated in Africa long ago. Accordingly, there was an emphasis on connectedness and humanity towards others, ultimately reinforcing that simply being a scholar is not enough. It was imperative to me

that the children understood that as a scholar they had the responsibility to share all that they learn with others because their actions not only had a personal impact but impacted everyone around them as well, be it positive or negative. Considering the overwhelming disproportionate expulsion rates of African American preschoolers (Gilliam, 2005), the goal was for the children to begin to develop empathy. Perhaps if our students were given the support to become familiar with the expectations of the schooling environment as well as an understanding of the impact their actions have on other as well, they will be less likely to engage in antisocial behaviors.

This directly aligns with the necessary skills for school readiness that emphasize the importance of social development (Rashid, 2009). The collaborative approach to humanitarian efforts is not only reflective of African American culture but also of collective empowerment a key component of engaged pedagogy and CRT (Hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The benefit of this approach is that it took the burden of social accountability solely off the individual child and made it a shared experience. For the students in my program this seemed to be advantageous as it was not uncommon to walk into a classroom and hear them correct each other's behaviors. One comment that I remember distinctively occurred during circle time in one of the classrooms. Two little girls were sitting beside one another and when one of them attempted to initiate a side conversation with other while the teacher was talking, the other responded, "You need to stop talking because I am trying hear so I can learn. You gotta learn too." Although I am sure that she was repeating a phrase that she had undoubtedly her from her teacher the fact that she had internalized it to govern her own behavior as well as to support her classmate in altering her own was a powerful assertion of the transformative power of

Culturally sustaining pedagogy. This type of behavior was not customary at our center prior to the emphasis on humanity and connectedness. As opposed to self-correction and problem solving as a team, the children often resorted to tattle tailing or physical altercation.

Another key component of Ubuntu and source of collective empowerment, was the daily affirmation (see Appendix C) in which the children proclaimed their worth as individuals and scholars. In accordance with tenets of CRT this affirmation challenged deficit ideologies by present a counternarrative to pervasive negative perceptions of African American children. As opposed to letting others dictate their identities and abilities they were empowered to proclaim it for themselves. This was extremely important considering the many messages that they receive during various forms of media on a daily basis. By presenting this counternarrative, it was my hope that we would counter the impact of the many media images of negative stereotypes to which they have already been exposed (Boutte, 2012). Given the potential of these stereotypes to have detrimental effects of student motivation, engagement, and achievement (Seaton, 2010), we could not afford the degrading voice of outsiders to be louder than the affirmations those of us who love and care for them the most. One of the greatest rewards was to see the children internalize the affirmation as evident by their increased confidence to take chances and try new things. Each morning I would ask a student to come up and lead us in the affirmation. It was uplifting to see children who would not normally choose to be the center of attention, out of fear and shyness, eagerly volunteer to take the lead. Apparently, somewhere throughout the summer they begin to view themselves differently

and find the strength within to act on it. Although there are several potential contributors to this transformation, it is very likely that the affirmation contributed significantly.

Music and Movement. Without question, music is inextricable from African American culture. Throughout history is has been a vehicle of expression and continues to be just as relevant today; hence its incorporation into Ubuntu each morning. The songs we sang with the children had melodies that included rhythms and beats reflective of the music that the children would hear on the radio. For these students it was a connection to home ultimately removing one of the barriers of success. This connection was critical as it eliminated the potential for cultural discontinuity.

Cultural discontinuity can impede students ability to achieve academic success (Ogbu,1982), as children of color often struggle with reconciling their familiar culturally influenced customary behavior with the foreign expected behavior of this new schooling environment. Thus, it is not surprising that students may become frustrated and disengage during the process if culture is not utilized as a bridge to connect the two. The music and movement of Ubuntu served as that bridge for many students in our program. However, as I reflect on its significance, Mekhi is the first child that comes to mind. Day after day I observed the same little boy who had previously destroyed one of my classrooms because he was frustrated and felt school was boring now singing, dancing and smiling during morning celebration. Mekhi was now engaged and it made a difference not only in Ubuntu but in the classroom as well. The infectiousness of the music and movement even spread to the parents as some of them would be heard singing the songs with their children during arrival or reported that they sing along at home.

