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What works? Teaching African American students in urban schools

Shawn Renee Forman

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What Works? Teaching African American Students in Urban Schools

by

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Dissertation

Submitted to the College of Education

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Ypsilanti, Michigan

Dedication

“It takes a village to raise a child.” ~African Proverb (Just Peace, 2017)

This dissertation is dedicated to my village of ancestors who arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, to those who traveled along the Underground Railroad to freedom until 1863, those who marched and protested for equality from 1954-1968, and the many who continue to embody the message that *Black Lives Matter*. If it were not for the perseverance, compassion and commitment of these individuals for the betterment of African Americans and paving the way for me to have the opportunity to experience being educated, this dedication page would be nonexistent. Words cannot express my sincere gratitude for their selflessness and bravery. Finally, to the tireless, dedicated, self-sacrificing, caring, in the trenches educators who instruct African American students in urban settings to experience academic success, I take my hat off to you!

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“No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helped you.”
~Althea Gibson (Brainy Quote, 2017a)

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Abstract

The academic achievement gap for African American students compared to their White counterparts has historically and currently remained significant. Many researchers have been prompted to address this issue by examining the practices utilized to teach African American students. The findings from this study suggest that when teachers move away from the traditional methods of teaching and move toward teaching practices that take into consideration the individual student, motivation and academic performance can be achieved. This research presents a general literature review, interviews from four urban elementary school principals, and the stories of five African American urban elementary teachers who were selected by their principals and deemed successful with teaching African American students. The themes that emerged from this study include: progressive teaching philosophy, integration of technology, differentiation, cooperative learning, culturally responsive curriculum, high expectations, caring, and othermothering. The results of this qualitative study challenge educators to examine the methods that are being utilized to teach African American students in urban schools to attain academic success. The findings of this study are consistent with previous results and will be an addition to the body of knowledge about how African American students learn and how they experience academic achievement in urban schools. Implications and recommendations for this research study are provided.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
List of Tables.....	x
Chapter I: Introduction	1
Problem Statement	6
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Significance of the Study	9
Research Questions	10
Definition of Terms.....	10
Chapter II: Literature Review.....	13
Historical Context.....	13
African American Students.....	16
Cultural Competency.....	21
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....	23
Critical Race Theory.....	25
Chapter III: Methodology.....	27
Ethnography.....	27
Mini-Ethnography.....	30
Case Study.....	31
Intended Methodology.....	33
Participants/Selection Criteria.....	34

Positionality/Reflexivity.....	35
Data Collection	37
Data Analysis.....	38
Underlying Assumptions.....	39
Validity/Reliability.....	40
Chapter IV: Research Findings.....	42
Schools	43
Principals.....	44
Principals' criteria for teacher selection	44
The Classrooms.....	48
Participant's Profiles.....	52
Alisha.....	53
Tamara.....	55
Danielle.....	57
Angela.....	58
Rose.....	60
Teaching Practices That Work	62
Progressive Teaching Philosophy.....	62
Integration of Technology.....	65
Differentiation.....	71
Cooperative Learning	74
Culturally Responsive Curriculum.....	78
High Expectations.....	85

Caring.....	89
Othermothering.....	95
Summary of Themes.....	99
Chapter V: Discussion, Implications & Recommendations.....	101
Analysis of Principal’s Nomination Criterion.....	102
Relationship building.....	102
Othermothering.....	103
High expectations.....	104
Cultural competency.....	104
Analysis of African American Urban Elementary Teachers.....	105
Culturally Responsive Teaching	106
Progressive Teaching Philosophy.....	107
Integration of Technology.....	113
Differentiation.....	117
Cooperative Learning.....	121
Culturally Responsive Curriculum.....	124
High Expectations.....	128
Caring.....	131
Othermothering	133
Limitations.....	137
Implications & Specific Recommendations	138
Teacher Education Programs.....	139
Professional Learning.....	143

Policymakers.....	145
Teachers of Urban African American Students.....	148
Continued Research.....	150
Conclusion.....	150
References.....	152
Appendices	
Appendix A: Teacher Recruitment Letter	181
Appendix B: Teacher Consent Form.....	182
Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter	185
Appendix D: Teacher Demographic Survey.....	186
Appendix E: Classroom Demographic Survey.....	188

List of Tables

Table	Page
1. School Demographic Overview	43
2. Principal's Criterion Overview	47
3. Classroom Demographic Overview.....	49
4. Participant's Demographic Overview	53
5. Themes and Teaching Behaviors.....	100
6. Themes and Culturally Responsive Teaching	107
7. Teaching Philosophies of Teachers	108

Chapter I

Introduction

The continued academic failure of African American students in American public schools arguably has been the greatest educational catastrophe of the United States. This academic tragedy is riddled with an extensive history of racism, inequalities, limited economic resources, and low expectations of African American students (HB 2722 Advisory Committee, 2008). Since the enactment of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) academic performance for African American students has been a concern (Kunjufu, 2002). Every year the nation publishes a report that highlights academic performance on standardized test of students in elementary and secondary schools in the United States (Hollins, 1993; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013a). Before these reports become public, predicting which students have scored above proficiency is not a challenging task (Hollins, 1993). Generally, culturally diverse students (African American, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaskan Native) score below proficiency, and of all the culturally diverse ethnic groups, African Americans score the lowest (Boykins & Noguera, 2011; National Center Educational Statistics, 2013a).

Due to standardized testing being the preferred method of assessment adopted by the government to measure attainment, these tests persistently position African American students' performance below that of their White counterparts (Irvine et al.; Gay, 2000; Boykins, 1982). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average reading scores in 2011 of eighth graders were 274 for White students and 249 for African American students, creating a White-African American achievement gap of 25 points (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2013a). The Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) reports that among twelfth grade students, 44% of African Americans students scored below proficiency on basic

level literacy assessments, compared to 17% of White students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014b). The results from these assessments have created an achievement gap between African American students and White students for over 20 years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014a; Boykins & Noguera, 2011; National Center of Educational Statistics, 2013a). The complexity of the achievement gap is solely based upon race and social class because the results consistently demonstrate the low academic performance of African American students in high-poverty urban areas compared to White students in educational settings with greater economic means (Bailey & Boykins, 2001; Boykins & Noguera, 2011; Dee, 2005; Foote, 2005; Hollins, 1993; Irvin et al., 2001). The annual publicized results of culturally diverse students, particularly African Americans, on standardized test elicits the question, what are African American students experiencing in American public schools that continues these dismal results?

Historically, an innumerable amount of effort has been put forth attributing the academic failure of African American students on environmental, social, and genetic causes (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Gay, 2000). The AEE (2014a) posits that the gap in achievement starts at the inception of formal schooling and continues on into college. In fact, the AEE (2014a) asserts that the achievement gap exists because of a lack of literacy and educational encouragement in the homes of these students. This pattern of blaming the students and their families for their poor academic performance creates a mind-set of deficit thinking practices toward African American students. Cultural deprivation has been utilized to explicate the achievement gap. It is believed that the academic failure of culturally diverse students is due to their exposure to being impoverished (Ogbu & Simons, 1988). Genetics as a predictor for poor academic performance also has been a justification for the achievement gap. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) affirm that inheritance renders disparities in academic results between African Americans and Whites.

In spite of the aforementioned causes of the gap in achievement, it is apparent that the reasons given serves to maintain the value and belief systems of the dominant culture. The existing research argues that the academic failure of African American students in American public schools has nothing to do with environment, socialization, socioeconomic status, or genetics but everything to do with the educational system that African American students are situated within (Hale, 2001; Haynes-Walker, 2010; Kozol, 1991).

In fact, Perry, Steel, and Hilliard (2003) posits that the achievement gap really is a result of the inequitable quality of service that is rendered to culturally diversity students who are specifically situated in high-poverty urban schools. This lack in quality of service, as noted by Darling-Hammond (1998), present differences in school funding, teacher quality, curriculum choices, and class sizes in urban schools that instruct culturally diverse students compared to those schools that service White students. These differences can be witnessed by the fact that the teaching staff in most urban schools are more than likely to be first year teachers who lack cultural competence and are commonly the least qualified (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Foote, 2005; Naman, 2009).

Although urban schools are staffed with culturally diverse teachers, 40% of urban schools have no teachers of color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Milner, 2012a). This shortage of culturally diverse teachers, specifically African American teachers, is due largely to the majority of the teaching force being White, female, and middle class (Wilder, 2000). The infrastructure of urban schools is also typically challenging (Foote, 2005; Jacob, 2007; Milner, 2012a). Basic necessities, such, as textbooks, supplies and materials, and technologies, are severely lacking or outdated. The physical environment of urban schools is often witnessed by the amount of disrepair and dilapidated buildings. Overcrowded classrooms are also a challenge in the urban

school context (Foote, 2005; Jacob, 2007; Milner, 2012a). Urban school funding, which is allotted through state and federal programs designed with the intent to decrease the economic disparities based on a deteriorating tax base, varies in amounts depending on whether the urban school is considered high or low poverty schools (Foote, 2005). With all this knowledge of the achievement gap, unequal resources, failing test scores, lack of culturally diverse teachers, unqualified teachers, weak curriculums, and oversized classrooms, what practices and pedagogies exist and are supported to ensure that culturally diverse students, specifically African Americans students situated in urban schools, experience some level of academic success?

Critical issues have developed from this academic tragedy of African American students in urban schools that denote there is an unequivocal correlation between cultural practices and pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Children who are situated in urban settings crucially need to experience teachers who can successfully present powerful instruction (Delpit, 2012). As a result, who should deliver this type of instruction in order for African American students in urban schools to grasp the skills needed to increase achievement?

The literature endorses the position that when African American students encounter teachers who are of the same ethnicity, they experience a linkage to their cultural/social lives more so than if they are taught by White, middle class teachers. Pang and Gibson (2001), as documented by Milner (2009), discovered that African American teachers are far more than someone that students can emulate because they bring a variety of similar attributes, such as family histories and diverse experiences, to the classroom that are often omitted from the utilized curriculum and texts. These cultural elements, in turn, increase student engagement and academic achievement and decrease disciplinary issues for African American students (Wider, 2000). In a study conducted by Beady and Hansell (1981), as documented by Wilder (2000), they

found that in low/high achieving schools that service African American students, the expectations that African American teachers held were higher than that of White teachers and that these high expectations led to African American students succeeding in higher education.

Howard (2001b) discovered in examining the pedagogical practices of four African American elementary school teachers who taught African American students in urban settings that they utilized holistic instructional strategies that encompassed teaching their students academic, moral, and social competencies. The study found that the teachers taught their students academic and nonacademic topics that they concluded would prepare their students for real life challenges. The holistic approach, Howard (2001b) posits, goes beyond the academics and teaches students to build character by developing a sense of responsibility, empathy, respect toward themselves and others, and cooperation in order to socially be consistent with norms of the classroom and society as a whole. Similarly, Foster (1991) conducted a study of African American teachers and found that the pedagogical practices that these teachers utilized went beyond the “institutional goal of developing cognitive growth” (p. 386) but also embodied the social/emotional development of their students. The teachers expressed that their positions as educators were defined by the intellectual and affective development of their students as opposed to the constricted definition of schooling.

The mentioned studies indicate that when teaching styles and methods are aligned with what is unique about the student’s culture and distinctive academic/social strengths, African American students have opportunities to experience a level of academic success. These studies clearly imply that teachers of African American students need to move beyond what is mandated and concentrate more on the inclusion of creating home-school cultural connections, developing positive student-teacher relationships, and being culturally competent. Granted, developing an

environment that is conducive to learning, unbiased, and relevant are key components to educating all children. However, with the gap in achievement between African American and White students, creating the aforementioned learning environment is essential to providing opportunities for academic success among African American students. Therefore, the historical and statistical realities of academic failure among African American students in urban schools denote the need for educators who are able to have an awareness of their own culture as well as their students' and use this knowledge to inform their teaching by confronting their own prejudices to address issues of discrimination within the classroom (Gay, 2000; Harmon, 2002; Howard, 2001a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

In order to develop an understanding of this phenomenon, it is necessary to examine various aspects of teaching and learning for the African American student situated in urban schools. First, the historical context of schooling for African Americans needs to be investigated in order to understand the origin of their educational journey. Second, the African American student experience in urban schools should be taken into consideration to comprehend what these students encounter. Lastly, the theoretical framework of cultural competency, culturally relevant pedagogy, and critical race theory should be explored in order to gain an understanding of the process of teaching and learning for African American student in urban classrooms.

Problem Statement

Annually, the United States population becomes more ethnically diverse (Gay, 2000; Maye & Day, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Significantly, this increase has been witnessed in pre-K-12 school populations (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Sleeter, 2001). In 2010, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 47% of the overall public school population

was students of color. This increase included 10% of the students being English language learners and 21% of the students living in poverty.

The culturally diverse student populations in public schools in 2010 were 16% African American, 23% Hispanic/Latino, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 2% of two or more races. In 2000, the percentage of culturally diverse public school students totaled 38%, resulting in a 9% increase over 10 years. The NCES projects that by 2021, the overall population of culturally diverse pre-K-12 students will increase to 53% (NCES, 2013). While public school population is increasing with students of color, as mentioned, the teaching profession is made up of 86% white, middle class females (Feistritzer, 2011; Foote, 2005; Irvine et al., 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013a; & Watson, 2011).

With the given statistics, a demographic divide exists between culturally diverse students and the teachers who educate them because the ethnic makeup of educators in the teaching profession is less diverse than that of minority student enrollment in public schools (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). This increase in student diversity characterizes the need for educators who can relate to and teach ethnicities and social classes different from their own. These educators will need to be prepared to meet the needs, challenges, and opportunities of students who are not only considered academically and economically disadvantaged, but who also historically have been unsuccessful in mainstream educational settings, particularly urban African American students (Gay, 2000; Irvine et al., 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Schaffer, 2012; Maye & Day, 2011). Research supports that African American teachers are a fit for African American students because they have the ability to achieve meeting the needs of these students due to the fact that they bring a unique set of cultural characteristics that are not only relatable but often times mirror

those of their students. African American teachers typically have higher expectations for their student's level of attainment, they are likely not to label them, and African American teachers often serve as role models of achievement for African American students (Naman, 2009).

Kunjufu (2002) argues that two consecutive years of poor instruction has a detrimental effect on the academic prowess of a child for the life of their educational journey and that the results of this deprivation will be visible in standardized test score two years later. On the other hand, Delpit (2012) contends that students who are exposed to quality teaching are six to ten times more likely to be academically motivated. This academic motivation can be witnessed, according Naman (2009), by the teaching methods that African American teachers utilize with their African American students. She explicates that African American teachers tend to increase the allotment of time devoted to ensuring that instruction is delivered in a manner that African American students can comprehend, they typically utilize a variety of culturally preferred teaching methods and strategies, they often utilize collaborative approaches with their students, and they supplement the curriculum and materials to present them to include the culture and traditions of their students. As mentioned, the quality of instruction is essential to learning, it is beyond critical for African American students who experience academic failure in urban settings to be exposed to teachers who present instruction that is academically motivating, engaging, rigorous, and culturally relevant (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2000, Howard, 2001b; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of African American elementary teachers who teach African American students in urban schools by examining the practices they utilize to influence the academic achievement of

their students.

Significance of the Study

The schooling experiences, learning opportunities, and educational outcomes of culturally diverse students, specifically African American students in urban schools, compared to White students have stark differences (Boykins & Noguera, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 1998). Historically and currently, these differences have influenced the manner in which African American students are taught and how they learn due to the quality of teaching these students experience (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Hardcastle-Stanford, 2001). While there are capable teachers of other ethnicities who have been able to meet the needs of African American students, research confirms the premise that African American teachers possess similar cultural influences and therefore are able to address the cultural norms that can contribute to increasing achievement among African American students (Foster, 1997; Naman, 2009; Tillman, 2002). The lack of cultural/social connections and experiences among those teachers of different ethnicities from their African American students may be a result of failed standardized test scores, lower academic expectations, higher disciplinary actions toward African American students increased special education referrals (Naman, 2009).

Much research has been contributed to the academic performance of African American students situated in urban schools. However, the intentions of this research are to provide a forum for the voices and lived experiences of African American elementary teachers who influence the academic achievement of African American students in urban schools to be heard which will impact the continued developing knowledge of how to increase performance for African American students. Examining the experiences and illuminating the voices of African American elementary teachers will provide different perspectives of why African American

students are enduring academic challenges in American urban schools. This research can assist with promoting cultural competency amongst teachers and the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, which will ultimately assist in decreasing the achievement gap. Lastly, the intent of this research is to provide alternative scholastic approaches that will influence educational/political decisions regarding instructional methods, academic achievement, teacher quality, teacher education, and professional development when educating African American students in urban schools.

Research Questions

The main research question that this research study will address is as follows: What practices do African American elementary teachers utilize with African American students in urban schools to acquire a level of academic achievement? The following ancillary questions will be employed to develop a level of inquiry: (a) What are African American elementary teachers' perceptions about African American students in urban schools? (b) What kinds of curriculum do African American elementary teachers use? (c) What kinds of instructional methods do African American elementary teachers use? and (d) What kinds of relationships do African American elementary teachers have with their African American students?

Definition of Terms

The meanings of the following terms are offered to assist the reader with an understanding of their use throughout this dissertation:

- *Achievement Gap*: "Disparities in student achievement that correspond to the racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds of children" (Noguera, 2009, p. 62).
- *African American*: A population of United States citizens with African ancestry.

- *Caring*: Student-teacher relationship that goes beyond academics and focuses on mental, physical, and emotional health and development.
- *Cooperative Learning*: An instructional method that requires students to work collaboratively to obtain a desired educational outcome (Slavin, 1991).
- *Cultural Relevant Pedagogy*: "A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 382). The word culturally relevant pedagogy is used synonymously with culturally relevant teaching.
- *Cultural Responsive Curriculum*: Core subject content or lessons that are taught in school, which incorporates and honors the culture of the students being taught.
- *Differentiation*: Modifying instruction before planning lessons to meet student's individual readiness levels and instructional styles (Tomlinson, 1999).
- *High Expectations*: Set of high educational standards that are based upon for all students achieving in a class, school, or school district.
- *Othermothering*: "African American women's maternal assistance offered to the children of blood mothers within the African American community" (Case, 1997, p. 25).
- *Practices*: The strategies, techniques, and methods used in teaching to deliver instruction and impact academic achievement. The word practice(s) is used synonymously with method(s).
- *Progressive Teaching Philosophy*: Teaching that focuses on the whole child and not the content being taught (Cohen, 1999).
- *Technology*: Equipment used to enhance teaching, such as desktop computers, iPads, and SMART boards.

- *Urban School*: A school situated within a large metropolitan city and has an average enrollment of 20,000 students with a large population of culturally diverse students, specifically African Americans (Foote, 2005; Milner 2012a).

Chapter II

Literature Review

Historical Context

The educational journey of African Americans has been one of triumphs and setbacks. Africans were taken from their homelands; arrived on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia; and were utilized solely for economic slave labor, launching the beginning of disregard for African culture (Johnson & Smith, 1998). The actions taken toward Africans during enslavement have influenced educational decisions for African Americans presently (Woodson, 1933). Ladson-Billings (2000) argues that the social/cultural African American experience is one of distinctiveness, as they were the only ethnic group who unwillingly was brought to the United States and exploited by way of racial servitude. Ogbu and Simons (1998) explain that enslaved African Americans were “involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities” (p. 165), which they explicate are people who were subjugated and forced to embrace American culture against their own will by Whites.

African American slaves were legally forbidden from schooling, which sparked the creation of antiliteracy legislation that was passed mostly in Southern states and prevented African Americans from acquiring any form of formal or informal schooling (Williams, 2005). These antiliteracy laws were enacted to subdue resistance and rebellion among enslaved and free African Americans (Williams, 2005). From 1800 to 1835, it was deemed a punishable crime to teach African Americans how to read and write (Anderson, 1988). If enslaved African Americans were discovered reading or writing, they were severely brutalized or slain (Harmon, 2012a). Nonetheless, the eagerness of African Americans to become literate generated controversy, and in spite of these laws, many African Americans persevered, risking their lives

and were successful in secretly attaining a level of literacy (Williams, 2005).

In 1896, segregation was legally enforced and prompted “separate but equal” institutions for African Americans and Whites, which included schools (*Plessy vs. Ferguson*, 1896). Much of the literature reports the insufficient quality of education, the lack of supplies and resources, and the dilapidated structures used for schooling African American students (Siddle-Walker, 1996). However, the literature lacks the positive implications that legalized segregation created. Despite what appeared to be dismal probabilities, African Americans increased educational access for their children by creating community-based schools (Tillman, 2009). These schools often provided an educational environment that nurtured the whole child. Tending to needs beyond the classroom was the primary goal of these schools, which was staffed by African American teachers, administrators, and parents that lived within the community (Siddle-Walker, 1996). In fact, Siddle-Walker (1996) notes that these community-based schools were known for having support systems that encouraged rigorous standards and assisted students to acquire a sense of self-esteem and worth in order to accomplish their aspirations.

Fifty-eight years later, segregation was overruled, and desegregation made separate public schools unconstitutional with the decision of *Brown vs. The School Board of Topeka, Kansas* (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). Desegregating schools under the *Brown* ruling became an agonizing process for many African American children and their families. Many states overturned the ruling illegally on their own and refused to desegregate their schools (Tillman, 2004; Vance, 2009). Just as Whites resisted desegregation, many African Americans were not in favor of their children desegregating schools in White communities (Siddle-Walker, 1996).

The *Brown* ruling exclusively focused on assimilating schools but failed to incorporate

African American teachers (Lash & Ratcliffe, 2014). Therefore, the ruling was followed by a large number of African American teachers who were “displaced, demoted, and dismissed” from their occupations (Lash & Ratcliffe, 2014, p. 329). Not only were African American teachers ousted with this ruling, but *Brown* also implemented the reduction of African American administrators, the dismantling of African American community-based schools, certification requirements, terminating teachers who were ineligible for rehire, and failure to fill positions of African American teachers who retired (Lash & Ratcliffe, 2014).

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act functioned as a proponent to the *Brown* ruling by eliminating federal funding to facilities that continued to segregate legally, which included schools. This act did not become effective until 1965, when several school districts were sued for maintaining de facto segregation systems (Vance, 2009). Subsequently, desegregating facilities, for many, was not a solution. Both, *Brown* and the Civil Rights Act inspired a crusade that left many communities astray, especially in urban areas. An exodus of Whites moved out of areas that condoned segregation, leaving those spaces no choice but to resegregate (Vance, 2009). Today, those urban areas are resegregated with high need public schools accommodating many African American students who live in poverty and require compensatory education (Ladson, Billings, 2011; Lewis & Moore, 2008). Some may call the enactment of the mentioned laws political and social gains for African Americans. However, because America is not in post-racial status and the historical marginalization of African Americans still exist, in education, what educational improvements have really been made and when, if ever, will the experiences of African American students in urban schools cease to be based on a past history?

African American Students

You are young, gifted, and Black. We must begin to tell our young, there's a world waiting for you. Yours is the quest that's just begun. ~James Weldon Johnson (Brainy Quote, 2017d)

African American students are often labeled, miseducated, and underserved in American schools and are frequently represented negatively in the literature (Milner, 2012a). Connotations, such as “at-risk” (Foote, 2005, p. 374); “talkative, lazy, and rebellious” (Bakari, 2003, p. 641), and “defective and lacking” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 216) are used to describe the academic persistence of African American students (Foote, 2005; Bakari, 2003). The African American cultural experience has also been excluded from education as a means to dispel its significance as a component of learning for African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

This practice of labeling and of cultural exclusion is a disservice to African American students, and teachers tend to lower and neglect the expectations of these students, particularly, “inner-city...males in upper grades-dark skinned, speaking Ebonics, and trapped in remedial classes” (Kunjufu, 2000, p. 94). African American students experience stereotype threat when they and their academic performance are characterized negatively. Stereotype threat, according to Steele and Aronson (1995), refers to a threat in which individuals worry that their poor performance will endorse the presumed negative stereotypes. Stereotype threat has the potential to drastically influence the effectiveness and identity of African American students; its implications can contribute to significant decreases in academic performance and self-esteem (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997; Wasserberg, 2014).

Milner (2009) affirms that stereotyping of African American students also stems from the language that is employed in teacher education programs. He notes that when higher educational settings extend the negative labeling of African American students, highly qualified teachers opt out of teaching in high need urban schools that service African American students. Watson (2011) explored how teachers in a graduate-level teacher education program labeled and measured students as well as their school placements based on a term attached to beliefs

regarding race and class. The researcher found that the term *urban* influenced teacher expectations based on the perceived behaviors, values, and beliefs of the students. If students were considered to be more *urban*, the teachers had negative expectations of the students and their schools. If the students were considered to be less *urban*, then teachers had positive expectations of their students and their schools. The researcher noted that the word, *urban* was presented as a method to communicate about race without utilizing race words (words used positively or negatively to describe one's culture or ethnicity).

In another study, Smith and Smith (2009) surveyed teachers who taught in urban schools to gain an understanding of the perspectives they had on their practice. They found that the majority of the teachers were unprepared within their teacher education programs to teach in high-poverty urban schools, which resulted in the teachers experiencing difficulties interacting with their students and managing their classrooms. The study revealed dislikes the teachers had about their teaching, their classrooms, their students, and their student's social surroundings. Some of the challenges cited in the study were that teachers experienced difficulty with motivating students to learn, which resulted in them lowering their academic expectations and skill levels for their students. The teachers expressed that the student's social environments and culture made it difficult to maintain high expectations due to their lack of exposure outside of the influence of their social environments, their socioeconomic statuses, and their values and beliefs toward education (Smith & Smith, 2009). Both studies suggest that culturally diverse students are often judged according to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic statuses, and social environments, which often determine the quality of teaching these students receive. Given the findings from these studies, it is advantageous that preservice and inservice teachers who chose to teach in urban schools need to be prepared within teacher education programs and through continuous

ongoing professional development to understand how culture and unconventional teaching methods play an important role in successfully educating African American students. If teacher education programs and school districts continue to utilize the same traditional teaching methods to teach African American students in urban schools, then these students will continue to reap the same academic results. Are these traditional teaching practices being utilized by design to continue the marginalization of specific groups of people or is it that cultural differences between students and teachers really are a determining factor of the academic/social success of African American students in urban schools?

