FIVE WHITE TEACHERS' STORIES: THEIR CHALLENGES, THEIR CHANGES, THEIR CONNECTIONS WITH URBAN STUDENTS OF COLOR

A Dissertation by

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THEIR CHALLENGES, THEIR CHANGES, THEIR CONNECTIONS WITH URBAN STUDENTS OF COLOR

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DEDICATION

I can't recall a time in my life that I have not sat in a classroom with my feet under a desk or table, learning from someone in order to increase my knowledge, my skills or my ability to do better in life. From the moment I could comprehend my first language, English, my mother has always told me, "You have to get your education; you have to work harder, study longer, and be smarter in this life to get where you want to go." As I hear the voice of my mother and I reflect on her words, I sit here today writing this dedication page of my doctoral dissertation. I know, had it not been for my mother, I would not have crossed the threshold to become a doctoral candidate. There are not enough words contained on a page that would express my tribute to her. My mother set her bar of expectations very high at the time of birth for each of her children and she has never wavered. I am who I am and where I am in my life today because of her values, belief in me and desire to model for me no less then what she expected. My mother taught me to become a lifelong learner before the phrase became a part of the educational jargon, and a lifelong learner I have become.

While my mother instilled in me the value of lifelong learning, I've also had a coach, a confidant, a mentor, a stable force who provided a solid foundation for me along this doctoral journey. Anthony Burkhalter has been my rock, providing a solid foundation when I felt I was sinking in this work, the glue who held me together when I felt I was falling apart and beyond patient when I had lost mine. Without his support, dedication, belief in me and love, this journey would have been much more difficult to navigate.

Nicole, Amber and David, my adult children keep me grounded and my life would not be complete without them. Their unconditional love is the inspiration for all that I do in my life. Their support during this journey has been immeasurable. They've challenged my thinking

during this process and have caused me to step outside of my own values and beliefs and shift my perspective. I've learned so much from each of them. I love them dearly.

My legacy, my grandson Myles, who is in second grade, often asks why his "Nana," at such an old age, is still in school. Myles has been the reason I could laugh and smile during this journey. I hope to leave with Myles the value of education that was instilled in me; so when he completes compulsory school and enters the world of higher learning, he will look back and remember the days his Nana was in school (at an old age) and have the answer to his question. Even at age seven, Myles was my encourager, my influencer, my teacher and even my editor. He provided the balance along this journey and helped me to see life's bigger picture.

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Let it be said, that no one can complete a doctoral research project by themselves. Yes it takes a village, a village of people who have a vested interest in your work, your accomplishment and lastly your mental and physical health.

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I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Mara Alagic, for her patience through this learning, stretching and growing process. She has been an awesome mentor, dedicated to seeing me through and guiding me along this journey. Mara has a heart for research and unselfishly shared her passion with me. My learning from and with Mara has been rewarding. Thank you Mara for you resilience, believing in me and high expectations. I'm all the better for having you in my life during this journey. I also want to thank those on my research committee, Glyn Rimmington, Rachel Norwood, Deborah Gordon, Johnnie Thompson and Jo Bennett. Their expertise and feedback during this process was and is priceless.

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To the Educational Leadership Program staff I thank you for giving me this opportunity and guiding me along the process. I remember day one of this journey wondering WHY I was selected for this program. You each convinced Cohort 16 that we would survive and you were there to give us the survival tools we needed. You kept your word and each member of Cohort 16 survived with a few scrapes, scratches and bruises to meet the challenge, and possibly transform our thinking. I appreciate each of you and I'm honored to be a product of such an esteemed doctoral program at Wichita State University.

ABSTRACT

Across the United States students of color make up approximately 69% of the urban school population. More than 85% of the classroom teachers are White and predominantly females and 40% of the urban schools do not have teachers of color in their classrooms. Educational systems often struggle in their efforts to support the needs of racially and culturally diverse students; students' educational success is usually not regarded as a function of students' culture. The study comprises a narrative inquiry, captured in the stories of five White teachers, and analyzed through the lenses of critical social theory, critical pedagogy and socio-cultural theory. Teachers shared their stories regarding their awareness of racial and cultural differences and the effects these differences have on teaching practices and engaging students of color in learning. They articulated how their personal and professional life experiences may have changed their understanding of racial and cultural differences as well as challenged them to change their teaching practices in order to provide culturally relevant instruction and elicit engaged interactions from their students of color.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research Problem: White Teachers' Challenge

The education for many students of color is in a state of crisis (Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005; Guerra, 2007). In the United States, students of color are those individuals who are racially classified as non-white and are minority (Arboleda, 1998; Stanford University, 2010). In this study I will refer to African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Multiracial students as *students of color*. When children start school, many have already acquired a style of interacting with others based on their family and local community culture. Their culture has shaped their way of thinking, beliefs, values and much more. However, when they enter school, they encounter an environment that is in conflict with their culture (Delpit, 1995; Williams, 2006).

In spite of good intentions, White educators teaching students of color experience challenges due to the racial and cultural differences of their students (Saffold & Longwell-Grice, 2008) Many White educators lack the cultural knowledge, cultural congruence to educate students whose race and culture is different from their own. Howard (2006), emphasizes that the educational system and educators must seriously and critically examine the racial and cultural differences in urban education and make the necessary adjustments that are needed to effectively teach all students.. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be aware that the cultures in which children are raised also shape their development. In the words of W.E.B. DuBois, as cited in Singleton and Linton (2007),

> "Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental . . . We must insist upon this to give our children the fairness of a start which will equip them with such an array of facts

> and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is and what its greater minds have thought it might be!" (p. 1)

In 2000, across the United States, students of color made up approximately 69% of the urban school population. More than 85% of the classroom teachers were White, predominately female, and 40% of the urban schools did not have teachers of color in the classrooms (Johnson, 2002; O'connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reports that over the past twenty years, (from 1998 to 2008) K-12 public education enrollment for White students has decreased by 13 percent and increased for students of color by 13 percent. While different regions reports different statistics, each region reports an increased enrollment for students of color. These national statistics mirror the urban school district in this study; statistics of which are outlined in the research site of this proposal. Today's students are multi-racial, multi-ethnic, speak various languages, have varying abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds. The increasing presence of racial and cultural differences in urban school districts represents the picture of the future. To associate race solely with color of skin, and phenotypical traits, absent of culture which involves the social roots, experiences, values, beliefs, etc., threatens the components that shape this research. Within educational systems, leaders and teachers often struggle in their efforts to support the needs of racially and culturally diverse students, and a student's culture is frequently disregarded as a variable of student success (Irvine, 1990; Sailes, 2008). In fact, with fewer students of color entering college in the field of education and an increasing diverse population of students in urban schools, the racial and cultural divide between teachers and their students continues to widen (Farah, 2006; Johnson, 2002).

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One includes the research topic and the background of the research project. It further contains the purpose of the study, the research questions and the limitations and delimitations of the research. Chapter Two consist of literature reviews and the theoretical perspectives supporting and framing this research. Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology including details about data collection and analysis. Chapter Four comprises the life stories of five participants, their childhood, educational and professional experiences. Research findings and my reflections regarding this project are included in Chapter Five. Finally, Chapter Six provides summary and potential implications for teaching practices in urban school environments.

Purpose of Study

This study explored through teachers' voices how some, if any, White teachers came to recognize the effect their culture had on teaching practices and students' learning. The teachers shared how they transformed their teaching to better meet the needs of students of color. For the purpose of this study , the term "students learning" is not directly related to students' academic outcomes, rather it is related to the students' engagement shared in the teachers' stories and observed in the classroom setting. The intent was to use a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology to capture the stories and experiences of research participants (Clandinin & Connely, 2000; Johnson, 2002). The motivation for this study came from the challenges that White teachers face when teaching students of color (Boykin, et al., 2005; Castro-Atwater, 2008). Therefore the study examined the following three areas; a) how White teachers see themselves and their relationship with students of color, b) how racial and cultural differences between teachers and students might stimulate teachers' transformative learning and c) how teachers understand their culture and how it affects teaching practices and student learning. Some

studies, shared throughout this research, investigated the life experiences of White teachers' attitude about cultural and racial differences, and how their attitudes affected instructional practices. However, this research study added a component, focusing on teachers' transformative learning related to race and culture and shifting teaching practices. Inasmuch, I did become aware of the limitations and delimitations during this study.

Limitations

Limitations in research identify weak areas in the research study that are not possible to avoid or minimize (Creswell, 2007). Some of the dynamics that may have affected this research, and may have affected the participants' level of comfort, hindering the possibility of an open honest dialogue during interviews were: keeping all six participants engaged in the study. One teacher dropped prior to beginning the study due to personal scheduling commitments. It was difficult find a replacement, therefore I started my research maintaining five participants. I also remained cognizant of what I believed to be the imbalance of power as the researcher and administrator in the same school district. In addition being an African American interviewing and collecting data regarding race and culture differences from White participants may have imposed some inherent limitations. These dynamics potentially affected the teachers' comfort level in sharing their stories and hindered the possibility of an open honest dialogue. At times throughout the interview process, some participants would check with me to ensure their comments were not perceived as offensive by me.

Delimitations

Delimitations explains how and why the focus of the study was narrowed and why In this study, I focused only on White teachers and students of color identified as African American, Hispanic, Native American and Multiracial. Research suggested that those entering the teaching career are predominately White females. Urban schools' student enrollment

population is increasingly becoming majority minority (students of color). There is evidence that White teachers struggle teaching students who are racially and culturally different (Creswell, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Johnson, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Sleeter, 2001).

According to the Washington State School Directors' Association; Policy Action Guide, data has shown a clear pattern of achievement based on socio-economic status of students living in poverty. Trend data has shown that poor African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Multiracial students score lower on national and state assessments; experience higher dropout rates, are overrepresented in special education, underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement classes and are suspended or expelled at a disproportionately higher number when compared with their White peers from poor families. The data suggests that even in poverty these student groups continue to experience poorer educational outcomes related to race and culture. Given these statistics, recognizing that socio-economic status is an overarching layer in the conundrum of culture and in an effort to genuinely focus on the educational outcomes related to culture and race and its effects on teaching and learning, socioeconomic status was not a factor considered in this research (Gay, 2000; Hyland, 2005; Maddox, 1998; Noguera, 2003; Saffold & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Wolf, 1978).

Narrative inquiry was the methodological approach selected for this research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) . This approach matched the objective to hear the voices and stories of White teachers who shared their challenges and successes in teaching students of color. Furthermore, this methodology allowed the stories to be kept complete, as well as to investigate how their stories provided some answers to the following research questions.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this research:

1. How do White teachers understand the manner in which their own culture differs from that of their students' of color and how this shapes students learning?
2. How do White teachers see themselves and their relationship with students of color?
3. Why and how do racial and cultural differences between teachers and students might provoke/stimulate the teacher's transformative learning?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review was structured around two main themes: Race and Culture in Education, and Perspectives and Transformative Learning. Race and Culture in Education is organized according to the following topics: A Historical Perspective: Brown vs. Board of Education, Culture and Race, Racial and Cultural Attitudes in Education, The Colorblindness Effect, White Privilege and Power in Education, Culturally Relevant Instruction, Building Relationships Across Racial and Cultural Differences. The theme Perspectives and Transformative Learning consist of: Perspective Sharing, Taking and Shift; and Transformative Learning. The theoretical framework comprises relevant aspects of Critical Social Theory, Sociocultural Theory and Critical Pedagogy.

Race and Culture in Education

Throughout the course of history, terminology used to identify racial and ethnic groups have been changing. For this research report, the following terms will be used to identify racial and ethnic groups: Black, African American, White, Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American and Multiracial. Black and African American as well as White and Caucasian will be used interchangeably throughout this report.

Historically, public education in the United States has been viewed as a gateway to social, political and economic opportunities for citizens. An integral element in defining citizens' rights for schooling was the conception of culture and race (Jackson, 2008). Before the 1840s

education in America was only available to the wealthy. Citizen reformers fought for all children to benefit from education. Their efforts resulted in access to public education for all children, except Blacks and Native Americans. The only education given to Blacks and Native Americans was by missionaries who attempted to convert them to Christianity (Jackson, 2008; Lynn, 2006).

Prior to the Civil War, Blacks and Native Americans were not given access to public education. Blacks were enslaved and Native Americans were imprisoned on reservations; neither were considered citizens and therefore they were not granted rights or access to public education (Lynn, 2006; O'connor, et al., 2007; Vergon, 1990). After President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 access to public education remained beyond reach for many Blacks and Native Americans through much of the 1870s and 1880s. Although slavery was abolished, policies, practices and laws continued to deny equal access to education for all in the United States (Lynn, 2006; Palmer & Little, 1993; Vergon, 1990).

In 1896 Laws such as Plessy vs. Fergerson declared it legal to racially separate and mandated equality for all. This "separate but equal" (Atwater-Castro, 2008 p.246) law was soon applied to all situations, and allowed access to public education for all citizens separated by race. The "separate but equal" law did not result in equal access to education for all students. Schools for students of color did not receive the same funding, buildings were not maintained, resources were inadequate and teachers did not receive equal salaries. This unequal access to resources resulted in imbalanced educational opportunities for students of color and consequentially had an effect on the lack of social, political and economic power opportunities for people of color in the United States. This practice continued for over a half a century (Castro-Atwater, 2008; Cusick, Gerbing, & Russell, 1979; Jackson, 2008).

In 1954 the well-known Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education ruled racially segregated schools to be unlawful. The Supreme Court required school districts to

desegregate, which would guarantee that students of color and White students attend the same schools with equal access to education. If education was the road to equal opportunity, school desegregation would allow equal access to all children. Five decades later the courts reversed the desegregation order when the Supreme Court ruled school districts could no longer use race as a factor to integrate therefore resegregating schools. Today the education system is comprised of predominately White female teachers. These teachers continue to struggle with challenges to educate students of color (Orfield & Chungmei, 2007; Palmer & Little, 1993; Vergon, 1990).

Many White teachers have been raised in predominately White environments and have had limited meaningful contact with people of color. Because of this limited contact, many White teacher may have a monoculture perspective (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2009; McIntosh, 1989, 1990) and view students of color as less capable of achieving academically. This limited perspective impedes the teachers' ability to bridge cultural gaps, gain knowledge about the racial and cultural difference of students of color, thus affecting the teaching practices and students' learning (Lynn, 2006; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Smolen, Colville-Hall, Liang, & MacDonald, 2006).

In order to provide a research-based understanding for the background for this study, the research literature describes how White teachers have faced challenges associated with racial and cultural differences of their students. The following sections focus on a Historical Perspective: Brown vs. Board of Education; Culture and Race; Racial and Cultural Attitudes in Education; The Colorblindness Effects; White Privilege and Power in Education; Building Relationships Across Racial and Cultural Differences and Culturally Relevant Instruction.

A Historical Perspective: Brown vs. Board of Education

Brown vs. Board of Education was a milestone in the lives of American citizens. The ruling marked what was believed to be the end of segregation, unequal educational resources and

substandard facilities for Black schools. Eradication of school segregation was the fundamental goal. Equitable opportunities through education were essential for the sake of all Americans. The court ruling was greeted by some with excitement and celebration, but by others with anguish and disappointment. This educational reform aimed to alleviate the burdens of social marginalization and injustice on African American children. However, African American parents expressed concern that their children would be forced to assimilate into the dominant culture and lose their own heritage and culture. They believed that White teachers would not understand the culture of their children and not be able to teach them (Chapman, 2007).

Although the 1954 ruling was left to the interpretation of each state, school districts across the country continued their practice of segregated schools until they were faced with lawsuits filed by National Association of Advancement for Colored People (NAACP), or sanctioned by the Office of Civil Rights to desegregate schools. These lawsuits and sanctions energized desegregation across the nation. In the early 1970's as courts ordered immediate integration, school districts moved forward and became the avenue to learn tolerance and acceptance of differences. This mandate was believed to be the catalyst that would bring youth together to have different experiences and eliminate myths and stereotypes that endorsed fears related to cultural and racial differences (Orfield & Chungmei, 2007; Palmer & Little, 1993).

Some White parents were incensed with the thought of their children attending schools with Black children and some even expressed fear regarding the safety of their children. To avoid having their children attend school with Black children, some White families moved to the suburbs and away from schools implementing desegregation plans. These events were known as "White flight" (Jackson 2008, p.35). This attitude of White families regarding busing for desegregation was based on their beliefs that Blacks were inferior and the quality of education in integrated school would decrease (Cusick, et al., 1979; Jackson, 2008). While Brown vs. Board

focused on school desegregation and equal access to education for all students, many societal issues related to segregation surfaced. Civil rights activists began to develop strategies to remove barriers that supported segregation. Boycotts, marches, sit-ins and other forms of protest were organized and conducted for years in an effort to fight for the equal rights of all U.S. citizens. The Brown vs. Board of Education desegregating court ruling that deemed Black and White racially segregated schools unconstitutional remained in effect for more than 50 years (Carr & Zeigler, 1990; Vergon, 1990).

On June 28, 2007 the Supreme Court ruled that school districts could no longer assign students to schools based on race. Fifty-three years after the original ruling, the Supreme Court deemed school assignments based on race unconstitutional and ordered school districts to stop using race as a factor in the desegregation process. This 2007 Supreme Court ruling has perpetuated segregation in public schools today. This ruling was known as the Voluntary Integration Decision. This decision has annulled the historical purpose of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education that was the catalyst for society to address social injustices and the first that focused on racial and cultural inequities (Bergeron, 2008). Nonetheless, predominately children of color continue to remain academically underserved based on national, state and local assessment data and continue to live in poverty and continue to experience segregated lives (Banks & McGee-Banks, 2008; Beachum, Dentith, McCray, & Boyle, 2008)

Culture and Race

Culture is a complex phenomena that not only connects individuals to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status and other factors, but it is also a combination of shared thoughts, feelings, attitudes, behaviors, traditions, beliefs (Boykin, et al., 2005; Maddox, 1998). Some cultural characteristics are explicit and visible, while some might be difficult to identify. An often used representation of culture that depicts those differences as invisible is the *iceberg*

metaphor (Maddox, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). As with the iceberg, part of culture is visible and part below the surface is not always invisible. This may explain some misconceptions and stereotypes that arise from differences in cultural characteristics that are not obvious to the teacher or student. The complexity of culture is compared to the many layers of an iceberg as surface, intermediate, and deep. The surface level of the iceberg metaphor represents what can be seen, for example visible signs of race and gender. The intermediate level of the iceberg metaphor represents the cultural artifacts, customs, rules, and language that are socially constructed. The deep level is the layer of the iceberg metaphor defined as the values, beliefs, feelings, attitudes that individualize people within a cultural group that result from early childhood socialization (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). The invisible layers of iceberg metaphor that are unknown to others may cause gaps between people from different cultures. These gaps may influence teaching practices and learning experiences of teachers and students from different backgrounds. When the complexity of culture is appreciated and embraced, individuals become less confused, angered, and judgmental when faced with what appears to be abnormal behaviors of people who are different from themselves (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005; Williams, 1996).