Emphasis on African American Scholars. Aligned with anti-bias education aligned with the Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Practices framework (Hyun, Marshall & Dana, 1995), the presentation of African Americans in professions in which they would not be typically presented challenged pervasive stereotypes about career paths ultimately opening children to a world of options. Furthermore, in conjunction with the center affirmation, this exposure reinforced the scholarly identities of the students. It was evident that the students took pride in themselves as the proudly proclaimed their affirmation and declared their love for learning. Common phrases that students would say while engaging with their teachers and peers throughout the center consisted of things like, “I can do it because I’m smart.”

My pre-k teacher took it even further in her classroom with her students as she conducted a mini lesson on scholarship. Upon completion she instructed me to ask her students who they were whenever I encountered them. So one morning as I sat at the front desk and one of her students arrived I began my inquiry, “Good Morning Ari. How are you? Ms. Angie told me that if I asked you who were you had something special to tell me.” Ari looked at me and smiled an shook her head in affirmation. “Ok.” I replied. “Well, tell me then. Who are you?” She responded, “ I am African American and I am a scholar. A scholar is a person who likes to learn.” Both her mother and I began to adorn her with praise and compliments for her response causing her to smile even harder. Ari was proof that the children had not only embraced the information but also took pride in themselves and the racial group they represented, which is a key protective factor from negative stereotypes (Seaton, 2010).

This was also evident in conversations we were having with the children about future aspirations. As opposed to the most common answers among young children, such as a basketball player, a singer, a cheerleader, the students began to express interests in becoming artist, scientists and doctors. While all of these professions are honorable, it was exciting to see that they were open to exploring other fields. In numerous classrooms, I would observe little girls dressed up pretending to be Doc McStuffins. Admittedly, with the popularity of the show little girls had already began to show interest in the medical field. However, it appeared to be more intensified at least in the classroom setting. The exposure to Doc McStuffins was a definite benefit as it allowed us to activate the student's prior knowledge as a foundation for future knowledge. Up until this point, these children looked at Doc McSuffins as a cartoon character but we were able to give them a real life example. In fact, one of our mothers, who is actually a veterinarian was gracious enough to come in during Ubuntu one morning and talk about her experiences. This was a powerful moment for many of our students because not only did they realize that they had a personal connection with an African American scholar but she was a part of our village.

The KWL chart. Much like the utilization of the Doc McStufins show as a catalyst for activating previous knowledge, the KWL graphic organizer was an invaluable tool to empowering children to become active participants in the education process. Students were given a degree of ownership for the planning of their own learning experiences for each theme. First, by sharing what they already knew about the theme the students established a foundation for future knowledge. Next, by having the opportunity to determine what they wanted to learn on the specified subject empowered

them as stakeholders in their own education. This exemplifies the practice of engaged pedagogy, which is complementary to CRT. Engaged pedagogy is about creating a collaborative learning environment between students and teachers that accommodates student voice (Brophy, 2008). In my experience, this student voice seemed to increase the investment students had in their learning opportunities as evident in the change of student feedback.

After the implementation of this practice many of the students were able to better articulate what they had been learning and discussing in the classroom. For example, part of Ubuntu was a review of everything children had been working out throughout the week. Children were not only able to tell me the name of the theme but they were able to name the scholar of focus as well as tell me specific details about their impact on society and about their field of study. I must admit I was shocked at how much the kids retained myself and how they were able to share information with me that I did not know. It showed me that the teachers and students were doing some independent research and having real conversations about the subject matter. All things contemplated, learning was no longer simply an obligation for our students but it was engaging and exciting.