In Haberman's (1991) article, "The Pedagogy of Poverty versus Good Teaching" he denotes the need for urban educators to comprehend the aspects of "good teaching." He acknowledges that educators of poor urban students need to acquire an understanding of the difference between controlling students through utilizing oppressive, conventional, teacher-centered methods of teaching versus employing alternative teaching methods that focus on the student as a decision-maker and creator of an environment conducive to learning. According to McCollough (2000), African American students experience marginalization in educational environments often. He expresses that this disregard is due to the lack of cultural competency among teachers of African American students. Therefore, the actions and behaviors displayed by African American students are often misconstrued (Delpit, 1995; Smith & Smith, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2000) explicates that the literature simplifies the culture of African Americans and ignores culture as a teaching tool to meet the needs of African American students. She posits that African Americans are not regarded as having an individual culture and that educational institutions view African American students "as if they are corruptions of White culture, participating in an oppositional, counter-productive culture" (p. 206).

Educational institutions often utilize structural inequality and institutional racism, which is a systemic imbalance within organizational structures, such as schooling, that offers advantages to a particular group of individuals while marginalizing members of other groups by imposing differences based on race (Thompson, 2004; Howard, 2006). This systemic imbalance has survived on the belief that African American students are incapable of academic effort and success, which was developed by White Americans, refusal to accept that African Americans *are* able to achieve academically (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

The adage that “thoughts become things” is how African American students transfer the uncertainty of others upon themselves. If you are consistently told that you are incapable, deficient, or lacking, you eventually believe it. Therefore, many African American students in urban settings have equated academic success as identifying with middle class, White values or “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177; Fryer, 2006; Toldson & Owens, 2010). Acting White is a form of “selling out” (Toldson & Owens, 2010, p. 91), going against the grain of African American culture and the community, or forced assimilation (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Some African American students in urban schools believe that they have to discard their culture, traditions, and beliefs and embrace the dominant culture’s traditions and beliefs in order to be academically successful. This belief often times causes tension between African American students who chose to be academically successful and those that are capable but choose not to because of the fearing of being accused of acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

These practices and others have been used in educational settings to instruct African American students to remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic index (Thompson, 2004). In fact, it is affirmed by Kunjufu (2002) that 50% of African American students live below the poverty index and that the socioeconomic status of these students is frequently used as a

determinate of teacher expectations. These expectations often led to culturally biased curriculum standards and methods of instruction being utilized to measure readiness and academic performance (Thompson, 2004). Inequitable economic procedures and practices along with low-level expectations are societal and institutional influences that also guide the academic performance of African American students (National Center of Educational Progress, 2013). Therefore, the disparities in education focus primarily on isolating specific individuals or a particular group of people rather than placing the focus on the unbalanced, discriminatory procedures and structures that are employed to guide the supposed gaps in achievement (Milner, 2013).

Harmon (2002) analyzed the impact that desegregating a predominantly White school (PWS) had on the experiences of African American, gifted, elementary students who were bused from their neighborhood school in a predominantly African American community. The students described their experiences at the PWS and compared those experiences to that of their neighborhood school. The researcher concluded that the students experienced displeasure at the PWS that resulted in them being exposed to racial discrimination, teachers who lacked cultural competency, and teachers who were incapable of teaching highly academically gifted students. Reynolds (2010) documented similar discriminatory experiences in a qualitative study that examined parental involvement and its effects on the educational performance of Black male students in a PWS. The parental engagement noted in this study did not follow the traditional standards, such as volunteering in the school building; instead, parents supplemented their in-school involvement by devoting time at home. Due to the type of involvement that the parents chose to implement, school personnel found their choice to be invalid and not valued. Therefore, when parents had to interact with school personnel regarding their sons, their connections were

met with differential treatment. All of the parents expressed that they experienced attitudes and beliefs that were racially motivated.

Imagine being categorized, culturally excluded, and discriminated against all while navigating through an organizational system created solely to ensure that a select few are educationally and monetarily successful. Is success possible for urban African American students in a system that was designed to misinform and miseducate them? African American students are not socially and academically successful in American urban public schools due to historical marginalization that was devised for them to fail. This academic disregard has resulted in the scholarship of African American students being influenced by their exposure to low morale among teachers and administrators, out-of-school challenges, curriculum, instructional practices and systemic challenges that are more pronounced in urban settings (Ford, 2012; Milner, 2012b).

Cultural Competency

“The mere imparting of information is not education.”
~Carter G. Woodson (Brainy Quote, 2017b)

There is an unequivocal correlation between cultural practices and pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). According to research, a cultural divide has been experienced in education with 86% of the teaching force being White, female, middle-class, and monolingual English and who have had little or no contact with cultures different from their own (Feistritzer, 2011; Foote, 2005; Irvine et al., 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013a; & Watson, 2011). Not only are teachers disproportionately White, so are the professors who instruct them, but urban school enrollment is overpopulated with culturally diverse students (Cross, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Watson, 2011). Besides many teacher educators being White, many are aged and far removed from current K-12 teaching environments (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2011). This detachment of teacher

educators from K-12 classrooms dampens their ability to successfully prepare preservice teachers for the diversity within today's classrooms, particularly African American students in urban schools. The disconnection between culturally diverse students, White future and present educators, and White teacher educators create this cultural divide (Cross, 2003).

“Cultural encapsulation” is how Howard (2006) describes the disengagement between cultural groups (p. 14). This detachment occurs when people are unaware of the cultural presence of others due to being overly engaged in their own culture. The result of over indulgence in one's own culture leads to domination. In order to understand cultural dominance, specifically in education, one would have to understand how the power of a few constructs knowledge to make decisions. Domination not only allows for one group of people to have control and power over educational decisions but also leads to one ethnic group setting cultural standards for all other races (Howard, 2006). There are some Whites who believe that culture is not a part of their character, and they consider themselves to be Americans who possess common morals, standards, and principles that should be universally accepted by all nationalities (Gay & Howard, 2000).

Ladson-Billings (2001) affirms that cultural competence is the ability to understand and respect one's own culture and the culture of others. She further asserts, as noted by Milner (2009), that cultural competence is assisting students to identify and praise their own beliefs about their culture and customs while developing access to a range of other cultures in order to have opportunities to improve their economic status and make knowledgeable decisions about their future. In order to be culturally competent, as it relates to teaching African American students, teachers must understand that effective instruction for these students consist of a combination of cultural awareness, connected behaviors, actions, and reactions that are planned

and genuine (Hollins, 1993). Boykins (1994), as noted by Harmon (2002), states that teachers who have the capability to connect with their students through understanding their cultural beliefs, values, customs, and traditions are able to identify and support the learning styles of cultural diverse students. Teachers who are able to plan and deliver instruction so that it meets the predetermined objectives for culturally diverse learners possess certain competencies that Hollins (1993) explains are recognizable and improves their effectiveness when used in context. Some of those identifiable competencies of culturally competent teachers include: communicating ideas and feelings effectively by utilizing a common diverse language; understanding the subject matter and the students being taught in order to create new ways of connecting knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints of the learner and the new information; and self-reflective teaching that allows for successful and challenging approaches to be recorded and developed more effectively (Hollins, 1993).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is a framework that the literature recommends is necessary to create learning connections for African American students in urban schools (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The literature supplies a range of definitions for CRP. Creating learning environments that respect the preferred learning styles of culturally diverse students and utilizing cultural experiences as well as prior knowledge is how Gay (2000) defines CRP. Culturally relevant pedagogy confirms the African American experience as a vital component of learning. Students who are engaged in teaching and learning that specifies the contributions of all cultures, religions, nationalities, and gender to gain knowledge of differences is Haberman's (1991) meaning of CRP. Gay (2000), comparably, describes CRP as accepting and honoring the cultural

heritage of one's own ethnicity as well as others. Ladson-Billings (1995b) describes CRP as having three propositions:

- (a) students must experience academic success;
- (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence;
- (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 160)

She further illuminates that CRP is a framework that utilizes cultural referents to convey knowledge, skills, and attitudes that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically.

Irvine et al. (2001) provide various definitions for CRP from the works of the following: Bower and Flinders (1990) affirm that CRP is an awareness that uses cultural patterns and behaviors to influence the classroom environment in a constructive manner. Villegas (1991) states that CRP maximizes the learning of culturally diverse students by building on the idea that learning differs across cultures. Smith (1998) concludes that CRP is a concept that assists teachers in understanding their commitment to the common good of reconstructing society so that it is fair, just, and free of oppression for all. Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, and Stuczynski (2011) argue that when culturally relevant practices and standards of teaching are merged, CRP can be utilized to improve student motivation and engagement. They contend that CRP is a theory that places values on the individual culture of each student and draws on the culture of these students to strengthen their education and challenges them with curriculum that is rigorous and relevant. Regardless of the definition that is employed, if CRP is implemented in urban classrooms that service African American students, they will experience academic and social success.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) developed from a legal perspective in the 1970s as a response to the failure of critical legal studies and civil rights scholarship to properly address the impact of race and racism in American law and society (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Milner, 2008). CRT's focus is on the effects of racism and race while addressing the power structure of White supremacy and to bring about change that can ensure social justice (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Parker and Lynn (2002) affirm that CRT has three objectives. The first objective presents stories about discrimination from the voices of those who are marginalized, which can be accomplished utilizing a case study research approach that offers in-depth dialog through interviews (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The narratives are a means to develop an understanding of the experiences of those being studied (Ladson-Billings, 1999). The second objective rejects racial submission while acknowledging that race is a social concept (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Creswell (2007) affirms that race is not a set term but one that evolves with the lived experiences of individuals and the pressure of politics. The third objective addresses the intersectionality of other disparities such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status (Parker & Lynn, 2002). As noted by Parker and Lynn (2002), Crenshaw (1988) argues that the experiences of African American women are often intersected by racism and sexism, and therefore they are marginalized by both gender and race.

The foundation of CRT can be credited to legal scholar Derrick Bell, as documented by Milner (2008). In addition to Bell's introduction of CRT, CRT has expanded to education and has developed into an analytical framework that is trusted by educational researchers (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) advanced CRT as a methodology in educational research by arguing that education could gain by having a theoretical framework to assist in

empirical and conceptual arguments related to inequalities in educational structures and environments (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Milner, 2008). Smith-Maddox and Solórzano (2002) explicate that CRT in education provides an understanding and awareness of the practices, pedagogies, and perspectives that aim at transforming, identifying, and analyzing those cultural and systemic structures that continue to uphold dominant and inferior racial opinions in educational settings.

CRT and CRT methodology utilized in education have five elements that Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explains as: (a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other form of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) a transdisciplinary perspective (p. 68). CRT is comprised of five tenets: *counterstorytelling*, *the permanence of racism*, *Whiteness as property*, *interest convergence*, and *the critique of liberalism*. However, educational researchers often only focus on the two principles of *counterstorytelling* and *the permanence of racism* (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Because this research will examine the pedagogies and practices utilized by African American elementary teachers of African American students in urban classrooms, critical race theory as a theoretical framework and methodology is fitting as it emphasizes the use of stories by those impacted by racism to disapprove conversations or distrust the legitimacy of ideas or beliefs that disseminate racial stereotypes which present a damaging impression on African Americans (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Harmon, 2012a).

Chapter III

Methodology

Ethnography

Ethnography is a method of qualitative research established in the fields of cultural anthropology and sociology (Creswell, 2007; Lichtman, 2006). It involves studying a particular culture of people in their everyday lives who share a common attribute (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2009; Lichtman, 2006; Schram, 2006). Because ethnography emphasizes describing an entire cultural group, culture is a key element of this method of inquiry (Glense, 2006). Merriam (1998) affirms that although *culture* has various definitions, it refers to the ideologies, morals, and outlooks that create behavioral patterns of a particular group of individuals. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) argue that the variation in definitions for the term *culture* actually assists with developing one's understanding of culture and how culture structures research. They contend that culture is utilized as a theoretical framework even though many researchers do not agree on a unified definition.

Ethnography, according to Lichtman (2006), is the focused attention in a detailed investigation of physical features and social traditions. The effort to explain culture or the characteristics of culture is how Bogdan and Biklen (1992) define ethnography. Ethnography entails concentrating on an entire cultural group that interacts over a period of time in order to illustrate and understand the shared and learned characteristics of that group, such as their morals, what they value, their attitudes and behaviors, and how they communicate (Creswell, 2007). This method of research is applied when researchers are interested in learning about the everyday happenings in a specific setting (Newman & Benz, 1998). The objective of ethnography is to utilize the voices of the participants being studied in order to create a "cultural

portrait” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 9).

The essential tools utilized in *all* ethnographic studies entail extensive interviewing and continuous observations in order to produce the final outcome of a *holistic cultural portrait* of the participants (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 508). Therefore, researchers accomplish two undertakings when utilizing ethnography. First, they get to know the participants in the study by conducting in-depth interviews and becoming immersed in their environment by observing their daily routines. Second, the researcher methodologically takes written notes on what they observe while being immersed in the natural setting of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Glense, 2006). The written records of the participant’s accounts is known as ethnographic fieldnotes, which provides “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 6-7) of what is observed (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Thick descriptions are a manner in which researchers write qualitatively to allow the narrative to evoke emotion, provide a voice, and present a detailed illustration of the observation (Creswell, 2007). Geertz (1973) and Schram (2006) contend that thick description involves detailed interpretations of the participant’s environment, cultural patterns, behaviors, and mannerisms. They assert that in order to accomplish thick descriptions, the researcher must be skilled at building relationships, conducting in-depth observations, and having a keen sense of writing descriptions.

The gathering of information from conducting in-depth interviews and ongoing observations is a means of data collection that must be analyzed in order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007; Glense, 2006; Lichtman, 2006). Generally, analysis in ethnographic research takes place from the instant that the researcher chooses a topic to explore until the final findings are recorded (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Ethnography, therefore, can be classified as being a method of research that entails both a

process as well as an outcome, according to Agar (1980) as documented by Creswell (2007). As a process of research, ethnography involves collecting data, and as an outcome, the ethnographic study develops into a written analyzed testimony of the cultural group being researched (Creswell, 2007).

The choice to use ethnographic research is dependent upon specific variables. These variables can range from time to cost. Therefore, the need to determine whether ethnography is the appropriate approach to examine the research problem is crucial (Creswell, 2007). Although ethnography has it strengthen in providing factual information about a specific group and offering detailed descriptive interpretations that are formulated by intense exposure of the lived experiences of that group, this method does present challenges (Glense, 2006). First, researchers should be versed in cultural anthropology and have some understanding of sociocultural structures in order to perform the exploration executed by ethnographers (Creswell, 2007). Lack of the aforementioned anthropologic skills may be witnessed as a challenge in the attempt to interpret data where the ethnographer struggles to understand the vernacular, customs, and behaviors of the participants being examined (Hancock et al., 2009).

Researchers may also influence a change in how participants behave in their social environments just by being present (Schram, 2006). Moral concerns may exist with whether participant observations are conducted appropriately (Glense, 2006). Schram (2006) discloses that concealed participation may violate a participant's entitlement to privacy while unconcealed participation may change how participants act. Writing style may also be considered a challenge with this method of inquiry. Researchers who are accustomed to a more academic or traditional style of writing may find it difficult to switch to a narrative, storytelling form of writing, which is the style that many ethnographies are written. This style of writing can also restrict the audience

drawn to the research (Creswell, 2007).

Lastly, time is an important characteristic of ethnography. Collecting data is an extensive process as it may require the researcher to spend lengthy periods in the field to observe occasional changes in the lives of the participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). This method can also become expensive because of the extensive characteristics of this research approach (Creswell, 2007; Schram, 2006).

Mini-Ethnography

Just as ethnography seeks to study a particular group of people who possess shared behaviors and experiences, mini-ethnography accomplishes the same task (Leininger, 1985; Morse, 1994). However, mini-ethnography is a more specifically focused, time-limited investigation (Morse, 1989). This method is utilized when the area of concern being examined is constricted (Leininger, 1985). The time devoted to accomplishing mini-ethnography is generally less than the time it takes to conduct a full-scale ethnography, and the group being studied is much smaller (Morse, 1994). According to Weinstein and Ventres (2000), the word *mini*, within itself, insinuates the length of time required to carry out this specific approach. A six-week time period utilizing one day per week is what Weinstein and Ventres (2000), suggest for this completing this type of inquiry. McFeat (1974), as noted by Morse (1994), posits that the ideal size group for this type of study is around five participants, which McFeat describes as small group cultures.

Mini-ethnography is commonly used in health-related fields. Weinstein and Ventres (2000) demonstrate how a medical student uses mini-ethnography to investigate the attitudes and understanding concerning breast-feeding in a demanding urban clinic. Kleinman and Benson (2006) employ mini-ethnography to develop an understanding of the impact that cultural

competency has on patient-centered care. Like ethnography, the goal of mini-ethnography is to develop an understanding of cultural rules, norms, and values of a specific group of individuals (Morse, 1994).

Case Study

Case study differs from ethnography and mini ethnography as it entails the study of one or more cases within a “system bounded by space and time” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 11). This bounded system can consist of a particular setting, individual, context, event, or group (Creswell, 2007; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Yin (2009) provides a practical definition that has two parts. First, he asserts that case study is an experiential method of research that thoroughly examines, existing real-life phenomenon within their natural settings particularly when “the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Second, Yin (2009) emphasizes that due to the context and the phenomenon not being closely linked realistically, data collection and data analysis assist in furthering the definition of case study. He posits that case study is extensive and is dependent upon triangulation, which is the practice of utilizing multiple sources of data or evidence within the same study, and that case study methodology benefits when data collection and analysis is driven by theoretical intentions (Newman & Benz, 1998; Yin, 2009).

Creswell (2007) describes case study as an approach where the researcher examines either a case or multiple cases over an extended period of time using multiple sources of data that result in a report based on themes. Stake (1995) explains case study as a selection of what is to be examined as oppose to a method of inquiry or a research strategy. He argues that the case can be an obligation of study that is created from one’s interest or curiosity of a particular issue. If a teacher is concerned about why a student is not interacting socially, Stake (1995) suggests that

this concern is a given case and that the interest in why the student is having difficulty is a need to learn about this particular case in general as oppose to exploring this case to learn about other cases.

Merriam (1998) defines case study as the “end product” (p. 27) as oppose to a method or strategy. She argues that a case study is a thorough, complete description of a single occurrence, phenomenon, or social organization. She contends that case study is a singular unit that has boundaries. In education, the case can consist of an individual such as a student; an administrator; teacher; or support staff member; an educational program; a classroom; an entire school; or an educational policy (Merriam, 1998). Milner and Woolfolk-Hoy (2003) employ this research approach in a study that examines the self-efficacy and perseverance of an African American teacher who experiences challenges teaching in an unsupportive suburban school. Howard (2001a) uses case study to examine the effective pedagogical practices of four urban elementary school teachers of African American students to reveal that the practices of the teachers were aligned with being culturally relevant.

The case study approach, ideally, is the method of inquiry to be utilized when *how* and *why* questions are being asked when the researcher has no authority over the activities or the environment of the study, and when the research is concentrated on a social phenomenon that affects real-life situations (Yin, 2009). Case studies are usually characterized by three types: *intrinsic*, *instrumental*, and *collective*. The intrinsic case study involves the idea of the case itself being of interest and having an understanding of a particular case. Instrumental case studies refer to a specific case being studied in order to present awareness of an issue or to assist in developing an understanding of something else. A collective case study is an extension of an instrumental case study that involves several cases with the same focus (Glense, 2006; Schram,

2006; Stake, 1995). Case study, according to Merriam (2009), is characterized by particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. She contends that particularistic involves the participants or the phenomenon being studied. Descriptive case study focuses on the interaction and influence of the participants and how the information is obtained within the study. Heuristic deals with how the reader comprehends the investigation of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

Overall, the three aforementioned methods of research have similarities and differences. All the approaches have the shared beginnings of identifying an issue to research that develops into questions, collecting and analyzing data, and the final report of the research. How the data are collected for each approach is similar. Ethnography and case study can both investigate one individual (Creswell, 2007). Some differences in these approaches are that the focus of the study in ethnography is a culture-sharing group and case study focuses on an individual case or multiple cases. The forms of data collection with ethnography are primarily observations and interviews, whereas case study employs multiple sources of data collection. In addition to observations and interviews, case study uses documents and artifacts for data collections. Data analysis techniques used with these approaches consists of ethnography analyzing via descriptions of the culture-sharing group with the use of themes. Case study uses descriptions of the case(s), themes of the case(s), and cross-case(s) themes (Stake, 1995; Wolcott, 1994).

Intended Methodology

Darling-Hammond (2000), Haberman (1991), and Kozol (1991) contend that historically and statistically urban schools have been known to accommodate increased populations of culturally diverse students who are associated with having low academic achievement. However, they agree that there are pedagogies and teaching practices that can be implemented in urban environments to ensure academic achievement for all students regardless of race or social

class. Due to the said belief that all students can learn regardless of their backgrounds when instruction is conducive, this study focused on illuminating the voices of African American elementary teachers who teach African American students in urban schools to gain a deeper understanding of the practices they utilize to enhance academic skills amongst their students. Because the individual voices of the teachers were an essential component of this study, a case study approach was employed to highlight their experiences. In addition to utilizing the case study approach, ethnography was also used to examine the everyday happenings of a specific group (Newman & Benz, 1998), the African American teachers that service African American students in urban schools. The research method of ethnography allowed the voices of the participants to be utilized in order to create a “cultural portrait” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 9) of how culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural competency impact the learning experiences of African American students in urban schools.

Participants/Selection Criteria

Purposeful sampling was used to select the teachers for this research, as the information studied was based on the prior knowledge and experiences of a select population (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The participants selected were five African American, female, certified elementary teachers who teach various grade levels in four urban schools in Southeastern Michigan that service predominantly African American students. The principals of the four urban schools were informed of the research through a communication detailing the purpose of the research. A brief conversation took place with the principals to identify the teachers who fit the criteria to participate in this research. Principals selected teachers based upon the following criteria: the ability to establish rapport and build relationships with their African American students and their families, overall student attendance, and the number of classroom suspensions/office referrals.

The teachers chosen were those who principals felt greatly impact their African American students' academic achievement. The identified teachers were given a teacher recruitment letter that invited them to voluntarily participate in this research (see Appendix A). Once the invitation was accepted, an informal gathering was scheduled to meet with each teacher individually to establish rapport, which assisted in reducing concerns or questions they had regarding the research. This informal gathering provided the participant with an overview of the study itself; created an atmosphere that was encouraging, open, free of judgment, and reiterated the importance of their participation in the research (Seidman, 2006). These informal meetings also detailed other important information in regard to timelines, meeting locations, interviews, and follow-up meetings. A copy of the teacher consent form was also given to the participant at each meeting (see Appendix B).

Positionality/Reflexivity

My positionality to the research being examined was familiar as there were shared traits such as gender, race, and culture with the teachers as well as occupation. Due to this familiarity, it was understood that bias is a human trait that happens naturally (England, 1994). Therefore, I had to be cognizant of my individual biases and persist on being an outsider as opposed to an insider in order to precisely depict the voices of the participants. Being an insider has advantages and disadvantages. Accordingly, these advantages and disadvantages have been subjected to debate. As an insider, it is generally presumed that the researcher has effortless opportunities of access, has a comprehensive understanding of the culture or phenomenon being studied, and thus has the ability to pose questions that are authentic and meaningful (Merriam et al., 2001). However, on the contrary, insiders have been suspected of being too close to the subject, which can endorse biases. Insiders have also been charged with being too acquainted with the culture or

phenomenon to formulate questions that are stimulating. The outsider's advantage is that researchers are unfamiliar with the topic being researched, which can elicit the asking of inquisitive questions that may result in receiving more information than an insider. However, the outsider also has the ability to form biases based on a lack of information known about the culture or phenomenon being researched (Creswell, 2014; England, 1994; Glense, 2006; Merriam et al., 2001).

Overall, the portrayals of insider/outsider can be subjective and are dependent on the researcher in order to shape the direction of the study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam et al., 2001). Although there were similarities amongst myself and the teachers, my biases were safeguarded by knowing that positionality "is thus determined by where one stands in relation to 'the other' and that positions are known to shift (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 441). For example, I was never employed at any of the schools that were utilized for this study or worked under any of the principals who nominated the teachers. My first encounter with the teachers was the initial meeting, meaning I had never met them prior to inviting them to volunteer for this study. Therefore, although I was an insider with similar demographical traits, I also possessed outsider characteristics thus allowing me to maintain a neutral position. So I conducted the interviewing clear of assumptions regarding the matter being examined. Consequently, Peshkin (1988) explicates the significance of the researcher possessing an inclusive understanding of how biases, attitudes, beliefs, values, and perceptions can influence how the world is interpreted.

Due to the phenomenon being studied, my position as an urban educator, my cultural and ethnic similarities, and my opinion concerning the academic state of education for African American students in urban schools, it was crucial for me to be self-reflexive throughout the entire research process. Reflexivity is the ability of the researcher to possess an awareness of the

effect that she/he can potentially have on the outcome and process of a study based on the fact that the knower cannot be detached from the knowledge they possess (Steedman, 1991).

Therefore, knowing that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower. My voice, views, perceptions, and opinions were minimized in order to remain focused on the task of illuminating the voices and experiences of the participants and the purpose of the research.

Behar (1996) argues that remaining voiceless, as a researcher, can be a difficult task without developing a forum for the voice of the researcher to be perceived. However, she states that inserting the researcher's voice allows one to connect similar experiences as well as sense the humanistic aspect of the researcher, which creates a more comprehensive, in-depth study. Therefore, it is important that the researcher avoid what Geertz (1998) describes as "author saturation" (p. 9), which entails an overabundance of the author being inserted in the research and less of the voices and lived experiences of the participants. As it is important to avoid author saturation, it is equally important to evade detachment from the research as an author as well. Geertz (1998) defines this disconnect as "author evacuation" (p. 9) or separation of the author within the research, which can denote the research as being incoherent and unconcerned with the experience of the participants as well as the purpose of the research. A research journal was utilized to note personal reflections that transpired as well as assisting with remaining focused throughout the process. Overall, as a researcher, self-monitoring was vital in order for me to present a true representation of the phenomenon that was studied as well as illuminating the voices and lived experiences of the participants.