As early as 3 B.C. theories were created about the concept of race by the explorers as a way to bring social order to the world they did not fully understand. It is believed that this social order was constructed and transmitted between generations to identify superiority or inferiority of specific racial groups (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Social construct of race is identified by what is visible, the above surface layer of the iceberg. An phenotypical set of traits characterize individuals belonging to groups such as, Caucasian, African American, Native American, Hispanic and Asian (McDermott, Raley, & Seyer-Ochi, 2009; Williams, 1996). According to Campbell-Jones and Lindsey (2010) twenty-first century socio-cultural anthropologist

researchers have constructed a newer theory about race. Race is defined as a social construct that gives different groups power and privilege in relation to opportunities and resources. Federal, state and local governments and institutions have created or reserved disproportionately more opportunities for wealth, and resources for White people than people of color (Campbell-Jones, Campbell-Jones, & Lindsey, 2010). A theory which supports this claim is known as the deficit theory(Gorski, 2008). Gorski argued that deficit theory has existed all through history and has shaped the stereotypes and negative beliefs of groups such as, Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics, to name a few. He further indicated that this theory and mode of thinking is used to transfer power to the dominant culture. For example Gorski stated, "European colonialist justified Native American genocide and slavery in the US by painting native people and African slaves as 'savages' who require civilizing…" (p. 518). Peggy McIntosh (1988) shared her ideas that the dominant culture is taught not to recognize their oppressive behaviors and have benefitted from the culture of power based on their whiteness. "Obliviousness," as she identified this behavior, unable to see or choosing not to see the oppression, perpetuated the oppressiveness and dominance (McIntosh, 1989, p. 97).

In a 3-year ethnographic research study, *Being a Good Teacher of Black Students? White Teachers and Unintentional Racism,* Hyland (2005)used a critical-social perspective, explored how four White elementary teachers unknowingly perpetuated racism. Data were collected from interviews, classroom observations, facilitated focus groups and participation in school events. The teachers believed themselves to be good teachers of students of color. They defined good teachers as being helpful, encouraging, having an ability to move students to assimilation being focused on similarities and not racial and cultural differences, and empowering students to move toward actions of social justice. However, Hyland discovered that the White teachers held lower expectations for their students of color vs. their White students. Each of these teachers lacked the

skills and knowledge to provide "culturally relevant instruction" (p. 455).The teachers' beliefs about students of color were at times judgmental and stereotypical. While these teachers recognized the system of education as perpetuating racism they were oblivious to the ways in which they supported this practice. They saw themselves as advocates for social justice and fighting against social injustice. Overall the study presented a resounding argument that culture and race permeates the teaching and learning of students of color (Hyland, 2005).

Racial and Cultural Attitudes in Education

Have times changed? Have the years of segregation continued into the 21st century? What effect did the 1896 dissent by Justice Harlan regarding Plessy vs. Ferguson have on teachers' attitudes regarding race and cultural background of their students? The history of education continued to resonate with those who fought for or against school integration historical events clearly had intentional and unintentional consequences (Johnson, 2002).

In an action research study of seven White teachers, *Emotional Abuse of Students of Color; the Hidden Inhumanity in Our Schools,* McKenzie (2009) found that teachers' stereotypes and biases affected the way they treat their students. This six month research project was conducted in an urban elementary school that served Latino and African American students. The research focused on White teachers perceptions of teaching in an urban school with predominately students of color. The goal of this action research was for the researcher and participants to work together to examine and reflect on their views about students of color as well as the understanding of their racial identity. Participants were identified by their administration and colleagues as some of the best teachers in the elementary school. They were also the only White teachers in the school. Through focus group interviews, McKenzie described her finding as "insidious dysfunction…that was vulgar and violent…" (p. 130). She concluded that the participants revealed antagonistic and racist attitudes toward their students of color and

their families. McKenzie described the participants' behaviors as psychologically and emotionally abusive. For example, the participating teachers referred to the students as "freaks" and suggested placing them in one room "where they could all just kill each other" (p. 134). The research uncovered that the White teachers' values when placed on students of color, along with the beliefs, stereotypes and lack of understanding of the students' backgrounds created an environment of racism and hostility towards the students of color (McKenzie, 2009).

The Colorblindness Effect

The historical concept of colorblindness can be discovered in the words from Justice Harlan in his 1896 dissent in Plessy vs. Ferguson,

> The White race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievement, in education, in wealth and in power. So I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains fast to the principles of constitutional liberty. But in view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates class among citizens (Jackson, 2008, p.136)

There are those that believe "color-blindness" is a misinterpretation of Martin Luther King's words from I Have a Dream speech, relating his dream of a nation where children would ". . .not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." (King, 1963) to mean "race should not matter" not "race does not matter" (Castro-Atwater, 2008, p. 246). These terms have become distorted in today's society. The intent of race should not matter was that individuals should not be discriminated against based on the color of their skin. As opposed

to “race does not matter” which was taken to mean people ignore how individuals are treated differently because of the color of their skin (p. 246).

Teachers remain challenged to recognize the spoken and unspoken attitudes regarding students’ racial and cultural differences, as well as the relevance of the students’ prior knowledge and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2001). The mindset of colorblindness is the idea that teachers disregard the race and culture of the students, reporting that they only see children, not their race and culture. Conversely, according to Castro-Atwater (2008) some teachers submit to a method of color-blindness. This attitude has the potential to create a racial and cultural gap between teachers and their students. Left unacknowledged, this cultural gap influences teachers’ abilities to connect instruction to the students’ racial and cultural experiences. In addition, this racial and cultural gap increases the possibility of failure for students who lack the cultural knowledge to navigate implicit and unstated culture norms in the educational system (Delpit, 1995).

Educators, who focus on color-blindness are not always attentive to racial and cultural differences, they may lack sensitivity to the needs of students of color (Castro-Atwater, 2008; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Sailes, (2008) explicated that the inability of White teachers to teach students of color has not been “called into question” (p.75). Consequently the curriculum and instruction perpetuates colorblindness and racism (e.g., Delpit, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1998) suggested that curriculum was written to sustain the power in the dominant culture while it weakened the dignity and pride of other cultural groups. She described how literature for U.S. history has been written to silence the truth about Civil Rights heroes. For example, the story of Rosa Parks was portrayed as a person who was physically tired when she would not give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery Alabama, when in fact, she should have been portrayed as an individually who was mentally tired of the mistreatment of Black people. Ladson-Billings further indicated that colorblindness and cultural insensitivity in the area of curriculum goes beyond the

textbook to the teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Gillborn, 2004).

Educational policies and instructional strategies are often initiated and created by those from the dominant culture, allowing for racial and cultural differences to be ignored by the educational system and educators (Freire, 1970). Colorblindness underestimates the importance of recognizing effects that racial and cultural background have on the teaching of students of color (Evans, 2007; Fiere, 1970). "Pretending race does not exist is not the same as creating equality" (Campbell-Jones, et al., p. 90).

Many students from the dominant culture enter the educational system at an advantage compared to students of color. The White "cultural capital" can shape the perspective and belief that teachers have toward students of color who enter the same educational system (Takei & Shouse, 2007). Understanding the complexities of race and culture is important in providing quality teaching that engages students in the learning process. The culture of education is a reflection of the dominant middle class White culture, structured to accommodate students who readily fit into so-called "cultural capital" (Takei & Shouse, 2007, p. 372).

Takei and Shouse (2007) explored how Black and White teachers evaluated the academic work habits of Black students. They investigated whether school culture and content matter, beyond race and culture, affected teachers' relationships with Black students. Through a survey analysis Takei & Shouse found that the race of the teacher in concurrence with the race of the students, socioeconomic status of the students, and content of course did appear to affect the teachers' judgment and evaluation of the students. For example, White teachers in English and Social Studies rated the performance of their Black students more negatively than their White students, in a school with predominately Black students. It was suggested that the behaviors of the Black students in the predominately Black school could be viewed as intolerable by the

White teachers. Black teachers rated their Black students' work in Math and Science more negatively than the White teachers. Black students with more challenging behaviors may have been placed in classrooms with Black teachers, while White teachers may have Black students with less behavior problems assigned to their classes. However analysis did not show that White teachers consistently evaluated the work habits of Black students negatively. The overall rating of the Black students was more negative (Takei & Shouse, 2008). The cultural capital that students of color acquire may not be valued by those of the dominant White culture. This devaluing affects the upward mobility for students of color and fosters power and privilege for the dominant White culture (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009).

White Privilege and Power in Education

An attempt to identify White privilege and power in education may be compared to trying to make explicit invisible behaviors and attitudes. Although educational institutions had taken strides to redressing issues related to racial and cultural inequities, the prevailing obstacles often hindered attempts to change (Johnson, 2002). If educators have difficulty with having courageous conversations about White privilege and power, then it will be an even greater challenge for them to encourage similar conversations with their students. If conversations related to White privilege and power are ignored then policies, practices and procedures are continually developed, initiated and mandated from the perspective of those who have the power. Awareness and understanding power and privilege may prompt an ethical and moral obligation to consider related social and educational injustices (Delpit, 1995; Henze, Lucas, & Scott, 1998). McIntosh (1989) states,

> "I have come to see White privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like

> an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks." (p. 10)

White privilege and power (also referenced as Whiteness) implies that certain social, cultural and economic privileges are afforded only to those who are from the dominant culture (majority) not the minority (Beachum, et al., 2008). Historically, an advantage has existed for Whites based on racial dominance, while people of color (minority) have experienced disadvantages. Consequently past historical events such as the take-over of land from the Native Americans in North America and the enslavement of Africans, influenced today's social interaction (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006).

In an autobiographical narrative study (Johnson, 2002) with six White teachers, the researcher analyzed the participants' awareness of race and racism. Each participant defined race by skin color and unquestionably identified specific characteristics and behaviors for particular racial groups. However, when having conversations about the White race, the participants had difficulty assigning specific characteristics to their Whiteness. Moreover, the participants believed they themselves did not benefit from such (White) privilege. The researcher concluded that the opportunity for participants to articulate their views about race and racial privilege served as a reminder for each to focus or refocus on race issues in the classroom. The study further suggested that more autobiographical narrative studies and conversation are needed for society, institutions and individuals to understand race, White privilege and power from a critical perspective (Johnson, 2002).

On March 18, 2008 during his presidential campaign, Senator Barack Obama stated these words in what is known as his *Speech on Race*. In this speech, he depicts a society challenged to understand the complexities of racial privilege.

> ". . .the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of Black people; that the legacy of discrimination -- and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past -- are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds…Most working and middle-class White Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience - as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives." ("Obama's Race Speech," 2008),

Racially marginalized groups have always been aware of the power and privilege available to others. When those, who are beneficiaries of power recognize the benefits they're experiencing, the barriers between the two groups begin to collapse (Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Gillborn, 2004). The social injustice and inequities associated with these kind of power relationships can present a barrier between the students' race, home culture and school culture (Maddox, 1998). According to Gay (2000), incorporating culturally relevant instruction in education, speaks to the cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs in the learning process.

Culturally Relevant Instruction

Culturally relevant instruction is defined as an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges and integrates the racial and cultural differences in the learning environment (Ware, 2006). Ladson-Billings (1995b) argued that this approach empowers students academically, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural references to convey information, skills and attitudes. It allows students' prior knowledge and experiences to emerge

in the learning environment. If educators themselves are not aware of their own cultural perspectives, they can unintentionally stifle educational opportunities for their students and obstruct their potential for success. Educators that expanded their knowledge about racial and cultural differences of their students and self reflected on their own cultural background gained the potential to facilitate culturally relevant instruction and learning (Gay, 2000). In order to provide culturally relevant instruction to diverse student populations, researchers suggested educators craft and implement curriculum and instructional practices that are inclusive of students' cultural backgrounds (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006).

Education has chiefly been centered on academic diversity through various learning practices such as cultural celebrations, ethnic heroes, food, etc. However, culturally relevant instruction is not only about having special ethnic celebrations; it is an obligation for school to assure equal opportunity for all students. Educators who revolutionize their beliefs, attitudes and values about racial and cultural differences can improve the learning for students (Nieto, 2002).

Bergeron (2008) conducted a narrative inquiry study of one first-year middle class, White teacher in an urban classroom with predominately Latino students and one White student. The research examined (a) the preparedness of the teacher to provide culturally relevant instruction as a first year teacher in an urban setting, (b) the teacher's focus on her awareness of her cultural perspective and (c) how her cultural perspective affected her interaction with students. After one year of shared conversations, journaling, participant observations, emails and phone conversations, the researcher concluded that providing multiple systems of support for the first year teacher can aid in some successful culturally relevant instructional practices. However, it is important to mention that the one White student was emotionally and physically isolated and withdrew from classroom instruction and peer interaction. Because of this, the researcher

questioned whether this teacher would be able to provide culturally relevant instructional practices in a more culturally and racially diverse classroom setting.

Teachers who validate the various backgrounds of culturally diverse students are able to make learning more pertinent to their students which leads to students being more likely to engage in their learning (Menchaca, 2001). Further research indicated that teachers who did not share students' culture could provide culturally relevant instruction if they understood the children's culture (Colombo, 2005). Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2001) *Crossing Over to Canaan* gives a vivid description of the need for educators to embrace culturally relevant instruction.

> "The average White teacher has no idea what it means to be "ashy" or be willing to fail physical education because of what swimming will do to your hair. Many White teachers cannot speak even rudimentary Spanish, even enough to signal an emergency or satisfy a basic need, or know the distinctive histories of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, or the countless groups who originated in the Spanish speaking Americas" (p.82).

Many educators recognized that there are achievement gaps among groups of students identified based on race, ethnicity, and economic status. However educators may not be aware that gaps exist beyond yearly state assessment scores revealing those gaps (Nelson, 2008). In the article, *Cultural Proficiency: a Moral Imperative,* Baron (2007) argued, "… [T]here is no greater moral imperative for educators than to interrupt inequitable practices and eliminate the predictive values of race and culture on academic success" (p 54). When White teachers assess their race and culture and become aware of the culture of power which exists for them as members of the dominant group, acknowledge that race does matter when engaging students in the learning

process and provide culturally relevant instructions, changes may occur in their teaching practices (Bartlett, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

Building Relationships across Racial and Cultural Differences

Teachers influence the lives of their students and have an effect on students' learning. When students feel connected to their teachers, trust their teachers, and believe their teachers have a genuine interest in them, they are more likely to engage in the learning and experience success (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005). Delpit (1995) argued that successful teaching starts with building genuine relationships between the teacher and students; relationships that allow students to feel valued and safe with their teachers. She speculated that some cultures, more so than the dominant culture, placed more importance on the emotional and social aspect of building relationships (i.e. hugging, smiling, friendly chit chat, etc.). These cultural groups need to physically experience such emotions to establish trust.

Students of color may generally distrust their White teachers more so than their teachers of color unless they know that their White teachers are culturally sensitive and aware of their culture (Zirkel, 2004). Chesler (1993) studied how students of color perceived their white college professors. The emerging themes after analyzing 15 focus groups found that students of color believed their professors had low expectations of them, did not care about them, did not reach out to support them, and stereotyped them and treated them all the same. In addition the students believed that their professors did not recognize them as culturally different from their white peers. While the students acknowledged their uncertainty regarding the professors' behavior toward them, they did report that the professors' behaviors affected them negatively. Nevertheless, the White professors reported that they could not pin-point their particular behaviors that elicited the perceptions from the students of color.

White teachers often find it difficult to connect and build relationships with students of color. While some ignore that such challenges exist, many actively seek solutions to this challenge (Chesler, 1993; Cooper & Jackson, 2011). Through critical self reflection, courageous conversations, and a willingness to learn and share about racial and cultural differences, educators can begin to address their personal biases, stereotypes and beliefs about students of color. Such approach may garner change in White teachers' perspectives about students of color and provide an opportunity to build genuine relationships (Cooper & Jackson, 2011; Delpit, 1988, 1995; Gay, 2000).

Perspectives and Transformative Learning

This section discusses perspective sharing, taking, and shift and transformative learning. The first part consists of operational definitions for perspective, perspective sharing, perspective taking and perspective shift as introduced by Mezirow (1995) in 1978 and elaborated on by his followers (e.g., Taylor, 1997, 2000)The second part introduces Mezirow's theory of transformative learning and illustrates the interconnectedness of perspective sharing, perspective taking, perspective shift and transformative learning through two research studies.

Perspective Sharing, Taking and Shift

Perspective is defined as an individual's own point of view or assessment of the world around them. This assessment can be shaped from individuals' cultural environment, experiences, and information collected over time. Individuals' own perspectives are more than likely triggered in their mind before their mind thinks about another's perspective or way of viewing the world or a particular concept or idea (Epley, Caruso, & Bazerman, 2006).

Perspective sharing is defined as individuals telling each other about their beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and their view of the world through an active dialogic interaction. It may be part of conversations during shared experiences. *Perspective taking* may be described as an

individual's capability to understand the perspective of another person, to see through their eyes or walk in their shoes. A certain period of perspective sharing may lead to mutual and self understanding of individual perspective. *Perspective shift* or *Perspective transformation* means one is able to move beyond seeing and understanding another's perspective to adopting a new perspective in their own system of beliefs and values. Self discovery of one's own perspective or world view may arise as a result of perspective sharing and perspective taking. Reflecting on the iceberg metaphor of culture, perspective taking and especially perspective shift challenges the deeper levels of the iceberg, for example: cultural values, beliefs, and consequent behaviors (Mezirow, 1997; Rimmington & Alagic, 2008). Significant changes through perspective taking and shift involve transformative learning (Taylor, 1997, 2000; Mezirow, 1995, 1997).

Transformative Learning

The theory of transformative learning was introduced by Mezirow in 1978 and developed into a multifaceted depiction of how learners interpret and reinterpret specific beliefs (Cranton, 2002; Taylor, 2000). Transformative learning might happen when a person is engaged in life experiences that prompt changes in an assumption, feeling, value, or a belief. This learning can occur when a "disorienting dilemma" (an unforeseen life situation, culture shock) challenges the perspective of an individual (p. 82). Likewise, a series of small incremental phenomena may influence perception and one's willingness to be open-minded to new learning and new ideas (Rimmington & Alagic, 2008).

In an auto ethnographic study Boyd (2008) shared his personal transformative learning experiences. Through perspective sharing and perspective taking, Boyd attained a heightened awareness of his White male privilege during his participation in a six week class, Bridging Race and Class Gaps. In this class, Boyd developed a personal connection with and deeper understanding of his Whiteness. He stated, "I have always been working on myself...I attended

workshops on diversity...found them personally challenging and enriching…in this class…I began to wonder if I understood Whiteness and White privilege as well as I thought" (p. 212 - 214). When another class member confronted Boyd accusing him of being a "know it all" and "Hitler" (p. 212), Boyd acknowledged that such accusations caused him to face a "disorienting dilemma" (p. 213). At that point he began his journey toward transformative learning. Boyd's participation and the candid feedback he received from members of the class transformed his thinking and gave him a "new vision" (p. 224) about his understanding of his white power and privilege.

A disorienting dilemma challenging an individual's perspective may cause him/her to undergo a change which consequently alters his or her perspective. This kind of transformational learning occurs through efforts to resolve a disorienting dilemma caused by a critical crisis in life, or as a transition through a series of transformations over time (Mezirow, 1995, 1997). Mezirow identified five stages of transformative learning. An individual (i) realizes a new perspective may provide a new way of thinking about an issue; (ii) acknowledges possible consequences of the held perspective, belief, and/or value; (iii) begins to analyze present beliefs; (iv) engages in a dialogue or action to better understand the new perspective; and (v) transforms the behavior or worldview in order to adapt to new conditions (Cranton, 2002; Mezirow, 2003, 1997).

In the study conducted by Greenman & Dieckmann (2004) the goal was to understand through participants' stories, what experiences, if any, changed the participants' values, beliefs and attitudes with regard to racial and cultural differences. If change occurred, the researchers analyzed how it affected the participants 'teaching practices. Greenman & Dieckmann studied education faculty and pre-service teachers during a course *Theory and Dynamics of Intercultural Interaction in Education*. The feedback from the pre-service teachers to the college professors,

related to altering their perspectives about culture and cultural differences. This prompted the professors to study the value of the course and "efficacy of criticality in cultural context for transformative teacher education" (p. 245). The core of the course focused on culture and oppression related to race, class, gender, etc. The data consisted of class evaluations, review of course documents, informal discussions, observations and written personal narratives. The researchers concluded that the participants, who experienced perspective shift, encountered discomfort and emotional pain while changing their initial personal understanding to a new perspective. This explained, to some extent, the need to provide a safe environment in which participants may have had meaningful, honest and transparent dialogue which allowed them to express their feelings and discomfort. Research findings also indicated that participants, who experienced perspective shift, expressed a passion to confront social injustice issues and advocate for equity in education.