Staff Engagement

Findings on staff engagement reaffirmed much of what the literature stated. Teachers lacked the knowledge and skill set to effectively implement Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Terrill and Mark, 2000). Teacher preparation programs both community college and four year universities had failed to equip my staff with the necessary content knowledge and skills to utilize culture as an invaluable teaching strategy. As evident through the many staff meetings and workshops I conducted, not

only did they lack the skills they had never even heard of Culturally sustaining pedagogy nor were they aware that there was a need for it. All of which is imperative to getting the teachers to buy in and commit. In order for teachers, to effectively implement Culturally sustaining pedagogy they must first demonstrate an understanding of its necessity and purpose. Going into this endeavor I took for granted that the implementation would be smooth simply because most of us were African American. Not that I expected each of them to be automatically effective as I realize that being an ethnic minority does not equate competence (Kunjufu, 2002), but I did expect them to buy in faster than some of them actually did. However, in retrospect, this was very hypocritical of me because had it not been for my *Aha* moment in that third grad classroom during my senior year of college I probably would not have the level of conviction and commitment to the implementation of Culturally sustaining pedagogy that I have today. Without a doubt the information that I was presented during that sociology class got my wheels to turning but it was the first hand encounter that evoked a transformation in my thinking.

Nevertheless, one of the benefits that helped to facilitate understanding and willingness to implement CRT among my staff was that contrary to literature findings of African American teachers distancing themselves from African American culture (Kunjufu, 2002), my teachers embraced their African American identity. They were proud and had no problems expressing it. However, they still failed to see it as a pedagogical tool that could help bridge the gap between home and school for the children. The children were obviously confident and secure with their teachers as they freely expressed themselves and explored the classroom environment without hesitation, arguably due to the relationships the teachers had established with the children.

Accordingly, genuine relationships was undoubtedly one of the strengths of my staff. As pointed out by Noguera (2008) the establishment of trusting relationships are imperative to creating culturally sensitive learning environments for engaged and culturally relevant pedagogy. Correspondingly, my teachers had already mastered one of the most important components, genuine and trusting relationships so I felt confident that the implementation of CRT would indeed be a viable and effective teaching strategy for my program.

As time progressed, my confidence proved to be warranted. Research on CRT continuously highlights the benefits for the children but I found it to be equally beneficial to my teachers as well. I witnessed a transformation in teacher attitudes, commitment, and engagement. Teachers who failed to consistently complete and implement weekly lesson plans previously were now creating hands on learning experiences that literally brought their lessons to life through dramatization. For example, as opposed to simply talking and reading about traveling to Africa the children actually got to experience what it would be like during a classroom simulation.

Furthermore, the teachers were excited about what they were teaching as it was actually a learning experience for them as well. I can recall several occasions where teachers would come to me and say things like, “I had no idea that an African American invented this,” or “ I can’t believe I have never heard about that. I am learning just as much as the kids.” As part of the lesson plans, I provided some basic biographical information about the scholars but many of the teachers would conduct more indepth research independently to share with the children. For the first time it appeared that my teachers began to view themselves as educators. They took pride in their classrooms both inside and out and it showed. Walking down the hallway it was obvious what the

children were learning as their artwork and photographs lined the walls, and everyone noticed it including the parents.

One morning as I was sitting at the front desk in the lobby one of the parents walked up to me and proclaimed, " Ms. Tameka, I just love what y'all are doing. I love walking to Quentin's room and being able to see what he is working on in class because, you know, sometimes I'll ask him what he learned today and he just says nothing so this is really helpful to me." On another occasion while completing my morning walk through, I overhead two parents conversing in the hallway. The first parent stated, "They doing it up this summer ain't they? I love it." To which the other parent responded, "Girl, yeah. And my baby is loving it. She come home singing all these new songs. Shoot she got me and her brother singing with her." At that moment she begin singing, "I am the ruler of my destiny.." while clapping her hands to create the beat that accompanies it before both parents both burst into laughter. I could not help but to smile myself. Nevertheless, although all of these were powerful affirmations for me, some of my greatest confirmation of how CRT transformed my program and staff was feedback from the vice president and members of the board seeing as they had been affiliated with the center for many years given them a larger frame of reference.

In particular, one afternoon while sitting in my vice president's office she turns to me and said, " I'm so glad you are here. Everything is just so different. The teachers are different. They're happy, Tameka. They seem excited." She paused for a moment and her eyes began to feel with water prompting her to grab a tissue from the box of Kleenex on her desk. "I'm sorry," she continued. "I'm a big cry baby but you don't understand how much the atmosphere has shifted. Before it just felt like the staff morale was low but

you brought new life to the center. I can't lie I was skeptical about the whole culturally relevant emphasis on African American culture but you made me a believer. It worked. The kids are happy. The parents are happy. You should be proud."