Data Collection

The most common collection of data utilized in case study and ethnography consists of

gathering information through the use of documentation and physical artifacts, in-depth interviewing, and participant and direct observations (Creswell, 2007; Glense, 2006; Lichtman, 2006; Yin, 2009). Before collecting data from the participants, IRB approval was granted from Eastern Michigan University's Human Subjects Review Committee (see Appendix C). Data collection for this research was triangulated, which consisted of principals' selection of the teachers, teacher interviews, and a survey of the literature. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were employed so that the teachers and principals would have an opportunity to freely express insight into the phenomenon being researched. During the principals' interviews, they revealed the names of the teachers they nominated for this research study and explained why they selected them. The principals were interviewed once, which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The initial interviews with the teachers lasted between 60 and 90 minutes with follow-up interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded, which were later transcribed. The teachers also completed a teacher demographic survey (see Appendix D) and a classroom demographic survey (see Appendix E) that provided information such as education, teaching experience, student attendance, and suspension and expulsion rates.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed by taking a sizeable amount of textual and visual data that is not distinctly defined and making sense of it (Lichtman, 2006). Yin (2009) describes data analysis as drawing empirically based conclusions by closely examining, sorting, organizing, and arranging the research data. The data from this study were arranged to identify common themes through the use of coding. Lichtman (2006) calls this process the "three C's of analysis," which consist of "coding to categorizing to concepts" (p. 167). The transcribed data were systematically coded in four levels. Level 1 consisted of initial coding, which entails

categorizing sizeable amounts of raw data from the interview dialogues. Level 2 of the coding process focused more on developing main categories by reexamining the codes established in and expounding more on the data. Level 3 involved establishing themes that emerged from the concentrated focus in Level 2. Lastly, Level 4 entailed the theoretical framework progressing from the categories and themes that emerged from Level 3. The progression of each level of coding determined whether follow-up interviews were needed (Emerson et al., 1995; Hahn, 2008).

The findings from the research are presented in the form of a discussion with the inclusion of graphs (Creswell, 2007). The data analysis for the ethnographic research approach consisted of describing, analyzing, and presenting an interpretation of the culture-sharing group, African American urban elementary school teachers of African American students (Wolcott, 1994). In describing the teachers and their environments, a storytelling style was employed to create a portrait for the reader to understand what a “day in the life” is like for this group being researched (Creswell, 2007, p. 162). The interpretations of the teachers consisted of drawing inferences from the data as well as utilizing the theoretical framework to create a structure for understanding (Creswell, 2007).

Underlying Assumptions

In order to conduct any method of qualitative research, it is necessary for the researcher to know and understand the underlying philosophical assumptions about what is considered valid (Merriam, 1998). Creswell (2007) describes these assumptions as (a) *ontological*, which is conveying the multiple realities that exist from the experiences of those being investigated; (b) *epistemological*, when the researcher connects and interacts with the participants; (c) *axiological*, which acknowledges the research as value-laden and biases of the researcher are actively

present; (d) *rhetorical*, which is the language of the research and the literary style of writing used to illuminate the participants voices; and (e) *methodological*, which implicates the researcher's ability to use inductive logic, emerging design, and studying the topic in context in order to collect and analyze data. The mentioned philosophical assumptions were used to discover some of the underlying assumptions that may be associated with this research. A possible underlying assumption for this study was that teachers who service African American students in urban schools are culturally competent. This assumption is based upon the belief that if one teaches culturally diverse students, specifically African American students, then they must be knowledgeable about African American culture.

Validity/Reliability

Validity or "trustworthiness" is a concept that should be addressed within the research design and throughout the collection of data (Glense, 2006, p. 39). Validity in this study was addressed by triangulation, using multiple means of data, such as the results from a demographic survey, observation field notes, reflective research journal, and audio-recorded interviews. Other strategies that were used to address validity were *member checks*, which entail the data (interview transcriptions) and interpretations (thoughts) being viewed by the participants for acceptance; *peer examination*, which involves colleagues reviewing the data to provide feedback; *participatory or collaborative modes of research*, which includes the participants involvement in all phases of the research; *thick, rich description*, which describes a phenomenon/setting in detail; and *researcher's biases*, which includes clarification and reflecting upon the researcher's subjectivity (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

Reliability indicates whether the research findings can be repeated. This concept is based on the assumption that there is one reality and that repeating the same study would render the

same results (Merriam, 1998). Reliability was addressed in this study by obtaining rich field notes by utilizing premier equipment for recording interviews, transcribing the recordings, and manually coding the data (Creswell, 2007). Other techniques that were employed to ensure reliability in this study included identifying the researcher's position, illuminating assumptions, providing an explanation of the participants' roles and how they were selected, offering background information of the researcher, and specifying the social context in which the data was collected. Merriam et, al. (2010) assert that the more similarities the researcher has to his/her participants, it is assumed that access will be granted, meanings shared, and validity of findings assured. On the contrary, the researcher has to remain attuned to his/her attachment to the topic being examined. Audit trails were also used to ensure reliability, which are frequent checks that describe in detail the manner in which the data will be collected, how the themes or categories emerged, and how decisions were made throughout this study (Merriam, 1998).

Chapter IV

Research Findings

The intent of this research study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of African American elementary teachers who teach African American students in urban schools by examining the practices they utilize to influence the academic achievement of their students. The methodology utilized in this qualitative research was case study and ethnography. The participants in this study were nominated by four African American urban elementary principals. The principals were interviewed about their selection criteria and processes. Interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed.

The participants were five African American, female, certified, elementary teachers who were selected by their principals who deemed them successful with their African American students. Participants were interviewed individually using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The research questions that guided this research were (a) What practices do African American elementary teachers utilize with African American students in urban schools to acquire a level of academic achievement? (b) What are African American elementary teachers' perceptions about African American students in urban schools? (c) What kinds of curriculum do African American elementary teachers use? (d) What kinds of instructional methods do African American elementary teachers use? and (e) What kinds of relationships do African American elementary teachers have with their African American students? The interviews yielded themes, which emerged from the responses to the research questions in regard to the practices that African American urban elementary teachers utilized to acquire academic achievement with their African American students. This chapter will present the descriptive responses of the teachers, which will provide lucidity to the significance

of each theme. The chapter is organized to give a description of the four urban elementary schools where each participant taught, a discussion about the four principals and their criterion for selection, and the narrative of the five African American urban elementary teachers who participated in this research study.

Schools

The schools in this study were selected through purposeful sampling as they are situated in a large urban school district in the Midwest. According to the district's website, it has 104 schools, making it the largest school district in the state. The district services approximately 52,000 students with an estimated 18% who have an individualized education plans (IEP), which is a written plan to address the learning styles and meet specific educational goals of students with disabilities in order for them to receive special education services (Flannery & Hellemn, 2015). The ethnic makeup of the district is 83% African American, 13% Hispanic, 2% White, and 2% other. There are approximately 6,092 students who are considered bilingual, and amongst those students, there are over 30 languages spoken. The district has a graduation rate of 64.7% and has recently undergone change in leadership. Table 1 details the dynamics of each school utilized in this research study and provides the number of students enrolled, the type of federal funding received, how many students enrolled are African American, and the overall yearly attendance rate.

Table 1

School Demographic Overview

Schools	Student Enrollment	School Funding	Number of African American Students Enrolled	Yearly Attendance
Alexander	308	Title I	263	82%
Campbell	309	Title I	305	82.7%
Hemming	85	Title I	73	75.3%
Black	447	Title I	440	87.5%

Note. Data obtained from school websites.

All of the schools service grades prekindergarten (pre-K) through eighth grade. However, for the purpose of this research study, the data utilized were compiled from the elementary grades, pre-K through fifth grade. All the schools were participating in Title 1 due to the percentage of students who receive free and reduced lunch. In 2016-2017, (see Table 1) Alexander Elementary had 308 students in pre-K through fifth grade and 263 of those students were African American. Alexander's overall student attendance rate during the school year was 82%. Campbell Elementary (see Table 1) had 309 students and of those students 305 were African American. Campbell Elementary had 82.7% overall yearly student attendance. Hemming Elementary (see Table 1) had the lowest student enrollment, as it is a specialized school that services students with disabilities. Hemming Elementary had 85 elementary students, 73 of which were African American and a 75.3% overall yearly attendance rate. Lastly, Black Elementary (see Table 1) had the largest enrollment of elementary students with 447, and of those 440 were African American. Their overall attendance rate was the highest of all the schools at 87.5%.

Principals

The four African American urban elementary principals who nominated the five African American urban elementary teachers for this research study were experienced African American female administrators with longevity of over 10 years in urban schools. The principals were advocates of the teachers they selected and identified characteristics they attributed toward the success teachers had with African American students.

Principals' criteria for teacher selection. The principals were asked to choose teachers who had the ability to successfully teach their African American students to attain a level of academic success. The principals held high regard for the teachers that they nominated, and it

showed in their responses. When the principals were asked why they selected a particular teacher who met the aforementioned criteria, each responded similarly. The principal of Alexander Elementary stated:

She goes beyond just being a teacher. Really, she doubles as a mother...she cares about their well-being. It's not just about teaching and learning with her. She's nurturing...she cares about their mental and physical health too. I mean, if she sees one of her students having a bad day...I've literally seen her counsel them. I guess, I shouldn't say this 'cause we're told to keep church and school separate, I have my own thoughts about that though [chuckles] ...but I've seen her have prayer with her students, repeat affirmations, and it just gives them something to believe in and strive for.

Alexander's principal concluded that her second teacher selection had strong classroom management skills and stated:

I chose her because she is the disciplinarian...and I do not have to see her students in my office (she laughs)! Really, she is fair as fair can get when it comes to making sure her students are learning and behaved. Her students really think she is the meanest person ever, but it's because she cares that they excel and about what the future holds for them. I often hear her tell her students about the possibilities of what having no education could lead to...and she's real about it. She holds no punches and I like that she gives them [the students] options about the realities of being uneducated all while motivating and engaging them to learn.

The principal at Campbell Elementary indicated that the teacher she nominated believed that "failure is not an option." She goes onto to say that her teacher of choice communicates high

expectations at the beginning of the school year and throughout the school year. She stated that the students

Know what to expect...she gives them [the students] a target and believes they can meet it. They [the students] show tremendous growth in all areas and not just academically. It's because she genuinely cares about them and she works hard to instill confidence in them regardless of their abilities.

Likewise, the principal of Hemming Elementary described her teacher of choice as one who develops a level of respect for her students and maintains that same level of respect for their families and includes them in the learning process. She stated:

She knows the trials and tribulations that her students and their families are faced with...I mean, some of the students come from situations you can only imagine. She works hard to bond and build relationships with her students and their families so they know they can do anything they put their minds to with some effort. This teacher buys clothes and groceries, you know, stuff that is not required of her...she does it because she cares enough to make sure her students are ready to learn. She pays attention to details in and out of the classroom.

The principal of Black Elementary stated, "There are so many reasons I chose her, but one that sticks out is she has the ability to make students do what's right." The principal describes her nominated teacher as a "compassionate miracle worker" because she asserted that she has the ability to take the most challenging child, socially and academically, and transform them into a model student. She affirmed that the teacher

Deals with students on an individual basis...she learns their likes and dislikes, what their home life is like, and their skill level...she creates a plan of action based on those things

and then the magic happens. She gets her students to trust that she knows what's best for them and they do well with her.

The principals identified four characteristics that they attributed to the teachers' success.

In Table 2, the principals of the four urban elementary schools stated that the teachers they selected exhibited all four of the characteristics: relationship building, othermothering, high expectations, and cultural competency. The teachers promoted relationship building by getting to know the students they taught beyond an academic connection. The principal of Hemming stated that the selected teacher had the ability to "bond and build relationships with her students and their families."

Table 2

Principals' Criterion Overview

Schools	Relationship Building	Othermothering	High Expectations	Cultural Competency
Alexander	X	X	X	X
Campbell	X	X	X	X
Hemming	X	X	X	X
Black	X	X	X	X

The principal of Alexander described the teachers she selected as nurturers (see Table 2). They were skilled at developing a bond that consisted of caring for their students socially and emotionally even though there was no biological connection. This type of relationship between teachers and their students, according to Case (1997), is referred to as othermothering. Case (1997) explains that othermothering is a philosophy that places emphasis on the psychoemotional

and intellectual development of children in order for their psychoeducational needs to be met.

The principal of Campbell explained how the teacher she nominated operated with the notion that “failure is not an option” (Campbell’s principal). She believed that their students had the ability to achieve academically regardless of their circumstances and had high expectations for all of their students (see Table 2). All the principals noted how the teachers they selected set high educational standards and expected their students to meet them.

The principals believed that their teachers were culturally competent and they understood that in order for their students to be successful, teachers need to possess awareness of themselves and those who are culturally different in order to respect and value diversity (see Table 2). They emphasized the need for teachers to be aware of cultural differences and have an overall understanding of the African American students they taught. The principal of Black affirmed that her selected teacher “deals with students on an individual basis...learns their likes and dislikes, what their home life is like, and their skill level” and is conscious of the dynamics needed to teach successfully.

The Classrooms

This research study was comprised of five African American elementary teachers who taught in an urban setting. Table 3 gives a detailed overview of the participant’s classroom demographics.

Table 3

Classroom Demographic Overview

Teacher	Grade	Student Enrollment	Student Ethnicity	Students with IEP	SPED Students Mainstreamed	Attendance	Suspensions
Alisha	1 st	35	AA	5	5	Fair	1
Tamara	5 th	30	AA; ARA; HIS	5	0	Fair	5**
Danielle	1 st	34	AA, BR	3	2	Fair	0
Angela	pre-K	18	AA; HIS	2	0	Good	0
Rose	2 nd	24	AA; BR	6	4	Good	0

Note. Ethnicity: AA (African American); ARA (Arab American); BR (Biracial); HIS (Hispanic)

IEP: Individualized Education Plan

SPED: Special Education

Attendance: Good (1-5); Fair (5-10); Poor (10+) based on absences per month

Suspensions: based on suspensions per month

**Tamara's suspensions were generated from other teachers

The majority of the students that the teachers taught were African Americans.

However, there were other ethnicities represented (see Table 3) in four of the five classrooms.

Those ethnicities were Arab American, Hispanic, and biracial. The number of students that each teacher taught varied (see Table 3). According to the principal of Black Elementary, the district's class size limits for pre-K are dependent upon the licensed size of the classroom. If the pre-K classroom is large, the class size limit is 18, and if the classroom is small, the class size limit is 14. Angela's licensed pre-K classroom was every spacious, and therefore, her student enrollment was 18. The class size limits for kindergarten through third grade is 25 students, and for fourth and fifth grades the class size limit is 30 students. The K- fifth grade teachers were beyond their class size limits, except for Rose who had 24 and the class size limit in second grade was 25.

Alisha had the highest student enrollment with 35 students.

Each teacher had students with IEPs (see Table 3) who received special education services ranging from speech to resource push-in (when a special education resource teacher comes into the classroom to service the student with instruction delivered by the homeroom teacher or subject teacher) or pullout (when a special education teacher pulls the student out of their homeroom class or subject class to work on specific skills identified in the student's IEP or designated by the homeroom or subject teacher). Rose had the most students with IEPs, and Angela had the least students with IEPs. Not only did the teachers have students within their classrooms that received special education services, three of the teachers had students with disabilities mainstreamed into their classrooms, which is the process of moving students with disabilities into regular education classrooms to receive instruction. Alisha had the most students who mainstreamed, which was five and Danielle had the least with two mainstreamed students.

Attendance in the teacher's classrooms ranged between good and fair (see Table 3). Good attendance represented 1 to 5 absences per month and fair attendance was signified with 5 to 10 absences per month. Although, Rose experienced good attendance, she was concerned about one student's excessive absenteeism. She stated:

I would say my children, for the most part, has okay attendance. Every school year, though, there's a couple of children you worry about. So, at the beginning of the school year, I look at the students 80s [school records that follow students from grade to grade] but I only look to get a sense of if there's any patterns...or if they are transient and move a lot. Then, I look at their attendance record and if they've been retained. Attendance is so important to learning, it is imperative the children are in school every day...it's just hard when they miss so much. I have with one girl, who I think, could be like one of my best students and she's been out over 35 days so far. So, before the school year ends she's

probably going to hit 50 [days] due to her pattern...we only have 180 days [in the school year].

The teachers expressed that they each had a couple of students with extreme cases of absenteeism or tardiness and students with transient patterns. They stated that many times the students with poor attendance were some of their “brightest” students, but because of their attendance patterns, they felt that they did not have opportunities to make a difference in the lives of those students who exhibit extreme attendance patterns.

Suspensions within the teacher’s classrooms were low or nonexistent as they expressed that they handled discipline within the classroom and that it was rare that the student was suspended unless they were involved in fighting (see Table 3). Alisha, on average, had one suspension per month, and she expressed that the suspension was initiated when students choose to fight. She explained:

I rarely suspend students because if they are not in school, they can’t learn and it’s hard to catch students up with what they miss, but they also need to learn that we have a purpose and that purpose cannot by any means be disrupted. So, fighting is a no-no...for the most part my students all get along, but sometimes we have days when somebody says somethin’, somebody does somethin’ that somebody doesn’t like and then it’s like WWF or WWE, [wrestling organizations] whatever it’s called. And they need to know that when you take it to that level [fighting] that there are consequences. So, I have to use the fighters as an example of this is what’s going to happen if you choose to fight. You miss the fun things we’re doing in school and you’re away from your friends.

Tamara, on the other hand, had the most suspensions of her students, but the suspensions were not initiated within her classroom. Other subject teachers were suspending her students.

She explained what happens when her students platoon to other classrooms:

So, my students already know they are a reflection of me! If they go out somewhere and if someone comes to tell me they are cutting up, I'm going to have absolutely no mercy on them. I stay on them. I let them know...that they are expected to be well-mannered and...well-behaved. However, there are those teachers that just don't have a handle on how to manage a class...they know the subject, can teach it backward and forward, but just don't get that you can't teach anything if you can't manage. And you know they [her students], know who they can get over on. So, after gym...I may hear, "such-and-such was fighting such-and-such because they wouldn't pass the ball." or "You know Paul and Mr. Adams don't get along, so Paul is taking a vacation." I try not to interfere with what other teachers are doing in their classes because I don't ever want the students to see us [the staff members] not being on the same page because that's a whole 'nother story, but sometimes the suspensions are not the fault of the student but rather the teacher...if you don't develop some kinda of relationship with your students, they are not going to respect you, let alone do what you want them to do. So, when I see my students have been suspended from some of the same teachers. I know it's not my student's fault all the time.

Overall, the teachers agreed that they had a responsibility to teach students and the students needed to be in school every day in order to receive the knowledge being imparted.

They also believed that if student-teacher relationship were developed, discipline would be

minimal and handled at the classroom level so that suspending students is not the first line of discipline.

Participant's Profiles

Although, each participant was nominated based upon their ability to successfully teach African American students in urban schools, each participant possessed a uniqueness about them.

Table 4 provides a detailed overview of the participant's demographics.

Table 4

Participant's Demographic Overview

Teacher	Age	College(s)	Highest Degree	Years of Teaching Experience	Years at Current School
Alisha	47	PWI	Master	20	4
Tamara	44	HBCU	Bachelor	18	3
Danielle	40	PWI/HBCU	Doctorate	20	6
Angela	55	HBCU/PWI	Doctorate	17	5
Rose	"Senior"	PWI	Master	31	3

Note. HCBU: Historically Black College
PWI: Predominately White Institution

The teachers, on average, were middle aged with Danielle being the youngest at 40 years old and Rose being the oldest, according to her 31 years of teaching experience, as she chose not to disclose her exact age. The teachers in this research study were veteran teachers (see Table 4) as their combined years of teaching experience totaled 106 years with Angela having the least experience at 17 years and Rose having the most experience at 31 years. The teachers attended both historically Black colleges and universities (HCBU) and predominately White institutions (PWI); (see Table 4). Danielle and Angela both attended a HBCU and PWI. Danielle began her undergraduate studies at a PWI, but received her undergraduate teaching degree at a HBCU. Angela received an undergraduate degree at a HBCU but attended a non-traditional teacher education program at a PWI to receive her teaching certification. The majority of the teachers

held advance degrees in education except for Tamara who obtained an undergraduate degree.

The years the teachers worked at their respective schools ranged from 3 years to 6 years. All of the teachers were female (see Table 4).

Alisha

Alisha is a robust woman who is 47 years old and commands attention when she speaks. Alisha has been teaching for 20 years in the same district and is the most frustrated with the plight of urban education for African American students. Her teaching experience includes teaching self-contained fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, social studies and English language arts (ELA). She has been teaching at her present school for the last 4 years in a self-contained first grade classroom, teaching all subjects. She has 35 students, who are all African American. In her classroom, there are five students who have IEPs and receive special education services that range from speech therapy to resource room push in and pullout. She has five students with disabilities who are mainstreamed into her classroom, and on average, she has 5 to 10 absences per month. Discipline is minimal as she averages one suspension per month.

Alisha grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in a large urban city and attended a PWI in the same city in which she was raised. She received a bachelor's degree in elementary education majoring in English and recently obtained a master's degree in elementary education. When asked how her teacher training prepared her to teach in urban schools that service African American students, she shared, with a smile, that her student teaching practicums allowed her to gain a practical approach to educating in an urban classroom as she completed her student teaching in the same urban district that she is employed. However, she recalls that she had to develop her own style of teaching in order to academically provide for her African American

students because the methods courses taken during teacher preparation program did not prepare her to specifically teach culturally diverse students. She recalls:

As I think back though, only my student teaching gave me hands-on practice with teaching African American students, which was great! But, I had no specific course that specialized in how to teach to the African American child or any child of color for that matter. Like, it was my own personal experience and studying on my own that taught me how to teach my kids.

Becoming a teacher was not Alisha's first career choice. However, she knew that she wanted to help people. First, she wanted to become a marine biologist because she had acquired a love for science. She chuckles as she reminisces about also wanting to be a nurse and actually began a program to become a registered nurse but soon discovered that she could not bear the sight of blood. When recollecting on how teaching became her career of choice, Alisha proudly stated that she, was born into teaching. She grew up in a family of educators, where her two older sisters were teachers. She explained that her sisters taught in the district that "I attended as a child and here I am teaching in that same district." She humbly retold her experience that brought her into teaching:

I can remember as a child playing school, I was always the teacher, and in eighth grade I was always the teacher's helper. I would go and help the first grade teachers check papers and help with the students. So, I didn't chose it, it choose me. I guess it was in the stars.

Tamara

Tamara is the voice of dedication to the well-being and success of her students. She is 44 years old and has taught kindergarten, first, fifth, sixth, and eighth grades over a span of 18 years within the same district. She recalls that of all the grades she has taught, she enjoys

teaching the lower elementary students best because they “learn so much, quickly.” Tamara currently teaches fifth grade at a school where she has been for the last 3 years. She describes the school population as “diverse.” Tamara states that her school is situated in an area that is heavily populated by Arab Americans. In fact, the majority of her 30 students are Arab American. She states that the diversity in her classroom has given her as well as her African American students an opportunity to learn more about a culture different than their own. She explains:

The Arab students and their families have been so accommodating with teaching us. We have learned some Arabic words and we have had food brought in for celebrations. It is interesting to see my students interact with each other despite their cultural differences.

Tamara has five students who have IEPs and receive special education services. Her overall student attendance is fair and averages from 5 to 10 absences per month. When asked what constitutes the absences of her students, she indicated that the reason for absenteeism varies from students being ill and suspensions. Discipline in her class is no issue. However, when her students platoon to other teachers, the suspensions are generated. Tamara attributes the number of suspensions that her students receive outside of her classroom to teachers who have not established relationships with the students, poor classroom management, and unpreparedness of lessons. She states that lack of these attributes leaves room for foolishness and it’s not the fault of the kid, but unfortunately, they get the short end of the stick.

Tamara was trained as a teacher at a HBCU and has a Bachelor’s degree in elementary education. She explains that because her pre-service teacher training was completed at a HBCU, all of her teacher training professors were African American, and they prepared their pre-service teachers exceptionally well to teach in urban schools that serviced African American students. I

could tell by the change in the tone of her voice that she was honored to tell of her teacher training experience at a HBCU, as she recalled upon her practice:

I went to a HBCU and the way we were taught was hands-on. We did our student teaching in an inner city classroom. We had case studies that dealt with particular [African American] students in mind, we studied how they learned, and we looked at family makeup and parental involvement. So, we did peer-curriculum studies, created the classroom environment, and implemented discipline procedures for these students to be successful learners. Pretty much, we tracked them during student teaching to see what type of impact we were making on these students. So, I was very prepared to work in an urban school with African American students because we cared about making sure that our babies were good.

Tamara most liked that her pre-service teaching experience allowed her to have a realistic representation of what it would be like teaching in an urban school, which was what she wanted to do once she graduated.

Danielle

The sound of Danielle's soft spoken, nurturing, melodic tone was the type of soothing voice that could get students to do what she needed to be done. She is 40 years old and has 20 years of experience as an educator. Within those 20 years, she has had positions in and out of the classroom. She has worked in the capacity of a literacy coach, where she provided teachers with additional English language arts (ELA) support through professional development and the implementation of various teaching practices, curriculum, and assessments. Danielle was also a reading facilitator, where she also provided ELA support by managing the mandated reading program in her school. As a reading facilitator, her responsibilities included monitored the

implementation of the program with fidelity, classroom observations with teacher feedback, modeling instruction, conducting teacher component meeting and monitoring student assessment and achievement. She has three students with IEPs and two students who are mainstreamed into her general education class. Her attendance is fair as she normally has 5 to 10 students absent per month. Discipline is no issue in her classroom, as she does not suspend students because she believes that students need to be in school every day. She stated that because she runs her class like a family, everyone has a part to play and *we* make up the rules so that *we* can follow them, which is why her suspension rate is nonexistent. At Danielle's current school, she has been facilitating reading and teaching for the last 6 years. She describes navigating through her positions in and out of the classroom as a challenge because it is two totally different mindsets because you have to re-immense yourself in the culture of the classroom, which is not hard work, but definitely a paradigm shift.

Danielle began her undergraduate studies at a PWI, in the Midwest, majoring in school-based psychology. She wanted to be a school counselor because she felt that she could, "inspire and motivate people to become academically better" by resolving personal, social, and psychological issues and challenges. However, she ended up receiving her undergraduate degree in elementary education from a HBCU due to later transferring to a university that did not have a school-based psychology program. She opted for teaching and explains, that she was very happy because it felt natural for her to teach. She possesses a Masters of Education in administration and recently completed a doctoral degree in educational leadership and education technology, where her focus was on the obstacles and successes of implementing podcast technology in urban schools to enhance learning. She wants to use her doctoral degree to advance her educational career to become a K-12 administrator and eventually a university professor.