Teachers and students are empowered when engaged in learning with and from one another. They may experience transformative learning and consequently become more critically aware of societal structures and injustices (Freire,1970). Freire suggested teachers deposit information into the students without consideration for students' prior knowledge, experiences, and maintain an expectation that students memorize and regurgitate the information. This approach does not encourage students to think critically and may question their existing relationships. Therefore the approach is not compatible with critical thinking and transformative learning. Students do have experiences and information to share in the learning environment and these experiences can promote and legitimize their knowledge, exploration, rediscovery and reflection. When empowered, the possibility of transformative learning may occur (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 2003; Rimmington & Alagic, 2008). For example, in the Greenman & Dieckmann (2004) study, the professors empowered students to draw on their cultural experiences and think

critically about social injustices providing conditions for transformative learning. Boyd (2008) realized through his critical self analysis his way of thinking shifted. He began to understand the perspective of those in his class whose race and culture were different from his.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in Critical Social Theory (CST) with an emphasis on the works of Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory(Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003). Each theory provided a perspective that contributed to the critical awareness of race and culture and their effects on the educational theory and practice. *Critical Social Theory* (CST) emphasizes the social human needs and provided a perspective by which to examine social injustice (Peca, 2000). S*ociocultural theory* suggested that culture shapes the cognitive development of humans, and reflected that teachers' understanding of students' culture can transform teaching and learning (Ratner, 1998). Freire, from a *critical pedagogy* point of view, believed that through a commitment to social justice in education, education can be transformed (Reynolds, 2007). Further explanation of each theory and how they interconnected to frame this study is provided in this section.

Critical Social Theory

Critical Social Theory (CST) was developed in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory from the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. It was a result of the work of multidisciplinary scholars known as critical theorists from the Frankfurt School. These theorists included Horkheimer and Adorno, who proposed a broader perspective of critical theory to include race and ethnic theory, cultural theory, and sociological theory. Horkheimer and Adorno, leaders from the Frankfurt School, philosophers, and developers of the critical theory perspective believed that individuals should become the masters of their own knowledge. Together they published the work *Dialectic of Enlightment* in 1944 about contemporary

problems of society. They argued that society is conditioned by a capitalist belief supported by the dominant group, identifying this group as those who had "social-economic, political-psychological and cultural industry power over society" (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978; Gunzelin, 2002, p. 104; Peca, 2000)

Critical Social Theory is known for its perspective of criticism of established social structures. It encourages the overall search for transformative learning through the application of the theory. It is about the critique of society and established structures, focused on society's influence and the oppression of various cultural groups (Leonardo, 2004; Peca, 2000). In education, this theory promotes critical thinking, focused on social change and can provide opportunities to critically examine students' educational experiences. This critical theory perspective allows learners to view education with a broader awareness of humankind, inclusive of racial and cultural differences, and with the intent to change the world, not just describe it. Critical Social Theory encourages education and educators to search for and provide venues that garner quality education for all students (Leonardo, 2004).Concentrating on educational disparities increases the educators' awareness and insight regarding social injustices, influencing educators to progress from awareness to action. This theory encourages educators to engage in courageous conversations about racial and cultural differences while providing quality teaching in their classrooms (Beachum, et al., 2008; Leonardo, 2004).

Sociocultural Theory

In the 1920s and 1930s, Vygotsky, a psychologist from the Soviet Union, studied the social explanation of human psychology; how the culture shaped the cognitive development of humans. He believed that educators' limited knowledge regarding the subject of culture and human development created disconnect between teaching and learning. He further suggested that a child's development cannot be understood unless the child's life (environment) and culture

have been studied (De Valenzuela, Connery, & Musanti, 2000). Vygotsky also believed that incorporating students' culture in teaching engages students in the learning process and further enhances life-long learning (Kozulin, et al., 2003).

In a research study (Kozulin, et al., 2003) teachers in an education course became aware of some challenges associated with teaching concepts. They recognized that as practitioners they frequently taught concepts as outlined in the curriculum and teacher's manual. They rarely moved beyond the textbook to allow students' experiences to emerge in the learning. In this course, the teachers were encouraged to shift their approach to a model developed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Galperin's (1982) mental action theory. Galperin expanded Vygotsky's framework to the Vygotsky-Galperin learning and teaching model. According to this model, the learning environment is shared by teacher and students. The teacher allows for the students' prior knowledge to become an integral part of the teaching and learning processes. Together teacher and students collaborate and construct meaning of their learning (Arievitch, 2005). Bransford, Brown & Cocking (2000) summarizes "There is a good deal of evidence that learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to the knowledge and beliefs that learners bring to a learning task" (p.11).

The culture in which children are raised shapes their initial development. According to Vygotsky, first on a social level (external) interacting with family and others in the environment and second on a psychological level (internal) when the learning is activated through varying internal processes in the environment (Kozulin, et al., 2003).Therefore children develop social know-how from social interactions, and when they start school, many have already acquired a style of interacting with others based on their home and neighborhood environment and culture (Williams 1996). Scribner (1988) emphasized the importance of cultural history as a dimension in understanding individual development with various ethnic groups. These social interactions,

sequentially, mirrored cultural values and norms for appropriate behavior. Needless to say, children's social interactions are culturally shaped and culture is an important aspect to increasing the academic success of students (Lynn, 2006; Smolen, et al., 2006).

Critical Pedagogy

Critical Pedagogy provides educators and researchers with knowledge and understanding about the dynamics and the operation of the education institution and its effect on race, social class, and gender. Critical pedagogy researchers examine students' school experiences, teachers' teaching practices, curriculum, policies and educational practices. Through the lens of critical pedagogy, it is believed that schools are designed to perpetuate the educational values of the dominant groups in society (McLaren, 1998). Freire's (1970) theorized about realities of oppression, in an effort to explicate social injustice and inequities. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* he defined the teachers' instructional behavior as oppressive and the students' position as oppressed. Freire suggested that the process, practice and behavior when the teacher teaches, narrates, and thinks for the students, encourages and propagates oppression. As mentioned earlier, Freire referred to this practice as "banking" (p. 72), a common practice when teacher lectures and the student listens and memorizes. He further indicated, that teachers often assume that students have entered the classroom environment with no prior knowledge "a blank slate" (Freire, 1970, p. 75); essentially the students cultural experiences are disregarded. The teachers become the experts of the knowledge and the students' lose creative power to seek knowledge and make personal meaning of their learning. Thus, Freire identified this kind of teacher-student interaction as the perpetuation of oppression and proposes that educators identify means by which students could embrace and make personal meaning of their learning (Harris-Murri, et al., 2006).

Kincheloe (2008) whose work builds on that of Freire's critical pedagogy suggests that education is shaped by history and many other societal influences. These influences "operating in the name of democracy and justice" (p. 2) often are shaped and viewed from a dominant White middle class perspective and can be inappropriate for some students. Teachers are challenged by this concept and embrace a historical traditional approach to teaching because they believe their educational experience in schooling worked for them and should also work for their students (Kincheloe, 2008).

Making the Connections

To explore the bridges which connected the theories of this study required thinking about socio-cultural perspectives on learning, and critical pedagogical insights into educational power relationships. Socio-cultural theory contributed to the idea that an individuals' development is a result of the cultural experiences embedded in the learning process (Gunawardena, et al., 2004). A critical social perspective assumes that students' cultural experiences are an important part of the learning environment,. Teachers are expected to facilitate instruction in a manner that recognizes and includes students' experiences as part of the learning processes. When educators appreciate, embrace and embed the students' cultural experiences in teaching practices, students actively engage in the learning processes (Reynolds, 2007).

While Freire (1970) focused on critical pedagogy, Vygotsky (Kozulin, et al., 2003) centered his socio-cultural theory on the premise that learning occurs in a social and cultural framework and individuals experiences shape meaning and thought. In order for a child to learn, to shift from one perspective to the next, social, cultural and physiological changes must occur. Vygotsky further argued that modeling, encouraging, and leading by example, all are needed to support transformational learning (Ratner, 1998). For example, the environment from which a child comes involves sharing of common experiences, values and beliefs. As shared ideas are

supported by the commonality of the culture, knowledge is developed and cultivated. Transformative learning is more likely to occur when the learner engages in a critical analysis of the beliefs, values and shared ideas of a culture/community (Gunawardena, et al., 2004).

Researchers over the years supported the proposition that children bring their culture to the learning environment (e.g., Sleeter, 2001, Ladson-Billings, 1995a, Delpit, 1995). In a three year study of eight secondary teachers, Ladson-Billings examined the connection between school and the culture of the students from a critical pedagogy perspective. The qualitative study identified teachers who had the ability to embed the students' culture in the learning as "culturally relevant teachers" (p. 160). These teachers were able to help all students in the teaching practice by building on the students' prior experiences. The researcher found that students are more engaged in learning when their prior experiences were a part of the school based learning experience. Teachers who showed signs of culturally relevant pedagogy demonstrated the following outcomes: "…students experience academic success, students develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and students develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160).

The teachers in this study (Ladson-Billings, 1995a) were identified by African American parents. These parents also encouraged the researcher to elicit input about potential teacher-participants from the principals. The principals identified teachers, who had fewer discipline referrals and higher attendance. Each teacher's style of teaching was different. Some were rigid and routine while others were less structured and more open. The teachers in this study maintained a consistent positive relationship with their students. They encouraged students' prior knowledge and cultural experience to emerge during instruction which allowed the students to take ownership of their learning. They exhibited passion, not only about what they taught but also what they were learning from the students. The teachers were enthusiastic about their

profession and choose to teach in an urban environment as a way of giving to the community. Teachers acknowledged their passion was not derived from their formal college education but by life experiences and a desire to make a difference in the lives of students in urban school systems. Ladson-Billings (1995a) concluded that additional research is needed in the study of culturally relevant pedagogy and what influences teachers to become culturally relevant educators.

The use of narrative inquiry heightens an awareness of reality and self reflection that may prompt change. In addition, sharing stories through the narrative process allowed me and the participants to test their values, attitudes and beliefs against others. This testing fostered potential for transformation as participants built harmony around common thoughts and beliefs (Johnson, 2002; Peca, 2000).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research focused on how White teachers' understandings of racial and cultural differences between them and their students of color shaped their teaching practices and students learning. It further examined how White teachers viewed themselves in their relationships with students of color and how racial and cultural difference may have brought about the teachers' transformational learning. Employing a qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry allowed participants the opportunity to share their experiences from a past, present and future perspective.

Qualitative research was the method utilized to collect and analyze the data to explain the social phenomena of each participant. It explored the why and how of the research utilizing data collection strategies such as: semi-structured interviews, observations, and a focus group. Qualitative research allowed me to keep the collected data in its "natural setting" (Merriam, 1998 p.5). A methodological form of qualitative research, narrative inquiry, was used in this research

study. Further explanation of Narrative Inquiry along with my, Researcher's World View, Research Site, Participants and Selection Criteria, and Data Collection Strategies are outlined in the following sections (Erlandson, 1993; Merriam, 1998).

Narrative Inquiry

A research method of narrative inquiry was utilized to capture feelings, hopes, dreams and event interpretation of the participants' stories. It supported the exploration of participants' thinking and their stories beyond their external behaviors. Narratives conveyed ideas about the nature of events as reflected in the life experiences of the teachers (Clandinin, Pusher, & Orr, 2007). The specific nature of the narrative inquiry used in this study is both biographical and reflective. Biographical narrative refers to the participants' opportunity to share their life stories holistically; stories that shaped who they are including their racial and cultural identity. Reflective approach intentionally guided participants to reflect while telling those stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Johns & Joiner, 2002). This approach allowed me the opportunity to listen to their stories, their reflections on their developmental and educational experiences, years of teaching and how, if at all, their teaching practices might have changed over time (Johns & Joiner, 2002; Moss, Springer, & Dehr, 2008). As Connelly and Clandinin (2000) wrote

> . . . development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories…To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study (p. 477).

Researcher's Worldview

My actions and reflections were a part of the narrative inquiry process. My primary role was to actively listen to the stories of the participants, and remained cognizant of the power relationship I may have had as the researcher as well as an administrator in the district. Furthermore, as an African American researcher, I was aware that my racial and cultural differences from White participants may have affected our interactions and what they chose to share with me in this study. As participants shared their stories, I had to know the appropriate time, if any, to disclose my own stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It was important for me to explicate my professional and personal background and the perspectives I took during data collection and subsequent data analysis.

I have worked in the field of education for more than18 years with my educational background in school social work most of my career, in many different capacities in this urban school setting. I have worked in the areas of adult education, parental involvement, at risk early childhood, student/family advocacy and currently diversity equity. In each of these areas I have addressed social and emotional needs of individuals and groups.

In the capacity as a social worker advocate, I facilitated student groups, counseled individual students, taught or trained district staff, and collaborated with parents and community groups on a variety of topics. I recognized my absence of classroom teaching experience might have presented some limitations such as a deficit in knowing the pressure teachers may face when meeting the demands of state assessments, providing instruction to meet the needs of all students, and teaching to the different learning styles.

Most recently as the district's Director of Equity and Accountability and Coordinator for the District's 5 year plan with Cultural Proficiency, I have heard the voices of White teachers as they expressed their challenges and concerns with teaching students of color. Therefore, I

believed it was important to explore how cultural and racial differences between White teachers and students of color affected teaching practices and students learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Throughout my experiences, I have become more aware of the educational inequities associated with students of color such as: the existing achievement gaps, disproportionate numbers of suspension and expulsion, overrepresentation of students placed in special education, and a higher dropout rate (Maddox, 1998). These inequities have affected my perspective about urban education. Maintaining a belief that the institution of education perpetuated oppression and social inequities (Freire, 1970), in this research I explored the effects of racial and cultural differences between teachers and their students utilizing a critical perspective. However, to collect accurate data and respect the confidentiality of the district, school sites and participants, I have assigned them pseudonyms names.

Research Site

Usher County Public Schools (UCPS), located in the Midwest, is the largest school district in its state. UCPS educates approximately 50,000 students. According to the district's 2010 student enrollment data, demographics reflect 35% Caucasian, 26% Hispanic, 23% African American, 6% Asian, 4% Native American, 6% multiracial and 2% other. The teaching staff was comprised of 89% Caucasian, 10% African American, and 1% Hispanic, 87 % female and 13% male. In the 2007-2008 school year, the Usher County School district implemented a 5-year Cultural Proficiency initiative as a method by which to embed culturally responsive practices in the culture of the organizations. The five year plan was designed based on five essential elements of cultural proficiency created by Randall Lindsey (2005) and his colleagues. All district educators participated in quarterly professional development learning sessions provided by a team of district Learning Coaches. The professional development for Cultural Proficiency was organized to support and provide strategies for educators as they instructed students in a racially

and culturally diverse environment (Freire, 1970; Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones, 2005). During the first year of implementation, district employees focused on the first essential element, *Assessing Cultural Knowledge.* This element highlighted individual culture, understanding the culture of the organization and recognizing how each culture affected others who were different. In the second year of implementation, professional development sessions focused on the next essential element, *Valuing Diversity*. This focus challenged educators to acknowledge diversity as different as opposed to characterizing diversity as inappropriate. The intent for year three (the time when this research was conducted) was to concentrate on *Managing the Dynamics of Differences*. This focus offered strategies to resolve potential conflict with cultural differences. Year four, the district planned to focus on *How to Adapt to Diversity* and year five's learning on *Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge* (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003)

School Sites

Hill Grove High School was a historical landmark build in 1929, known as Grove High, home of the Braves. It was the second largest high school in the city located in mid-town, a lower income Hispanic dominated community. This Native American theme for which the building was designed and built was to pay homage to the Native Americans who founded the school. The school was populated by predominately Hispanic students. The student enrollment was 1,960 with 57% Hispanic, 25% Caucasian, 11% African American, 4% multiracial and 2% American Indian. Hill Grove was embraced by the neighboring community and Usher County Hill Grove alumni.

Garden Grove K-8 School was one of the newly built schools in the district. Garden Grove was built as part of the district's elimination of busing for desegregation plan with a goal to design a school with a magnet theme that would promote integration and not perpetuate racial isolation. The magnet theme was International Baccalaureate. The school opened August 2008

with a student elementary enrollment of 271 and 71% African American. At the time of this research study the student elementary enrollment was 259 with 68% African American, 15% Caucasian, 8% multiracial, 9% Hispanic. The middle school level enrollment was 108 when the school first opened with 57% of these students being African American. Enrollment at the time of this research was 107 with 57% African American, 14% Hispanic, 15% Caucasian, 11% multiracial, 2% Asian, 1% American Indian. Garden Grove is located in the northeast quadrant of the city, an area dominated by lower income African Americans.

Lyons Accelerated Magnet Elementary less than two miles from Garden Grove served the same population. A school named after an African American administrator who worked in the district for over forty-one years. Lyons had a student enrollment of 377 and 78% African American, 6% Caucasian, 9% multiracial, and 7% Hispanic.

Participants and Selection Criteria

For the purpose of this study I focused on identifying participants that taught in the Usher County Public Schools and schools that were identified as one race schools in the district. A one race schools was defined having 60% or more of any one race enrolled. Eight schools were identified, two high schools, two middle schools, one K-8 school and three elementary schools.

Selection Process for Potential Candidates

The school administrators at each of the schools were asked to assist the researcher by identifying teachers who they believed exemplified an authentic relationship with students of color. In an effort to avoid the administrator's personal preference, the administrators were given criteria to guide them in identifying each teacher. The teachers' reputation with students of color was based on past and present students' personal reports and beliefs about the teacher, colleagues' thoughts and beliefs about the potential candidate, administrator's assessment of students' level of engagement and applied knowledge in the classroom activities, discussion, etc,

and the administrators' professional knowledge about the potential candidate's teacher-student relationships with students of color. A total of sixteen teachers from the eight schools were initially identified.

Interviews of Potential Research Candidates

I interviewed sixteen potential participants in order to identify six teachers for this research. Two teachers from elementary and high school and one from middle school were selected. The following criterion was used to select the participants: participation in the district's Cultural Proficiency professional development, two or more years of teaching experience in Usher County, and a planned decision to become a teacher in an urban school district. I also asked each candidate to describe some of their interesting and challenging teaching experiences in their interactions with students of color. Based on those experiences they were asked how their teaching might have changed over time (Appendix A). How each candidate responded to these questions also weighed in on my final selection. Each interview was held individually at a convenient time for the potential participants in their classroom.

Selection Process for Research Participants

Selection of participants was based on the responses from the potential candidates' interview using a purposive sampling technique (Erlandson, 1993; Merriam, 1998). Based on the face to face conversation, meeting outlined criteria, responses to the questions, and availability of candidate, I selected six individuals, five White women and one White male. Prior to beginning the research the male participant eliminated himself from the research due to personal time constraints.

Interview Process with Research Participants

Interviews were scheduled with participants individually. Once selected, the participants' first research interview was scheduled, once again, in their classroom. All other interviews and

focus group discussion were conducted away from the schools and at mutual agreed locations such as: coffee shops, book stores, or restaurants. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The interview questions (Appendix B) allowed me an opportunity to develop an initial understanding about each participant. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to prompt discussion, encourage reflection and recollection of critical events. The interviews were informal and gave me the opportunity to build rapport with each participant. Implementing reflective questioning during this initial interview, I utilized the participants' responses from their candidate selection interview. As I continued with rapport building I encouraged participants to elaborate on their initial responses from the candidate interview. This practice allowed each participant an opportunity to reflect and share their life's story.