Additionally, a week later I was invited to speak about what was going on at the center during a board meeting. For the first fifteen minutes of the meeting I shared information about my vision for the center and some of the strategies including CRT we were using to meet the needs of the students, after which I left to return to my administrative duties. Shortly after the meeting was dismissed the CPO reached out to me to inform me that the board was thoroughly impressed with my presentation and that several members were interested in joining us for Ubuntu. The next week, a White male board member and his family came for a visit. Immediately following Ubuntu he approached me and exclaimed, " Tameka that was so much fun. The kids and teachers really seemed to enjoy it. You're doing a great job." Undoubtedly, he took the details of his visit to the board because I soon received word that the members expressed that the center had an energy and vibrancy that they had not seen in years and that they were excited about the direction it was moving.

Moreover, the literature consistently highlights the ability of CRT to create empowering and affirming learning spaces for students but I have found it does exactly the same for the teachers as well. Although I was surprised by this, perhaps I should not have been. Hooks (1994) asserts that when engaged pedagogy is intentionally used to foster a holistic approach to learning, teachers will inevitably grow and be empowered as a result of the process. Accordingly, I observed that as the teachers worked diligently to help the children view themselves as scholars, they began to see aspects of themselves as

well. By examining the achievements of notable and influential African Americans, teachers began to associate success and scholarship as attributes of their own race. Consequently, at this point racial pride was no longer an individual phenomena but a collective one that engulfed the center.

In addition, the beauty in this collective pride was that it was not at the demise of the non-African American students. In fact, I think the overall process was equally empowering to them. At the very core of the teaching strategies and content that we provided the children was a message of self love and acceptance. Scholarly identity had no race or ethnicity attached to it, just a commitment to personal achievement and accountability. I did not realize it at the time but in hindsight I recognize that this was reflective of the multicultural education. The children were empowered to embrace their own culture while simultaneously learning about the culture or others. We made sure to emphasize that although we were talking about African American scholars, what they did was relevant to each and everyone of us. In true spirit of Ubuntu, "I am because we all are" (Thompsell, 2017).

Reconciling DAP with CRT

Although I am beyond grateful for the DCAP framework's acknowledgement of the necessity of incorporating culture in the pedagogical practices of early education, reading about it did not sufficiently prepare me to effectively merge CRT and DAP in my program. In all honesty, there were times that I found myself so consumed with the implementation of CRT practices that I failed to reinforce the importance of maintaining the universal policies and practices identified as being the proper way of providing early care and education for young children. Even so, I also found myself struggling with why

it mattered if we were doing things the *proper way* as long as we were meeting the cultural and developmental needs of our children. For example, DAP places an emphasis on unstructured individual and small group activities over structured large group activities. Additionally, there is a premium placed on learning centers in which students are supposed to spend a third of their time in care exploring. Hence, activities such as Ubuntu do not neatly fit into the confines of DAP, especially as a daily occurrence. In all honesty, considering the transition time from the various classrooms to the multipurpose room as well as the actually time spent in Ubuntu, it did in fact take away from the coveted learning centers as mandated by DAP.

However, it must be noted that during this morning celebration the children were learning the same skills and concepts as they would in the classroom environment plus more. During Ubuntu, not only did the children practice letter recognition, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, language skills, numeric awareness and social skills; but they also got their cultural needs met while having fun. It was a safe place that encouraged children to celebrate who they were and the cultural strengths they brought with them. The African American children had the opportunity to learn about people who not only significantly impacted their lives but with whom they also shared a common racial and ethnic background. They were engaged and excited but the reality of the matter is that I knew that had a representative of a regulatory agency showed up for an evaluation we would have likely been found out of compliance in that particular area.