Danielle believes that teaching is a gift, a noble career that she “*still*” places very high on the spectrum! She believes that teaching is a great career and that she would definitely do it again, maybe in a different district, but she would still be helping her people.

Angela

Tall in stature and culturally aware, Angela is one that ensures her students have access to knowledge of self. Angela is 55 years old and has been teaching for 17 years. She attended a HBCU where she obtained a bachelor’s degree in agricultural business and a master’s degree in environmental science. After working as an environmental health safety specialist and being unsatisfied with this career choice, Angela decided to enroll in an alternative teacher education program. Initially, when she began college, teaching was her major, but she was urged by her family to pursue degrees in science and business because they convinced her that there was no money in teaching. It was through this accelerated teaching program did she receive a teaching certificate. She began her teaching career in a large urban district in the South where she taught second and fourth grades. She reminiscences on the cultural difference between the South and the North:

Teaching in the South was different [than in the North], the students and the parents always showed Southern hospitality. The students were respectful, they always responded with, “yes ma’am” and “no ma’am” and their parents were appreciative of you teaching their children. There was never an argument with parents. If you [the teacher] said something happen then they believed it happened. When I moved back home, it was different.

When asked to expound on the difference in attitude toward education in the North and the South, Angela stated:

The difference was that teachers were respected. The kids were courteous. Back talking and being standoffish was not something that I experienced when I taught in the South...even in the urban areas, I didn't experience it [disrespect]. In the North, there's a lack of respect for teachers and just education in general. The kids don't take learning as serious...I see this mostly in the upper elementary grades and the parents are concerned about the wrong things. Like if you take a child's phone away, they [the parents] are quick to be in your face, but if it's parent-teacher conferences, you're likely not to see that same parent that was in your face about a cellphone. So, that's why I start with my [prekindergarten] students and parents...making sure that they understand the importance of being educated and what having an education can afford you.

Angela's decision to become a teacher was not only based on it being her first career choice but because she "wanted to do something that she cared about." Her teaching experience extends to both, general and special education as she is endorsed in autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She has taught every grade level from prekindergarten through eighth in the areas of science, ASD, and self-contained. She recently completed her doctoral studies in urban education. She specifically chose to pursue a doctorate in urban education because of her desire to create programs that will facilitate African American girls in post-secondary educational opportunities.

Currently, Angela teaches pre-K in a school that she has been employed at for the last 5 years. She works with an associate teacher and a noon-hour aide in a classroom of 18 students. Two of her students have IEPs and receive special education services. The attendance in her class is good as she experiences one to five absences per month, which she attributes to student illness. Suspensions are nonexistent, as she does not write students up to be suspended.

She stated that dealing with behavior issues in the classroom is just a matter of teaching little ones appropriate behavior and once they understand what to do, all is good.

Rose

The most seasoned of all the teachers and the one who knew that she was created to teach, Rose identifies herself as being a “senior.” She chuckles at the question concerning age and chooses not to disclose hers. Rose has been teaching for 31 years with 15 of those years being a pre-K teacher in an urban school in the West. Rose feels like she has completed her duty of service with teaching and feels that she is ready to live her life. She submitted her separation of service paperwork in order to retire at the end of the school year.

She currently teaches a second grade homeroom in a school that she has been at for 3 years. She has 24 students in her class, and six of her students have IEPs and receive special education services. She has four students who are mainstreamed into her second grade classroom. She experiences one to five absences per month, and this she attributes to her students being very transient. She explained that many of her students move residence often. Rose attended the elementary school where she teaches, and she lives in the community. She sentimentally explains that she chose to transfer to this particular elementary school on purpose because she wanted to end my career where I started it. She humorously explains the element of surprise when the students in her classroom or from the school see her in neighborhood stores that they frequent or at the church they attend. She laughs as she explains the association that she makes with the students outside of school and provides an example of how the conversation goes the next school day:

The students will come up to me and say, “I saw you at the Dollar Tree!” “Yeah, I saw you too!” “Yeah, Ms. Rose, we seen you at the pizza place!” “Yes, you sure did!” “I saw

you at church! Yes, you saw me at church!” You know, so, I make the connection that I’m here to service you, I’m here by choice, I have a connection with you and this is what I want to do and I want you to receive it.

Rose has a bachelor’s degree in education and a master’s in library science from a PWI. She states that she knew at a very early age that teaching was what she was meant to do. She recalls how she knew that she was destined to teach:

I had teachers in my family and my Grandfather, who was a minister, used to say teachers and preachers are called. And so, I always felt it...I knew from preschool age that I wanted to be a teacher. So, I have always known. But...as I grew up, I knew I wanted to do other things as well, so...when I was a little girl and they [people] would always ask, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” And I’d always say, “Oh I wanna be a teacher and I wanna be a lawyer.” And they would say, “Oh no, no, no lawyer!” And because that’s what people did back then.

Rose believed that because she discovered her purpose at an early age that teaching is something that she does without thinking about it. She affirmed:

Well, I knew that teaching was on my heart and it was what I was supposed to do and that's one reason I think it comes easy for me...I see it as my life's calling at the core of who I am and I have done some other things and enjoyed it, but teaching has been the core of who I am and I teach wherever I am. It doesn't matter where I am. I can be in the grocery store and I'm teaching [she laughs].

Teaching Practices That Work

“If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.”
~Ignacio Estrada (Good Reads, 2017a)

The themes that emerged from the data provided by the teachers were reflected in their

teaching philosophy, instructional practices, curriculum, and relationship building. The themes provide insight on the culturally relevant practices that the teachers utilized to assist with the academic performance of their African American students. A discussion focusing on each of the theme is provided based on the responses rendered by the teachers.

Progressive Teaching Philosophy

Each participant agreed that children learn in a variety of ways simply because they are different. Angela believed that it is complicated how children learn because no one child is alike. Danielle affirmed that children are so unique. They learn in different ways; it is almost like a fingerprint because everybody is so different. Angela believed that in order for African American children to learn, they have to be involved in the learning as oppose to being subjected to what she describes as “traditional” methods of learning. She stated:

Because it's a different world than it was when we were sitting down at a desk and the teacher said, “Open your book, read chapter two, answer the questions at the end of the chapter, and turn it in.” Like kids have so much stimulus, you know, from so many different devices and technology and stuff that they just have a hard time sitting down focusing like that and I don't think that was probably the best way to learn anyway.

Because I could never remember half the stuff I answered.

Alisha agreed that the methods of traditional learning are extinct and the use of these practices are not the most productive when teaching African American students. She stated:

So, the days of rote memory is just about gone as far as learning goes. You know how we used to learn all our states and capitals and we knew our multiplication facts. These methods don't always work with teaching our students. They need more, just to memorize, it's not enough.

Danielle concurred that the traditional methods of teaching were a disservice to their students.

She explained:

Okay, so one of the things that doesn't seem to work anymore is straight lecturing. It seems like they drift off, they get tired of hearing me standing up there. Their attention span is short and I find that if I'm not really thinking about them and I just want to get through the lesson to keep up with pacing and I just try to present the concepts without them actually taking ownership and getting involved and whether its Language Arts, Math, Science...they can't manipulate the concept.

Due to the traditional way of teaching not being the best methods to teach African American students, Tamara asserted that

the traditional way of teaching is passive. The days of teachers teaching definitions, doing all the instructing, and having the children come in through the backdoor when we [teachers] have already pre-taught is not the best way to teach them [African American students].

Rose affirmed that in order to reach African American students, teachers have to have a bag of tricks that encompass a variety of teaching methods. She believed that the traditional method of teachers managing all the learning is a thing of the past and sometimes students learn better from other students, so teachers have to be facilitators of learning. The data collected from the teachers provided common responses concerning teaching practices that work. The teachers believed that the curriculum and the instructional practices they were expected to use were too traditional.

Overall, the teachers agreed that a progressive philosophy of teaching needs to be adopted. Teaching guided by a progressive philosophy advocates instructional methods that

focus on the varied levels of understanding amongst their students, provides opportunities for experiential learning, integrates technology into teaching and learning, and allows students to learn from one another. A progressive approach takes into account the attention span of the students, utilizes the student's prior knowledge, and permits students to be architects in the lesson planning process. The data collected from the teachers support the adoption of a more progressive teaching philosophy as the teachers agreed that when they utilized instructional practices that were focused on meeting the learning needs of their African American students, they became more actively engaged in the learning process and performed better.

Integration of Technology

"We need technology in every classroom and in every student and teacher's hand, because it is the pen and paper of our time, and it is the lens through which we experience much of our world." ~ David Warlick (Educationinis, 2016)

Angela suggested that integrating technology into instruction allows her to incorporate Gardner's multiple intelligences into her lessons, giving her students the opportunity to use some of their senses to learn. She explained that using technology in her classroom engages a student's sense of touch, seeing, and hearing, depending on what you are teaching. Danielle concurred that African American students learn best by doing, and you must engage their visual, auditory, and tactile senses. Tamara asserted:

I think that the most important part of educating our kids today is integrating technology. [...] they learn best from seeing and then they learn best from doing. Tapping into their prior knowledge is also very important because they do have some prior knowledge on most of the things that...we teach them. I believe a lot of their prior knowledge comes from what they've been exposed to from the different forms of technology they're using. You know our kids are whizzes when it comes to electronics.

So, most importantly, hands-on activities they're interested in with that technology piece, I believe is a way to get our children captivated with learning.

Tamara affirmed that technology gives students opportunities to see, and touch and that she believed that if technology was integrated into the classroom your hands-on learning could be through that technology. She goes on to explain how she uses technology with a student who has a short attention span due to being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD):

I have a young man who...lives in a group home. African American male, diagnosed with ADD, 10 years old, and so when he first came to me... it was tough...because after 5 minutes he was having a party and it was very discouraging...because I needed him to learn this information. And so, I had to turn his work into more hands-on and mostly computer based. [...] he could not sit for a traditional 50 minutes of lessons. Most kids cannot and so he helped me to just change my way of teaching and thinking. So, 15 minutes of direct instruction, no more than 15 and the rest of it would be hands-on, which incorporated technology. [...] after that 15 or 20 minutes, he needed that extra support to... break into a small groups or work independently...on the tablets to complete a specific skill or research project.

Alisha described how her students reacted toward having an interactive SMART board in the classroom that was used to present new content. She stated that they tend to gain a better understanding of the information and skill she was teaching when she included technology. She stated:

We got whiteboards this year and they are interactive. You know, I used to have a white screen and a document camera and projector and it would just project...like a big screen TV and they were tickled about that but now that we actually have a SMART Board and

they can manipulate it by touch, they are beyond tickled, they are ecstatic and way more engaged and eager to learn because of the hands-on interaction. They can see and do and, you know, that touching that board is the highlight of the day for my students.

Alisha continued to describe how she includes software and video mini-lessons as a separate overview of an introduced skill or a review of skills. She indicated:

Now [that] we actually have a SMART board. I got a couple...CDs that are programs that they [the students] can use to interact with the board for learning...doing Venn diagrams...but again manipulating pictures or words or whatever. [...] visual and catchy things like raps or songs, a cartoon, I try to find some type of video correlation to everything we talk about. So...if we are reading about the desert. I am going to find the Magic School Bus or Bill Nye the Science Guy or Sid the Science Kid, or something they can relate to...I do a lot of video stuff. It's just another way of reinforcing...especially with [my] African American kids. You know...society is about video and quick images and things changing quickly. You got to try to keep up with that.

Danielle also uses an interactive whiteboard to instruct. She explained how she has utilized just about every teaching technique, but the one that she has found to be most effective with teaching her African American students is using videos to preview and review skills:

One [teaching technique] that is really popular now is the software, the technology, so kids are into the videos and learning in a fun interactive way with technology. So, in my classroom, I have a SMART board. So, what I do is I basically with the technology...I will introduce the lesson and with some of my set inductions, I'll introduce a video concept using the SMART board. You know, I'll find an interactive software to get the kids excited, let them do a chant, interact with the board...introduce whatever it is that

I'm teaching and that tends to help a lot of students, especially. Because you know our students, it's hard for them to just sit and read a book when it's so much stimulation with technology.

Angela's pre-K curriculum is a program that requires active learning where the students have direct, integrated technology experiences with events, concepts, cultures, and objects, which is based on the interests of the students. She shared how her students may have little or no prior knowledge of a concept or skill and how she integrates technology into teaching, giving them the opportunity to process content with the assistance of technology:

So, the...curriculum is active learning. A lot of the components I agree with, like when it requires...manipulatives, scaffolding, and technology...but then there are other things [concepts and skills] that I don't think our students have been exposed to. Let me see, like they're [the students] not going to ask you can they learn about Ecuador if they never traveled or if you've never been off the block. So, I think it [the curriculum] has the assumption that there's a lot of prior life experience, which a lot of my African-American students actually don't possess, you know what I mean? So, what I do is use the SMART tables and computers in my room to give my students a resource. Especially, when they ask about different places or people. So, I make sure that, you know, they get to see where Ecuador is...what the people of Ecuador look like...how they dress and what they eat. So, that my students, even if they have never traveled and still have so experience with other cultures and places can get a feel for it. Truthfully, if technology was not what it was and readily available, I can't imagine how I would provide that experience for my students.

Angela's use of technology creates a space where her African American students can research far

away locations by planning a virtual field trip that gives them a non-traditional opportunity to learn a different language, culture, and study unknown areas from a geographical perspective.

Rose affirmed that her students are excited and motivated when technology is utilized, with reading, as a tool to teach but stated that in her classroom the technology was a kind of hit and miss process when incorporating the technology because her classroom lacks the technological resources. She shares:

I have four computers. Four outdated desktop computers for students in my classroom...but, three work and we have...an electronic-based supplemental reading program and my children love it! So, they get on the computer almost every day. I have divided them up into groups. So, on Monday this group goes and on Tuesday [a group goes]. This kind of [grouping] ensures that everyone gets a chance [on the computer] at least once a week. I have four children that use it [the electronic-based supplemental reading program] at home...and they can use it on the cellphone or any electronic piece. So, I set up a daily schedule so that at least they [the children] can get some exposure to the program because they like it! Uh, it reads to the children, the book, highlighting each word as it goes and then there is a four to five question comprehension assessment at the end of each story. And I can pull a report. I know how many books they've read and how many they completed, what the comprehension score was. If they have improved. So, that's a lot of information. So, I think we should use our resources, whatever's available to us.

Rose uses a digital library as a means to create learning stations to enhance and support literacy, which not only provides an alternative way of receiving instruction but also gives a different way to process the instruction as well. Rose also uses PowerPoint with her students to create an oral

presentation for social studies during Black History Month. She described the process she uses with her students to produce the presentations:

For Black History Month...they [the students] get really excited about doing their first research paper. First, I teach my students how to use PowerPoint...this takes some time because this really is the first time they [the students] have used this software and because we only have a few working computers, I work with them in small groups to show them what to do and to assign them the person that they have to research. They have three weeks to do it [complete the research] and the parents are really involved. [...] then finally they have to put together an oral presentation on the person they are assigned and present it to the class afterwards. I believe... that a lot of people kinda of overlook teaching them to use this type of software 'cause they're young but, the children can do as much as you push them to do. This is when I ask the parents with some extra time on their hands to come in and help out. [...] they get up as a group and they love it, they love the presentations and they get judged. They get a grade, but it's a group grade. So they know that if one person does not participate, it could bring down the whole group grade. We [the class] critique them in four areas. We critique them in appearance [of the presentation], volume and clarity...and then the last is content, did they know their stuff? Did they know what they were talking about? Did you understand what they were trying to relay to you? The students do two of these research projects a year...the other one is in Science. They [the research projects] really get the students use to using technology. I've had a few of the parents tell me their child taught them to use PowerPoint after doing these projects.

The teachers largely agreed that in order to ensure African American students grasp the skills and concepts being taught, instruction should incorporate technology as an alternative way to not only teach, motivate, and engage students, but as a means to offer a learning experience that results in knowledge to be retained. In their own way, the teachers created a system where students could benefit from technology by utilizing it to introduce and reinforce skills and concepts being taught in core subject areas.

Differentiation

“Differentiation is simply a teacher attending to the learning needs of a particular student or small groups of students, rather than teaching a class as though all individuals in it were basically alike.” ~ Carol Ann Tomlinson (2000, p. 4)

Angela’s pre-K curriculum requires her to plan and differentiate her lessons based upon student’s interests. She utilizes small group learning activities and describes how she manages her small group learning sessions:

In pre-K they have small group time and that’s their individual direct instruction time.

During small group time, there’s no more than eight students in the group. So, that’s the perfect time...where you can observe... what their interest[s] are and listen to their conversation[s]. They kinda of give you clues to things that they might like to learn about and you just listen to them and then from there, I kinda of device these...small group activities that we do. [...] a perfect example [of a small group activity] was when one of my students...left her apple on the table and she said, “Ugh, it turned brown.” And so, then I was like, “So, what do you think made it turn brown?” And she was like, “I don’t know!” And then everybody started guessing and saying what they thought. So, then we started doing stuff to see what didn’t turn the apple brown. You know, we was like, “You think, if you poured milk on it, it would turn the apple brown? And they was like, “No!”

So, we just do stuff according to the interest that they see. And I think that ties into them really retaining the knowledge. 'Cause it's something that they have prior knowledge about [and] they have [an] interest in, wanting to learn about it...it peaks their creativity. So, stuff like that. I just try to capture that light...with Pre-K, you can follow your [student's] interest and I really like that and it helps with forming my small group teams.

Tamara also incorporates small group instruction to enhance the learning for her students. She explained that she uses this method twice a week to give her students an opportunity to experience the closest way to having some kind of one-on-one instructional time, since she is the only adult in the room. Tamara believed that small groups help the students to hone in on some concepts that may be challenging and that some of the students just like that small, intimate setting. Tamara has a routine in place to manage her small groups that she stated assist the students with staying on task and having ownership over their learning. She described her routine:

I'll say on a Tuesday...we'll break down into small groups. Like say we are working on Math...and we'll rotate [the students in the small groups]. We have these little bells, these little buzzers that...we push when we're done [with the small group instruction]. Everybody knows and they look on the board to see who the next group is, "Oh, orange, orange, the orange stars they're going back with Ms. Tamara, now." So, they all know exactly [who should be where]. So, during *Do Now* [bell work], in the morning everybody doesn't do *Do Now*. A group will come with me and then we'll rotate. So, usually, it's during *Do Now* [in the morning] and its right after lunch when I can pull those groups and they know [they] need to come to the back. Working with small groups,

let's me know who gets it and who doesn't. It's a way for me to differentiate my instruction for those students who need that extra push.

In order to manage small group instruction, Tamara has created a strategy that keeps the students who are not working directly with her on task. She designed assignment sheets for each group:

I use a weekly assignment sheet because kids like to know when you're [the teacher is] working with small groups. They like to interrupt and say, 'I'm done.' And so on their assignment sheets, its ability based. So, they are not the same...they will have vocabulary words that they will have to get on the tablet to define and find a picture to draw that go along with the word, something like that. Their math is...in the [text] book and they would have to get on iExcel to complete an assignment and then it allows me to pull small groups. [I do] not allow disturbances when I am working with those small groups. So, it keeps them on task for what they have to do.

Tamara uses these small groupings to target the learning of my students in core subjects.

Rose utilizes small group instruction based upon student's performance as she directly works daily with specific students in a designated area for a limited length of time focusing on skills and concepts that are perplexing. She described her process of small group instruction:

I do small group, I have the u-shape table at the beginning of my classroom...I don't do long lessons to be honest I do, mini lessons that are probably about 15 minutes. I do a short, guided practice before I send them off to do independent practice and in that small setting I can look at each child, 'cause I only have four chairs...I can almost put my arms around the whole group. So...that's about the closest I can get to them on a daily basis.

Rose focuses on the core subjects of reading and math during small group instruction. However, she stated that performing small group instruction during math transitions easier than in reading due to time allotments. She believed that although her students were not all good readers, math was more of their weak point, but math they *all* like to do.

Each teacher had a system for differentiating instruction and curriculum. They utilized differentiation by placing students in small groups based upon their interests and by readiness, or what they were ready to learn. Lessons were differentiated or modified according to what students were ready to learn the concept and skills of the lesson as well for students who already knew the concept and skills. They also differentiated their instruction to provide for some individualized instruction to students who were in need of additional assistance in reading and math.

Cooperative Learning

“The best answer to the question, 'What is the most effective method of teaching?' is that it depends on the goal, the student, the content, and the teacher. But the next best answer is, 'Students teaching other students.'” ~Wilbert J. McKeachie (Quote Fancy, 2017)

Rose incorporated cooperative group learning as a way to enhance engagement amongst her students who were at different academic levels as well as a way to organize the physical environment of her classroom. She described her use of cooperative group learning:

I love cooperative learning, I like teams and groups...it allows me to group students in a lot of different ways. [...] I use diverse groups and it kind of depends on what I'm teaching in a way. [...] my groups are always heterogeneous...my table situation is like four. So, I may have two boys and two girls. I don't have as many children at grade level...so, I may have one [on] grade level child at each table. And then I may have two low [students] and one [student] that's low average. Sometimes, I'll do it like that for

science and social studies because it gives them a...variety of views and it allows them [the students] to contribute what they know. And even though they all live in the same neighborhood, they have different abilities and the children know. I mean it's not like it's a secret to them. [...] they know who gets it and who doesn't. They have a social order as well.

Rose not only creates heterogeneous, cooperative learning groups, but she also situates her students homogeneously as well. She provided reasoning as to why she groups students according to the same academic level:

I also sometimes will do [same] ability level with cooperative learning because sometimes those children who are on grade level need to be with their peers [other students who are also on grade level] 'cause that encourages them. It pushes them... so, sometimes they just need to have a little group and sometimes I'll do that [have the students who are on grade level in a cooperative learning group] while they [students below grade level] have [learning] centers. I'll let those four or five children be together and they love being together 'cause they are challenged...by each other.

Rose affirmed that she uses cooperative learning groups as a means to have students teach students. She explained this process as being a way to have the students who are on grade level share their way of acquiring and retaining knowledge to students who are below grade level, which she calls peer tutoring. She described peer tutoring, as a method used to reinforce what the students on grade level know and that it emphasizes their leadership qualities. Rose tells her peer tutors that they are assistants to the teacher, that they are class leaders, and that when they peer tutor, they are helping to bring their peers along as well.

Due to Angela's pre-K curriculum being based upon the interest of her students, she indicated that allowing students to engage in cooperative learning was an effective method:

I like doing projects with them and teaching them teamwork and then you [the teacher] can find what strengths each person has and let them be a part of a team so that everything doesn't fall on them [any one student]...that's really my best way I like to teach.

Danielle is also a proponent of using cooperative learning groups as a way to have students work together to be accountable for producing a desired outcome, engaging in social learning and hands-on learning, and working as a team. She asserted that her students enjoy this type of learning because it allows them to socialize and learn social skills. She described a math lesson that allowed her first grade students to grasp the concept of geometric shapes:

Kids like learning in cooperative groups. [...] just a couple weeks ago we were learning...about geometric shapes. And so, what I did is, I actually put the shapes...on the table of each group and let them manipulate them, let them communicate with each other to describe them. So, they were able to touch it [the shapes], they were able to... talk about it...before we actually could delve into the lesson. So, when I allowed them time to communicate, talk about it, touch it, play with it, some of them begin to build different things with them, then they were more excited when it was time to learn [about the more about geometric shapes] and they were very, very successful in learning the concept. As a matter of fact, I am so happy about that unit because...I did not have to repeat [reteach] it at all, it seemed liked everybody...grasped those concepts...they really enjoyed that one.

Danielle, like Rose, has a system that she utilized to manage her cooperative

learning groups. She groups the students in a way that acknowledges individual differences, involves students in learning, and assist in interpersonal development. She explained her method of cooperative group learning and how it aids to the success of her students:

They're mixed gender groups with ability level taken into consideration. This way they can learn to work with anybody...there might be like three or four that are the same [ability level] and then it will be one strong [student] to help. This helps with giving them [the students] the chance to get a different way to do something. You know, getting different responses. Then they also...do partner practice [within the cooperative learning groups]...allowing them to take ownership of the lesson. I think that they feel independent in their learning and they tend to grasp the concepts much better.

Lastly, Alisha's physical space in her classroom is situated so that her students work with one another in a cooperative learning group setting as well. However, she uses this method not only for instruction, but as a means to curb interruptions and monitor behavior. She described her cooperative learning groups according to their physical structured:

So, the way that my classroom is set up is I have a table of six, another table of six, a table of six, a table of six, and then in the middle I have two, two, two, 'cause some kids can't handle those other five [four] folks so they just have one person next to them and then there are some people who can't handle one person next to them so I have some individual desk around the room too. So...I try to group the students so that they can be able to work with the people they sit with [...].

Alisha further explained her method of using cooperative learning groups:

So, I have to think about their [the students] personalities along with their abilities...I have some students who just cannot be with certain students...no matter how much I

teach and emphasize the importance of getting along together. So, I sometimes group...students with others who they have made some kinda social bond with...it makes life for all of us sooo much easier and the students work. So, the groups have someone to keep up with the time, somebody does the writing, there's one that presents the information to their class, a student is in charge of making sure that everyone does their job, there's someone who get the things they need to do the assignment, and the illustrator. Each student has a responsibility in the group...those groups with two kids...sometimes they have more than one [responsibility]. They learn what to do [with all of the group positions] at the beginning of the year and I try to make sure that all the students rotate so they everyone has a chance to do all of the jobs...I use cooperative groups for just about all the subjects so that my students...can have a different way of getting it [the skills being taught]. For the most part, my students love when they when they have a chance to work with each other.

The teachers described how they utilized cooperative group learning as a practice to improve the understanding of skills taught in core subjects. The teachers grouped students in teams that worked with each other. They not only utilized cooperative group learning for instruction, but also to establish and develop social behaviors, to create an environment where students could utilize their prior knowledge, and to have opportunities to work with students at various ability levels. They agreed that cooperative group learning allowed the students to learn from one another by taking ownership over their learning.