Data Collection Strategies

Narrative Inquiry data collection involved several strategies. For this study the strategies included classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with each teacher, and a focus group discussion with all participants. Data from the stories, semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion and classroom observations were analyzed; in addition, data was further analyzed then organized by key critical events in the participants' lives. I, along with the participants could create meaning from their experiences and draw on key factors or critical events that caused change in their lives and their teaching practices. To check for accuracy and preserve the truth of each story, the researcher provided participants with their stories for review and feedback.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted after the first initial participants' interview. The first observation was conducted toward the end of the spring of 2010 in April and May, the second observation was conducted after all interviews and the focus group in the fall of 2010, in

September. I wanted to have an opportunity to see interactions of the teachers with their students as the school year was ending, and how the teachers established rapport to build relationship and connection with their students as the school year began. These classroom observations also provided information related to actions, interactions and behaviors between teachers and students. I observed and recorded classroom artifacts, student's level of engagement, and body language of students and teachers. I observed to see if, and how the teachers engaged their students by using culturally relevant instruction. These observations offered a better understanding of the teachers' role in their classrooms. In addition, these observations allowed me to analyze each teacher living their stories as well (Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Merriam, 1998)

Interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to support reflective and biographical narrative inquiry. Sixteen teachers from K-12 levels were identified in the selection interview. The selection interviews were held in the potential participants' classrooms. I believed having the selection interviews in the classroom of a potential candidate would empower the candidate to feel comfortable in their own environment and provide a relaxed and informal setting. To continue with this level of comfort and in order to build rapport with the selected participants their initial interview was held again in their classroom.

Open-ended interview questions were designed for all interviews. These types of questions would elicit the sharing of reflective life stories by the potential candidates as well as the participants. "Tell me a little about yourself, your childhood and your educational experience?" were the type of questions asked. These questions are included in Appendices A and B. As stories were shared by participants the interview questions were merely used to prompt discussion. However, some responses from the participants' prompted additional questions and initiated a deeper level of dialogue and sharing. All interviews were recorded and

transcribed and shared with participants for accuracy, feedback and correction. Stories told by the participants are shared throughout the research report, highlighting the experiences of each participant (Erlandson, et al., 1993; Mertova & Webster, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Semi-structured interviews and a shared focus group discussion were also recorded and analyzed using critical event narrative analysis. *Critical events* are highlighted points in a story when the storyteller's expresses a change in their view of the world, the belief about an idea or prior understanding (Mertova & Webster, 2007). This approach provided a vehicle for the researcher to understand the behaviors, values, and beliefs inherent to the participants' stories and their interpretations (Clandinin & Huber, 2002)

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted at a local restaurant in a private room during breakfast. I felt it was important to have all teacher participants meet at a neutral location. I believed food would bring a sense of comfort to each participant (as they had never met one another) and a neutral location would allow for a sense of equality. While focus groups in general, are more structured to evoke participation with an interview guide (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), the focus group was facilitated as an informal conversation, with participants sharing their stories on varying topics related to the research topic. Prompting questions (Appendix C) helped guide the discussion, encouraged reflection and shared learning among participants.

Data Analysis

The data for this research was analyzed using three different methods of analysis. Although not typical for the narrative inquiry, a *constant comparative qualitative method* was used to compare and analyze data until categories and themes became apparent (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993). As a researcher I believed it was important to analyze the data for similarities if any, among the participants, particularly the stories of what brought them

to teach in diverse urban setting. A *critical event narrative analysis* was the second method used to analysis the data. Everyone has a life story and every life story has one or more critical events (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Additionally, critical events in the life of a person may evoke a change, perspective shift or transformation. From a critical theoretical perspective and taking into account the factors presented for critical event narrative, this method of analysis appeared to be ideal for this research.

The third and final method of analysis for this research was creating *plot lines* (Appendix D). I used *Inspirations* software to create visual plot lines to help tell the story of each participant. The plot lines provided the opportunity to scaffold the stories, identify and highlight times and critical events in the participants' lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I worked collaboratively with the participants to retell their stories and accurately describe their life experiences. Participants offered their input, feedback and made the necessary corrections to their stories. This data collection process and analysis provided opportunities for better understanding of the participants' experiences and how their stories shaped the findings of this research (Mertova & Webster, 2007).

Research Quality

Reliability and credibility are two quality factors I considered when designing this study. If the issues of reliability and credibility differentiate a 'good' from 'bad' research then testing and increasing the reliability and credibility in this research was important to me (Mertova et al., 2007, Merriam, 1998). It was essential that I developed rapport with each participant so that they would feel comfortable in sharing their stories and trust that their shared story would provide value and respect in accordance to how they were told, as promised in the Institutional Review Board approval. I obtained this rapport and trust with each participant by maintaining a

nonjudgmental attitude, openness and honesty about my perspective regarding the topic of discussion (Kezar, 2003).

Understanding that the trustworthiness in narrative inquiry can be questionable, I realized that my research analysis depended upon the accuracy of documentation. The recorded transcriptions of the stories, a focus group discussion, and authentic classroom observations documentation needed to reflect the truthfulness of the information shared by the participants. To prevent discrepancies in the data, a member checking process was utilized, an important factor of qualitative research. This process was accomplished by clarifying with participants the authenticity and truthfulness of their transcribed stories and a focus group discussions. Together with my classroom observations this allowed for credibility, reliability and dependability of the data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mertova & Webster, 2007) The interviews of all participants remained confidential. Each participant checked for accuracy of their shared information and they provided feedback via email, phone conversations or in person.

Using critical events as a method to analyze this research required two criteria as suggested by Webester and Mertova (2007). These criteria are known as place and event or broadening and burrowing. These criteria were used in creating a plot line for each participant. The plot line identified a place in time, referencing the broadening, and highlighted critical events, reflective of burrowing. I collaborated with the participants to understand what critical events in their life stories influenced transformational learning.

4. VOICES OF THE TEACHERS

Five White teachers participated in this study representing elementary, middle and high school levels. They shared life experiences that shaped their character and their desire to become teachers in an urban school district. The teachers shared what challenges they faced regarding racial and cultural differences between them and their students of color, and how those

challenges affected their instructional practices and students learning. This chapter consist of participants stories. Each section begins with a brief introduction about the teacher and it is followed by that teacher's story in her voice. Sections' subtitles are designed to reflect the emerging theme of the teachers' life experiences and reflect potential relationships with the research questions. For example, in the section *Amy*, the subtitles *My Inspiration to Teach* and *Face to Face with Diversity and Race* relate to the first research question - How do White teachers understand the manner in which their own culture differs from that of their students' of color and how this shapes students learning?

Amy

Amy is a White female born in Idaho in a small rural predominantly White community that she identified as "Whiteville." Amy taught for eleven years, six years in suburban public high schools and five years in urban public high school. Currently Amy teaches Social Studies and Advance Via Individual Determination (AVID) at Hill Grove High School, the second largest high school in Usher County urban school district. She has been teaching at Hill Grove for five years. Hill Grove has 57% Hispanic students, 25% Caucasian, 11% African American, 4% multi-racial, and 2% Native American students.

My Inspiration to Teach

I had an eighth grade English Teacher, Mr. Jones, who taught in my middle school in Hathaway. He was the coolest teacher, and there was something different about him and the way he related to us that made it fun. Mr. Jones had high expectation of his students. I was a struggling reader, and did not like reading. I was always the student in the lower reading groups in elementary school. I remember I was in the blue birds reading group and we always sat in the back in the corner of the classroom. Mr. Jones was able to inspire me to love reading. I trusted him and he made me want to write essays. Later I began to love English. He said to me one day,

"Amy you need to figure out what you're going to do so you have a plan. I said, you know, I would really like to teach. I would like to be a teacher some day. He laughed and said I should go for it." As I look back it was him that inspired me. I ended up student teaching at the same school where he taught me language arts and I wrote him a letter and said I did it.

Face to Face with Diversity and Race

I am from a German family. My grandparents speak fluent German. I was born and raised in Lancaster Idaho, a White German Catholic community. I lived in an all White community and attended an all White school. I can remember the first time I heard racial slurs, I was probably ten and I lived in Hathaway, a predominantly White community. I had one African American in my middle school classes and by high school I think there were three African Americans. I can remember Kim Nguyen and her little brother were the only Asian students and they really seemed White to me. I don't remember ever having a teacher of color my whole life, always White teachers. So I was born and raised in what I now refer to as "Whiteville." I don't know if I should say that but I do.

I moved to Detroit and I taught in a suburban district. Somebody told me if I wanted to become a "good" teacher I should teach summer school in the inner city of Detroit. I never thought I'd be teaching in an inner city school. I was scared; I mean I was frightened because I had never done it before. It wasn't that I was scared of the kids, they were kids, I was scared of how was I going to teach them and if they'd like me. I feared I would fail them. I think it was the fear of the unknown because being raised in a White family, I knew, that how I was brought up was how I would treat the kids. I had ten Black kids I couldn't relate to. I didn't know what to expect. It was ten fifth graders, sweet little ten year old Black kids looking at me. They dressed differently, they did their hair differently, and they talked differently. I didn't understand their culture, and they didn't understand me. Some of the kids were touching my hair and saying they

never felt a White teacher's hair before. I loved it. I wanted to learn more so I always taught inner city summer school even though I was teaching suburban high school the rest of the time.

I can remember I did an activity with my kids one day and I gave them grocery flyers from the local stores. I said okay, we're going to plan a meal with an appetizer, an entrée and dessert. The kids raised their hand and said, what is an appetizer? "Immediately I thought, you don't know what an appetizer is, and said its food you eat before your meal. Well, why would you eat food before your meal they ask?" Tell me what kind of restaurants you've been to. The response was McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, etc.

It was at that point I finally sought help from and African American teacher. I realized I needed to understand their race and culture, not necessarily from my perspective as a child who came from a working class family, [from a socioeconomic point of view] but as a person that grew up in "Whiteville." I needed to learn how to relate to them on a smaller scale, it was more of me adapting to them.

I've heard people say they don't see color and color doesn't matter. When I teach my students, I see Lauren who loves to draw, who is in leadership and church. I see Santiago who is quiet and wants to just be left alone, yet he likes to rap. I don't see what race box they checked. However, race matters when I want to relate to them. When I discipline a Hispanic girl or boy and they look down I need to understand that's their culture. When I'm pushing these kids to go to college, when I connect with them on an unseen level, that's when race should matter, that's when race matters. I think it's the cultural piece that helps me relate to my students. I think it's the door, when opened that takes us beyond race.

My Return to Whiteville: Bound for Urban Education

After 5 years of teaching in Detroit I returned to Idaho. It was the middle of the school year and I immediately began looking for jobs everywhere. Hill Grove had a position for a head

volleyball coach but no teaching jobs, I applied anyway. Many people in my community of Hathaway started telling me that I did not want to work in the urban school district, it was not safe. I remembered a stabbing that took place at Hill Gove in the nineties but I thought it could not be that bad. I remembered a lot of racial issues that took place in the urban school district in the nineties and I remembered my first visit and impression of Hill Grove as a teenager when I went to watch my boyfriend in a wrestling match.

The floors of the school were mostly concrete, the brick was dark brown and the building was very dark, institutional looking. It was scary to me. I'd never gone to school with a diverse population before and I remember sitting in the gym and looking at a sea of diverse faces. It was not like my high school in Hathaway. I can remembered feeling fearful and my friends and I not leaving the corner of the gym during the match.

Needless to say, I went to my neighbor to let her know I'd placed an application with Hill Gove and sought her opinion regarding the school because her children attended the school. We also called my neighbor's friend who was currently working in the high school. She told me I would love it. I ask about the diversity and she told me it was very diverse. When I went to my interview I just knew the minute I walked in the building I was going to be alright.

People were very friendly when I walked in. I was amazed because what I remembered of a dark and dungy building was very bright and welcoming. The floors were beautiful, there was artwork everywhere. There were lots of diverse faces. I thought this was very cool. This was like no school I'd ever been in. I was hired mid-year after a teacher quit.

Building Relationships Establishing High Expectations It's the Key

I remembered walking into my freshman classroom filled with mostly Hispanic kids. I think I was terrified. "I'd never seen that many diverse faces in a classroom, thirty-two fifteen year-olds thinking, who's this White girl? Don't let them see you sweat was my first thought,

along with I hope I make it." Honestly I felt like I was in a survival mode. I wondered how I could come across to them, so they would know not to take me as a joke, but I did not want them to dislike me. I knew first impression meant everything, and I didn't want to lose them day one, it would be so hard to get them back.

A lot of Spanish was spoken and that made me nervous. I wondered if they were talking about me. The first challenge was letting them know I wasn't going anywhere. The teacher before me was White and he walked out. I told them where I was from, they liked my accent. I shared with them my teaching style, what subjects I taught, and asked them what they'd been learning. I didn't want to just throw the curriculum at them. It was important for me to take the time to relate to them, learn their names, find out what they liked to do, what sport they played and other information that would begin to connect me to them as a class and individually. I also shared information about myself. I felt it was important that they saw me outside of my role as a teacher. They needed to know that I was a mother, and that I too had life challenges. I was abused by my first husband, and lived out of my parent's basement while on welfare. I realized, they had a story, I had a story, and everybody had a story. A lot of my students just wanted to tell their stories so I listened.

As I introduced the curriculum I would check to see what they'd learned before my arrival. I shared what I expected and asked for their feedback and thoughts. I allowed them to guide their own learning, and take ownership regarding how they would learn the required materials. I would check in and continue to provide my input, knowledge and expectations. I would hear a lot of my student's say "I can't" and my response was always, "well I'll just show you how to do it." I expected excellence from my entire class, average was not acceptable. It was important that I not allow their lives outside of school to change the expectations I had for each of them; to succeed. So, we learned together.

Learning from My Challenges: It's Not All Roses

I watched when I made mistakes and learned from my mistakes. I struggled relating to the Hispanic kids because I didn't know their culture. It did not make sense to me. I talked, a lot, to other colleagues, Hispanic secretaries. I spent a lot of time having conversations with them about the Hispanic kids. I had to learn how to discipline my students. One thing I learned quickly was that I could not discipline my Hispanic, Black and White kids all the same. For example I couldn't get in the faces of my Black and Hispanic kids when disciplining because they feel they are being disrespected. However, I could chastise my White and Asian kids in a similar fashion that my parents chastised me. It has been my experience that most of my kids of color believe I expect too much of them.

Teaching them to love learning has been a big challenge for me. I liked school and my son loves school. I can't imagine kids not being excited about school, that just baffles me. I think when kids start school they are not academically ready. By the time they get to high school they struggle with their classes. I had a senior that was reading on a second grade level and he was not tested or identified for special education services.

In today's society, parents are working several jobs and there is no one at home monitoring homework. I see a lot of teen pregnancy with my Hispanic girls and high dropout with my Hispanic boys. I think the teen pregnancy has a lot to do with the traditional quinceañera and the girl moving into womanhood. I still struggle relating to my Hispanic boys. They don't want me in "their business." I have to learn the different cultural groups among my Hispanic students and which group my Hispanic student belong to. I've had to learn how to handle the groups and still deal with each of my students as an individual.

It has been a challenge for me to connect with the parents of my students. I've noticed it is difficult to connect with the mommas of my Black students. Maybe they look at me as if I'm

just a White teacher telling them how to raise their kid. I tend to get a little more respect from the fathers of my Black students. However I think the roles would be reversed for a Black teacher teaching in Hathaway, "Whiteville". Hill Grove has changed me and I like the path it has put me on.

Lisa

Lisa is a twenty-eight year old born in Usher County, the largest urban city in the state, but as a young child, moved to Blue Skies, a very influential city and community within the state. Lisa graduated from Blue Skies High School but moved around frequently as a young girl. She has five years of teaching experience as a Language Arts teacher at Hill Grove High School. Hill Grove is located in Usher County. Usher County school district is the largest urban school district in the state.

I Was Born to Teach

I came from a long line of teachers in my family, so it's in my blood, I always wanted to be a teacher. I had really good teachers in elementary, middle and high school. "I always thought, how cool would it be if I could inspire somebody." I felt like I could make a bigger difference in a school where they don't have as many role models at home as I had. I had such a different upbringing, I can learn so much from my students; different perspectives from different cultures and different expectations. I mean it was expected from my parents and teachers that I do well get good grades and do my homework. Where I went to high school it was expected that I came to school every day, that I respected my teachers, that I did what I was told, and I did my homework. I love teaching; I wouldn't have it any different way.

Race and Culture: My Experiences

I grew up where most everybody looked like me, the same financial status as my parents or higher income levels. We moved around a lot when I was a kid. I didn't have a lot of diversity

growing up. Even the school districts that I went to were not diverse. The very first memory I had of race was from the time we lived in New Jersey. I was very young. Our neighbors were African Americans. They had a boy named Tony who was my age and I had never seen anybody of color before; that I can remember. It was in the middle of the summer and we went outside to meet Tony and his family. After I met Tony I ran back into my house and I put on Black sweat pants and a Black turtle neck because I didn't want Tony to feel like he was the only person who had Black skin. I was always told that everybody is the same and should be treated equal, there was no difference no matter what color skin we have. "That was instilled in me since I was little. Yeah, let's just all be friends, hold hands and sing Kum Bah Yah."

We later moved to the suburbs of St Louis and then moved to the Blue Skies but still not a lot of diversity. While in high school in Blue Skies I dated a Black guy, he was a very nice guy and my mom liked him. But, when we started dating she had reservations. I remember her sharing her apprehension. I was flabbergasted that my mom would feel this way because my whole life I grew up thinking everyone is equal. What happened to the Kum Bah Yah philosophy? I became the defiant teenager and kept dating because I wanted to make her mad. I didn't understand; my whole life I was told there was no difference. 'We're all the same,' my mother would say to me, but dating a Black guy was not socially acceptable? It was 1997 are you kidding me?

I student taught at Jackson City High School, near Blue Skies, at a military base school with a majority population of African American students. I was in the minority. This was an eye opening experience for me. I loved it; I loved the atmosphere. My cooperating teacher was also a White female and I liked her laid back attitude and the way she interacted with the students. The students were quite personal with her. I felt, I never had that kind of relationship with my teachers as they had with her. It was different from any experience I had as a high school student.

My high school was about sitting and taking notes with very little teacher student interaction or student to student interaction. As the student teacher I developed a relationship with the students and learned a lot about them, and their backgrounds. I had nothing similar to their life. I knew everybody had struggles but I'd never been in any of their situations.

At Hill Grove where I teach students now, it's predominantly Hispanics. I typically have majority Hispanic students, some White students and a few African Americans in my classes. We talk a lot about different races and what has happened throughout history; how different races have been persecuted and how they've been treated. It really makes the students think about how they treat others. I think we need to be open to learning about other people. When we close ourselves to learning, I believe that's how we begin to stereotype.

Inspired by my Granddad

Oh my granddad, he was wonderful. He has always been the type of person that said exactly what he was thinking. He thought about it first, didn't just blurt it out. He has always taught me to stand up for myself and do what I think is right and to treat everybody equal. He did not just say that but he has done that. He was a basketball coach before he became a superintendent and he would tell me how he handled many different situations with his basketball players. He was one of the first coaches in a small district to recruit a Black student for basketball. One of my favorite stories happened in the sixties. My granddad's basketball team won a tournament and he took them to a small town restaurant. The owner told my granddad that the Black kids could not eat in the restaurant, but they could eat in the kitchen. The White kids could eat in the restaurant. My granddad took the entire team to the back of the kitchen to eat. He could have gone somewhere else, he could have done a lot of different things, but to stand up and do something like that in the midst of all that tension, I was in awe. He is not the type of person that hangs a sign for the world to see the things he has done but I bet every single one of those

players will always remember Coach Steele. When I have problems at school or questions that I don't really know what to do about, I can always call granddad and he always knows what to say.