Throughout the process, situations like this had been a thorn in my side. I was fully aware of the universal expectations for which I was required to uphold to maintain certain accreditations, but I also knew what worked best for the students and staff in my

particular center. Unfortunately, if followed explicitly, these expectations would not allow freedom for the incorporation of meaningful culturally inclusive activities that depart from traditional teaching practices and program structures.

Additionally, I think about discipline policies and practices. According to DAP standards, discipline should be non-punitive. In fact, there are no real consequences at all with the exception of natural consequences that cannot be prevented. Instead, children are to be redirected to a more appropriate activity in a calm and neutral voice. Though I can see the value in redirection for all children, the reality is that it is not always beneficial for African American children. The stakes are higher for African American children when it comes to behavioral expectations.

As demonstrated in Malik's third grade classroom, a Caucasian and African American child can commit the same offense but receive two completely different consequences, the later receiving the harshest. Consequently, it is vital that African American children understand the significance of consequences. Unlike the premise of redirection within the confines of the early childhood classroom, should an African American child commit an offense anywhere else it is highly likely that they would not receive a second chance. Actually, considering the racial tension and discrimination pervasive in today's society, especially as it relates to African Americans and law enforcement, the issue of discipline is even more pertinent.

As a result of my staff being predominantly African American, this is a concept that they not only understand all to well but one that is personal for them. It is a topic that we have all shed tears over and had many conversations about sitting in the teacher's lounge or in the lobby at the end of the night. In fact, we all experienced the tragedy first

hand as we supported one of our students and her family through the lost of her uncle as a result of an officer involved shooting. Consequently, much like the obligation parents feel to socialize their children to be able to thrive in an environment where being Black positions them at an automatic disadvantage (Peters, 1985), both the teachers and I feel equally responsible.

As a result, there is a propensity for the staff to be firm and strict when managing student behaviors and I acknowledge the fact that to an outsider it can come across harsh. Nonetheless, the children understand and respond to it the best because it is what is familiar to them. Just like the mother chastising her child in the lobby on my first day, most of these teachers are acting in love. Yet, there have been occasions in which I had to correct teachers for taking the "village mentality" too far. Accordingly, I had to consistently remind some teachers that although they may love and care for the children as their own, they are not. Thus, some methods of discipline, common to African American culture, that are used in your home are not appropriate in the classroom. Nevertheless, all things considered, I believe that there must be some accommodation for such cultural differences in the school environment. Thus the following questions are raised: "Where do I draw the line?"; "What compromises should I be willing to make?"; and "How do I effectively communicate the boundaries to my teachers to prevent confusion?"

Although I am still grappling with some of these questions, I have concluded that rather than focusing on compromising or drawing lines, the key has been to first understand the logic and intent behind both DAP and CRT practices. Next, I had to determine whether or not the identified intent addressed the developmental needs of the

children that we were serving. If so, I made the necessary accommodations to ensure that they were implemented to the best of our abilities but if not I found a more appropriate alternative that ultimately achieved the same goal. For example, in the case of discipline and redirection, in the older classrooms we implemented an accountability system in which students received a relevant consequence for their action but had the opportunity to redeem themselves by coming up with their own behavioral improvement plan an altering their behavior accordingly. This reinforced the realness of consequences imperative to growing up Black but also the possibility of redemption and decision-making that comes with being a responsible and productive citizen, the ultimate goal of redirection.

Furthermore, I realized that this level of understanding is also necessary for me to be able to effectively communicate the needs of African American children as an advocate and the servant leader. It is not enough for me to just acknowledge potential discrepancies in the expectations of DAP and the cultural needs of African American children but I must also be willing to do something about it, especially if it is at the demise of their optimal growth and development. I ultimately have to make a decision as to what is most important to me as a African American scholar and educator. Is it meeting the cultural needs of my students and families or is it maintaining the status quote for the sake of compliance and maintaining my title of program administrator of a 5-star NAEYC accredited center? Through this journey I have realized that challenging the status quo is never easy. I had to take risks and I had to be courageous. I honestly had no idea how the implementation of Culturally sustaining pedagogy would go over or if my superiors would even allow it but I knew the children and families were worth it and to me that was most important. Furthermore, I was reminded that there will always be

tension and even opposition and the intersection of personal conviction and professional responsibility when it comes to being African American professional attempting to navigate a westernized White middle class influenced field. However, it is all necessary to dismantled the status quo and to effectively evoke change.