Culturally Responsive Curriculum

If the curriculum does not respond to the culture, then the culture will not respond to the curriculum. ~Leslie Hooks (Hooks, 2013)

Tamara explained how society tends to give students a false sense of reality or a one-sided view of particular groups of people, which she believed can be a hindrance to the learning process. Due to the biased opinions incited by society about people of color, particularly, African Americans, she expressed the need to provide positive cultural examples for her students to correct the prejudices. She stated:

Society has a way of destroying dreams for African Americans and it's, I feel, my duty to make sure my students know they can be whatever they put their minds to...regardless of what people perceive of them, what goes on at home, what goes on in the neighborhood, [and] what they see on television. I just had to tell them the other day, last week, that what happens on the video games is not real. When you shoot the gun, you don't bounce back up and what happens on *Empire*, it ain't true...a lot of those kinda things can interfere with learning. I spend time just letting them know everything they see and hear is not real. So, it's like I have to undo what's been done...it's like brainwashing. Like, society has every African American boy thinking they are going to be LeBron James. I had to show them statistics on that so they understand that everybody is not going to be a LeBron James, but you can be a Baraka Obama or the creator of a video game or a television show or even a Ben Carson, the surgeon, that is (she chuckles). So, I've shown them *Gifted Hands* or I've found articles on African American video game creators, or tell them Lee Daniels, who made *Empire*, is an African American man...so they know they have options. I just really try to support my students and let them know, it doesn't matter where you come from or what people think about you...you have the intelligence to be what you want.

Tamara utilized events that directly affect her students as a means of providing

social studies instruction. She explained how she compared what took place in the past with African Americans during slavery and what has taken place presently with police brutality amongst African American males to get her students to make connections. She asserted:

So, with the killings of African American men [by police officers]...which is one aspect of how we're viewed...and the injustice of African Americans as a society, I use it [the events] to teach...[and] as we study social studies, the children begin to see how in the Southern colonies the [way] African Americans were [being] treated then [is] the same way they're being treated now. So, I teach them there's really no difference. A lot of us still work for minimum wage, just as the slaves did, which was as minimum as you could get. So, I tell them...still African Americans are in slavery [enslaved], it's just a different time, but those things [injustices] still go on. And so they were able to make the connection with...some of us are still in bondage.

Tamara speaks highly of her students and makes learning relevant and stimulating because of the stigma that is attached to students of color and education. She stated:

So, I teach at a very diverse school, 80% of my class mostly are Arab students. I have one Hispanic student. The rest are African American, 30 students...the majority boys. So, of course, I have to keep them engaged with the learning. They are very smart. They seek learning. They want to know more. They want to know "why" all the time. They love hands-on learning. They like projects...they are very into world news. So, I try to keep them motivated with things that interest them.

Rose utilizes a social studies curriculum that was created by the district in which she is employed. She explained that many of the photographs in the text are of actually students and city landmarks, which she affirms makes real-life connections for her students. She stated that

because her students are young and do not have a comprehensive understanding of the social concerns that African Americans are faced with, she incorporates age-appropriate instructional practices to assist her students. She described how she makes these connections:

The children are developing a sense of the world around them...unfortunately some of them know more than they should for their age. So, when it comes to teaching social studies, we do a lot of role-play so they get what's going on in their community and the world. I show videos, kid-friendly of course, and use trade books so they can get a better understanding of their history and culture. I just love the social studies curriculum we have. I know a lot of teachers don't, they say it's old and it is, but the children can relate to it. I love the social studies [curriculum] because the textbook is actually written for [the name of the city was deleted] children...it has landmarks they know and visited, when we've done field trips...that familiarity is just so precious. When they see pictures of familiar places, they go, "Oh, I've been to this store." or "I know where this is," "You remember when we went there." So, I think that it [the curriculum] really fosters a sense of community. And even though it's old, I still use it because it has people that look like them...showing things that they do and it's positive. I mean they know what needs and wants and goods and services are but they need to see themselves in those roles. So, you break it down and make connections and it's just beautiful. I love it, I love it!

Passion could be heard in her voice as she spoke. She discussed how she ensures that her students know the truth about who they are ethnically. She stated that she exposes her students to primary source materials that allowed them to "see themselves in what I teach" as she utilized cultural examples that were representative of her student's heritage. Angela expressed how she teaches her students that particular aspects of African Americans are either distorted or absent

from the curriculum. She explained the methods that she utilizes to teach her students about their heritage:

Okay, I'm going to be totally frank and honest, a lot of times, I show [them] how the history books negate the real information on African Americans. I introduce them [the students] to African American inventors and talk about [how] the items that they use every day...African Americans created. I talk about...the backstory behind the Statue of Liberty that a lot of people aren't aware of, you know, that the original model was of African descent. I try to give them information that I wish I had of known as a child. You know, I...try to make sure they understand that African American people have a great history.

Angela not only teaches her students about their cultural greatness, but she also provides a social justice outlook for them to gain an understanding of why they have to uphold the legacy, which was created for them. She stated:

So, I talk to them about the pitfalls, I talk about what can happen if you don't graduate, the likelihood of having a criminal record or even prison. I try to be very real with them and I talk to them about the pitfalls in society and about fear and how important education is and all the sacrifices that other people made for us to be able to vote. Like, I try to give them a well-rounded social justice perspective when I teach so it encourages their daily life, so they have a better understanding [of] why their neighborhoods are the way they are. Why their parents are struggling to find good jobs. Why their parents can't get to their job when they do find them [jobs] because of transportation. Like, I try to give them a real clear picture so they understand they're other forces at work. It's more to what you see...it's kind of like a matrix, the red pill, blue pill. [Either] you want to stay

without knowing or you want to know. And most times they want to know.

Angela recalled her own schooling and a lesson that she was taught in social studies about African Americans. She expressed that because of her own educational experience, she makes sure that any African American child that she teaches knows the truth about their culture. As she reminisced, she was still in awe about the lesson in her social studies class and stated:

Oh my God! I remember when I was in school in social studies, in the textbook, we got two paragraphs about African Americans! It talked about President Lincoln freeing the slaves and the Emancipation Proclamation and those were the only two paragraphs, I'll never forget it! It was, literally two paragraphs and that was it and then all the rest was Eurocentric...it would make you think African Americans did not contribute to anything in this country, that we're lucky to be here! And then I find out that we built this country, a lot of the buildings and infrastructure is based on our hard work and labor and unpaid labor, at that! It's just like wow, to be kept in the dark...it's just a crime to me really! So, that's another reason why I wanted to become a [an] educator because I wanted to expose a lot of the blanks in the curriculum and fill them in with the real truth...our accomplishments and our contributions because if you feel good about yourself then you can be a positive contributing member of society.

Alisha spoke proudly of her classroom library, which she expressed, featured trade books that represent various ethnicities. She discussed a compare and contrast literacy lesson that she teaches her students using cultural versions of the fairytale, *Cinderella*. She discussed details of the lesson:

I do a unit on fairytales...every one of my students have heard or seen *Cinderella*...at some point in their short lives, but sadly the only version they know is the White one. So,

I introduce my students to two stories...*Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, which is a [an] African version [and] *Adelita*, a Mexican one. I start out showing the Disney version of *Cinderella* and having a class discussion of the characters, setting, plot, etcetera...then [we] read and discuss the books, watch videos of the books, and pretty much breakdown each story...we look at what's the same and what's different and make a t-graph of our responses. I've done this lesson a couple years now and every year is different. One year, we performed a skit of *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*...and one year, we had a ball. The girls dressed up like Princesses and the boys, Princes. That year [the dress up year] was my favorite...the parents made costumes, bought costumes, and we had a King's feast, pizza, chips, and some juice (she laughs as she recalls) and danced. It was fun and they loved it!

Danielle spoke of having to supplement the mandated curriculum; she believed the adopted curriculum was not enough. She articulated how the curriculum is not reflective of the children that she teaches and stated that on occasion she has to enhance the learning of her students by using outside materials in order to assist her students with reading. She explained how the theme *Community Helpers* in the social studies curriculum featured a book that reflected African Americans in service positions. She stated:

So, the theme was about community helpers and we had this read aloud, I wish I could remember the name of the book, anyhow, it was one of those times I didn't preview the book before I read it to the kids...I was probably testing that week (she chuckles). I think I was at about the third page when I realized the African American people in the book was in jobs [such as], you know, the garbage man, the mailperson, a waiter. I was like "hold up" in my mind, I didn't say it out loud though, but I was like "hmm, we have

professional degrees, we're doctors, lawyers, judges, even Presidents!" So, I read the book, but you best believe the next day, I brought in *Barack, Grace for President*, and books that showed African Americans in professional jobs so they could see us in another light...you know, we can be both!

The teachers created a culturally responsive curriculum for their students. They reminded their students that their culture mattered. Whether it was utilizing current events that directly affected the students or supplementing the mandated curriculum with content that was relevant, they presented educational opportunities that connected to the lives of their students and linked real-world issues. This allowed their students the chance to challenge the status quo as well as distinguish the difference between fact and opinion. The teachers spoke of creating a space where students could discover their own point of view and that of others. The teachers allowed the students to engage in lessons that provided access and equity from a social justice perspective. Culturally responsive curriculum uses the student's own culture to teach. Students are able to problem solve using issues they are familiar with. Instruction incorporates culturally preferred learning styles. All the teachers engaged in providing a culturally responsive curriculum.

High Expectations

"What all good teachers have in common, however, is that they set high standards for their students and do not settle for anything less." ~Marva Collins (Good Reads, 2017b)

Angela understands that her students face tough realities, but she never lowers her expectations because of the surroundings that her student are subjected to. She explained:

When you look at their [the student's] home environment and [you] expect for all of the one's that have a lot going on in their home to be like really struggling. And it's [not] the case at all...there is an innate ability in people and their environment does not dictate

their learning ability and that's always something to remember and never get hung up on. Because regardless of where they come from, I know that they can accomplish anything if they're given the chance. So, I never base what they can do on the struggles they have. I have a little student, he's in one of those homes and he can count with the best of them. His memory is A-1. His number sense, his letter recognition is okay. Like...I really am impressed. So, you can't really judge them by their economic status. You have to really judge them one-on-one [and] interacting with them. Learning...their curiosity level, that interest level, and what I really love to do is make them love learning because if you make them love learning now, they will have a love for learning later. And I hold them to what I know they can do.

Similarly, Danielle expressed the same thoughts about a student's home life and their academic performance. She recognizes that adversity is a part of their reality, but regardless of their circumstances, she still holds them accountable for what they need to accomplish in the classroom. She stated:

You have students that come in where they're not dressed appropriate, they're coming in [and] they're hungry, they're having a bad attitude and then that spills over [into] the culture of the class. So, whatever their home life is...those things that they pick up at home comes into the classroom. Even though this happens, I still expect them to be ready for school. And because I have a lot of students who come from these type of homes, you have to make your classroom [like] your own family...you have to have your own norms and your own culture in your classroom to blend [with] what they bring, not to change it [what they bring], but blend what they bring and make sure that it is something that is

working out for their good 'cause I do want them to know that their home life is positive regardless and that they have to do well regardless.

Tamara admits to being a disciplinarian and having high expectations for the way that her students behave themselves in school and out of school. She believed that representation is key and stated:

I stay on them. I let them know that they are expected to be well mannered and well behaved. I don't have many suspensions at all because I set my expectations every day. And those expectations are high. They have to come up here (she demonstrates with moving her hand toward the ceiling) because am not lower anything. And I let them know, first you represent yourself and then your represent your family. So, I set those expectations and I carry myself in a way that they would want to imitate. I use examples all the time of how they should act not only in school but when you're in the streets too. I often emphasize a character is something you have even when no one is looking.

Tamara continues to explain why she holds such high expectations for her students, particularly her African American male students. Like Angela, Tamara does not base academic performance on socioeconomic status:

I expect the best out of them. I want them to be successful. With everything that's going on in our society today, I want them to be prepared to make a sound decision on whatever. Especially, our Black males, I'm harder on them and [I] want to look up and see them be successful. And we know the neighborhoods that [they] come from, the homes that they come from, and what they deal with at home. So, [I] try to make school a fun comfortable place for them, but [I'm] hard on them because you know what some of them go home to. They go home to being mama's and daddy's and so it's hard and so I'm

tough on them and I won't let down.

Alisha expectations of her students are based on their future. She stated that because they are first graders they do not have a comprehensive understanding of what they do today would benefit them later. She believed that when students know you have a genuine caring for them that they will rise to your expectations:

They have to know you care about 'em [them]. That you have a vested interest them.

Otherwise, what reason do they have...they're not able to see the big picture. That this is going to be able to benefit me in the long run. We can talk about that all day long. They don't see that [the benefit in the long run], but what they do know is, 'Ms. Alisha is countin' on me. She knows...she has faith in me. She knows, I can do it. I want to show her, I can do it. I don't want to disappoint her. I don't want to let her down.' They [the students] are doing it for themselves, but they also...especially 1st graders, are all about pleasing and I have high expectations of them. I can do that whole thing [give a compliment to one student in order to have the other student follow], 'Oh, I like the way so and so is standing.' And everybody else fall in line. They want me to say, 'I like the way they're standing.' So, yeah, they're are all about pleasing and I work that to my advantage. They want to do their best...and I try to give them as many advantages that I can.

Rose admitted that she is old-fashioned and believes that the student has an obligation to do well in school regardless of their circumstances. She too understands the social hindrances that come with teaching in an urban district and with students who are at or below poverty level, but she affirmed that she would do what it takes to make sure that her students are successful, even if it causes her to lose sleep:

You know, I grew up in a time when you had no choice on whether you did well in school or not. You went to school, you listen to your teacher, and you did what needed to be done...no questions asked. So, I run my classroom the same way, it is their obligation to succeed and it's my expectation that they succeed. We always had the poor, we're gone to always have the poor, what's the big deal! Poverty is a big issue [and] a lot of it is self and the choice that people make...but the children don't have anything to do with that. So, no matter what, I make sure that they get it [knowledge]. But let me tell you...I probably would teach until I died if I could find the balance where I could have more time for me. I mean, I don't think you should neglect your students in any way but it does take a lot. I burn the candle at both ends because I didn't want to shortchange anybody. And a lot of people are not making that kind of commitment or investment and perhaps they should not. They shouldn't, because it takes a toll on your health and a lot of things, but I think that's the difference between [a] career and calling. Because for me it never seems like work, so I can do it 24/7 sometimes, and sometimes I do. I'll be up all night for something if I need to. Yeah. it needs to be done, it's going to be done (laughter). And then when it's done and I'm fine with it. I may crash the next day...and I'm in bed for 12 hours. But it is done!

Achieving no matter the circumstances is what the teachers expressed with holding their students to the highest of expectations. They agreed that home environment and socioeconomic status does not dictate the success of one's future. Creating a classroom environment that resembles a family, embraces and respects every student, holds students accountable for their learning, and assists in building character is what the teachers described. They believed that

when you are optimistic about the academic success of students that student outcomes could exceed expectations.

Caring

“One who cares must meet the cared-for just as he or she is, as a whole human being with individual needs and interests. [...] at most, it directs us to attend, to listen, and to respond as positively as possible.” ~Nel Noddings (Good Reads, 2017c)

The teachers spoke authentically about the care that they exert toward their students in order to assist with them attaining a level of success academically and socially. Rose believed that the first step in educating students is to build a relationship with them because everything is built on that. She explained that she forms this connection before school begins by giving the parents the opportunity to know who their child’s teacher will be. She stated:

I start off in the summer...with a postcard and a phone call...if they haven’t moved or numbers haven’t changed I make a connection. I send a postcard to the children, I call the parents, you know, [to] introduce myself. I let them know that I live in the community and I went to [M] PS schools. I’m here by choice. I'm looking forward to working with you and your child. I like to know from the parents...“What do you want for your child?” I just want to get them thinking that there is someone who cares about their future in a more specific way than just the jargon they may see on TV.

Rose not only makes a connection with parents during the summer, but on the first day of school, she has a ritual that she continues throughout the entire school year with her students.

She explained her procedure:

At the beginning of the day when they come [to school], I stand outside my door and I shake the child's hand and greet them and I look them in the eye. I'm doing two things. I'm making a connection every morning with that child but, I'm also kind of doing my

“teacherly” duties. Do you see a scratch? Do you see any fine bumps? [Is] the eye[s] swollen from allergies? Do they have a cold, this morning? So, I'm doing a physical check but I'm also...psychological bonding. I guess you might say social bonding with a student. So, I do that and then we go on and begin to feel very quickly...[like a] community. Because...I tell them this is a class family [and] like any family in order for it to work everybody has to be cared for.

Rose believed that getting to know the students that you teach is essential and explained:

You can't teach a child...without having a solid relationship. But, I know you can teach a child easier and in more depth if you have a good solid relationship. I think it's absolutely key. It's an anchor of learning. We all have relationships. A relationship teacher has to be one of trust, one who cares, it has to be one that they feel comfortable [with].

Due to the types of relationships that Alisha is known for, she has earned respect from students whom she has never taught because of her concern for students. She described an incident that took place with a student on a day when there were an abundance of teachers absent and classes were dispersed among other grades.

There's a lot of absenteeism in the building right now as we get closer to the end of the school year, it's getting worst and worst. We have a few people [teachers] that have just kinda stop coming. FMLA or...we know their pattern too. They are either not here on a Friday or a Monday and because we are already over class size and short staffed.

They...end up splitting those third graders up amongst second and first grade. So, I end up with students [from other grades] all the time. Even when I don't end up with students, they will come to me, “Ms. Alisha, I was with so and so this morning, but I want to come

to your room...can I come to your room?" I don't know. I always end up with extra kids. Just like today, I had three or four extra kids. They were just in the hallway all day causing problems. They show me a great amount of respect. So, I was in the hallway today and there were a couple of 5th grade teachers that were out and I don't know why they were not letting these 5th grade students into whatever room they were supposed to be in. So, they were just kinda hanging in the hallway. And, you know because they have been in the hallway most of the day, they are going to cause some trouble. So, they were knocking on teachers doors and running away. So, one of the teachers came out and was fussing at a girl. I guess she [the teacher] was videotaping her [the student] to have proof that she was knocking on the door and the girl was going off. Talking back to the teacher and all of that and then she [the teacher] said, "And you still talking?" "Yeah, [the student says] I'm still talking!" And I'm walking up and I'm like, "Hey, wait a minute, wait a minute." "You better quit talking to me [the student said]." "Nah, nah, Ms. Alisha, I'm not talking to you [the student says]." Total change! She was saying that to the other teacher. She [the student] saw me walking up, "Nah. Ms. Alisha, I wasn't saying that to you." "I wasn't saying stop talking to me, to you. I was talking to her 'cause she [the teacher] came out videotaping." She [the student] was all riled up and I just grabbed her by the arm. We walked arm in arm down the hallway and I was just talking to her, "Calm down. I understand that she may have upset you. She said she accused you of doing something that you didn't do. But, she is an adult. She's a teacher and you have to talk to her with a certain amount of respect." And I just settled her right on down. "Come on back to my room with me." And she spent the rest of the day with me and was fine. I don't know, I think I am the "Child Whisperer!"

Alisha's caring extends beyond school with some of her former students who have invited her to various occasions and have kept in constant contact with her during life events. She gave insight on some of the contacts that she has had and some activities that she has attended of former students:

It [building relationships with students] goes all the way back to when I first started teaching at Adams [school pseudonym]. Here, I am friends with students on Facebook... from my first class that I ever taught. I've been invited to baby showers. Housewarmings. When I graduated with my Master's, one of my former students, posted about it on her Facebook page. 'I don't know if any of you keep in touch with any of your teachers, but Ms. Alisha was my teacher in fourth grade. I loved her. She's kept up with me. She's come to my baby shower. She came to my housewarming and I just want to say congratulations. She graduated with her Master's, 'Who does that?' It's about three students that I am friends with on Facebook, my personal Facebook page, not my Ms. Alisha teacher page. But there several students that I keep up with on that page too and these are kids who are in high school and beyond. This young lady is beyond high school. Danielle explained how she views her students as an extension of herself and that she has a responsibility as their teacher to service them. She stated:

When I see them, I see me...I don't think anything different except for the fact that they're children and they're ready to learn. Regardless of the challenges, regardless of their academic deficits...I see me as a child. I see them in me because I am them...it's just at a different phase in my life. I see an African American student that could be...somebody that was from my community and somebody that...could be a family member. So, I feel like...I'm looking at a cousin or a family member. I feel a connection

with them...I do feel a bond. I care. I feel obligated to help them. I feel obligated to make a difference in their lives because they have so many adversities already.

Angela described how she utilizes harsh realities to show her students that she cares about their future and enlightens them on what could happen if they lose the love for learning. She explained:

I talk to them about the pitfalls because I want them to have a good life, I talk about if you don't graduate the likelihood of prison. I try to be very real with them and I talk to them about the pitfalls in society and about fear and how important education is and all the sacrifices that other people made for us to be able to vote. Like, I try to give them a well-rounded social justice perspective when I teach so that it encourages their daily life so they have a better understanding why their neighborhoods are the way they are. Why their parents are struggling to find good jobs. Why their parents can't get to their job when they do find them because of transportation. Like, I try to give them a real clear picture so that they understand that there other forces at work. It's more to what you see...it's kind of like a matrix, the red pill, blue pill. You want to stay without knowing or you want to know? And most times they want to know. And we delve into it. I teach real and because I have pre-school students I have to break it down, you keep missing school, you don't learn, you don't get good grades, you don't graduate, you going to jail. I hate to be that frank with them but I care enough for them to get it.

Angela believed that interacting with students is a way that exhibits care and gives them a sense of assurance in knowing that they have someone cheering them on. She affirmed:

I think I present a positive role model for a lot of my students. First of all, they know I care and that's a big deal for the teacher to care. I have students that just come in here for

a hug. And I mean, I don't even know them that well. I don't even know their name, but they just know that I care about them. I say, "Hello" to every student I see. "How you doing this day?" "Good morning!" If they don't speak, "I'm like, hey, you okay?" You know, "Did you hear me? I'm saying hi to you." And they get used to it, you know. I think it's just to show that...you're in it because you care about these kids. To show your commitment every day in small ways is important. To just be committed and just be for these kids. A lot of kids will just come [to my classroom] and say, "Do you have a snack? I didn't get anything to eat." They know I'm not going to shame them and say, "What you mean you ain't got nothing to eat?" Instead, I give him a little something. They might tell their friend, "She'll give you a snack if you hungry." And they don't abuse it either. I don't have to say y'all can't keep coming [to my classroom], they don't abuse it. They use it when they need it. Like they will say, "I really am hungry, can I get one of your breakfast bars?" And I give them a breakfast bar. It's so important for the kids to know that you are here for them and you are rooting for them. I'm here for all the students you know. I try to support them and all kind of ways.

The teachers discussed the genuine care and concern that they have for their students. They demonstrated ways in which they extended care beyond academics and spoke of social and emotional bonds that were created amongst themselves and their students. They agreed that care and teaching goes together and that in order for students to be successful that they need to be secure in knowing that their best interest is a priority.

Othermothering

"They look at me like a Mom. It never fails, someone is going to say, "Ma" instead of "Ms. Alisha." It never fails. Because they know I care." ~Alisha (Research Participant)

Alisha employs maternal practice to build relationships with her students and to create a learning environment where both, her and the students can be their authentic selves. In between chuckles, she explained the type of atmosphere she has formed with her students, which speaks to her genuine care for their welfare:

I have a good relationship with them [her students]. They can laugh...we can laugh together. We have fun together. I always get this with a lot of my students. They look at me like a Mom. It never fails, someone is going to say, "Ma" instead of "Ms. Alisha." It never fails. Because they know I care... I have to say it always amazes me. I am not one of those teacher, 'No, I'm not hugging you.' 'No, don't touch me, none of that.' It's almost a line of kids outside my door in the morning waiting to give me a hug, 'Good morning, Ms. Alisha!' They...need that affection too. And I don't have a problem with...giving that. They know I care. They know I have their best interest at heart...I am going to try to do what I can to make things pleasant. They know I will protect them. I will look out for them. [...] when there are students in the hallway horse playing. I will move my students to the side. Like I said, 'Mother Hen' them and talk to the kids like, 'Listen, my kids are coming through here, if somebody bumps into to them, it's a problem. I need you to move out of the way, they're coming through. Move over!' You know, I just want to make sure they are safe inside school and out!

Danielle, like Alisha, has a maternal-like bond with her students where she fosters growth and nurturance. She takes the time to ensure that she not only knows her students academically but personally as well as she voluntarily does home visits. She assures the students that they are left in the hands of someone who cares when they come to school. She described her student-teacher relationship and the reason that she does home visits with her students:

For the most part I feel like I have...a maternal relationship with them [the students]. I think that even though I'm their teacher, I still...let them know that I'm their school mom. I can have personal conversations with them. I can tap into areas that they may not actually let [other] people in and they will tell me personal things about themselves and their families. Some things they tell me, I am obligated to let someone know if it is harmful to them [the student] or it's something I keep to myself. They're very affectionate and always hugging. So, I make sure that they receive that affection back. I have a strong relationship with each of them. I do home visits, which is a program that our school participates in. When I go into their homes, I am showing them that I care enough to see what goes on with them outside of school. I talk with them and their parents about what they expect from me, what they want their children to focus on in first grade, and how they [the parents] can help them [their children] succeed.

Tamara also refers to the relationship that she has developed with her students as one that is maternal. Her students confide in her not only regarding academic issues but with personal situations that take place in their lives as well. She described the relationship that she has developed with her students:

We have a very good relationship. Mama, teacher, auntie kinda of relationship. They come and talk to me about stuff in school. What's happening at home. They let me know what's going on. If they don't let me know verbally...they will throw me a note on my desk. So, we have a very good relationship. I can talk to them and we can talk about what's going on, what's bothering you. At that point, it's really like being Mama. I have [bought] clothes, from just talking to them. Buying food... just being there. Letting them know there's not anything that you [they] cannot tell me. Don't be scared or afraid of

anything or anybody, “I’m the bully, nobody bullies you.” So, I just try to reassure them that I’m human and I understand. You know, I...fight for them. If I find out that one of them [is getting] suspended from another class, I call up the principal and say, “Why?” You know, this is his teacher. I need this child in school. This child does not need to be at home. Let’s find another way.” So I’m usually the fighter for them. I guess that’s what a mother does!