Urban Education Is a Perfect Fit

The job fair came to my college and I signed up for a number of interviews. Usher County was my first interview. I interviewed with the high school principal at Hill Grove, the urban high school, and instantly fell in love with her. She was upbeat, motivated and made me feel important. In my interviews with the suburban high schools, I explained my teaching style and how I believed students learned best. I did not feel the suburban district was supportive of my teaching methods so I decided to go to Hill Grove in Usher County.

Hill Grove was mid-town in the city. I knew I would have a lot of challenges, such as; kids whose parents didn't care about education. Those challenges intrigued me. I wanted to be in a classroom where I felt I was going to make a difference. I wanted to make my granddad proud; he inspired me in so many different aspects of education, I wanted to do the same for him. I wanted to be the type of person that my grandkids could say, my grandma did this. I wanted to instill inspiration in some kids who experienced hopeless, and hopeless at sixteen is so sad.

How Will They Learn If I Don't Connect

I'm not the smartest in the world, I don't know every book or author but I don't have problems with classroom management because I understand the importance of building relationships with students. They trust me. I really wanted to get to know the students. I won't lie; I was a bit startled when I was the minority at the beginning of my student teaching experience. I was not as confident and as comfortable as I would have been had I walked into Blue Skies High School. Once I got to know the kids and I knew they would have my back I felt shameful for even feeling uneasy.

I think the major challenge for me was I had nothing in common with them. I felt automatically disconnected. I thought they wouldn't like me because they would see me as this White teacher, trying to teach them and knowing nothing about them. I wanted to get beyond that uncertainty and think of ways I could connect. I started with journaling to learn about them. I could learn about them through their journaling. I also wanted them to get to know me so I told them about my life and life challenges. I was amazed how personal these students got and they only knew me for a couple of months.

Really listening to my students and having that open communication, I think, was very important. I don't have a clue how they feel and I never tell them that I do. I think the biggest mistake people make is telling somebody, "I know exactly how you feel," because you don't. I know students just want to get their story out but they don't know who to share it with and they don't know how to do it. So journaling was helpful. When I was growing up I would always write about my issues. I could express my thoughts and feelings and nobody would have to read it. I feel English and Language Arts provides that opportunity of expression. There are times when my students write and they know they can just rip up their writing and there are times when they know I'm going to be reading their journaling.

I feel like I get to know each of my students, not just the loud ones. There are kids that have had write-up after write-up and they are struggling in their classes. I find myself going one on one with them and trying to figure out what's bothering them. I refuse to send a student to the office, even if they want to go just to get out of class, I think that's just a cop out for me and for them. I think talking to my students and not at them is important. I learned this early on in my teaching experience.

Making Their Learning Relevant

I think it is import to have students read books where they can find a connection and relate to the characters. As a student I didn't relate to the characters in the books I read. I'm intrigued that the characters in today's literature are a lot deeper. I remember reading books about old dead White people. I don't want my class to be the sit down, listen to lecture, take notes, do an essay and everyone turn in their homework and have a nice day. We did a unit on intolerance. I think it was one of my students' favorites. They were able to talk openly about customs they have, their ancestors and history. There was a lot of researching, thinking back and having to talk to their parents and grandparents. It gave the students a sense of their culture. It's important to give students an opportunity to express who they are in whatever curricular they're studying.

Susan

Susan has been teaching in Usher County school district for over thirty years. She's had a number of educational experiences while in the district. She began her teaching experience as an Art teacher in the early 1970s and later became a school counselor and writer for the district's health curriculum. At the time of our interview Susan had just returned to the classroom as an Art teacher after her many years of counseling.

My Educational Life Journey

I started my teachers' education at the local university in the Cooperative Urban Teacher Education (CUTE) Program. The idea was working in urban schools and working with that population. I started my student teaching in the early 70s at Samuel Lewis Junior High School, which was the only racially integrated school in Usher County. That same year the district began busing for desegregation but Samuel Lewis was not affected by the plan because of the natural neighborhood integration. During that time a lot of things were happening, racial tension in the

south, President Kennedy was killed and the Usher County school system was experiencing a lot of racial upheaval. I worked at Samuel Lewis as a student teacher in Art Education and my cooperative teacher was Sam Johnson, an African American. They pulled him during my first year of student teaching and made him an administrator at one of the district high schools due to all of the racial tension. That was at that time the district was placing a lot of Blacks into administrative positions.

I applied for the teacher position left vacant by the removal of Mr. Johnson and I got the position. Samuel Lewis was this wonderful neighborhood school that received some additional federal funding that gave us the time and opportunity we could get to know families. The staff taught four to five hours a day and a couple of hours during the day we were to go visit families. The school's racial demographics were probably one-third White, one-third Black and one-third Latino, at least that's what I remember. One thing I remember most about that school, every year, we would celebrate Christmas and every year we would have a different color Santa. One year was a White Santa, one year a Black Santa and another year Latino because we wanted to be ethnically correct for the neighborhood.

By my fourth year of teaching I went from Samuel Lewis to Banks Junior High. The racial tension had somewhat settled. After teaching at Banks I questioned if I wanted to teach for the rest of my life, I was very frustrated with educational politics so I moved to New York City. I started working for a commercial art company. After a couple of years in New York I received a call from Usher County School District offering me a position to work with "push-out kids." Push out kids were those kids that were pushed out of the system, pushed out of their classrooms and kids that other teachers did not know how or did not want to teach. The district was opening up an alternative junior high school and I was asked to come and help open the school. I accepted and I was the Art Education teacher at this school. At that time, I also went back to

school and received my counseling degree because I thought I could help more if I was a counselor. So in my fourth year at the alternative junior high school, I was the school's counselor. I always thought I would go into social work but I ended up teaching Art and then going into counseling.

I've always been around education so I've seen the changes as they come. I have not always been in the classroom; I left the district again and worked for a construction company putting together the Historical Museum. I used my creativity and art to support that work. From there I worked at the American Red Cross as the Youth's Services Director, working with the schools and clubs teaching kids how to volunteer and became actively involved in HIV and AIDs education. I worked there for thirteen years and then returned to the school district. I worked as the counselor at Hynes High School. I connected my learning and experience from the American Red Cross. I began educating kids, wrote the Health curriculum for the Usher County school district since I was the AIDs expert from the Red Cross. I developed a peer education program about 20 years ago called Teen Hope and I'm now in charge of that program.

Returning to the Classroom and Connecting with Students

Returning to the classroom after thirty years, I was concerned as to whether or not I could actually do it. Teachers were saying these kids are out of control and I was questioning if I would have control of my classroom. I soon realize it wasn't a problem. There were a few kids, of course, and I recognized which ones they were and what special attention they needed. There were moments in class that I could tell stories about the sixty's and what I was doing, and they thought, 'oh you lived that?' It has been fun. I have one kid who was really into duct tape; he was making billfolds out of duct tape. I told him about an annual duct tape contest and encouraged him to research it online. He researched and has decided that he wants to enter the contest next year. It is those things, those connections that I have made with kids; I believe no

kid is un-teachable. You just have to find what works with them. As I look back, my teaching philosophy has not changed, I teach art [education] the same way I used to teach, believing you teach by providing a framework to guide others in their learning and then allow them to do it their own way, using their self expression.

My Encounter with Race

My first year of teaching a family called the National Association of Advancement for Colored People (NAACP) on me because the family felt I was not being fair to the child. The Vice Principal at that time was an African American male and he supported me and stood in the gap for me when the NAACP came to visit me at the school. Through their investigation NAACP determined that the accusations were not warranted and discontinued the investigation. The first few years of desegregation there was a lot of turmoil. The district began to put together a Human Relations Program and I was part of that team. The purpose was to educate people on how to get along with different races. The team would offer workshops for staff, parents, and students. I was a group leader and would go out to different schools to offer workshops. It was a fascinating time.

To take a step back, during that time I worked for a local university in the Upward Bound Program as a Student Counselor, with predominantly African American kids. That was a cultural experience for me. I lived that life, I was the minority. I really wanted to do that job; I wanted to be able to help. My father was a Methodist minister and I was taught that the Christian thing to do was to help people. When I worked at the program I loved it, I felt like I was a part of it, I didn't feel different I felt accepted. I immersed myself into the culture of these African American kids. I learned how they straightened their hair by pressing, I could smell it. I worked with that program for several years. Now I have a child who lives at my house and is in that program. So when I moved her into the Upward Bound Program dorms one summer, it was like déjà vu, same

dorm, same floor, all of those memories were wonderful. It was like coming home, it was like a full circle. It was a wonderful feeling.

The girls in the Upward Bound Program would teach me how to dance. Some of the girls from the program would come over to my house and they would talk about me being the "White" person. Actually they told me I was grey, I wasn't White and I wasn't Black. They said they accepted me, but they also told me that when the revolution comes I would be as White as all the other Whites, so I needed to understand that. What they meant was it will be us against them and that there would not be that middle ground. That was their thought process at that time, but I didn't understand. I recall the time when people were driving down one of our major city streets and there was a race riot. White people were pulled out of their cars and beaten because they were White. I took that street daily to get to the Upward Bound Program and the local university. I remember the news reports cautioning people to stay clear of the street and the news footage with cars on fire and people running in the street. The revolution (race riots) had come to Usher County.

I remember an experience I had when I was planning a talent fashion show. This was a tradition, and it's my understanding it still goes on. I was in charge of organizing and I arranged for different clothing stores to loan us clothes for the kids to model. I took the kids to one of our local shopping centers to try on outfits, they were having a ball. The owner pulled me aside and said, "why didn't you tell me about these kids?" I told her I didn't feel I needed to tell their color, I told her it was an activity for disadvantaged youth. "I told the girls to put everything back, we were leaving the store, and I explained why. They said they didn't care, they wanted to wear those clothes, but I said no. It didn't matter to them, they liked the clothes and they were going to take the discrimination" It was not out of the ordinary for them to hear those kinds of comments but I felt offended, so we left. I'll never forget this place and I never stepped foot in there again.

The Essence of Me

While my upbringing was to help people and I worked in a very diverse school population and worked for Upward Bound with predominantly African American students, I lived in a very White world. I was the third child which I think makes a difference. My siblings disappointed my parents and I decided I was the one to do different. It was very important to me to keep an even keel and not do anything too extreme. I was very cautious and always aware of how my actions impacted others. Before my father was a minister he was in the insurance business. He would not sell insurance to someone who didn't need it, but if they needed it and could not afford it, he made sure there was some way they could pay for it. I remember we always adopted a family in need at Christmas. My parents were so compassionate.

As I get closer to the end of my career and I look back I wonder if things have really changed. I don't believe things have changed much; I know it is better, I know that, but I guess I assumed that we'd get beyond prejudice and discrimination. I guessed there would be total acceptance, and there is not. I can honestly say that I feel I've made a change in some kids' lives. I do believe that. I think I've educated some students to be more understanding and more accepting.

Diane

Diane is a twenty-six years old in her 5th year of teaching. She teaches fourth grade at Lyons Elementary School, a Title 1 urban school with a predominantly African American population. Lyons Elementary is located in the inner part of Usher County. Diane obtained her education degree at Usher State University. Diane says she purposefully sought to teach in a high need and low income urban school district. She credits her family upbringing and faith as the catalyst for her decision, her calling to teach.

Becoming a Teacher: My Calling

Since, I was a little girl I always wanted to be a teacher. I got along with kids very well and I loved working with children. I have a lot of patience. I have younger siblings and so they brought that out of me. Also, I had a first grade teacher who was very personable. Looking back I felt that my teacher knew me and she knew me well. I felt she never showed favoritism. She always made me feel special, we did fun stuff, and I don't remember her ever being negative. Looking back, those were probably signs of a good teacher. I know how much she impacted my life.

When I was little I was always in a Bible Club. When I was in fourth or fifth grade I would help my mom and dad in Bible Club with the little kids. I enjoyed the lessons and I enjoyed the structure of it. By the time I was a senior I was leading a Friday night bible club and helping with the junior high bible club. I grew up loving the Lord and these kids. I think right now my mission or my purpose is for kids in need. I don't think I would be fulfilling my mission otherwise. God's purpose and missions in our life might change but right now I'm still at that point where I think I'm fulfilling my calling, not just a job, but a ministry. In addition, I love to learn and the best way to learn is to educate and I'm learning at the same time while doing something I love. So I would say teaching is rooted in a love of knowledge and that's the way I like to teach. I loved school and I know that school is a refuge for a lot of kids and I want to be a positive model in their life and to encourage them. Every school needs good teachers.

Not Fitting In

My parents worked with an inner city church planning organization in Usher County until I was six years old. We then moved to Los Angeles for four years and then relocated back to Usher County. At both places, we lived in the inner city community. In Los Angeles we lived around predominantly Hispanics. In Usher County our neighborhood was predominantly African

Americans. I had a real hard time adjusting in Los Angeles. The kids at the school spoke primarily Spanish. The girls would gather at lunch and speak Spanish which alienated me so I really didn't hang around the girls. I played basketball with the boys. By the time I was in fifth grade I was home with my mom being home schooled. I stopped playing basketball with the boys and the language barrier between me and the other girls made me feel even more alienated. I don't know if it was the culture difference or just a culture shock because I hadn't been around Hispanics. The language was new to me, the customs, just a completely different lifestyle.

We returned to Usher County, this was kind of a tumultuous time for me, I did not fit in anywhere. I attended an affluent Christian school, Grace Christian. We lived in the inner city, impoverished community and, yet, I attended an affluent school. I don't remember having very many close friends, maybe one or two but they were still scared to spend the night at my house. They would say they couldn't come to my house because of the gunshots in the neighborhood. My clothes compared to the name brand expensive clothes of the other kids, were like Target brand clothing. In high school, I was the only junior that did not have a car; I would have to wait for my dad to come pick me up from school. At the same time I didn't fit in my neighborhood either. It was like we ministered there but not really a part of the community especially since I went to a different school. It was difficult not fitting in anywhere.

My college experience was different and I really enjoyed it. I attended a private college, it was much more laid back, not uppity. I liked the educational program, but it was hard for me being away from direct ministry job opportunities I began doing some mentorship work with Prairie Hills Elementary near the college and surprisingly there were a high number of impoverished kids. So I guess I've always found ways to work with kids in need.

An Urban Educator: My Passion My Purpose

After graduating I moved back from college to Usher County and started looking for a job. I purposefully looked for two things when seeking a job: high diversity and high poverty rates. I did not apply to any school that didn't have at least seventy percent poverty and diverse demographics. I began teaching at a school located in the inner city, very diverse, and highly impoverished. The children attending the school were from the neighborhood, predominantly African Americans.

My very first year, I had a challenging group of students. However, I do remember the first day of school going well; I shared pictures of myself and told the students about me. I was very comfortable and I honestly believed it had to do with the exposure to poverty and diversity I experienced growing up. Even though I felt I knew a lot coming in, I didn't know nearly as much as I thought I did. It was hard to relate to the boys. The girls in my class were very competitive and I think some saw me as a threat. The boys honestly just tried to walk all over me. I was told by a few teachers that students related to me that way because I was White, young and female. I was also told I would never be able to relate to the African American boys. While I realized it was going to be harder for me than I expected, I didn't think it was impossible. I knew I didn't look like them, talk like them, I knew I was different.

I was a new face in the building and I felt as though the kids wondered what I was doing there (in their school). They did not trust me. They would ask me if I was going to be at their school the next year. I soon learned that the students at Lyons had many new teachers every single year. So, I think in part, the students would connect with a teacher and then the teacher was gone the next year. I remembered my parents telling me that it takes time to build trust and to stay focused on the reason I was at the school. After a while the students began to trust me. I think they settled with the thought, 'oh she's still here.'

Building Trust and Connecting with My Students

I'm not the type of person to hold a grudge. The students know they can mess up and we will be okay the next day. It took some time to get to this point. I remember my first year at Lyons, I had a discipline folder with Think Sheets for student to reflect on the inappropriate behavior. The folder was mangled. When I thought the student was out of control, I would send them to the safe spot in the room to complete a Think Sheet. Many of the students sent to the safe spot would take their pencils, because they were so upset, tear holes in the folder, and scribble on the folder. I think this was a way for them to express their anger. By the second semester, I realized that things were getting better between me and the students. I'd like to think they began to realize that they could trust that I was not going to turn my back on them. I kept that folder as a reflection of where I was at the beginning of my teaching experience.

I think consistency is the key. As I look back, especially this year, my kids are very honest. They are much more open. I try to go to their activities outside of the class time, football games or other activities. I was trying to connect and build relationships. One day one of my students said, "You can be mad but you can still love us." They knew if I became angry with them that I didn't hate them and that I would still give them a hug.

I am really good at connecting with my kids. However, I struggle connecting with their parents. I don't know how to build that type of relationship. I don't have a close relationship with parents but they know I care about their kids and I think they trust me as a professional. Maybe I fear they don't want me to teach their child. But when I looped with my fourth graders, I was surprised at the number of parents that wanted to make sure their child would be in my class, so maybe those relationships are building.

Connecting Learning to My Students' Experiences

I try really hard to expose my students to lots of different things. Finding those things and making them relevant to my students, requires that I understand their backgrounds. For example we had a story on national parks, if my kids have never been to a national park I have to prepare to make the learning relevant to what they know. Relevant instruction does affect academics. If everything I talk about is irrelevant, their interest is not going to be there. Once, my students were taking a test and one of the boys in my class asked me what season was Thanksgiving. The question on the test asked about the setting of the story presenting options such as, spring, summer, autumn or winter. Not knowing his seasons just broke my heart. I blamed myself for not teaching about seasons because I assumed they already knew that information. I try my best to fill in the learning gaps by taking what they don't know and connecting it to what they do know. "Making it look like them, talk like them so they will engage in the learning," but that's a challenge for me.

Jaime

Jaime teaches fourth grade in Usher County urban school district, at Lyon's Elementary. Lyon's Elementary is located in an area of the city with the reputation as a high crime rate neighborhood. Many of the children attending the school live in the neighborhood. Jaime has been teaching for ten years in the same district with eight of those years at Lyon's Elementary. Lyon's has a seventy-eight percent African American student population and approximately ninety-five percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

A Cultural Experience

My story is not a very happy one. I was exposed to things I shouldn't have been when I was really young. My parents were drug and alcohol abusers during most of my childhood. It was kind of a sad childhood. Of course, drugs and alcohol know no race or culture. Therefore,

diversity, as I knew it, was always a part of my life. From a very early age I interacted with kids from different races and cultures who were at our home because of their parents' drug addiction. I would get to know those kids but as a child I really didn't distinguish the race and color of my friends.

My parents were getting into lots of trouble in Usher, my dad was arrested, and my mom was really strung out on some bad drugs. My parents decided to leave Usher when I was about seven and we moved to Millwood which was a culture shock for me. Millwood was an interesting place, a small town with about five thousand people, very White, suburban, well-to-do city. We were going from associating with people from all different races and cultures, to a very White community. Of course, I lived in an area of Millwood that was considered "White trash" a very poor White neighborhood. Being poor and trying to fit in with the Millwood culture was difficult for me and my sisters.

My sister and I are eighteen months apart. My baby sister is another two years younger than my middle sister. We were very, very close; we were the only friends we had. We got teased a lot in elementary school. From second grade until I graduated, it was hard. We never made any friends, not really good friends. So by the ages of sixteen and seventeen we got a car and we would drive back to Usher to hang out with our friends. Our friends would also come to Millwood to play pick-up basketball games or to participate in other social activities. Most of our friends were African American and Hispanic, so we were labeled trouble makers. We never got into fights, never were suspended from school, honor roll students, yet we were labeled as being trouble makers because of having friends of different race. I guess the people of Millwood were not able to accept that we had different friends.