Future Research Considerations

Overall, I am very pleased with the insight I gained from my study. However, there are a few aspects that were revealed that deserve further exploration. The first is the role of the family. In the planning of how to incorporate CRT in my center rather than consult or solicit family input, I just drew from my own cultural understanding, experiences and beliefs as an African American woman. This is one of my biggest regrets because so often the parent voice is omitted from research, yet they are the source of the cultural knowledge of young children. Parent input could powerfully enhance the quality and impact of CRT. It would be both insightful and informative to see what aspects of African American culture they would like to see addressed in the classroom environment.

Secondly, my Scholars on the Rise program and CRT implementation focused primarily on the preschoolers in my center. However, infants and toddlers are equally important. Thus, it would be beneficial to explore how CRT can be effectively incorporated into infant toddler classrooms in a meaningful way that extends beyond the status quo. In accordance with DAP standards, there is an inclusion of dolls of different skin types and diverse play foods representative of different ethnic groups, but this is a very shallow attempt at cultural inclusion. Therefore, there has to be an intentional more in depth acknowledgement of culture even for the 0-3 population.

Lastly, the early childhood field could benefit from a research based developmentally and culturally appropriate curriculum. As evident from the experiences of my teachers and the outcome of the interview with the representative of the child care commission, the current teacher programs are failing to prepare teachers to embed the culture of the students at the core of pedagogical practices. Consequently, there needs to be an alternative method to equipping them with the necessary knowledge and content. Perhaps a research based scripted curriculum can fill that gap.

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APPENDIX A: SCHOLARS ON THE RISE PARENT FLYER

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Sample Daily Schedule Snapshot

9:30-9:50 Ubuntu: A morning celebration to start our Day

9:50-10:50 Learning Centers/ Theme related small groups

10:50-11:20 Outdoor Play

11:20-11:30 Transition to Lunch

11:30-12:15 Lunch/Clean-up

12:15-12:30 Routine Care

12:30-2:30 Individual Reading/Nap/Quiet Activities

2:30-3:00 Snack/Clean-up/Routine Care Departure

WHAT IS UBUNTU?!

Ubuntu is a South African phrase that simply means, "I am who I am because of who you are."

WEEKLY THEMES

Week One: During this week we will highlight the continent of **Africa** as the origin of where everything began.

Week Two: This week is all about **Education**. Using the experiences of Ruby Bridges, children will learn about the value of education. They will also get the opportunity to explore some of their favorite careers.

Week Three: From the "Father of Black Aviation" to the first female pilot of African American descent this week is all about the contribution of African Americans to the field of **Aviation**.

Week Four: This week is about some of the amazing things African Americans have done in the field of **Medicine.**

Week Five: Children will follow in the footsteps of Garrett A. Morgan as they explore **Technology** through the creation of their own inventions.

Week Six: This week is all about experiments and exploration in the field of **Science** highlighting the accomplishments of notable African Americans such as Marie Daly, the first African American woman in the U.S. to earn a Ph.D.

Week Seven: From visual arts to the performing arts, African Americans have left their mark! Our emerging scholars will explore their artistic side through drama and **ART**.

Week Eight: It's campaign time at TCDC as we explore **Politics** and explore the accomplishments of our first African American presidential family.

Week Nine: WE CAN end of summer celebration.

APPENDIX B: STAR RATINGS SCALE

Number of Stars Received	Total Points Earned
★	1 - 3 Points
★ ★	4 - 6 Points
★ ★ ★	7 - 9 Points
★ ★ ★ ★	10 - 12 Points
★ ★ ★ ★ ★	13 - 15 Points

Breakdown for the number of stars a program can receive based on the total points earned in each of the two components. Adapted from "How Points are Earned" by the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education

APPENDIX C: THE DAILY AFFIRMATION

I am uniquely and wonderfully made!

I have everything I need inside of me to do my very best!

I am smart!

I am important!

And I am destined for greatness!