As Tamara continued to speak, compassion and firmness emerged when she described the tough love she has for her African American male students and how she integrates real-life African American male role models in her instruction:

I use the examples of successful men in my teaching for my boys. I use President Barack Obama all the time and... why he is successful...because of his drive and his push. Because [I]...teach mostly boys, I’m hard on them...my African American boys, especially. If I’m not hard on anybody else, I’m hard on them because I care about what happens to them. They have to know that you are vested in them. They have to know that you will fight for them. They will have to know that if they don't understand something you are going to explain it to them. They need to know that no matter what, you have their back and that they're going to achieve. That you're going to make...the classroom a comfortable environment [and] that they are safe with you.

The relationship the teachers described with their students is one that acts as an extended family and is referred to as othermothering. They discussed actions that took on the role of non-biological mothering responsibilities, which were not necessarily associated with academics. They attended to the social, emotional, and physical needs of their students by being nurturing and supportive, showing affection, and providing a sense of protection. According to Case

(1997) when teachers display othermothering, they cultivate and encourage their students to excel socially and academically.

Overall, this research study was an examination of the practices that were utilized by African American elementary teachers in urban schools to influence the academic success of their African American students. The principals from four urban schools were interviewed and nominated the teachers who took part in this study. The five urban elementary teachers were selected based on their ability to successfully engage and motivate their students to attain academic achievement. In interviewing the principals, they asserted that the teachers were culturally competent as they built relationships with their students, demonstrated othermothering, and had high expectations for their students.

Summary of Themes

There were several themes that arose from the analysis of the interviews with the teachers. The themes identified the commonality of the teacher's teaching practices. Table 5 provides a summary of the themes and curriculum as well as the instructional and relationship practices the teachers utilized. The teachers all voiced concern over the traditional curricular and instructional strategies they were being asked to use. They believed that the traditional methods of teaching were ineffective with their African American students and that a progressive philosophy of teaching (see Table 5) was more advantageous. Their students seem to benefit from engaging in active learning, social learning, and problem solving.

Table 5

Themes and Teaching Behaviors

Themes	Teacher's Behaviors
Progressive Teaching Philosophy	Facilitated of learning and fostered thinking (Rose) Met the needs of students at their readiness levels (Angela) Incorporated active learning (Angela) Attended to the whole child, physical, mental, and emotionally (All teachers) Provided a social justice perspective (All teachers)
Integration of Technology	Incorporated sensory learning (Tamara) Assisted with teaching and reteaching skills (Alisha)
Differentiation	Provided for task completion (Tamara) Grouped students by interests (Angela) Grouped students by readiness levels (Rose) Worked with students on specific skills (Tamara)
Cooperative Learning	Learned through "peer tutoring" (Rose, Tamara) Communicated desired educational outcomes (Danielle)
Culturally Responsive Curriculum	Showed positive African Americans images used in place of distorted images (Tamara) Supplemented mandated curriculum supplemented with culturally relevant materials (Alisha) Communicated the contributions that African American have made (Angela)
High Expectations	Recognized that adversities do not dictate academic performance (Danielle) Held African American males to higher standards (Tamara) Communicated the realities associated with African Americans and encouraged students to challenge the status quo (Angela)
Caring	Understood and knew the students being taught (Rose) Provided reality checks about future endeavors (Angela) Displayed genuine care for students' well-being (Alisha)
Othermothering	Fostered a maternal-like relationship that mimics a mother or aunt (Tamara) Doubled as a teacher and a protector from harm (Alisha) Saw herself in students and ensured that they are cared for beyond academics (All teachers)

Integration of technology (see Table 5) was utilized to engage, introduce, and reinforce skills in core subject areas. Differentiation (see Table 5) was practiced to instruct students at various academic levels. Cooperative learning (see Table 5) supported students being responsible for their learning and learning from one another. Culturally responsive curriculum (see Table 5)

was employed to create a learning community that utilized materials that valued and respected diversity. High expectations (see Table 5) were set so that students gained confidence in their ability to learn. Caring (see Table 5) for students created reassuring, positive relationships that built thriving learning environments. Othermothering (see Table 5) presented opportunities for students to experience social and emotional care beyond academics. W. E. B. Du Bois stated, “ Education is that whole system of human training within and without the school house walls, which molds and develop men” (Brainy Quote, 2018). The teachers valued the learning of their students by utilizing practices, which not only focused on academics but also recognized their student’s strengths and interest, incorporated their backgrounds and history, and cared for their overall well-being.

Chapter V

Discussion, Implications & Recommendations

This research study was conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of African American elementary teachers who teach African American students in urban schools by examining the practices they utilize to influence the academic achievement of their students. A qualitative ethnographic case study approach was used to capture the experiences of the African American urban elementary teachers and to investigate the practices they utilize with African American students in urban schools. The qualitative research method allowed the voices of the teachers to be utilized to create a “cultural portrait” of the participant’s experiences teaching African American elementary students in an urban district (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 9).

This qualitative research study was guided by the following questions to develop a deeper level of inquiry: (a) What are African American elementary teachers’ perceptions about African American students in urban schools? (b) What kinds of curriculum do African American elementary teachers use? (c) What kinds of instructional methods do African American elementary teachers use? and (d) What kinds of relationships do African American elementary teachers have with their African American students?

Four African American urban elementary school principals in a Midwestern urban school district were selected to nominate teachers they believed were successful in teaching African American students. Principals were interviewed individually about their process and criterion of selection. The interview data were analyzed and themes emerged.

The teachers of this research study included five African American female elementary teachers selected by their principals. On average, the teachers had over 17 years of experience as

urban educators and over 10 years as elementary teachers. Data were collected from the teachers through the use of one-on-one interviews. Teachers were interviewed individually, transcripts were reviewed, and data were analyzed through coding resulting with several themes arising.

Analysis of Principal's Nomination Criteria

Principals of four urban elementary schools were asked to nominate African American elementary teachers they believed were successful in teaching African American students. The school district had a lengthy process for approval. The principals were selected based upon their availability to participate in this research study. Although a mixture of males and female principals would have been more desirable, only four female principals were accessible.

These principals were interviewed about the criteria and the process of selecting the teachers. Traditionally, teachers are evaluated on their success with teaching utilizing an evaluation framework or rubric through a series of classroom observations, which are conducted by administrators (principals, assistant principals). In addition, student work samples, lesson plans, test scores, and attendance are also taken into account as well to determine effectiveness (Danielson, 2008; Sawchuk, 2015). Although, the principals stated that they utilize this type of process to evaluate their teachers, additional criteria were identified. These criteria were analyzed and led to themes that were not part of an evaluation tool, test scores, or tied to student growth. The principals identified four characteristics they attributed to the teacher's success with teaching: relationship building, othermothering, high expectations, and cultural competency.

Relationship building. The principals witnessed the development of supportive, positive relationships between the teachers who they selected and their African American students. They concluded that the teachers cared about their student's well-being and that they understood that teaching goes beyond learning and retaining information. When students

become comfortable with themselves and the world around them in an educational setting it is due to the relationship that is built between the teacher and their students (Rey et al., 2007). The teachers nurtured the mental and physical health of their students as well, which assisted with their academic performance. These teachers created secure relationships that provided their students with a sense of belonging, which in turn allowed them to focus on the academic goals of learning, exploring, and mastery (Rey et al., 2007). They identified teachers who possessed special skills and knowledge that gave them the ability to establish a “personal, and not simply professional, relationship with their students that cares for their social, psychological, cultural, and academic well-being, both in school and society” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997, p. 2). Pang and Gibson (2001) affirm that “Black educators are far more than physical role models, and they bring diverse family histories, value orientations, and experiences to students within the classroom, attributes, often not found in textbooks or viewpoints often omitted” (p. 260-261).

Othermothering. The principals believed that the teachers doubled as a mother when instructing their African American students. As they selected the teachers based upon their understanding that “failure was not an option” (Campbell’s principal) for their students. Othermothering, according to Patricia Hill Collins (1990), is the role that African American women portray as community mothers, who take on the responsibility of nurturing the social and emotional development of all children through the lens of social justice and racial uplifting. The teachers understood “the realities of being uneducated” for their African American students. The principals believed the teachers engaged in the process of othermothering because they viewed their teaching as a “family affair” where their students were regarded “as their own” (Milner, 2009, p. 136). They agreed on the importance of teachers engaging in othermothering to provide students with a safe environment, support, and an understanding of their reality.

High expectations. The principals all believed that their teachers instilled confidence in their students regardless of their abilities and communicated high expectations at the beginning of the school year and throughout the school year. Establishing expectations that are high and well defined assist with increasing both behavior and academic performance (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The teachers ensured that the students understood that they were concerned about them excelling and about what the future held for their African American students. Milner (2009) states that successful teachers in urban school “have and demonstrate high expectations. Teachers do not water down the curriculum and present unchallenging opportunities for students just because they ‘feel sorry’ for their students. They empathize with and care for their students” (p. 136). The selected teachers exemplified their belief that their African American students had the ability to do anything they put their minds to with some effort. The principals spoke of the importance of teachers being able to build specific kinds of relationships with students that helped them understand and realize their teacher’s high expectations of them.

Cultural competency. According to the principals, the selected teachers were culturally competent in that they had an awareness of their own cultural identity and that of their students. They were aware and understood the cultural learning styles of their students and taught to the diversity within their classroom (Harmon & Stokes, 2005; Irvine et al., 2001, Milner, 2012a). The principals expressed that the teachers knew the importance of allowing their students to see themselves in what was being taught so that their student’s cultural traditions and language were being characterized in the classroom. The teachers established relationships with their student’s families in order to keep an open line of communication and to include them in the learning process. The selected teachers managed teaching and learning from an “inclusive, humanistic, relational, and worldview” approach (Lindsey, Karns, & Myatt, 2010, p. 86). Being culturally

competent was seen as being critically important and necessary as it enabled teachers to understand the cultural learning needs of their students and engage in successful relationship building.

The principals in this study did not identify successful teachers of African American elementary students using a standard teacher evaluation or observational tool focusing on the implementation of the curriculum, specific instructional practices, test-taking strategies, and standardized test results. The principals selected the participants for this research study based upon their ability to successfully motivate, engage, and teach their African American students so they could attain a level of academic success. In selecting the teachers, the principals identified four characteristics that endorsed the selection of the teachers. Those characteristics were: relationship building, othermothering, high expectations, and cultural competency. All of these characteristics are all rooted in culturally responsive teaching practices.

Analysis of African American Urban Elementary Teachers

The African American urban elementary teachers that participated in this research study were selected by their principals based upon their ability to motivate, engage, and increase the academic performance of their African American students. On average, the teachers had over 17 years of experience as urban educators and over 10 years as elementary teachers. Data were collected from the teachers through the use of one-on-one interviews. The following themes emerged from teacher interviews: (a) progressive teaching philosophy, (b) integration of technology, (c) differentiation, (d) cooperative learning, (e) cultural responsive curriculum, (f) high expectations, (g) caring, and (h) othermothering.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

All of the participants in this study understood the challenges and realities of their

African American students. They all adhered to a belief that they were responsible for their students' success. They believed their students could achieve academic and social success if they could provide a nurturing, affirming learning environment. These teachers were fully aware that the curriculum and instructional methods they were required to use were not a good fit for their students and were willing to modify and change what was needed to ensure their students could experience success.

Culturally responsive teaching recognizes the significance of incorporating students' cultural references in all aspect of learning (Ladson-Billing, 2009). Gay (2000) asserts that when the performance styles, prior knowledge, and cultural experiences of culturally diverse students are taken into consideration to create learning encounters that are relevant and successful, then cultural relevant practices are being utilized. Relevant connections need to be made between culturally diverse students, the curriculum content being taught, and the tasks that they are being required to complete (Montgomery, 2001). When culturally responsive teaching is implemented students are motivated and engaged in learning (Irvine, 2010).

Even though, none of the teachers specifically mentioned that their teaching methods were culturally responsive, the descriptions from their responses in each theme affirmed that they engaged in cultural responsive teaching. They changed the curriculum making it more student-centered and experiential. To meet the needs of all of their students, they differentiated the curriculum based upon readiness and cultural learning styles. Modifications and additions were made the to curriculum to make it more culturally inclusive, accurate, contextual, affirming and culturally responsive. Table 6 illustrates how each theme identified by the teachers corresponds to cultural responsive teaching.

Table 6

Themes and Cultural Responsive Teaching

Themes	Culturally Responsive Teaching
Progressive Teaching Philosophy	Progressive teaching philosophy Student-centered Fosters critical thinking Experiential learning Build upon student's prior knowledge
Integration of Technology	Address the digital gap Interactive learning Hands-on learning Contextual
Differentiation	Differentiates content, process, product, Flexible small groups Accommodations for diverse academic abilities and disabilities
Culturally Responsive Curriculum	Cultural responsive curriculum Multiple perspectives Multicultural materials Lens of oppressed and disenfranchised
High Expectations	High expectation Intrinsic motivation Positive praises Healthy concept of self
Caring	Care for the whole student Provide honest feedback Build relationships with students, families, communities
Othermothering	Feeling of kinship Care for students as their own

Progressive Teaching Philosophy

Teachers believed in and utilized a progressive philosophy to teaching that attended to the whole child to teach their African American students. They all agreed that the existing curriculum they were required to use was based upon a traditional philosophy of learning that created a teacher-centered learning environment and used lecturing, memorization, textbook-dependent lessons, and pacing charts. Teachers felt these practices were insufficient for engaging, motivating, and fostering the academic performance of their African American

students. Rather than focusing on a traditional approach to teaching, they emphasized learning by doing, learning through active experimentation, and experiential learning (Cohen, 1999). They believed that African American students needed academic, social, and individual learning experiences in order to improve their performance. They utilized a progressive teaching approach to promote collaboration and to develop social skills that allowed their students to take ownership of their learning. The teachers saw their students as unique individuals and that the one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum and instruction was not appropriate.

Cultural responsive teaching is built upon a progressive philosophy of learning and creates a student-centered learning environment (see Table 6). Students learn through experiential and discovery learning exploring problems and finding solutions (Irvine et al., 2001). The context of the student is always foremost in the teacher's mind incorporating the student's world into curriculum and instruction (Harmon, 2012a). Building upon student's knowledge is critical. The teachers in this study held the same kind of progressive teaching similar to teaching used in culturally responsive teaching.

Table 7

Teaching Philosophies of Teachers

Traditional Philosophy	Progressive Philosophy
One-size-fits all curriculum	Differentiated curriculum
Passive learning	Active learning
Rote memory	Experiential learning
Lecturing	Individualized learning
Teacher-centered	Group learning

Note. Adapted from *In search of understanding: The case of constructivist classrooms* (p. 17), by J. G. Brooks and M. Brooks, 1999, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Copyright 1999 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Reprinted with permission.

The teachers all believed that a much-needed change was necessary from the traditional approach of teaching. They believed a progressive approach to teaching was the best method to

utilize when teaching their African American students. A traditional philosophy promotes instructional methods where students attain knowledge through the process of lecture, recitation, and rote memorization. It does not provide students with the opportunity to develop problem solving, critical thinking, or decision-making skills (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

The traditional philosophy of teaching involves strategies that limit the learning of students. With this philosophy, students experience a one-size-fits all curriculum (see Table 7), which is teaching that assumes all students learn in the same ways. This type of curriculum relies on increasing test scores, using textbooks, and worksheets. A one-size-fits all curriculum excludes student's learning styles, developmentally appropriate practices, and their interest, leaving the needs of the students unmet (Murray, Shea, Shea, & Harlin, 2015). Alisha believed that "just to memorize [was] not enough" for her African American students to be academically successful.

Passive learning (see Table 7) is an approach where students receive information and through a process of memorization they internalize the information. This method merely has students transferring information through recalling or assessments without receiving feedback or being actively involved in the learning process (Duarte, Cabrito, Figueira & Monge, 2015). Tamara indicated that the days of teaching definitions, doing all the instructing, and having the children come in through the backdoor with learning is not the best method to teach African American students.

Rote memory (see Table 7), similar to passive learning, is the process of memorizing based on repetition. This approach entails students being able to quickly recall the information the more it is repeated (Mayer, 2002). Alisha explains that the days of rote memory is just about gone and that learning all the states and capitals and multiplication facts was a method of the past

and could not be used solely with teaching her African American students.

Lecturing (see Table 7) is a teaching method where the teacher takes on the role of the expert and provides information to students orally. A study was conducted by the National Training Laboratories (2000) and found that lecturing is the most ineffective teaching method for student learning and retention of information. The study concluded that when lecturing was used as a teaching method to deliver instruction, students retained only 5% of the information taught. Compared to other teaching methods, students retained 75% of the information taught with learning by doing, 50% with group discussions, and 90% was retained when peer teaching took place (National Training Laboratories, 2000). Danielle understood that solely lecturing was not effective with her African American students because their attention spans were short and that when she used the lecturing approach, she was not really thinking about her students and their style of learning.

Being teacher-centered (see Table 7) involves the dominant use of direct instructional methods where the teacher governs the lessons, materials, and the ways in which students learn (Brown, 2003). In this type of learning, the teacher is the active participant, which involves giving instruction, lecturing, or reading aloud. The students are inactive in the learning process and is either sitting, listening, completing worksheet, or taking notes (Haberman, 1991). The teachers agreed that their students should be active in the learning process so that they have opportunities to take ownership and get involved with their own learning.

The progressive philosophy of teaching involves strategies that maximize the learning of students. A differentiated curriculum (see Table 7) is one in which the teacher structures the curriculum in order to meet the different readiness levels or what students are ready to learn based upon what they have demonstrated they understand, interests, and learning

profiles of the students in one classroom (Tomlinson, 1999). According to Tomlinson (1999), restricting the curriculum to meet the needs of the students will render teaching that is meaningful, includes the students, and goes beyond just learning facts. Angela differentiated her instruction using small groups based upon readiness so that she could observe what her students interest were and listen to their conversations. Implementing small groups allowed her hone in the things that her students might like learning about.

Learning that involves students engaging in the learning process is active learning (see Table 7). Students are doing more than listening; they are involved in discussions, working in groups, and presenting information when active learning takes place. Active learning compared to lecturing allows students to not only improve their ability to retain and recall information but it also develops critical thinking skills (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). The teachers understood that their African American students needed to be involved in meaningful activities that required them to think about what they were doing. Alisha ensured that her cooperative group members had a responsibility in the group so that everyone was actively involved in the learning.

Similar to active learning, experiential learning (see Table 7) is the process of learning through doing. Students learn through their own experience, observing, analyzing, and experimenting. They interact with the materials and equipment as opposed to learning from a textbook, lecture or through someone else's experiences (Morpheus, 2017). The teachers incorporated hands-on lessons to give their African American students opportunities to see and do. Danielle used manipulatives with her first grade students when she taught geometric shapes so that they could touch the shape as well as see it.

Individualized learning (see Table 7) allows students to learn at their own pace based on their abilities and interests. This method acknowledges students who are in need of additional

instruction and those students who do not, as it is an instructional strategy that is based upon the readiness of the student, which when implemented, meets the needs of all students (Basye, 2018). The teachers incorporated individualized learning with their African American students by differentiating instruction with small groups. Tamara stated that incorporating small group instruction was the closest way to have some type one-on-one instructional time so that her students who needed additional instruction were supported.

Small group learning requires a collective effort that extends learning beyond being individual (see Table 7). The groups are given a shared focus in which each member of the group must contribute knowledge in order to meet the desired outcome (Burke, 2011). When students have the opportunity to experience group learning by working with their peers in teams, they are able to take ownership over their learning. The teachers created a learning environment where their African American students were accountable to and for one another when they engaged in cooperative learning. Rose utilized this strategy to encourage her students who were below grade level and those students who were on or above grade level because it allowed for students to teach their peers. Those students who were below grade-level received additional assistance, and the students who were on or above grade level, were encouraged to use their leadership qualities. As mention earlier, in the study conducted by the National Training Laboratories (2000), they found that when peers teach peers, 90% of the information learned is retained.

Culturally responsive instruction reinforces a progressive philosophy of teaching because it offers opportunities for students to experience learning that is self-directed with peer and teacher collaboration. It allows students to encounter learning that is designed to meet their learning needs as well as relevant and culture specific (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2012). Academic outcomes are influenced with a progressive philosophy of teaching for urban African American

students because they are immersed in the learning.

Overall, the teachers agreed that a progressive philosophy of teaching needs to be adopted. Teaching guided by a progressive philosophy advocates instructional methods that focus on the varied levels of understanding amongst their students, provides opportunities for experiential learning, integrates technology, into teaching and learning, and allows students to learn from one another. A progressive approach takes into account the attention span of the students, utilizes the student's prior knowledge, and permits students to be architects in the lesson planning process. The data collected from the teachers support the adoption of a more progressive teaching philosophy as the teachers agreed that when they utilized instructional practices that were focused on meeting the learning needs of their African American students, they became more actively engaged in the learning process and performed better.

Integration of Technology

All teachers reported that their African American students possessed an understanding of operating technology and were enthusiastic about using it. They stated that their African American students were motivated to learn when technology was integrated into the curriculum and their instruction. They also indicated that their students were more attentive when using technology and appeared captivated with learning.

Judge (2005) found that when African American students are exposed to computer use early, there is a positive relationship between academics and achievement. Offering students opportunities to explore what they learned using technology resulted in them gaining a deeper understanding and reinforced skills. Having students demonstrate their knowledge through technology allowed them to explore and learn more about technology. The teachers described how excited their students were when technology was used to scaffold certain skills being taught.

Rose stated that some of her students were so eager to use an electronic reading program to improve their literacy skills on cellphones at home.

According to Beerer (2017) integrating technology is a means of implementing culturally responsive teaching because it allows for culturally diverse students who come into the classroom with various languages, learning styles, socioeconomic statuses, and experiences to witness real-life and real-time images of real-world situations. Beerer (2017) examines how teachers can implement culturally responsive instructional methods using digital content. She points out seven strategies that can be incorporated in instruction. The first strategy is to provide students with digital content that is relevant and allows the student to “see themselves” in the subject being taught (para. 6). Second, teachers must provide high-quality digital content (HQDC), which is standards-aligned subject matter that is created specially for culturally diverse students, as it builds vocabulary for early learners and English language learners, engages students to think critically, and provides multiple methods of acquiring knowledge (Pusey, 2016). Third, include high-quality math and science activities that incorporates graphics, virtue labs, and games that challenges and motivates students to use high-order thinking skills. Next, develop reading and language skills by using videos, games, animation, definitions, and images that are relevant to their culture and content in order for students to make meaning with what is being taught. Next, use digital content that allows students to take virtual field trips to places of interest in order to assist with building an understanding of other cultures and their traditions. Next, close the “belief gap,” (Beerer, 2017, para. 6), which is defined as uncertain thoughts that some educators acquire about the potential of urban culturally diverse students. Finally, take interest in understanding the cultural and community of the students being taught through the use

of digital content. When these strategies are taken into account along with integrating technology, culturally responsive teaching is taking place.

In a study by Judge (2005), when teachers integrated technology into their lessons they increase the presence of the computer area in the classroom. In turn, students increased the frequency of using technology in the learning environment. Teachers reported that technology integration also offered more opportunities for hands-on learning (Judge, 2005). When faced with the issue of access to technology in the classroom, teachers spoke of the kind of technology that was available in their school buildings, maintenance of equipment, and access to the Internet in their building. Some students had daily access to iPads, SMART boards, SMART tables, and Apple desktops. Although Rose reported it was a hit-and-miss process with integrating technology because of outdated equipment that she had in her classroom, she still managed to create a system where her students had access to technology at least once a week. Overall, the teachers made use of the technology that was available to them and incorporated it in their instruction, despite the poor condition of the equipment, lack of technological support in the building, and inconsistency of Internet server.

Integrating technology into instruction is encouraged in culturally responsive teaching because it addresses the digital gap that is ever growing between the dominant culture and culturally diverse students (see Table 6). The use of technology provides opportunities for students to interact with what they are learning and to work in small groups. Studies reveal that when students are exposed to and utilize technology, it enhances their performance (Wenglinsky, 1998). Integrating technology allows students to make more meaningful connections to what they are learning. The teachers in this study reported that integrating technology into their own instruction allowed them to make more cultural contextual and relevant connections for students

and assisted student's retention of information.

Culturally responsive teaching speaks to the relationship between academic performance and the integration of technology. Donnor (2005) explains that in order for African American students to understand how technology can assist them with becoming successful in a postindustrial society, they have to be exposed to teachers who understand culturally relevant teaching. Teachers must understand the realities and challenges African American students in urban schools may encounter and how to navigate the system.

Not only does this research study support the case for integrating technology as a culturally responsive teaching practice, it also endorses Eisenhart and Edwards' (2004) research. They conducted a case study examining a culturally responsive urban afterschool intervention program intended to increase the interest and engagement of African American girls in computer science technology. The afterschool program curriculum was implemented based on the participants' responses. They found that when computer science technology lessons were reflective of the girls' lives, they were more motivated and engaged with the activities than when no relevant connections were made. The girls were encouraged and motivated to learn and acquired knowledge beyond the expectations of the program. The study demonstrated the importance of making cultural connections with implementing technology. However, making these relevant technological connections with cultural diverse students is a topic that is underexposed and is in need of further research.

Lee (2003) argues that the teaching environment and technology instruction needs to be more culturally responsive and offers a framework that is designed to create a more culturally responsive approach to integrating technology. Her Cultural Modeling Design Framework, is a software application that focuses on four culturally responsive rationales: (a) building on prior

knowledge (b) cultural ways of knowing (c) engagement and (d) motivation, social, civic, and political empowerment. Lee (2003) explains that the computer-based tool influenced the literacy skills of African American students situated in a high-poverty urban school because the students had opportunities to work in groups and use higher order thinking skills to problem solve. The teachers' use and reported the impact of integrating technology in their teaching supports. Lee's (2003) argument that the teaching environments and technology instruction "needs to take issues of culture into account" (p. 57) supports the responses of the teachers in this study.

Differentiation

Differentiation of curriculum and instruction involves providing lessons for students based upon their readiness level, interest, and preferred learning styles (Littky, 2004). The teachers agreed that each year they received students who came with a variety of experiences, knowledge, and learning needs. A typical classroom with students who have different learning abilities needs to experience a teacher who is versed in satisfying the learning needs of the students who are at different readiness levels by adapting their instructional methods to cater to the vast diversity of the knowledge in the classroom (Tomlinson, 1999). Personalizing the learning for their African American students was a method the teachers utilized to increase their academic performance.