As a freshman, I played basketball on the varsity team, however our high school team was not very good and few scouts came to watch us play. I knew I wanted to get into college and

I really wanted a four-year college. But my fear was, I would go to a two year college and not be able to continue and get my bachelors. Neither of my parents had money set aside for me to go to college. For three summers I played summer basketball at a local university, Forbes, and connected with the university's coach. During my senior year our high school basketball girls' team had a new coach. This new coach was a former basketball player for Forbes and she knew the coach at Forbes where I wanted to play college basketball. I just think God had a plan for everything. My high school coach Ms. Cindy continued to talk to the coach at Forbes about my basketball skills and my family hardship. At the end of my senior year I received a four year scholarship from Forbes.

To Teach or Not to Teach: It Was Never a Question

I had some teachers that really inspired me to want to be a teacher. They helped me and my sister. They knew that our parents were not always there for us, so they just did little extra things to help. For example when I signed my letter of intent to play basketball at Forbes University my parents were not there. Ms. Cindy my basketball high school coach stepped in to help me. It was really comforting to have Ms. Cindy there.

I graduated from Forbes and I completed my student teaching in Usher County school district and decided that's where I wanted to teach. Many of my peers, who also graduated from Millwood, could not understand why I wanted to teach in an urban school district. I knew from my experiences that I did not and would not feel comfortable teaching in Millwood. I felt like I would have to be somebody I am not, I would have to go with the status quo, and that is just not me. I felt comfortable in the urban school setting and the moment I stepped into the school building I knew I was where I wanted to be. It was a good fit for me.

I accepted my first teaching position at Simpson Hills Elementary, a Title 1 school with a predominantly Hispanic population, where I taught for two years. I was later recruited and

encouraged to apply for a teaching position at Lyons Elementary, a predominantly African American populated school located in the inner city of the community. When I walked into the building on my first work day I was shocked to say the least. The building was the worst situation I'd ever seen; a two story building with scratched paint on all walls, dead cockroaches littering the floors and much more. I began to wonder if I'd made the right choice when looking around. To my amazement when the school doors opened in August the building looked good as new and the staff was ready to receive the students.

I taught second grade my first year at Lyons. Coming from Simpson Hills, I was used to being in control of my classroom and I had well behaved children. Well, just let me say, within my first nine weeks at Lyons I left my classroom crying a few times and I had been called a White bitch a couple of times by parents because they were not happy with the way I was handling their children. But, I was not giving up on the kids, even in my frustration I was not giving up on the kids. I knew many of the kids were coming from an environment that was similar to mine growing up, an environment of chaos. That's what it was like in my home, chaotic, but somehow I learned how to behave at school, I guess by watching my peers. Given, there were no peer role models in the classroom where I taught, I had to model appropriate school behavior.

Making the Connections with Students and Parents

I remember one particular boy in my classroom that was having a very difficult time in school. This student really frustrated me because I could not connect with him, and his mother did not believe I could teach her son because I was a White female. I was intimidated by this particular parent. I had strong determination and belief that this child and all of my other students could learn. I just knew I would keep hitting a brick wall if I did not connect with my students and their parents.

As I learned more about my students, their way of learning, what they enjoyed, along with maintaining high expectations for all of my students, they began to trust me. I learned how to initiate parent/teacher conferences by sharing with parents their child's strengths. I would share with the parents how much I loved their child in my room and I would mention the student's talent(s). Once I started genuinely praising the children, parents began to trust my professionalism, my capability to teach their child. I believe every parent wants the best for their child and they are sending us their best. Although, not all parents have the tools they need for parenting, they do see value in their child, and acknowledging what the parent sees builds relationships every time.

5. FINDINGS

Three research questions guided this study: How do White teachers understand the manner in which their culture differs from that of their students' of color, and how this shapes students learning? How do White teachers see themselves and their relationship with students of color? Why and how do racial and cultural differences between teachers and students provoke or stimulate the teacher's transformative learning? The findings are articulated based on narrative stories from the teachers (participants), classroom observations and a focus group discussion. In their stories, participants revealed some of their thoughts, values, beliefs, and behaviors related to the research questions. The classroom observations provided triangulation as a means to connect their stories to their daily teaching practices and relationships with their students. During the focus group session the teachers reflected on their school year, their interactions and relationships with their students of color. The participants also discussed their awareness of Whiteness, White privilege, how they developed a better understanding of cultural differences and how those ways may have changed their ways to engage their students and their teaching practices.

Three major findings emerged from this study. Every participant's path to understanding racial and cultural differences was unique. Participants' connections with their students as well as amongst their students, reflected engaged interactions. Every participant experienced a disorienting dilemma of the following nature – my students of color do not see the world the way I do.

No Two Experiences are Alike: Paths to Understanding Racial and Cultural Differences

The analyzed data in this section explicates participants' unique experiences toward understanding racial and cultural differences. For each participant it also includes their reflections on those experiences as well as their follow-up actions related to those experiences.

Amy recalled her experience teaching in Detroit inner city, "I couldn't relate, I didn't understand their culture and they didn't understand me." When teaching a lesson to fifth grade African American students she talked about using language that was unfamiliar to the students and how shocked she was when they didn't know what ("appetizer") she was talking about. Amy's lack of appreciation and awareness of racial and cultural differences at that time, affected her teaching. While this critical event could be related more so to socio-economic status, Amy continued to reflect and acknowledge, "I realized I needed to become aware of their culture, not necessarily as a child who came from a working class family that qualified for free and reduced lunches but as a person [who] grew up as a White girl." She shared a willingness and desire to understand the racial and cultural differences that existed between her and her students. To better comprehend the differences she sought to learn from colleagues with the same race and similar culture as her students. She learned through that experience, "race did matter" and her belief that it did not affect her teaching and the students' learning shifted. "It was learning how to relate to them, it was more of me adapting to them."

Lisa said, "I had such a different upbringing and I learned so much from my students, different perspectives from different cultures." Lisa heard several stories from her grandfather, who she described as a social justice teacher, coach and public school superintendent. From Lisa's story, I learned that Lisa, at an early age, was aware of social injustices related to racial and cultural differences. Those stories gave her some insights about the injustices encountered by those whose culture and race were not White. She described her upbringing as upper middle class with limited exposure to diverse cultures. When she student taught, even with her prior knowledge and learning, she still believed that her Whiteness placed her at a disadvantage when working at a predominantly African American high school in Function County. "I felt they wouldn't like me because they would see me as a White teacher trying to teach them and [not knowing] anything about them." Although Lisa experienced apprehension, she realized there were barriers she needed to overcome as a teacher to engage these students, "I think the major challenge was I didn't have anything in common with them…but I wanted to get to know them."

Susan had thirty years as an educator both in an out of a traditional classroom setting. She related her understanding of racial and cultural differences to the experiences she encountered in her teaching years. Susan spoke vividly about her classroom teaching and other professional experiences which influenced her understanding of differences. At one point in the interview Susan identified herself as being a minority White woman amongst a group of African American females in a summer youth educational program. "I was the minority. I didn't feel different, I felt accepted. I immersed myself into their culture." Although Susan did appear to recognize and exhibit an awareness of racial and cultural differences, she understood that the path to understanding differences was a continual journey. She did share her disheartening thoughts and reflections about the continued issues of prejudice and discrimination related to race and culture. She says,

> "As I get closer to the end of my career and I look back I wonder if things have really changed. I don't believe things have changed much; I know it is better, I know that, but I guess I assumed that we'd get beyond prejudice and discrimination. I guessed there would be total acceptance, and there is not."

Diane said, "I was of it but not in it." As a child of missionary parents, she described herself as a third culture kid (Barringer, 2000), meaning she did not fit in the environment she lived in, nor did she fit into her race or cultural identification. Most of her childhood, Diane lived in predominantly African American or Hispanic neighborhoods but she attended a predominately White affluent Christian school. Diane did not fit in the environment with those in the neighborhoods where she lived and she was challenged to fit into her world of Whiteness. Her religious beliefs, values and convictions grounded her in a desire to work with underprivileged children of color. "…it's my calling; these kids need the love of Christ." During our interviews, Diane acknowledged how she came to understand her awareness of racial and cultural differences, through her lived experiences. However, she appeared challenged in how to understand ways to adjust her teaching practices to better engage her students. Diane taught a predominantly African American student population, and believed it is important to expose her students to different cultures and experiences unknown to them. She shared that it was difficult to embed the students' cultures in their learning.

> I expose them to things they normally wouldn't have an opportunity to see filling in those gaps to the best of my ability. We talk so much about showing kids people that are like them. We were talking about explorers and one of my kids asked if there are any Black explorers. I felt kind of bad. I can name all the Spanish

> ones and ones from England but I couldn't name any Black explorers, so we looked it up. I think that constant reminder of making learning applicable to the kids. I'm falling short there.

At an early age *Jaime* was surrounded by diversity due to the drug abuse lifestyle of her parents. At age seven her family relocated to a suburban community where she found she did not fit in with her peers. Feeling like an outcast, when she was old enough to drive, Jaime sought friends outside of the community. Because of her experience living in a White suburban community she conscientiously decided to teach in an urban school district after graduating from college.

Shocked by the idea that she was not accepted by the African American students and their parents at the predominantly African American elementary school, Jaime was determined to make a connection. She began to study the world from which her students were coming. She acknowledged their racial and cultural differences, modeled expected classroom cultural norms without criticizing cultural differences and she built an alliance with parents by sharing the potential she saw in their children. "I approached it in a different way; in a different light… I finally broke the barrier between us."

Every participant's path to understanding racial and cultural differences and acting upon those differences were unique. Amy, after failing to engage students in an activity, realized a need to better connect with her students. She sought to learn from colleagues with the same race and similar culture as her students. Unlike Amy, Lisa learned about cultural differences from an early age. However, her first classroom experiences with those differences made her apprehensive. She realized there were barriers to overcome to understand and engage her students. While Amy and Lisa in their stories drew from their childhood and family upbringing, Susan's story centered on her thirty years of professional experiences through which she came to

her understanding of differences. She reflected on being disheartened about continued prejudices and racial discrimination.

Diane, with less teaching experience than Susan, found it difficult to fit in her two childhood worlds. As a child of missionary parents Diane believed it was her calling to work with students whose race and culture were different. While she realized that there are differences, she also reflected on her challenges to act upon those differences. Jaime, an elementary teacher as Diane, believed she understood cultural differences and expected to be accepted by the African American students and their parents. She realized that her experience of the differences was not enough and she needed a different approach to engage her students and parents. Amy, Lisa, Susan, Diane and Jaime traveled along different paths toward understanding racial and cultural differences. Along their paths, they realized the need to seek their own ways to enhance their teaching practices in order to engage their students of color in the learning processes.

Classroom Culture: Engaged Interactions

Analysis of available data, with specific attention to triangulating transcripts of interviews and focus group discussion, along with classroom observation notes provided the following finding: Participants' connections with their students as well as amongst their students reflected engaged interactions. In this section evidence is provided to support this finding, per observation of each participant's classroom.

Amy was seated on the top of a table facilitating classroom conversation about criminal law when I enter the classroom. She was animated and energetic, engaging the class in the discussion. She also participated in the discussion and praised students using words such as "good thought, I never thought of it that way". Every student in the classroom appeared to be engaged in the conversation. Heads were up, students were looking, listening, nodding and participating. Their body language displayed an interest in the topic. Amy gave relevant

examples to help students' understand; she shared her personal experiences related to the topic. "I was once apprehended by police, mistaken identity for shoplifting." In turn the students shared their experiences. One African American student said, "I don't shoplift but if I knew someone who did, I would certainly have them get something for me."

Throughout the discussion Amy listened and encouraged students to reflect on the laws and consequences for their choices and behaviors. Amy's demeanor with her students was laid back, relaxed and engaging. What I saw during this two hour observations with two different classes brought Amy's interview to life. Her teaching style and practices solidified for me an understanding of her desire to have genuine interactions with her students. It appeared in her conversations with her students that she recognized that her cultural experiences were different from that of the students, and she verbally acknowledged those differences. "My values and beliefs are different from many of you in this classroom; I can't at all relate as a White girl from Whiteville coming from a middle class family." The students appeared to be comfortable in sharing their personal stories. There was a sense of classroom community and trust in the classroom environment. No judging of one another or ridicule took place during the group discussion.

I watched *Lisa* as she interacted with her students. It appeared that students were engaged, and Lisa exhibited energy and motivation like that of a cheerleader cheering on a winning team. I observed the students to be responsive to her teaching, willing to participate in the classroom activity. Lisa engaged every learner as they participated in a structured way to prepare for a test. She even engaged a student she had a prior conversation with about skipping her class. I assumed this student would put his head down and/or isolate himself from his peers but he was engaged, raising his hand and participating in the activity.

As students responded to the pre-test questions I could see the level of confidence increase on their faces. The activity was relevant to the students' experiences; they played a popular game known by the students in the class that was modified to practice and prepare for a test. As the class came to a close, many students said, "We are going to rock this test!" Lisa in turn responded, "You are all very smart, I expect you all to apply yourself." Lisa appeared very comfortable interacting with her students and in turn the students' seemed engaged with Lisa and their peers. Lisa explained that getting to know her students, embracing the differences and learning from those differences would strengthen her teaching practices and have an effect on the students' learning. Lisa shared,

> We have about 75 percent Hispanic students in the school. So we need to know about that and let them know that their culture is important, not only to them but to the school and have our students have the opportunity to express that in whatever curricular that they're in. I think that's important,

As I entered *Susan's* classroom, students were working on an art project at tables in cooperative groups. Some students were engaged in the art project quietly working (painting or drawing) while a table of very active boys talked loudly. Susan stood nearby listening to the boys' conversation and then sat down at their table. She asked the boys to share what they were each doing on their project. They each shared and when finished, returned to their discussion. Susan excused herself and moved to another table where two girls worked quietly on their project. She sat down to assist one student as she worked to cut out her mask. I remembered Susan shared during the interview that is was important for her to allow students to have movement and interactions with boundaries that allowed them to engage with their peers, as long as they were not verbally or physically hurting one another.

This class was engaged in the art assignment as well as in their conversations. The presence of their teacher did not appear to impede their interactions and they seemed comfortable conversing with Susan as she made her way to each table group. The students also were comfortable asking for assistance and open to her suggestions. Most students interacted only with peers and did not engage in interactions with the teacher. However, it was evident in my observation what Susan stated in her interview; she believed it was important to allow students to be creative when designing their project and work independently or in groups. She did not believe every project should be the same or look the same.

In *Diane's* room, the student-teacher interactions during this instructional time were minimal. The classroom environment seemed controlled and quiet. Students were working individually on a reading assignment as Diane walked around the room to help students individually. When the students transitioned from reading to math, Diane was intentional in her instruction as she repeatedly coached the students to gather the necessary materials for math and sit on the rug. She reminded the students that she should hear no talking during this transition. Some students neglected to follow instructions so they were all required to return to their desk to attempt the transition again. The second time the task was successfully accomplished.

During math instruction all students were engaged in whole group lesson writing the answers to math problems on white boards and displaying them for Diane's feedback. Diane was seated in a chair in front of the students gathered around her on the carpet. As she proceeded to the next problem, I noticed that a few students sitting in the back appeared to be struggling with the previous math equation. As Diane continued on with her lesson, the struggling students became disengaged in the lesson activity and began drawing pictures on their white boards.

After two visits to Diane's classroom, lacking my own classroom teaching experience, I wondered if Diane's style of interacting with students was a reflection of the academic struggles

she indicated she was having with her students. Her whole group instruction was a practice she believed was the best in order to keep the students' behaviors under control. She shared in her interview her biggest challenge, "I would say defiance and rebellion." Although it was difficult to determine the engaged interactions between Diane and her students, established respect from the students was present.

Jaime's students appeared energetic and engaged in the class activity. When I entered, the children were involved in a reflection activity, thinking and sharing what they had learned over the course of the year. They answered questions like: What stood out most for them in their learning, what challenged them, what subject they enjoyed most/least and why? Cooperative learning was the classroom structure during this instructional time. Students identified partner groups as assigned by Jaime, and when instructed they would move to new partner groups. During this transition time, Jaime played music which kept students engaged and moving through the transition. The music was upbeat, children danced and sang across the room as they moved from one partner group to another. They maintained their focus as Jaime presented the next question. Students shared their learning with one another, and then they shared their understanding of their partner's learning with the entire class.

Students' responses to the final question illustrated the kind of relationship that Jaime had with her African American students. The question was "What has been your most memorable moment about fourth grade?" As I listened to the responses of the partner groups I would hear students say repeatedly, that having Ms. Jaime as a teacher was their best memory.

Soon after this activity, the students were transitioned into their reading block, which again was interactive and engaging for all. Students were creating a blog page of their own interest and researching information related to their topic of choice. While using the computer some students worked in groups and others individually. As students worked, some talked, others

hummed songs and yet others talked aloud to themselves as they worked alone. Jaime shared with me that as she has come to know her students and visited their homes, she has learned that many of her African American students come from home environments with high levels of stimulation and noise. She recognized that she needed to find a balance in what she was comfortable with and where her students were coming from in order to keep them engaged during instructional time. She, along with her students developed classroom norms (at the beginning of the school year) that related to appropriate classroom noise levels and she modeled the expected behaviors and norms for her students. Jaime realized that to ask students to leave what they knew from their environment at the front door of the school would not be realistic and would create barriers in her relationships and interactions with her students.

Each participant engaged their students in activities in a way specific to their unique classroom culture. While interactions in Susan's and Diane's classrooms appeared structured, quiet and controlled, the interactions in Jaime's classroom were energetic and in motion. In Amy's and Lisa's high school classrooms, the interaction amongst teachers and students reflected engaged ongoing conversations. The participants provided instructions that reflected engaged interactions and demonstrated their abilities to connect to the worldview of their students of color.

Disorientating Dilemma: What is My Students' Worldview

Transformational Learning (e.g., Mezirow, 1997) is an experience that causes an individual to change their perspective on how they view the world. This transformation is sometimes believed to be caused when attempting to resolve a disorienting dilemma. It becomes comfortable to remain in our frame of thinking, beliefs and values, instead of challenging our habitual beliefs. To critically reflect on values, assumptions and beliefs, forces individuals to reexamine their thinking. Sharing personal perspectives with others can help to process and deal

with beliefs (Cranton, 2002). However, an event along the way does not necessarily create transformation. Amy reflects,

> I could never understand what it meant to be anything but White; everybody was White around me, [that is just] the way it was. I was on free and reduced lunch as a child but being White we learned how to hide it living around other White kids.

During the focus group session *Amy* reflected upon her life experiences, "I lived in a cute little townhome, taught in a 97% White school, and wore my name brands and all of a sudden I was left holding a six week old baby. My son's father left me." Listening to Amy's story, I wondered how this life altering experience related to being White. This experience could happen to any person regardless of race or culture, but as Amy continued to share her story I began to see how she was connecting this experience to her beliefs and thoughts about being a White female with the associated privileges.

"I'm the only White girl standing in the line at Social Rehabilitation Services applying for a Vision Card thinking *this is what 'they' feel like*." [My emphasis] It was at that moment Amy recognized the privilege she maintained as a White woman regardless of her income status, regardless of her circumstances, "No matter how I looked at it I was still White in Whiteland." Amy knew that being White outside of the welfare office afforded her privileges. She shared, "I knew what it felt like to be an 'other'." Amy later realized that she could use her personal experience to connect with her students, develop a level of trust and expectations by sharing her story. She further recognized her need to be open minded to hear her students' stories and learn from them in an effort to teach in a way they could learn better. Amy learned to use the experiences of her students in her teaching practices. "I think I'd really bonded with my minority students almost better than my White students."

Lisa recognized there is a difference that exists between her culture as a middle class White woman and her students of color. She shared during the focus group,

> . . . listen to your students and listen to where they came from and never say, I completely understand how you feel because *I have no idea*. A lot of my students will be the first to graduate in their family; I came from a family that instilled the value of education. When we don't understand that difference that's when the big disconnect happens.