The teachers reported that differentiating the instruction was the closest way to have some type of one-on-one instructional time. The teachers differentiated three components of their classroom: (a) content or what information was being taught (b) process or the way information is taught and explored and (c) products or the way students can demonstrate their knowledge (Dodge, 2005; Tomlinson, 1999). The content was differentiated through assignment sheets and activities that were individualized for students to complete tasks at their readiness level. Teachers

differentiated the process through their use of small group instruction and small group rotations implemented at least twice a week or more. In addition, short mini lessons along with short-guided practice lessons were taught in small groups before allowing students to do independent practice. Differentiated products provided choices for students to show what they learned in ways that they preferred.

The findings in this research study reinforce Santamaria's (2009) qualitative case study that examined pedagogical differences and identified teaching practices that are needed with culturally diverse students and English language learners. In this study, Santamaria observed educators in two urban high performing elementary schools that serviced culturally diverse students. In her study she found that the best instructional methods the educators utilized were those practices that included all student's learning styles and focused on diversity in the areas of academics, culture, language, and socioeconomics.

Differentiation, according to Forsten, Grant and Hollas (in progress), is a method of instruction that has seven "building blocks" and which lends itself to culturally responsive teaching based upon the students' culturally preferred learning styles and interests. They insisted that teachers instruct differently for culturally different children. First, they suggest that teachers know their students by developing an understanding of not only their learning styles but their pace and rate of learning; know their personal qualities, such as motivation and temperament; know their interest and ability levels; and know their social demographics, such as age, socioeconomic status, and family background. Second, educators must possess traits of a high-quality teacher by believing that all students have the ability to be successful learners, having the knowledge to differentiate instruction; understanding best practices and child developmental levels, and having experience teaching a variety of grade levels. Third, use a quality curriculum

and/or supplement where needed so that the lessons are of high interest to students and relevant, create appropriate levels of complexity and challenge, and ensure that lessons focus on skills and theory as opposed to facts. Next, create a learning environment conducive to academic achievement by arranging desk and tables to allow for collaboration; use flexible homogenous grouping methods, promote positive discipline methods; and provide anchor activities for students who finish tasks at different times and sponge activities, activities that “soak up” allowing students to refocus during transition, small group instruction, or when classroom housekeeping activities, such as taking attendance, collecting lunch money and homework, has to be completed (Tomlinson, 1999). Next, create flexible teaching and learning periods by engaging in team teaching, providing remediation, tutoring, and providing non-academic activities for students. Next, delivery instruction utilizing best practices such as cooperative learning, small group learning, tiered learning, “assignment sheets” (Tamara), and integrating technology. Lastly, develop multiple ways of assessing student knowledge that include portfolios; oral, visual, and written presentations; observations, and rubrics. The use of these differentiated instruction building blocks require teachers that are tenacious, risk-takers, who are comfortable with challenging the status quo in order for culturally diverse students to experience academic success.

Culturally responsive teaching embraces differentiation as it is the most effective way to address the academic disparities students bring into the classroom (see Table 6). Ginsberg (2005) found that in urban schools that service African American students, it is imperative to create lessons that elicit the interest, opinion, and value of the students as an incentive for encouraging intrinsic motivation-engaging in a task because it is interesting and enjoyable. Boykins, Tyler, and Miller (2005) conducted a qualitative study in elementary schools that explored the cultural

assets that African American students bring with them into the classroom and how these resources can be utilized to shape instruction. Cultural assets are culturally based ways of learning and behaviors. Often, teachers who are not culturally competent can misconstrue these behaviors and find them challenging. The cultural assets of African American children identified in this study were: movement, verve, affect, orality, communalism, individualism, competition, object orientation, priority placed on cognition over the display of affective expression, and maintenance of a bureaucracy orientation (Boykins et al., 2005, p. 528).

Boykins et al. (2005) found that the teaching practices utilized characteristics of the dominant culture, which were initiated by the teacher, as opposed to the cultural assets of African American students. The findings of this study support the recognition that the differentiation of cultural learning styles and behaviors are an important aspect of learning. In addition, Boykin et al. (2005) believe that this misalignment between African American culture and the culture of American urban schools is a reason as to why African American students are not experience academic success.

In this research study, the teachers not only understood the culturally learning styles of their African American students, they knew that they needed to be taken into account in order for their students to gain a level of academic success. To meet the academic needs of their students, they differentiated content, process, and products in their teaching. The findings in this research study support Boykin et al's. (2005) study.

The teachers' knowledge about the curriculum and understanding of their students' needs enabled them to instruct students in small groups based upon student's readiness, maximizing the abilities of their African American students. They understood that their students benefitted from working in small groups because they could observe what their student's interests were and listen

to their conversations in order to introduce, reinforce, and master skills in particular subject areas. The teachers also noted how engaging in differentiated small group instruction motivated their students. Differentiation, when implemented appropriately, met the needs of students who needed more instruction and experiences as well as those students who are advanced.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is an instructional method that requires students to work collaboratively to obtain a desired educational outcome (Slavin, 1991). It is an instructional system that groups students heterogeneously with four to six members. These groups work together to earn rewards, grades, and recognition based on their performance as a whole (Manning & Lucking, 1993). Gay (2002) states that it is important for teachers to have an understanding of those who value “communal living and cooperative problem solving and how these preferences affect educational motivation, aspirations, and task performance” (p. 107). The teachers agreed that their African American students learned best by working with their peers in teams because it allowed the students to take ownership over their learning.

The findings in this study suggest that cooperative learning can be used to improve cultural relationships because it allows learners to communicate with each other, develop an understanding of differences, and recognize the potential of students who share common goals and tasks that need to be accomplished (Manning & Lucking, 1993). The attributes of cooperative learning coincide with one of Boykin’s (1992) African American cultural assets, communalism. Boykin’s (1986) research on the cultural assets of African Americans stresses the importance and need for African American students to engage in activities that foster communalism. Communalism is “a commitment to social connectedness which includes an awareness that social bonds and responsibility transcend individual privileges” (Boykins, 1986,

p. 61). African Americans have a historical and cultural experience with communalism as it was a mechanism that assisted with surviving slavery and overcoming oppression (Gasman, 2002; Joseph, 1995).

Vaughn's (2002) study that examined the effects of cooperative learning on achievement and attitude among elementary students of color in mathematics supports the findings in this research. In this study, he had students participate in Robert Slavin's, Student Teams Achievement Divisions, for 12-weeks. Vaughn (2002) found that the effects of cooperative learning resulted in positive gain being made in the scores on both pretest and posttest given to the students. The student's attitudes toward learning in math also had a positive effect with the incorporation of cooperative learning. Overall, the study found that cooperative learning was the preferred method of learning amongst the culturally diverse students. The results of this research study support Vaughn's findings.

The teachers mentioned that cooperative learning instilled a sense of camaraderie where their students worked together in teams on the same task or a different task. They ensured that their students understood the importance of teamwork when completing a task so that everything would not fall on any one student, and it allowed them to take ownership of the lesson. The teachers created common outcomes, divided the labor and materials, and made each student dependent upon the other for the desired educational outcome.

The teachers also created a sense of community within the classroom by allowing their students to experience social learning, which forms social bonds and relationship (Hale-Benson, 1994; Harmon, 2012a). Through cooperative learning, teachers ensured that each student had a responsibility in the group, which allowed the students to make social connections in order to complete the task. Cooperative learning also provided opportunities for leaders to develop

amongst the students in the groups. Harmon (2012a) suggests that cooperative learning fosters critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and risk-taking in students. One of the teachers, Rose, reported that cooperative learning assisted with reinforcing what the students on grade level know and emphasized their leadership qualities.

Culturally responsive teaching encourages the use of cooperative learning (see Table 6). Using a cooperative learning method, the teachers created a space where cooperative interdependence could take place and develop amongst their students. However, cooperative learning goes beyond grouping students as it fosters active interactions with one another, collective accountability and responsibility, and it directly teaches social skills (Slavin, 1991). The teachers reported that their African American students worked well in cooperative learning groups because they love being together and being challenged by each other. It also gave students the opportunity to communicate with each other. The teachers clearly understood the importance and benefits of cooperative learning. They utilized cooperative learning to engage and motivate their students by grouping them in a variety of ways including heterogeneous grouping, grouping by interest, and grouping by learning styles.

Wilson-Jones and Caston (2004) conducted a study identifying instructional strategies that promoted academic achievement and examined effective learning styles of African American elementary boys. They found that cooperative learning was the instructional method that African American boys preferred because it allowed them to complete class projects with their peers. They also completed other activities where there was limited interaction with the teacher.

The teachers clearly understood the importance and benefits of cooperative learning. They utilized cooperative learning to engage and motivate their students by grouping them in a

lot of different diverse ways, which recognized the learning styles of their male and female African American students. Haberman (1991) states that good teaching and quality learning takes place in urban classrooms “whenever students are actively involved in heterogeneous groups” (p. 294).

Culturally Responsive Curriculum

The teachers in this research study incorporated multicultural knowledge into the curriculum where it was absent in order for their students to see themselves in the lessons being taught. In order for their students to understand the concepts being taught, the teachers utilized a curriculum that was relevant and meaningful to African American students (Hilliard, 1991; Ravitch, 1991). They understood that curriculum goes beyond the materials and manuals used to teach a particular subject and that it is an extension of the information that students were expected to attain as they navigated through school.

Hilliard (1997) argues that one of the most unsettling problems in American public schools is its inability to properly address the cultural and educational needs of African American students. In a study that examined the characteristics of effective teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1999) found that teachers who linked the curriculum to the students’ lives were successful at motivating and engaging their students. Thompson (2002) conducted research that examined the qualities of outstanding elementary teachers using responses from African American students. The students identified 15 qualities and of those qualities, one was that the outstanding teachers made the content work relatable. Forty-seven percent of the students agreed that teachers who incorporated curriculum that was relevant were considered their “best” elementary teachers (Thompson, 2002, p. 148).

The teachers in this study shared that their students were receiving misinformation

regarding their ethnicity, cultural traditions, and language within the context of the curriculum. They believed it was their obligation to have their African American students understand that society has a way of destroying dreams for African Americans and that they have options. The teachers taught the curriculum through a social justice lens as they discussed the injustices of African Americans during slavery and made connections on how some of the same practices that African Americans faced during slavery are being implemented today. Howard (2008) used the theory of critical race to examine the schooling experiences of African American male students in preK-12 schools. The focus of the study was to illuminate how race and racism impacted education for African American males. Counterstorytelling was used to give voice to the participants. Their findings revealed that the participants were aware of how they were perceived by their teachers and administrators. The findings also discovered that the African American students struggled to rid the negative stereotypes that were believed about African American males.

Howard (2008) argues that a “traditional curriculum that does not reflect the experiences, histories, and issues that are germane to African American males, could be reevaluated for the relevance that they have to various student populations” (p. 977). As in this research, the teachers understood the stereotypes and misrepresentation that their African American students were receiving and other forms of oppression in the school curriculum and chose to supplement their mandated curriculum so that their African American students could experience a curriculum that was culturally responsive. Researchers have spoke out about a revision to curriculum that is used to teach culturally diverse students so that there are multicultural aspects included (Banks, 1997; Gay, 1994).

A curriculum that utilizes the students’ cultural history as opposed to denying it is

culturally responsive (Gay, 2000). Shockley (2007) contends that African American students need to be placed at the center of their learning. In order to do this, they must experience an education that arms them with a sense of self-knowledge and awareness in order to instill a sense of culturally and political agency for the purpose of social justice and nation building.

Implementing curriculum that is culturally responsive is a means of ensuring that African American students are exposed to their cultural knowledge.

Milner (2016) conducted a study using an African American male, middle school math and science teacher and Geneva Gay's, culturally responsive pedagogy framework to examine the practices of the African American male teachers as they incorporated the framework in their instruction. Milner (2016) found that the African American male teacher had a willingness to learn from his students and was open to his students teaching him, which he stated allowed him to "remain current" with what was happening in the world of his students (p. 425). This immersion into the world of the students not only validated the lives of the African American students but also incorporated their worlds into the curriculum, thus making it culturally responsive.

All of the teachers in this study included culturally relevant books and other materials into their lessons, which kept students motivated because they could relate to them and had an interest in them. They exposed the students to familiar faces and places regarding their culture and history, which gave their African American students a sense of pride. The teachers created a learning environment that respected their student's heritage, language, traditions, and community by challenging cultural and racial stereotypes.

Culturally responsive teaching includes the use of cultural responsive curriculum (see

Table 6). It is genuine, student-centered, and makes real-life connections by employing culturally history to explain and teach concepts that can improve academic performance as well as enhance self-esteem (Milner, 2012a). Banks and Banks (1995) and Osborne (1996) state that culturally diverse students must interact with a curriculum that validates their culture and is reflective of their interest in order to provide a means to construct knowledge. The teachers used supplemental materials to support the mandated curriculum so that their African American students could see themselves in the learning. They ensured that their students saw images of African Americans and learned about events that involved African Americans in the lessons being taught.

High Expectations

Unfortunately, it has been proposed that teacher expectations are one of the causes of the achievement gap between culturally diverse students and their White counterparts (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Teacher expectations have been attributed to a population of teachers, who sometimes base expectations for academic achievement on the culture of the students. In other words, these teachers expect less from African American and Latinos students and more from White and Asian students based on standardized test scores (Baron, Tom, & Cooper, 1985). All the teachers in this research study expressed a strong belief in their African American students' ability to achieve academically and socially. They made sure that their students knew they expected the best from them and they wanted them to be successful.

Social class is also utilized as a basis for determining expectations for academic achievement of culturally diverse students of low socioeconomic status. As mentioned with culture been a determinant for low expectations, teachers tend to have lower expectations for students with a lower socioeconomic status than those with a higher socioeconomic status

(Hinnant, O'Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009). Auwarter and Aruguete (2008) conducted a study to examine whether teacher's expectations of students were based on gender and socioeconomic under four conditions. They found that teachers had higher expectations for boys from high socioeconomic statuses than boys with lower socioeconomic statuses. However, the teachers favored girls with lower socioeconomic statuses over those girls with higher socioeconomics. The data revealed that the teachers were likely to develop negative attitudes and low expectations, in general, toward culturally diverse students with lower socioeconomic statuses and perceived less promising futures for those students.

Unlike the Auwarter and Aruguete's (2008) study, the teachers in this research study expressed their understanding of the intense social circumstances that many of their students experienced on a daily basis at home and in their communities. Despite these conditions, the teachers continued to uphold high academic expectations for their students. They believed that there is an innate ability in people and their environment does not dictate their learning ability and that no matter the situation, they still expected the students to be ready to excel in school.

Holding firm to the fact that their African American students were capable of achieving, the teachers in this study vowed to never base what they can do on the struggles they have. They believed that teachers have the ability to dictate whether culturally diverse students succeed or fail based on their expectations of them. Teachers who have high expectations for culturally diverse students have a positive impact on the academic achievement of their students as opposed to those teachers who have lower expectations (Haycock, 2001).

Rojas and Liou's (2017) studied nine social-justice-oriented teachers who were recommended and known for developing successful relationships with their culturally diverse students. The study focused on how these teachers defined and fostered sympathy with low

socioeconomic culturally diverse students. They found that the teachers in their study redefined sympathy. The teachers viewed sympathy as fairness in educational access and a means to challenge the status quo. They implemented a culturally responsive curriculum from the standpoint of caring and instilled high expectations for their student's futures. The findings of Rojas and Liou's are supported by this research study.

Cultural responsive teaching (see Table 6) focuses on teachers having high expectations for students, particularly African American students; their communities; and their academic performance often portrayed from a deficit thinking mindset where the words "at-risk" or "culturally deprived" are used to describe them (Foote, 2005). Lewis (2013) affirms that if African American students do not experience educators with high expectations that one cannot expect them to achieve. He states that there are teachers who allow African American students to "perform at substandard level and not address this with them in the classroom" and that "meritocracy becomes acceptable" (p. 36).

Establishing high expectations that are well defined for both behavior and academic performance is a belief that the teachers agreed upon. The teachers held the students to not just academic expectations but also behavioral expectations as well. Being well mannered and well behaved was emphasized, especially for African American male students. They understood that being an African American male in American schools puts one in the position of experiencing negative consequences, such as referral and placement in special education, excessive suspensions and expulsions, poor academic performance, and violence (Polite & Davis, 1999).

Therefore, teachers' expectations emphasized character, as they believed that the way that one behaves is representative of yourself and your family. They understood the correlation between academic performance and behavior and the teachers stayed on them. The teachers

agreed with the notions that “when we expect more from students and act in a way that helps them meet our expectations, they accomplish more” (Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011, p. 6). The teachers believed that holding their African American students to the highest of standards was non-negotiable. They believed that “failure was not an option” (Campbell’s principal) and that no matter what their home environments revealed that they were expected to achieve socially and academically.

Caring

Care is an important aspect of teaching and learning especially for African American students in urban school settings (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1990b; Noddings, 1992). Care should be demonstrated in what teachers do and say so that African American students in urban setting understand that the care that is exerted is genuine (Case, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Noddings, 2003). According to Ladson-Billings (2009), successful teachers create a learning environment where students feel comfortable, supported, and safe. Gordon (1999) agreed and stated that the most successful urban teachers are caring, affectionate, and warm, and they ensure that the growth and development of their students are a priority. He also believes that in every American urban classrooms the vision of having students encounter a caring teacher who treats them like humans.

All of the teachers in this research study believed in the importance caring relationships. Rose expressed it best explaining that caring relationships are crucial to the academic success of African American students because one cannot teach a child without having a solid relationship because it is an anchor of learning. However, the care students receive has to be encouraging, genuine, and significant in order to bridge academic performance and the achievement gap (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997).

Brown (2003) conducted a study with 13 urban teachers to determine whether the

classroom management strategies they utilized in their classrooms were reflective of a caring community. In this study, Brown (2003) found common characteristics of care and reported that the teachers “spoke of creating caring learning communities and demonstrating genuine interest in each student” (p. 286). The teachers agreed that in order to get students to want to perform, authenticity was necessary to create connections with their students. Their care extended to viewing their students as a reflection of themselves. Danielle stated, “When I see them, I see me as a child. I see them in me because I am them.” They saw the promise that each of their students held and affirmed that they were obligated to help them to make a difference in their lives. The teachers in this research study spoke of how they had to protect the welfare of their students. They were honest with their students explaining the reality of being uneducated and how there were pitfalls in society that would prevent them from having a good life.

Milner (2007) stated:

Teachers demonstrated their care by offering students compliments on what they were wearing, by allowing students to do make-up work and extra credit at the end of the school term when students were at risk of receiving a failing grade, by volunteering to serve as sponsors/adviser to clubs and organizations, and by actually attending after-school activities (such as basketball games) even when the teacher were not on duty or serving as coaches for the team (p. 244).

The teachers in this research study support the findings of Milner’s (2007) research observation. They demonstrated some of the same attributes of care for their African American students. The teachers displayed simple acts of care by saying “hello” and “good morning,” which were how they showed commitment every day in small ways. They made connections outside of school. One of the teachers, Rose, lived in the community in which she taught and in the summer she

would send a postcard introducing herself and would personally meet with the parents of her incoming students so that their parents knew she was someone who cared about their child's future. Alisha had a continual connection with her former students because of the care that she exerted toward them when they were in her classroom. She has attended graduations and baby showers of her former students. Angela cares about her students' future and encourages them to have a love of learning.

All the teachers ensured that their African American students felt safe in their classrooms by building caring relationships. The teachers viewed their African American students with a growth mindset, which is the belief that skills can be developed through dedication and hard work along with talent and intelligence (Dweck, 2015). They engaged, supported, and challenged their students to be successful despite any challenges.

Caring is a major component of cultural responsive teaching (see Table 6). It begins with understanding your student's cultural experience so that you can provide the kind of care students need. Caring is required for students to experience social, emotional, and academic success among disenfranchised students in urban settings (Polite, Lisle, & Price, 2009). In order for success to occur among marginalized students, teachers must have the capacity to see beyond the academic ability of the students (Polite et al., 2009).

The teachers expressed their sincere concern for the well-being of their African American student's academic and physical health. They agreed that when their students felt cared for they performed better. Noddings (1992) argues that when teacher care is exerted, authentically, that the reward is evident in the growth and development of the students.

Othermothering

Othermothering, according to Ruddick (1995), is an intentional act that does not require a

biological connection with children. She asserts that there are three key components of maternal practice, which include the training of children, upholding a child's life, and nurturing their growth. Roseboro and Ross (2009) argue that African American female educators exemplify a distinctive type of care that has been historically characterized as maternal. Teaching is about developing and maintaining caring relationships with the classroom (Irvine, 2003).

The kinship-like relationships that the teachers in this research study exhibited in their classrooms with their African American students were like that of a mother and child. These academic mothers ensured that their African American students understood that they had their best interest at heart by nurturing them. The findings in this research study support Case's (1997) research that examined othermothering as it occurred in an urban elementary school. The study consisted of two African American females, a school principal and teacher, who acknowledged the philosophy of othermothering as an affective domain that guided their practices as educators. Case (1997) found that the participants experienced othermothering from lessons being taught by their own mothers and grandmothers, which were reinforced in activities within the school. Case's participants used othermothering as a means to meet the educational, social, mental, and physical needs of the African American students that they served, as did the teachers in this research study (Case, 1997).

The teachers created a space within their classrooms where their African American students felt as if they were part of a family. Alisha's students often refer to her as "Ma" because they felt they were a family in her classroom. Rose shared how her students were comfortable having personal conversations where they would tell her personal things about themselves and their families. Love and Kruger (2005) argue that African American students learn best when they are exposed to learning environments that resemble extended families, are personal and

relational in style with high expectations and accountability.

All of the teachers in this research study acknowledged that the students needed affection and that they did not have a problem making sure that the students received that care. They were successful in providing social-emotional support as evidenced by Alisha explaining the line of kids outside the door in the morning waiting to give her a hug. The teachers created a classroom where students felt safe. Alisha as well as the other teachers expressed their concern for their student's safety inside school and out. According to Alisha, the students understood that she would protect them and would look out for them. Alisha described how she is like a "Mother Hen" when it came to her young African American students. She protects them when they are walking through the hallway from older students who sometimes horse play while passing her students in line. She assures the older students that if somebody bumped into to them that it would be a problem. Most importantly, the students knew their teacher would defend them.

While the teachers nurtured their African American students as if they were their own children, they gave particular attention to African American male students. Milner (2007) argues that African American male students need the same type of care, educational opportunities, and lifestyles that African American male teachers aspire for their own biological children and calls this care *otherfathering*. Otherfathering is a practice that has been underexplored in educational research. Otherfathering refers to the relationship that is developed and maintained between male school staff members and male students. This relationship is consistent with othermothering as it is a form of care that tends to the social, emotional, educational, and physical well-being of students (Brooms, 2017).

Brooms' (2017) study explains the kind of care and concern teachers in this research study had for their male students in this research study, their understanding about being an

African American male in America, and why they were especially hard on them. The teachers made sure that their male students were exposed to examples of positive African American male role models because they wanted them to know what success looked like and that no matter what they were going to achieve.

The teachers voluntarily performed home visits, which demonstrated to their students and their families that they cared enough to see what goes on with them outside of school. Because the teachers collaborated with families and advocated for their students, they established a connection between home and school as well. All of these strategies resulted in empowering families to help their children succeed.

Culturally responsive teaching encourages othermothering (see Table 6) and realizes its importance in developing the critical relationships that African American students need with their teachers. Case (1997) found that when African American students were exposed to othermothering from their teachers it resulted in establishing strong relationships with their students and their families. Foster (1993) states that when African American teachers demonstrate othermothering consistently they do so with the belief that every African American student is capable of achieving socially and academically.

The teachers expressed that they had a responsibility to make sure that their African American students were successful. They believed that their academic relationship emulated a maternal-like bond because their teaching, at times, required them to move beyond academics and to tend to the emotional, physical, mental, and sometimes, spiritual health of their African American students.

Culturally responsive teaching (see Table 6) supports othermothering and otherfathering as it specifically speaks to the learning, social, and cultural needs of students. Culturally

responsive teaching asserts that teachers are aware of the types of relationships that they form with their students and why they establish them. Othermothering and otherfathering is a practice that specifically caters to culturally diverse students because traditionally they have been disenfranchised and have experienced negative aspects that may hinder their academic achievement and educational opportunities (Brooms, 2017).

Limitations

While analyzing this research study some limitations were prominent. The limitations of this research study included the location of the schools, the selection of the gender and ethnicity of the principals and teachers, grade level of students, and the lack of classroom observations. First, purposeful sampling was utilized to select the schools, principals, and teachers. The samples of the schools selected for this research study were elementary schools situated in urban areas. Due to the focus of this research study on urban schools, the results rendered may not be generalized to suburban or rural schools that service African American students.

Second, the principals and teachers who responded with detailed descriptions of the teachers, their philosophies, and teaching practices gave an interpretation of their responses based upon a female's perspective as no male principals or teachers were selected for this study. If this research study was conducted with African American male principals and teachers, implemented in the same manner, the suggested descriptions of the teachers, philosophies, and methods may differ according to the values of educating from a male's standpoint. Also, results may have differed if the sample had been cross-cultural, utilizing the experiences of teachers and administrators from other cultural groups (e.g., Latino, Native American).

Third, the grade levels that this study focused on were kindergarten through fifth grade. Narrowing the grade levels limited the contributions that could have been made by teachers in

urban middle schools or high schools that service African American students. Perhaps, the developmental practices for middle and high school students would have rendered other practices and strategies.

Last, the absence of classroom observations of the teachers influenced the capacity to communicate their stories. Listening intently, paying attention to body language and gestures, and visualizing allowed the sharing of their experiences to be documented. Viewing the teachers in their classroom settings could have allowed for what Patton (2002) refers to as an extension of the narrative offering “translucent windows into cultural and social meaning” (p.116).

Implications & Specific Recommendations

The teachers in this study identified instructional practices that can be utilized with urban African American students to increase their academic performance. Results of the study confirmed prior research that stresses the importance of having a progressive teaching philosophy; using culturally responsive teaching methods; and developing meaningful relationships to motivate, engage, and meet the learning needs of African American students. Although the use of technology also confirms prior research, it is typically not included in lists of culturally responsive teaching practice. This study suggests that researchers and advocates for instructional reform should include the use of technology as a core strategy for culturally responsive teaching. The recommendations provided are essential to educating African American students with the potential to increase their academic performance in urban classrooms so that ultimately the gap in achievement will decrease. Overall, the results of this study have important implications and recommendations for teacher education programs, professional learning, policymakers, and teachers of urban African American students.

Teacher Education Programs

What do teacher education programs need to do to prepare preservice teachers to teach in urban classrooms that service African American students? This research study reaffirms the impact that teachers who are culturally competent can have on urban African American students. The teachers in this study revealed how important it is to know and understand one's self, the students that one teaches, and to teach students how to navigate a system that has historically been educationally oppressive for culturally diverse students. Although the study identified strong themes in successful teaching practices for meeting the needs of African American children, teacher education programs struggle to prepare preservice teachers with the skills, knowledge, theory, and methods to teach culturally diverse students situated in urban schools and to be culturally competent (Gay, 2010).

Alisha, a teacher in this study, recalled her experience as a preservice teacher and states that she "had no specific course that specialized in how to teach to the African American child" and that it was her own personal experience, being African American, and studying on her own that taught her how to teach her urban African American students. Ladson-Billings (2000) affirms that teacher preparation programs are blameworthy when it comes to training preservice teachers to teach culturally diverse students because they do little or nothing at all to prepare preservice teachers to teach in diverse classrooms. Again, what can teacher education programs do to prepare preservice teachers to step in urban classrooms and ensure that culturally diverse students, particularly African American students, experience academic success?

Teachers need to understand that building relationships with African American students is an important aspect of improving their academic performance. Over and over again, the teachers in this study discussed their ability to bond with their students beyond the classroom as

key to their success. They established maternal-like relationships, othermothering, that attended to their student's physical, emotional, and social needs. Are teacher education programs equipped to teach such knowledge that goes beyond the routines of classroom procedures?

Being culturally competent is a precursor for building authentic relationships with African American students. Developing a cultural consciousness was supported in the responses of the teachers in this research study. They understood the societal consequences for uneducated African American students and centered their instructional practices, curriculum, and professional and sometimes personal lives assuring that their students knew that they were committed to their success not only as a student but also as an intelligent human being. Gay and Howard (2000) explain that teacher education program have to operate in a way that excludes fear of teaching culturally diverse students and "resistance to dealing directly with race and racism" (p. 3). Dispelling prejudices, attitudes, and assumptions about culturally diverse students and how they learn is how cultural competency can be acquired.

There is a demographic divide within teacher education programs, not just with teacher educators but also with the students who enroll in teacher education programs as well. According to the United States Department of Education (2016), teaching is comprised of 87% of White public school teachers and 7% who are African American, which does not reflect a diverse teaching workforce or the diversity amongst the population of students. Addressing the racial demographics of teacher educators is also a concern because it determines what information is being disseminated within teacher education programs with regard to teaching culturally diverse students.

This concern is valid as the teacher educators and professors who are preparing teachers to understand diversity are either unprepared or underprepared to do so as well (Gay & Howard,

2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Merryfield, 2000). Shouldn't it be expected that teacher educators have the experience and knowledge to teach preservice teacher to understand the learning, social, and cultural needs of students situated in urban schools, particularly African American students? What kinds of professional learning opportunities can we design specifically for teacher educators about the core practices identified in this study? When teacher education programs address the aforementioned concerns, colleges of education will begin to shed light on preparing teachers to authentically teach culturally diverse students. Teacher education programs have a responsibility for matriculating preservice teachers who are equipped to serve all students, specifically African American students in urban schools, in order for them to be academically successful. Should we allow pre-service teachers to graduate or be certified as a teacher "without being well grounded in how the dynamics of cultural conditioning operates in teaching in learning"? (Gay, 1993, p. 292).

Teacher education programs need to require a set of courses that focus on becoming more culturally competent in order to teach culturally diverse populations, instead of relying on "an occasional topic of discussion about exceptional or special students" when it comes to teaching students of color (Irvine, 1990a, p. 18). Cultural bias and prejudices need to be addressed in teacher education programs so that preservice teachers can become more culturally competent. Creating courses that allow preservice teachers to acquire an awareness about their own identity, viewpoints, and differences as well as that of others who are culturally different will assist in them becoming more culturally competent. In addition, practicums need to be created so that preservice teachers have field experiences in urban communities with cultural competent teachers.

Possessing an understanding of how culture impacts learning for African American

students will require preservice teachers to be immersed in the urban communities in which these students live. Ladson-Billings (2000) states that field experiences outside of teaching practicums in urban neighborhoods is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the “limited access to goods and services, poor health care facilities, uneven police and fire protection, and unsafe and dilapidated playgrounds, all work against students’ willingness to participate in school tasks” (p. 209).

Preservice teachers need opportunities to observe culturally responsive teachers who are experienced at building meaningful relationships with their African American students so that they can witness how othermothering and otherfathering are implemented in urban classrooms that serve African American students. Preservice teachers will be able to observe the impact of having high expectations and believing that African American students have the ability to be successful influences achievement. When preservice teachers observe urban classrooms, they have opportunities to dispel negative biases and stereotypes toward African American students because they can gain a comprehensive understanding of African American culture and cultural practices (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Lastly, teacher education programs need to address the demographic divide that has taken place in teaching at the elementary, secondary, and higher education levels. Milner (2012) argues that if this demography is not addressed that the needs of culturally diverse student in elementary and secondary urban schools will not be met because teacher educators who are teaching diversity and equity are not culturally prepared. Teacher education programs need to put in place procedures that will attract and retain culturally diverse teacher education professors. In addition, recruitment and retention programs need to be in place to support culturally diverse preservice students. This will assist with not only diversifying the teaching profession but will also promote

social change from the viewpoint of one who has the cultural understanding of culturally diverse students. Preparing teachers to teach African American students in urban schools is critically important. Although there is no simple solution to reforming teacher education programs to prepare teachers to teach African American students, this issue has to go beyond being a conversation.

Professional Learning

The teachers in this research study understood the dynamics that are involved with teaching urban African American students. They knew that developing meaningful relationships, using culturally responsive instructional practices and curriculum were a means of ensuring academic success for their African American students. However, these teachers are only 5 out the 3.2 million full time-equivalent teachers that are assigned to classrooms in the 2018-2019 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). How can the themes that emerged from this research be accessible so that in-service teachers who teach African American students and other culturally diverse students be abreast of practices that work? Educators, as with all professions, have accepted the notion that continuous learning is a requirement that is connected to student achievement. Professional learning is effective long term in communities that support learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

Can cultural competency be taught to in-service teachers who are not aware that these kinds of instructional practices assist with improving the academic performance of African American students? In-service teachers need opportunities to share what they know, have meaningful discussions, and witness how to implement strategies that are conducive to culturally diverse students learning for culturally diverse students. Professional learning must focus on enhancing learning in order for teachers to implement instructional practices that are successful

(Webster-Wright, 2009). Deep and sustained professional learning can be a catalyst for in-service teachers who did not acquire the knowledge and skills in their teacher education programs to becoming more culturally competent in order to teach in urban classrooms. Finally, developing professional development systems that focus on the core approaches identified in this study must be supported by school leadership. All educational stakeholders should be engaged in learning practical strategies that attends to academic achievement for students and professional achievement for teachers.

Teachers of culturally diverse students, specifically African American students, need opportunities to collaborate and extend their learning beyond the classroom to in order to stay abreast of culturally responsive practices, curriculum, and strategies that will improve the academic achievement of these students. This professional learning needs to include entities within the schools that teachers are employed, students' families, teacher education programs, community leaders, policymakers, and corporate organizations as all of these impacts the teaching and learning of culturally diverse students. Professional learning should be personalized and specific in order to grasp the concepts that would allow for personal and professional growth. King, Artiles, and Kozleski (2009) offers six professional learning principles to implement culturally responsive teaching practices. The principles are as follows: (a) include activities grounded in multicultural context that characterizes the urban school community; (b) collaborate and dialogue using inquiry-based activities; (c) embed professional learning within the daily practice by forming study groups, observing teachers, giving and receiving feedback, and mentoring; (d) measure success based upon the increase in academic performance of culturally diverse students; (e) conduct ongoing examination of current content and practices; and (f) share knowledge to build sustainable educational and diverse communities.

All of the themes that emerged from this research study should be topics addressed in professional learning: (a) progressive teaching philosophy, (b) integration of technology, (c) differentiation, (d) cooperative learning, (e) cultural responsive curriculum, (f) high expectations, (g) caring, and (h) othermothering culturally competent if they matriculated out of teacher education programs that did not offer opportunities for them to learn to be culturally aware. If teachers are willing to put aside their bias and truly engage in professional learning with a growth mind-set about African American students and other culturally diverse students, cultural competency can be acquired. The goal is to make sure that all children, particularly African American students, have opportunities to be academically successful and engaging in professional learning is an avenue that creates advocates for these students.

Policymakers

The imbalance of the United States educational system is what determines the learning experiences of students based on their socioeconomic statuses. Delpit (2012) argues “...educational policy has been virtually hijacked by the wealthiest citizens, who no one elected and who are unlikely ever to have had a child in the public schools” (p. xv). Due to educational policies being determined by those who are not engrossed in the daily operations of public schools, the low academic performance of culturally diverse student existed based upon unequal access to important educational resources, such as, experienced teachers and quality curriculum as opposed to race (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

During the Obama Administration, it was stated that “every child in American deserves a world-class education” and “that by 2020, the United States will once again lead the world in college completion” (United Department of Education, 2010). These statements made by President Obama created a reauthorization of the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary

Education Act (ESEA), currently known as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), that would ensure equitable educational access and opportunities for all students by (a) requesting rigorous and fair accountability for all levels of school performance, (b) meeting the needs of diverse learners, (c) and ensuring equity in providing students a fair chance to succeed (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b; United Department of Education, 2010, p. 1).

The ESSA also states that in meeting the educational needs of culturally diverse students, it will put in place programs and resources to assist in providing opportunities that will ensure that these students succeed in college and career. The wording of the ESSA is exactly what is needed in urban schools that service culturally diverse students. However, are there adequate systems in place to ensure that the mandates of ESSA are actually carried out in urban schools? Equity in education is a critical component of ensuring equal opportunities for culturally diverse students and policies that address issues of equity like the ESSA need to be fully resourced.

Policymakers are key in improving outcomes for marginalized students by supporting and following through with educational initiatives that support efforts to guarantee high quality teaching that increases academic performance in urban schools that are chronically low-performing (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In short, culturally and linguistically diverse students are dependent upon culturally competent, skilled, qualified teachers that can engage in culturally responsive teaching as reported in the findings of this study. Therefore, the renewed words in the ESSA have to be more than text on paper. They have to be words in action.

Closing the achievement gap for African American students needs to be a primary goal of policymakers as it has had a lengthy legacy of racial exclusion. This issue of academic failure for African Americans is one that affects our entire nation. There are several key components that need to be addressed by policymakers in order to close the gap. These factors include those that

are social and educational. First, policymakers need to focus on the social and economic disadvantages of culturally diverse populations in order to improve school experiences and educational outcomes as these factors directly affect academic performance. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2013b), urban students are more than twice likely to live in poverty, receive free or reduced lunch, and attend schools with high populations of low-income students than suburban or rural students, which they suggest results in a decrease in academic performance. Poverty impacts educational attainment for African American students situated in urban settings. Instead of only focusing on improving schools and teachers, policymakers need to understand the challenges that many low socioeconomic students face that may hinder their academic success, such as low educational attainment of parents, the exorbitant costs of child care, irregular work schedules, and poor health care.

Next, improving the educational opportunities for African American students is also a critical aspect of successfully educating them. Policies need to be created that allow for recruiting and retaining teachers and administrators of color so that educational outcomes can be improved for marginalized populations, specifically for African Americans. This needs to take place by offering incentives, such as loan-forgiveness programs, service scholarships, and urban school residencies to African Americans who chose to pursue teaching in order to assist with reducing the cost of college, which in turn will help with staffing urban schools (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Tuition reimbursement should be offered to teachers and administrators who choose to pursue advanced degrees and certifications. Policies need to be written in order for teachers to be fairly evaluated. Revamping the teacher evaluation system so that educators are not assessed based on student growth attached to test scores but rather on the teaching philosophies,

instructional strategies, and relationships they implement in their teaching that have been proven successful.

Teachers of Urban African American Students

The teachers in this study acquired an understanding of what it means to be culturally responsive in their teaching as they exhibited these practices in their daily routines. Stanford (1997) asserts that successful African American teachers of African American students in urban schools possess characteristics that support “community solidarity, community of learners, focus on the whole child, and personal accountability” (p. 108). However, as mentioned, the teaching workforce in public American schools is 87% White and 7% African American, which equates to African American students experiencing teachers with different ethnicities. Therefore, it is imperative that the *all* teachers are experienced in teaching culturally diverse students.

Teaching is a challenging but rewarding profession, and in disfranchised urban areas, teaching can be twice as tough but also twice as inspiring. Because the teachers in this research study were committed to the success of their students despite the negativity that challenged their success they managed to be more than a physical role model. Teachers who choose to teach in urban areas should understand (a) the content of the subjects being taught and to include the student’s culture in every aspect of learning; (b) their student’s cultural background and interest (i.e. learning styles, language, and home life); (c) how to work with English language learners; and (d) how to motivate students and engage families (Berry et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Irvine, 1990b; Milner, 2009). Learning the aforementioned traits is not limited to African American educators because African American students need teachers who can implement the pedagogical cultural practices necessary for them to become empowered, overcome educational oppression, and make meaning in their lives. This knowledge comes from being open to

becoming culturally competent. This commitment will require that successful teachers of African American students continue to teach African American students as if they were their own regardless of one's ethnicity.

Understanding the connection between culture and academic performance and utilizing culturally responsive teaching practices will ensure that African American students have learning opportunities that make connections with their cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and their style of learning. Teachers should know specific cultural practices to make connections when teaching African American students, such as using an expressive style and gestures to disseminate information and communicate, call-and response, repetition, and creative language and movement (McCollough, 2000). Before teachers can teach African American students, they need to dispel the negative beliefs attached to African American students in order to develop positive perceptions and attitudes of them so they can trust, respect, and understand that their teachers have their best interest at heart.

Teachers also need to develop a growth-mind set and be firm believers in their students' ability to perform academically by having high expectations and refusing to allow them to fail. Communicating high expectations and holding African American students to a higher standard will facilitate their rise to the desired educational outcomes. Holding African American students to a higher standard is key to increased performance because they will not want to disappoint their teachers (Lewis, 2013). This can be achieved by making certain that African American students are consistently being told that they are expected to perform and achieve successfully. This message needs to be communicated by *all* who are involved in educating African American students. Being authentic and genuine while building positive relationships will allow for trust and respect to be gained.

As the findings of this research study indicate, teachers need to adopt a teaching philosophy that will allow African American students to experience teaching that is active, engaging, and inclusive of their culture. This can be accomplished by engaging in culturally responsive teaching and using a culturally responsive curriculum that is student-centered and promotes student engagement. When the aforementioned entities embrace, and implement the recommendations provided, African American students in urban schools will experience classrooms where culture informs teaching and learning.

Continued Research

This study will contribute to the body of research that focuses on teaching culturally diverse students and the understanding of culturally responsive teaching practices utilized to successfully teach African American students in urban schools. However, additional research is needed to further investigate the practices utilized to successfully teach African American students in urban schools because this study was limited by the number of participants and should be repeated to expand beyond the perspective of the female elementary African American teacher and principal. This research study should include the viewpoints of African American male elementary school teachers as well as middle school and high school teachers, other teachers of color, and teachers of African American students who attend rural and suburban schools. Research is also needed on how to develop cultural competency and caring, especially the kind of caring that is embodied in acts of othermothering and otherfathering, to preservice and in-service teachers. Finally, the inclusion of the use of technology as a core practice of culturally responsive teachers needs to be further investigated in relation to the other practices that this study found to be effective.

Conclusion

Despite the overshadowing commentary that often highlights the lack of academic proficiency among African American students in urban schools, there are African American teachers who manage to create a classroom environment with academic connections where African American students can achieve and experience success. However, the experience of these teachers, who navigate through multiple institutional challenges to dutifully add value to the lives and education of their African American students, is rarely narrated. This research study sought to gain an understanding of what takes place in the classrooms of African American elementary teachers in urban schools who passionately work to motivate and engage their African American students. This research study highlighted practices that can be used in the classroom and taught through professional development and in teacher education programs. When educating African American students in urban schools, it is vital to understand their cultural background as well as their ability to learn. Making genuine human connections coupled with positive relationships and high expectations is how African American students in urban schools achieve success. This research study can be summed up with a quote by PJ Caposey that states, “Successful teachers focus not on compliance, but rather on making connections and relationships” (as cited in Feriazzo, 2014).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Teacher Recruitment Letter

Dear Teacher,

Hello! I am Shawn Renee Forman, a doctoral candidate at Eastern Michigan University in the College of Teacher Education. I am conducting a qualitative research study titled, *What Works? Teaching African American Students in Urban Schools*, in order to complete the requirements for dissertation.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine cultural pedagogy used to improve the academic performance of African American students in urban schools. This research will specifically focus on the teaching experiences of nominated African American elementary teachers who teach African American students in urban schools. Therefore, the cultural pedagogies that teachers of these students utilize will be significant in gaining a comprehensive understanding of how they impact their student's learning. This research study intends to provide educators with various cultural instructional approaches/strategies, which may be utilized to increase student engagement and academic attainment for African American students in urban schools.

If you agree to take part in this research, your participation will consist of:

- completing a demographic survey
- one (1) interview
- a follow-up interview (if needed)

Your participation in this research study will be greatly appreciated, as the responses that you provide will be an addition to the already existing knowledge of educating African American students in urban schools. Due to this study being voluntary, at any time during the study, you may refuse to participate or withdraw without consequence to which you are entitled. Every attempt to confirm safety, privacy, and discretion will be implemented. Work locations and names will be assigned pseudonym in order to ensure anonymity. All documents will be locked away or password protected and those documents of participants who withdraw will be destroyed.

I look forward to having you as a participant in this research study and if you have any questions regarding the study, I can be contacted at (313) 505-3574 or at sforman@emich.edu. You may also contact the faculty sponsor/committee chair, Dr. Deborah A. Harmon at (734) 487-3260 or at dharmon@emich.edu.

Educationally Yours,

Shawn Renee Forman, Doctoral Candidate
College of Teacher Education
Eastern Michigan University

Appendix B: Teacher Consent Form

Eastern Michigan University

College of Education: Educational Studies/Urban Education

Teacher Consent to Participate in Research Study

Title of Study: *What Works? Teaching African American Students in Urban Schools*

Hi! My name is Shawn Renee Forman and I am a doctoral candidate at Eastern Michigan University in the College of Teacher Education and my concentration is Urban Education. My committee chair for this research study is Dr. Deborah Harmon.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this interview-based qualitative research study is to examine the cultural practices that African American elementary teachers utilize to influence the academic achievement of African American students in urban schools. This research study intends to provide educators with various pedagogical approaches and strategies, which may be utilized to increase student engagement and academic attainment for African American students in urban schools.

Contribution: Participating in this research study involves:

- completing one (1) audio-taped interview (approximately 60 minutes)
- may request a follow-up audio-taped interview for further clarification (approximately 30 minutes)

The interviews for this research study will be audio recorded. Through audio recording, it will be possibly to identify your voice in the recordings. If you agree to be audio recorded, sign the appropriate line at the bottom of this form.

Risks: There is no unforeseen physical or physiological risk associated with participating in this research study. The primary risk of participation in this research study is a potential loss of confidentiality. However, in order to minimize the loss of confidentiality to the study participants, the identifiers (for you and the teachers) will be anonymous by assigning a pseudonym for names, work location, city, and state in order to ensure anonymity. Some of the interview questions are personal in nature and may make you feel uncomfortable. As voluntary participants, you can decide whether to answer specific questions or not.

Research Benefits: The benefit of this study will provide additional research that is needed to assist with increasing the performance and outcomes of African American students situated in urban schools, which will ultimately assist in decreasing the achievement gap. You will not directly benefit from this research. However, your participation will have the potential to influence educational and political decisions regarding instructional methods, academic achievement, teacher quality, teacher education, and professional development.

Confidentiality: Every attempt to confirm safety, privacy, and discretion will be implemented. However, we cannot guarantee confidentiality. There may be instances where federal or state law requires disclosure of your records. The information will be kept confidential by using a code labeling data system that links the code to identifiable information separately from the data,

which will be stored in a locked cabinet that only the researcher will have the ability to access. Consent forms, artifacts and documents that are retrieved to develop the research will also be securely locked away. Work locations and names will be assigned pseudonym in order to ensure anonymity. Documents or identifying information that is stored on any electronic devices (computers, tablets, smartphones, recording (audio/video) devices, USB jump drives, file backup programs) will be password protected.

If, during your participation in this research study, there is reason to believe that child abuse is occurring, or if there is reason to believe that you are at risk for being suicidal or otherwise harming yourself, it must be reported to the authorities as required by law. Every effort will be made to keep your research information confidential. However, it may be possible that we have to release your research information. If this were to occur, your confidentiality will not be protected.

Other groups may have access to your research information for quality control or safety purposes. These groups include the University Human Subjects Review Committee, the Office of Research Development, the sponsor of the research, or federal and state agencies that oversee the review of research. The University Human Subjects Review Committee reviews research for the safety and protection of people who participate in research studies.

Your information maybe shared with other researchers outside of Eastern Michigan University. If your information is shared, all identifiable information will be removed so that you will be anonymous.

The results of this research may be published or used for teaching. Identifiable information will not be used for these purposes.

Future Use Storage: Your information will be stored from this research study for future use related to cultural practices that African American elementary teachers utilize to influence the academic achievement of African American students in urban schools. Your information will be labeled with a code and not your name. Your information will be stored in a password-protected or locked file. Your de-identified information may also be shared with researchers outside of Eastern Michigan University. Please initial below whether or not you allow use to store your information:

_____ Yes _____ No

Cost: Participation in this research will not cost you anything.

Compensation: You will not be paid to participate in this research.

Research Subject Rights: For questions about your rights as a research subject, contact the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee at human.subjects@emich.edu or by phone at (734) 487-3090.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate at any time, even after signing this form, with no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may chose to leave the study at any time with no loss of benefit

to which you are otherwise entitled. If you leave the research study, the information you provide will be kept confidential. You may request, in writing, that your identifiable information be destroyed. However, information that is already published cannot be destroyed.

Statement of Consent

I have read this form. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers I received. I give my consent to participate in this research study.

Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Teacher's Name (printed): _____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview(s) tape-recorded and/or videoed.

Teacher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

I have explained the research to the research participants and have answered all questions. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the research participant.

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name (printed): _____

Research Study Contacts:

Researcher:

*Shawn Renee Forman, Doctoral Candidate
Eastern Michigan University
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Detroit, MI 48238
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Faculty Sponsor/Committee Chair:

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Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

RESEARCH @ EMU

UHSRC Determination: EXEMPT DATE: May 3, 2017

TO: Shawn Forman

Eastern Michigan University

Re: UHSRC: # 853030-1 Category: Exempt category 2

Approval Date: May 3, 2017 Title: What Works? Teaching African American Students in Urban Schools

Your research project, entitled What Works? Teaching African American Students in Urban Schools, has been determined Exempt in accordance with federal regulation 45 CFR 46.102. UHSRC policy states that you, as the Principal Investigator, are responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of your research subjects and conducting your research as described in your protocol.

Renewals: Exempt protocols do not need to be renewed. When the project is completed, please submit the Human Subjects Study Completion Form (access through IRBNet on the UHSRC website).

Modifications: You may make minor changes (e.g., study staff changes, sample size changes, contact information changes, etc.) without submitting for review. However, if you plan to make changes that alter study design or any study instruments, you must submit a Human Subjects Approval Request Form and obtain approval prior to implementation. The form is available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Problems: All major deviations from the reviewed protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may increase the risk to human subjects or change the category of review must be reported to the UHSRC via an Event Report form, available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website

Follow-up: If your Exempt project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office will contact you regarding the status of the project.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-3090 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

April M Gravitt, MS Research Compliance Analyst, University Human Subjects Review Committee

Appendix D: Teacher Demographic Survey

Assigned pseudonym: _____

Teacher Demographic Survey

Directions: The following questions ask about your background and experience. Please answer questions to the best of your knowledge. All responses will be anonymous, as they will be assigned a pseudonym.

Gender:

- Male
 Female

Age: _____ (on your last birthday)

Race:

- African-American/Black
 Hispanic
 Alaska Native/Native American
 Arab
 Asian
 Caucasian/White
 Other _____

Higher Education Experience

Where did you attend college/university (school name, city)?

Education Level (check highest degree):

- Bachelor
 Master
 Specialist Certificate
 Doctorate
 Other _____

Degree Specialty: What area (major) is your degree(s)?

Bachelor: _____

Master: _____

Specialist Certificate: _____

Doctorate: _____

Other _____

Teaching Experience

Total Year(s) Teaching: _____

Total Teaching Year(s) at Current School: _____

Teaching Specialty:

Elementary School (urban district) Grade: _____

Teaching Subject(s): _____

Prior Teaching Experience

Year: _____

Grade: _____

Subject: _____

District: _____

Year: _____

Grade: _____

Subject: _____

District: _____

Year: _____

Grade: _____

Subject: _____

District: _____

Appendix E: Classroom Demographic Survey

Classroom Demographics**Grade:** _____ **Subject(s):** _____**Number of Students:** _____ **Female:** _____ **Male:** _____

African American: _____

Hispanic: _____

Alaska Native/Native American: _____

Arab: _____

Asian: _____

Caucasian/White: _____

Other _____

Number of Students with IEPs: _____**Number of Students with Physical/Cognitive Disabilities:** _____**Overall Attendance:** Number of students absent per month (check one)

_____ Good (1-5) _____ Fair (5-10) _____ Poor (10+)

Number of Suspensions/Exclusions (this school, thus far): _____**Number of Students Concerned “At Risk”:** _____ (see below for risk factors)**Risk Factors**

- Physical disabilities and learning disabilities
- Prolonged or persistent health issues
- Habitual truancy, incarceration history, or adjudicated delinquency
- Family welfare or marital status
- Parental educational attainment, income levels, employment status, or immigration status
- Households in which the primary language spoken is not English