Lisa shared how she assessed and compared the racial and cultural differences between her and her students of color, and made the necessary attempted to make the perspective shift to meet their learning needs.

Throughout the interviews and during the focus group discussion, *Susan* struggled to identify a point in her life when and if her perspective shifted and affected her teaching practices, values and/or beliefs about race and culture. She continued to attribute her behaviors, beliefs and values about racial and cultural difference to her upbringing, and her own life experiences.

> "I think it's just as it is, *I don't think that I've learned something magnificent. It's just how I was raised* to be accepting and why aren't more people like that?. . . So I was optimistic that we were going to change and these things weren't going to happen anymore and people would learn and Civil Rights would come through."

Diane expressed that although she grew up as the child living primarily in low income Hispanic and/or African American communities, she never had to experience what her childhood peers experienced. She reminded me and shared with the group that although she lived in the same environment she was not a part of that environment, she shared,

> Just because you grow up in the community doesn't mean you're of it…I hear some of my fourth grade kids in my classroom say they walked into a store in the mall and the sales lady followed them around, *I never had to experience that.*

Although Diane talked about her "cosmic shift" in understanding racial and cultural differences and how these differences affected teaching and learning, she appeared challenged to apply this knowledge in her teaching practice.

Jaime realized that although she was exposed to diversity at an early age she operated in a world of colorblindness. "*I didn't see race for a long time*…and I believe as teachers it's our fault in not recognizing that we need to start having conversations about race; just because it's different doesn't make it wrong." She did learn that not recognizing and dealing with differences would lead to racism and stereotypical perceptions and assumptions about different racial groups and cultures. During a conversation with her fifth grade students she soon realized that their own lack of knowledge, exposure and conversation about other races and cultural groups festered racial hostility amongst the students in her own classroom. She recognized the need to begin incorporating dialogue about racial and cultural difference in her instructional time. Jaime wanted to encourage her students to think about their own perspective, and how they might change their own perception about other races and cultures.

Participants used different words and ways to share their moment of recognition that their worldview was different from that of their students. These selected moments provide insights into potential participants' disorienting dilemmas; the first steps in possible perspective shifts. In her experience of being the only White in a welfare center, Amy thought, "this is what 'they' feel like." Lisa shared, "…never say, I completely understand how you feel because I have no idea." Jaime shared, "I didn't see race for a long time." Growing up in a diverse environment Jaime

was surprised she was not accepted by her African American students and their parents. Diane said "I never had to experience that," referring to the discrimination experience described by her African American students. Diane being accepted neither in her African American and Hispanic community, nor her White Christian School, Diane experienced differences at an early age. As Susan struggled to identify a point in her life when and if her perspective shifted and affected her teaching practices, she reflected, "I don't think that I've learned something magnificent… It's just how I was raised."

Researcher's Reflections

My reflections were meant to explicate how my perspective might have had an effect on this research. In this section, I have shared my thoughts, feelings, beliefs and biases about the overall research project, the participants' stories and classroom observations. Furthermore, the purpose of my reflections was to sustain the research quality attributes: reliability, credibility, trustworthiness and truthfulness.

This section comprises my life story, my reflections to each individual participant's story, my perspective shift and concluding reflective thoughts. My life story is focused on those events that might be relevant for this research. It included some details from my childhood, education and professional experiences, similar to the way the participants' stories were told. My story about my personal perspective shift, due to this research, captured some of my dilemmas and surprises and how I came to the new understanding of White teachers' challenge in teaching students who were racially and culturally different from themselves. My reflections to each participant's story were inspired by critical events they reported during interviews and focus group discussion, as well as those events that appeared relevant to this study during transcribing and analyzing data.

Image in the Mirror: My story

A native of Usher County and a graduate of the Usher County public school district, I grew up in a family environment that placed emphasis on the importance of education. My mother believed that education was the key that opened the doors to many opportunities and maintained high expectation of me as a student. Throughout my childhood educational experience I attended schools with diverse student populations. Because I was bussed to my school, my friendships were developed with those who also rode the bus and lived in my neighborhood. I remember having White friends who lived near the school but we never visited one another's home, as I did with my friends in my neighborhood. I always assumed it was due to physical distance.

From kindergarten through my high school years I never had a teacher of color. I don't recall building any significant relationships or making connections with any of my teachers. In high school I was never encouraged by any of my teachers of high school counselors to attend college, but I was placed on an educational track for clerical business. My school connection remains somewhat of a blur; however, I have fond memories of my bus rides to school and having fun with friends on and off the bus. As a student who rode the bus across town due to desegregation, I was never involved in extracurricular activities. My connections with the teachers, staff and neighborhood kids at the schools were non-existent once I stepped off of the bus. I remember student connections in junior high and high school were segregated, Black students socialized mostly with Blacks, Hispanics with Hispanics, and Whites with Whites.

I attended the local university and decided I would become a teacher. Unlike the participants, I was neither inspired nor encouraged by a teacher, school counselor or my family to attend college or encouraged to become a teacher. I entered college and teaching just seemed to be a fit for me as a college student. To be certain teaching was for me, I took a job with Usher

public schools as an elementary paraprofessional in special education. After 3 years in the classroom and learning of the challenges young students faced, I decided I wanted to connect holistically with the child. I wanted to know what made children who they were before they entered the world of education and I changed my major to social work. There, I believed I could continue to serve children better in a capacity that would allow me to study their environment. Upon completing my bachelor and master's degrees in social work, I took a job with Usher as an elementary school social worker. This job led to other opportunities that advanced my career. These advancements provided me the chance to advance my aspirations as an advocate for social justice and eventually moved me to my current position as the Director of Equity and Diversity.

A Journey of Reflective Shift

At the beginning of this research, I had my own thoughts and beliefs about White teachers' inabilities to build relationships and engage students of color in the learning process. My perceived concerns about the relationships between White teachers and students of color, and how those relationships influenced instructional practices and learning were shaped by my professional and personal experiences in Usher County Public Schools. In my prior work as a mediator for the district, I would frequently hear concerns expressed by teachers, families and students related to racial and cultural differences. While White teachers rarely admitted to racial and cultural disconnect, this was a concern frequently mentioned by families and students of color. As the coordinator of a professional development program on Cultural Proficiency in Usher district, I facilitated courageous conversations about racial and cultural differences amongst district employees. It was at that time that I wanted to better understand how racial and cultural differences influenced teachers and students relationships, as well as how it affected teaching practices and student learning.

I started this research journey by interviewing each of the participants to better understand who they were. At my initial interview with each of the selected participants, I knew it was important to begin establishing rapport. With social work as my primary discipline I knew it would be important to actively listen, and be aware of my body language, facial expressions and responses as they shared. It was critical that the participants did not feel judged during the interviews. As I learned more about the participants, I was able to make connections outside of the research topic with each participant. For example, I learned that Diane attended the same Christian school that my daughters had attended a few years before her. I connected with Susan based on her desegregation experience and my current experience with the resegregation plan in the same school district. It appeared as though our connection brought history to a full circle. These connections allowed the participants and me an opportunity to establish a sense of rapport and trust.

I listened to their life stories, from their childhood to their teaching experiences. I journeyed into their classrooms to watch them in action and we met together for the focus group discussion. My epiphany happened during the data analysis, when I put all the pieces together and reflected and drew on my conclusions. Each teacher's story was unique, with distinctive ways and challenges involved in making connections and interacting with their students. I listened and observed each teacher while trying both to understand and examine their perspectives (worldview) related to the race and culture of their students of color and at the same time to assess my own perspective. To say the least, at times, I struggled with some of the teachers' level of comfort with me as they disclosed personal information and shared their life stories which I recorded and transcribed into a written document.

As a researcher, educator, and African American woman interviewing White teachers, I added a layer to this research that challenged both I and participants to have courageous

conversations about race, culture, White privilege, and how these affected the dynamics of the classroom and learning of students. Aware of the racial and cultural differences between me and the five White participants, I suspected the participants would tell me what I wanted to hear. I believed we would have a difficult time engaging in courageous conversations about cultural and racial experiences and what effect race and culture had on their instructional practices. However, I remained determined to investigate and challenge my professional and personal beliefs. I also wanted, and needed to remain cognizant of potential barriers that might impede our conversation due to my race. In our attempt to maintain a congenial discussion, at times, our conversations would illicit discomfort for all involved, yet we remained engaged and learned from one another. I did not expect that the participants' stories would cause me to reflect on my childhood, education and career life. As I speculated what might be my research findings, I developed a more comprehensive consciousness about the effects of race and culture from the perspectives of five White teachers, beyond just their classroom experiences. Some of the participants' life stories caused me to shift some of my beliefs; I have explicated some of my perspective shifts within the reflections I have written about individual participants.

Diane: "I was in it but not of it"

Diane, a child of missionary parents, and a third culture kid, did not fit into the neighborhoods in which she was raised. Living amongst impoverished African Americans or Hispanics she never felt like she was connected or fitted in her environment. Later while attending a predominantly upper middle class Christian school she found she did not fit there either. Diane shared, "I was in it but not of it," really stood out for me. While I didn't totally understand her comment at the beginning, this meaning emerged for me as I reread her interview. For Diane, her teaching was her calling. However, as she acknowledged her challenge with the academic success of her students she appeared defeated. Although she acknowledged

her understanding about making learning culturally relevant for her students, that was not apparent in her teaching practice.

Diane taught in a predominantly African American classroom. In her classroom there were no pictures, posters or artifacts that reflected the race or culture of her students. While her classroom arrangement was reflective of the cooperative learning instruction, her teaching was traditional during my two observations. I wondered how much of Diane's racial and cultural experiences shaped her attitudes and beliefs that affected her teaching practices. It appeared as though her description of being a third culture child (not fitting) had emerged in her teaching practices. She was physically present in a classroom with 98% African American children, knowledgeable of the cultural need to engage her students in the learning process, yet there was a disconnect between what she knew and what she demonstrated in her teaching practices during my observations.

I recalled many "I was in it but not of it," times when I was the only minority in a class, in a meeting, at a function, etc. and I reflected on how I felt at those times. Because this happened more frequently than not, I had really never taken the time to reflect on how I might have felt. I remembered that in those moments, I felt a disconnect, knowing that I could not change who I was, to what might be the known norm or the way to do things in a particular setting, I would choose to settle in to what was comfortable for me, ignoring and not embracing the norm. Reflecting and thinking from this perspective I was able to empathize with Diane to better understand her challenge and struggle to put her knowledge into practice. *I recognized through the reflection of my own experiences, I had to be open and purposeful in my desire to apply my knowledge and change. I further realized this is not always easy nor was it always a desire.*

Susan: To Do the Right Thing

Susan provided a historical timeline, a moment of interest that captured my attention during the selection interview. Susan's story placed some of her experiences in the heart of desegregation in the Usher County Public School system. I begin to think what her civil rights related experience would add to the research project.

Susan's story reflected not only a critical time in the history, but how such historical events affected her life, her teaching practice and her encounter with race and culture. At times, as I listened to her story, I was challenged to stay on the immediate context as the researcher and not get lost in the dismay I felt while listening to her story. Many times as Susan shared her memories of experiences about racism, racial tension during desegregation, and community race riots, I reflected on current day racial issues and wondered why present day issues were parallel and at times even identical to historical injustices. For example, Susan's shared experience about the racial tension centered on desegregation issues in 1971 which seemed so reflective of my present day experiences with Usher County district's resegregations plan in 2008. It saddened me to recognize that history was repeating such historical problems. I felt history had come full circle. I repeatedly asked Susan why she wanted to make a difference at such a critical time in society as a diversity trainer, a counselor for an all Black summer youth program, and an advocate/educator helping peers to embrace and understand racial and cultural differences. To my surprise, Susan was unable to articulate her reasons. After conversations with Susan about her life journey, I realized that Susan's motivation to her actions was an attitude inspired and developed from her father "to do the right thing."

Jaime: Embracing the Difference

A particular event that stands out for me was my first visit to Jaime's classroom. My first impression was that students' behavior was out of control. I was surprised by the level of noise

taking place during class; students were singing, laughing, talking, humming, and incessantly moving in their chairs…while some continually yelled out their teachers name for assistance. As Jaime walked around the room assisting students she encouraged them to raise their hand as she would come and assist those who had their hands raised, not those who were yelling out her name. Although she reminded the students to be aware of the volume level, she never directly silenced them. It was at this point I began to feel anxious and wondered how these students could focus with so much noise in the room. As I continued to watch, I realized that the students were not talking to one another but at their computers, humming to themselves and laughing at the activities on the computer. If students were engaged in a conversation with their neighbor they were assisting one another on the computer. It appeared that the students were on task and working on their projects.

I remembered growing up in a highly over-stimulating, energetic household, and mirrored the same structure for my children; there was never a silent moment in my home. There was constant talking, the sounds of the television, music, constant movement and noise until bed time. I remembered my time as a teenager, particularly an event when my boyfriend came to have dinner with my family. He shared later how surprised he was to see a family talk so much at the dinner table, yet, food continued to disappear from our plates; he was astonished how a family could talk as much as we did and digest our dinner at the same time.

I thought about the cultural experiences these students in the computer lab might have had in their home environment, rationalizing that they were not "out of control"; they were exhibiting what was the "norm" for them from their cultural experiences. I begin to think about the church I attend, and the call and response from the member of this predominantly African American church as compared to a predominantly Caucasian church I attended; the silence as the minster taught and how my husband's voice was at many times the only voice you would hear in

the church call out AMEN! I also reflected on how the African Americans in the theatre respond aloud throughout the movie to the scenes that spark their interest. These reflections *challenged me to question my assumptions and judgment about students' behavior being inappropriate or different.*

In the book, Beyond Silenced Voices, Weis and Fine (1993) discussed the codes or rules for participating in the culture of power held by the dominant culture. These codes are relative to "linguistic forms, communicative strategies, presentation of self and ways of interacting" (p. 122). Molinksy (2007) introduces the term cross-cultural code shifting as the ability to change a specific behavior, dialect, language or actions in a different cultural environment to align with the norms of that culture. This cross-cultural code shifting is applicable to Weis and Fine's work on linguistic code shifting. In her book, The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom , Delpit (2002) shared a story about her eleven year old daughter and her inability to "code shift" (p.41) when enrolled at a predominantly White private school which affected her daughter's morale and self-esteem. Although Delpit believed a child's educational experience should be inclusive of their racial and cultural experiences, she recognized the empowerment associated with code-shifting. She expressed an overarching concern regarding the rules of those participating in the culture of power, "the White folks," (p. 37). She implied that the dominant culture may view others as ignorant or "less than" (p.40) if their rules or codes are not employed in schools, the workplace and society.

Knowing that the cultural experience of the students' home environment was different from the school's culture, Jaime learned how to relate to her students' cultural experiences, embrace them, and model the norms of the dominant culture without stripping her students of who they were.

Amy: From "Whiteville" to the World of Diversity

The beginning of my journey with Amy, I felt as though she was cautious with her words, as well as with her body language. I knew I needed to discover a way to build a better rapport with Amy and help move the two of us to a point of trust. I needed to connect with Amy, to get to know her. I attempted to share more information about myself to begin to build trust and rapport.

Amy expressed her interest in the research and I believed her experiences in life could benefit the research project. After our initial interview and first classroom observation, Amy's conversations at our second interview seemed more relaxed and open. She began to share more of her personal life, her former personal stereotypical beliefs and her values. Amy talked about how her thinking changed as she transitioned from what she called "Whiteville" to the world of diversity. She shared her shortcomings, challenges and desire to increase her understanding of the racial and cultural differences between her and her students.

Amy gave me an opportunity to see the world of a White woman from her perspective. She taught me more about White privilege when she shared a change in her thinking as she found herself standing in a welfare line. She believed that welfare was not for White people but for "those people" until she became a recipient of the welfare benefits. Amy stood in the same line with "those people" with a hat on her head to slightly hide her face, name brand jeans, Amy clutched her named brand purse assuming someone would take it. At that point in our conversation, I was both pleasantly surprised with Amy's decision to share this experience and stunned by the stereotypes she held at that time. I thought, if I had to stand in a welfare line I too would be embarrassed, not because I was Black but because of my own middle class values. However from Amy's perspective, as a White woman, I was "those people" had I been in that same line with her. This was one of those uncomfortable conversations, where I found myself

choosing my words cautiously so not to offend Amy as she trusted me with her story. As Amy shared this critical event in her life which lead to her own change, *her story opened up a new understanding for me regarding white privilege, how it shapes the thinking for some White people, as I listened and learned from the perspective of a White woman.*

Amy's life experiences challenged her to question her own attitude about racial and cultural differences, and better yet she shared how her students had challenged her values and beliefs about their own differences. I enjoyed watching Amy as she interacted with the students in her classroom and valued listening to her as she shared some of her personal life experiences with her students. Open, vulnerable, and genuine was the message Amy sent not only to her students but to me. Amy's eagerness to learn about her students and how they were different from her was apparent.

Lisa: Inspired by Erin Gruwell

Lisa's story came to life in the classroom. As I entered her classroom the walls were covered with student's work and the classroom environment was high energy. Students were working in cooperative groups on a language arts lesson and helping one another with the lesson.

Lisa's energy was contagious and once I understood what the students were working on I was engaged and motivated in the activity they were working on.

The interaction between the teacher and the students lead me to believe that the students were connecting to the teacher. Students laughed and joked with Lisa during the activity. I felt as though I was in Erin Gruwell's classroom from the movie "Freedom Writers" watching Erin's interact with her students and engage them in the learning. I was reminded that in an earlier conversation, Lisa told me how much that movie inspired her as a teacher and how much she could relate not only to Erin Gruwell, but to how the students in the movie were a reflection of many of the students in her class.

I wondered if I had a teacher like Lisa during my high school experience. Unfortunately I could not remember even one teacher that engaged me in the learning process or showed genuine care and concern. Did I embrace my learning because I could relate or did I just go through the motion and jump through the hoops to complete my schooling to move on the next chapter in my life? Lisa teaching, re-teaching, engaging, reviewing, and allowing critical thinking from the students reminded me of the teachers Gloria Ladson Billings (2000) described in her research, Fighting for Our Lives: Preparing Teachers to Teach African American Students Teachers. These teachers exhibited cultural competence, made the learning relevant for their students and prompted and promoted critical thinking.

Connecting My Reflective Thoughts

Each teacher participant was unique in their teaching methods and the way they tried to connect with their students. Each teacher articulated and displayed a similar belief that getting to know their students was important in the learning processes. They believed that their acknowledgement of racial and cultural differences and understanding those differences helped them to better interact, engage and build relationships with their students of color. This acknowledgement of differences empowered some of the participants to incorporate into the students' learning courageous conversations with their students about differences. While some participants appeared challenged to provide culturally relevant instruction, they all acknowledged the importance of students' experiences, race and culture emerging in the learning. The teachers appeared willing to learn with and from their students who were different from them. They presented themselves as personable, and demonstrated an attitude of care and concern for their students which was reflective in their interactions, engagement and connections with their students.

6. DISCUSSION

To conceptualize and structure, this section I developed a Thinking Chart (see Figure 1) that points at interconnections of theoretical framework and findings with the research questions that guided this study. These questions and corresponding findings were considered within the theoretical framework consisting of sociocultural, critical pedagogy, and critical social theory. Findings are explicitly discussed in the context of associated theories in the following sections: understanding the differences, teachers' connection through engaged interactions and transforming teaching practices.

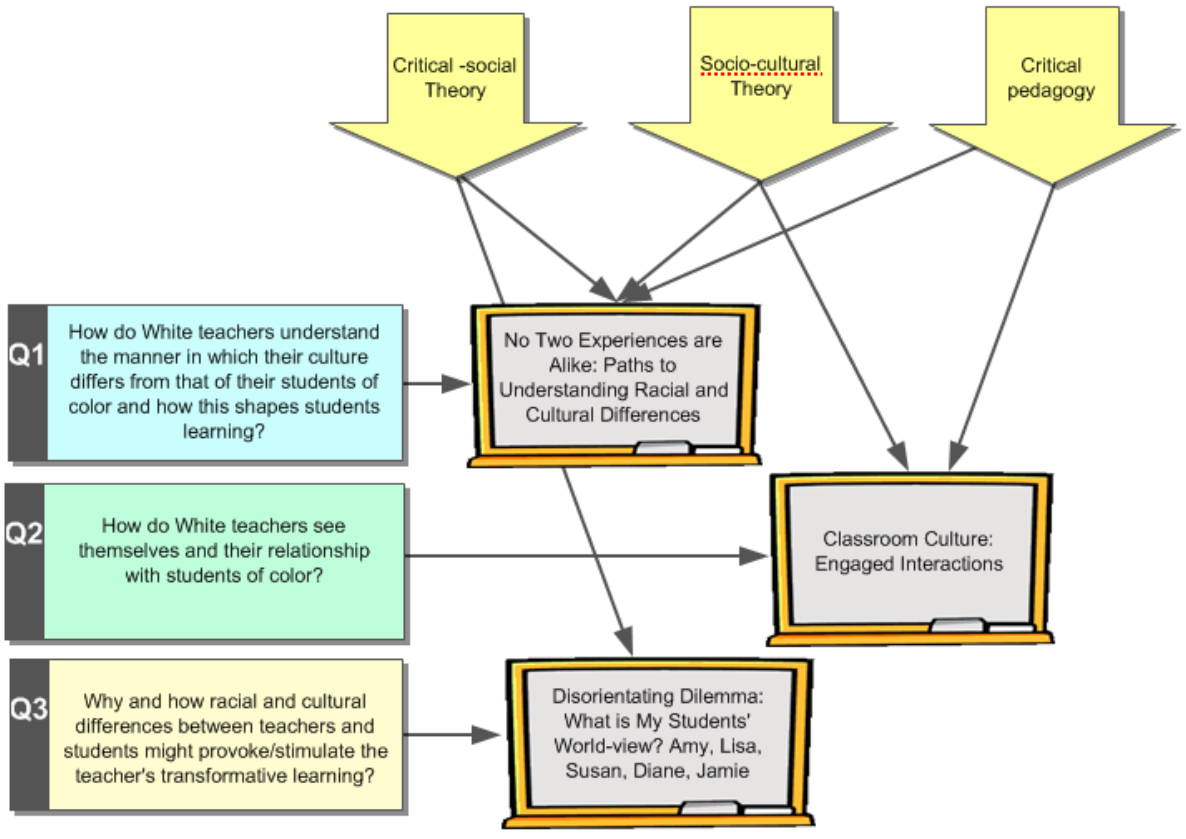

Figure 1. Thinking Chart for structuring Discussion Chapter

Understanding the Differences

Genuine dialogue about race and culture cannot exclude the effects White privilege has on education. Facilitating such dialogues in schools, with an attempt to promote inclusiveness and acceptance of cultural and racial differences may present a challenge. Even with resources and curriculum available to support these dialogues, the topics related to race and culture are often avoided (Henze, et al., 1998). During the focus group discussion, I intentionally ask the teachers a question about their experience with Whiteness, power and privilege. Their responses allowed me to seek answers and reflect on the research question, *How do White teachers understand the manner in which their own culture differs from that of their students' of color and how this shapes students learning?* As the participants remembered times they may have been aware of their Whiteness and the associated privilege, some shared that they did not believe they benefited from the culture of that power. Ruth Frankenberg, in her book "The Social Construct of Whiteness: White Women Race Matters," quoted one of her research participant's responses about Whiteness and privilege as saying, "a reality not acknowledged, a privilege lived in, but unknown"(p.9). Diane, shared during a focus group session,

> I can see being White that I can walk into Wal-Mart and walk into Dillon's and not feel like people are looking at me. I hear some of my kids say, 'I walked into a store in the mall, and the sales lady followed me around.' I've never had that experience and so even though I was raised with a lot of minorities, I think, sometimes you forget; I was in it, but not of it.

The culture of power that exists in the educational system does not provide the same access to all students. Students whose culture is not reflected in the school culture enter at a

disadvantage and need information and knowledge to access the educational system (Delpit 1988, 1995). However, if White educators lack knowledge and awareness regarding the culture of power and the inequitable educational access for some students, they may lack the ability to empower their students and engage them in the learning that develops critical thinkers. Freire's (1970) "banking concept of education" (p.208), is reflective of a statement made by Diane when she said, "I was in it but not of it." Diane acknowledged that she maintained and embraced her white culture while living in an environment and culture different from her. She did not believe it was necessary to embrace the culture which surrounded her.

The teaching field is largely populated with White teachers and the number of students of color continues to increase. White teachers that become aware of, and acknowledge the racial and cultural inequalities may, over times, change their instructional practices to engage the students of color in learning. These teachers may break the cycle of oppression and embrace the theory of critical pedagogy. However the continued absence and lack of embedding prior knowledge of students' experiences in their learning, perpetuates the cycle of oppression (Bartlett, 2005; Freire, 1970; McIntosh, 1989).

Critical Pedagogy and Critical Social Theory supported the idea that the teachers in this study were aware of their culture and how it affected what they believed about their students, their teaching practices and their ability to engage their students. When the teachers understood the difference, they recognized the necessity to allow their students' cultural experiences to become a part of the learning environment, as supported by *Sociocultural Theory*. For some this remained a challenge. Lisa stated, "We have mostly Hispanics [in our school] so we need to know about [their culture] and let them know that their culture is important, not only to them but to the school and give our students the opportunity to express that in whatever curricular that they're in."

Some of the teachers demonstrated, while some only acknowledged, their awareness and understanding of the differences. For example Amy shared, "I'm still relating. I would like to be able to relate to my Black kids a little more, but that is a culture that I see is very different [but] I'm still learning I can only learn from the kids." Through the process of self assessment, cultural assessment and self reflection, White teachers unaware of White privilege and power can become aware that their culture is different from their students, build relationships, and make connections to engage their students in the learning (Bartlett, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Gillborn, 2004; Rozas, 2007).

Do We Really Know Our Students: Teachers Connect through Engaged Interactions

Learning is relational, and knowledge is acquired through the meaningful connections made during the learning. So, *how do White teachers see themselves and their relationship with students of color?* Students' cultural experiences represent a significant portion of their prior knowledge. Educators who use students' cultural knowledge provide a pedagogical structure for instruction and facilitate successful students' engagement (Bartlett, 2005; Freire, 1970). In this study, the teachers that embraced the cultural experiences of their students, and integrated students' prior knowledge, found it at times to be a difficult task. Lisa reflected,

> I think it just takes a willingness to listen to gain a different perspective. I think, being open minded and listening to your students, and learning from your students. Disconnect comes when you act like you know how they feel when you don't and they shut off.

Lisa maintained that teachers learn more about their students by allowing the students' experiences to emerge in the learning. Culturally relevant instruction is a practice Lisa used to actively interact with her students in the learning process.

The five teachers recognized how their early cultural experiences shaped their individual development and cultural interactions, and how those experiences affected their teaching practices is reflective of *Sociocultural Theory and Critical Pedagogy.* For example, each teacher shared in their stories how the culture from their childhood shaped their beginning values, beliefs, and attitudes. Amy recalled her first teaching experience in a classroom with ten fifth grade African American students and she said, "I knew that how I was brought up was how I would treat those kids." Each participant acknowledged the importance for students to see their culture and race in their learning environment. For example Diane said, "That constant reminder to make it applicable to the kids. Making it look like them, talk like them so they will have buy-in." Diane recognized the need to be aware of her own cultural experiences, how it influenced her teaching practices. She realized that her teaching practices needed to incorporate the students' cultural experiences in the learning but acknowledged the difficulty in making the change. Many educators would agree, that to incorporate the students' cultural experiences in the learning is a complex process, particularly when the classroom is highly diverse (Sleeter, 2001; Stovall, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

"A Cosmic Shift": From Disorienting Dilemma to Perspective Transformation?

From the perspective of *Critical Social Theory,* which supports transformative learning (Leonardo, 2004), I analyzed available data for critical events that might have caused a change in the teachers' ways of thinking about racial and cultural differences. I questioned *why and how do racial and cultural differences between teachers and students might provoke/stimulate the teacher's transformative learning?* I entered into this research with the thought that each participant would be able to identify their perspective shift (transformation), and what may have caused such change. To my surprise the teachers struggled to pin-point if, how, when and what ignited their change. However, most believed this change in their thinking and teaching practices

had occurred either through personal life or teaching experiences. It seemed that they were challenged to articulate the specifics.

As Cranton (2002) suggested, individuals are usually creatures of habit versus creatures of change. It may take a critical event that causes a disorienting dilemma prompting a person to question their personal values and beliefs. She further indicated that in small segments, individuals may gradually see things differently, experience transformation and not recognize it. Jaime, a former high school and college basketball player spent most of her time interacting and building relationships with African American females on and off the basketball court. However Jaime was surprised at the worldview of her predominately African American class when they shared with her their prejudice and racial comments about other cultures. She said,

> A conversation I had with a fifth grade class a few years ago – they are racists and I didn't get that… we were talking about going out in middle school and interacting with other students and they'd say, "Oh, those Mexicans are so stupid and so slow." And I was like, "Whoa, where is this coming from and why are you talking like that?" And I was just shocked and that was the cosmic shift for me.

She continued, "Okay, it's not just white people thinking they're racist," and clarified, "There's different things going on in the African-American culture where they think they're better than some other races as well."

As the teachers reflected on their perspectives and when and how their perspectives might have changed, some acknowledged their willingness to have courageous conversations with their students about their differences. Lisa believed it was important for students to know about the challenges, hardships and struggles experienced by different racial and cultural groups,

contending that such learning encouraged students to think about others and not just themselves. "We talk about a lot of the different races and what's happened throughout history and how they've [different races] been persecuted and treated. It really makes them [the students] think about how they treat others." Jaime also shared,

> I come from a very poor White family, and I was open to lots of alcohol and drug abuse, so I was exposed to a lot of different things at a very young age. I didn't see race for a long time, but from a teaching perspective the "cosmic shift" for me was when I started talking to my African American students and realized they had racist attitudes about other racial and cultural groups. It's our fault as teachers for not recognizing a need to start talking about differences. It doesn't mean your way of doing is better, it just means it's different.

Merriam (2004) argued that a prerequisite to perspective transformation is critical reflection on experiences. She further suggested that just having a critical experience does not necessarily lend way to transformation. Most of the teachers stated that they had not taken the time to reflect over their life experiences prior to participating in this research. After I provided teachers with their stories to check for truthfulness and consistency, Susan acknowledged that it was interesting to actually read about her life in print and reflect over her life changes. Lisa shared how reading her story allowed her to see the significance of the influence her grandfather had in her life and how that influence has challenged her to adapt her instructional practice to meet the needs of her students. Some of the participants were pleased with the changes they made in their lives and how those changes affected their teaching practices and their ability to build relationships, connect and interact with their students of color.

7. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This research investigated five White teachers' understanding of the racial and cultural differences and how these differences might have incited transformative learning and affected students' learning and engagement. It further explored teachers' perceptions of their relationships with their students of color. In this section I summarized the teachers' challenges, and how they might have changed and connected with students of color in an urban school district. Furthermore, I explicated why the teachers chose urban education and how they recognized the need to provide culturally relevant instruction as a good teaching practice. The implications captured how teachers' awareness of their personal race and culture may support their ability to facilitate culturally relevant instruction as well as develop relationships with their students of color while increasing engaged interactions.

Facing Our Challenge

Through their shared experiences and observations teachers disclosed their thoughts, values, and beliefs about race and culture. They shared how their race and culture differed from that of their students of color and how those differences influenced their teaching practices. The teachers acknowledged racial and cultural differences in various ways, and some of them identified with their Whiteness. In each of their stories, they shared their challenges with the racial and cultural differences of their students. And the *manner in which they understood how their culture differed from that of their students' of color and how it shaped students learning*. Lisa reflected, "I learned so much about them [students of color] and their backgrounds and how I had nothing similar to them." Whether the teachers' perceptions about racial and cultural differences were based on personal stereotypes, prior knowledge or experiences, all teachers appeared to have a genuine connection with their students of color. They each shared *how they saw themselves and their relationship with students of color*:

> Amy indicated, “I think I have to be real [transparent] with them.”
>
> Susan remarked, “You just have to know what works with students,”
>
> Diane urged, “The difference is the trust. . . they realized they could trust me.”
>
> Lisa stated, “I find myself going one on one with them and trying to figure out what matters for them.”
>
> Jaime expressed, “I had a determination that every [African American] student in my class could learn . . .and I had to keep modeling what I expected.”

These were some of the responses articulated by the teachers as they thought about their relationships with their students of color. The teachers indicated that they recognized and believed in the need to connect and build relationships with their students. They understood that these connections were necessary in order to interact and engage their students. The teachers further revealed that connecting, building relationships, and sincerely knowing their students of color helped them to make the necessary instructional adjustments to facilitate culturally relevant teaching.

The teachers also discussed how their personal and professional experiences challenged their beliefs, behaviors and values related to races and cultures different from their own. Some articulated *why and how racial and cultural differences between them and their students provoked and stimulated their transformative learning*. In some instances, through their shared stories, the teachers disclosed how their way of thinking and their perspectives changed. Lisa shared a story she remembered that caused her to shift her thinking about students of color.

> When I was student teaching, it was a culture shock in the sense that, you know, I had always been the majority in any school that I was at. The students were majority African American. I wasn't as confident and comfortable as I was if I would have walked into a suburban high school. I felt that sense of uneasiness. I was a little startled at first just because I've never been in a place or an atmosphere where I was a minority. I had never been in that situation before. I think that the major challenge was I didn't have anything in common with them.

Lisa continued to share,

> I told them a little bit about my life and how I was so interested to hear about their lives. I learned so much about them and their backgrounds, I was amazed how personal the students were, they only knew me for a month or two, but they felt open enough to talk about their experiences. And that's what I wanted to do. Once I got to know the kids, I felt like, oh my gosh, if I was at a football game, I think they'd have my back, I kind of felt like shame on me for even feeling that way. I loved it. The experience made me want to teach in an urban school district.

What is Good Teaching in Urban Education?

While each teacher talked about their desire to teach in an urban school, most of them were discouraged to do so by family, friends, and colleagues. But their desires did not give way to the discouragement. Their desire and passion to teach in their current settings reflected a sense of their humanitarian service. Some described it as empowering, giving back, helping those less

fortunate or sharing the love of Christ. Overall the common denominator was the voice of social justice. I came to this understanding by asking each teacher the question, "Why did you decide to become a teacher in an urban school district?"

> *Amy*: I had an eighth grade English teacher he was the coolest teacher. There was something different about him, he related to us in a way that he made it fun and I trusted him. Isn't it amazing how sometimes it is a teacher that impacts, influences or affects your life in such a way that they've been a role model, and that's what I wanted to do.
>
> *Lisa*: I come from a long line of teachers. My mom's, whole side of her family [were teachers], so it's kind of in my blood. I had really good teachers in elementary and middle and high school. I just thought how cool would it be if I could inspire somebody.
>
> *Susan*: I always thought I would go into social work but I ended up teaching Art and then going into counseling. I've always been around education.
>
> *Jaime*: I knew probably my junior or senior year in high school that's what I wanted to do. My coach, she was very inspirational. I had other teachers that really just inspired me to want to be a teacher. They just really helped me and my sister out a lot when we needed it.
>
> *Diane*: Well, ever since I was a little girl, I had a great first grade teacher, and so ever since then, I've always wanted to be [a teacher]. As I grew older, I got along with kids very well. I love working with children.

From an early age these teacher participants knew that they wanted to enter the field of education. Either inspired by a teacher in their life or a family member they each decided they

wanted to give back to other students. In the newspaper article The Teachers We Never Forget columnist Schoonmaker (2007) reflected on a series of her articles inquiring about what makes a good teacher. After several classroom observations she reported that her idea of a good teacher was a teacher providing the most creative and least restrictive classroom, with students engaged, asking questions and working on class projects. Schoonmaker reported, classes with these kinds of activities were the classes with the highest level of student s' engagement. In support of her claims, Schoonmaker referenced The Hamilton Project (Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006) in which the researchers argued that a good teacher is not measured by their credentials, their tenure, or years in service. A good teacher is all about the teacher and how they're able to connect with students, interact and engage students in the learning. Without those qualities teachers lose students in the learning and students fail to engage.

Good teaching included elements such as providing a caring environment, having content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and practicing skillful classroom management. While all of these elements may exist in good teaching, this teaching is reflective the dominant culture values and beliefs, it is with the implicit goal of supporting and promoting the dominant culture. Culturally relevant teaching, on the other hand, is inclusive of all of the mentioned elements; however, good teaching also takes the students' racial and cultural background into consideration, building on their experiences and affirming their cultural identity (William, 1996; 2006).

When teachers acknowledge differences, connect and build relationship with their students of color, they become aware of the need to provide culturally relevant instruction. Culturally relevant teachers not only know their students well, they use what they know about their students to give them access to learning (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Some urban teachers, as

well as some of the urban teachers in this study, have expressed their concerns regarding teaching students from different racial and/or cultural groups (Osborne, 1996).

Implications

The awareness of racial and cultural differences between the teachers and students does matter (Smith & Singer, 2006, Johnson, 2002, Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition the teachers cultural and racial experiences affect the perspective by which they teach, who they teach and what they believe about students of color (Jones, 2004). Some White teachers are persistent that they only see children and not race, prescribing to a method of color-blindness (Sleeter, 2001). At the beginning of our conversation Amy shared her thoughts about colorblindness, "I don't know what it is, but honestly, people will say I don't see color. I always tell the kids I can't count up how many kids of color I have because I see you all as one unit. We're all one here." As a result of Amy's educational experiences she later shared, "I think the culture piece is what relates us to them. I think it's the door that when you can open that cultural door, it will take you way beyond." Jaime believed that diversity training in her district, Cultural Proficiency professional development was an important part of her learning about racial and cultural differences. She acknowledged that such learning provided opportunities for courageous conversations about race and culture. "We have to have discussions with White teachers about the culture of our school that is hugely related to the race of the African American students we educate."

Sleeter (1992) further disclosed in her study, White teachers associated African Americans and Hispanics as dysfunctional and with limited competency and motivation. Additionally the White teachers in the study believed diversity training was only useful if it taught new information about African Americans and Hispanics. Because they believed there was no new information, they did not find diversity training worthwhile; when diversity is ignored racism emerges. When Amy wanted to connect with her students, build relationships,

and engage them in the learning process, she believed race and culture should matter. However, in maintaining high expectations for all of her student Amy believed that race did not matter. The color of their skin or their culture did not determine her belief in their academic potential.

Building Cultural Bridges

Educators who reflected on their life experiences and assessed their own values, beliefs and attitudes toward students from different racial and cultural groups became more aware of their teaching practices and students' outcomes (Jones, 2004). Jones further indicated that educators, who examined how their biases might have influenced their interactions with students of color, planned their classroom lessons and activities to engage these students in the learning. Such educators created and developed their teaching practices to bring real life experiences and current events into everyday teaching and learning.

It appeared that the five teachers in this study acquired cultural self awareness through their personal life experiences and teaching journey in their unique ways. Although they came to recognize that their life experiences, cultural environment and race were not like that of their students of color, not all of them realized how this recognition affected their teaching practices and students' learning. As she shared her historical journey Susan recalled,

> I worked [with] predominantly African American kids. I immersed myself into that culture, I loved it, and I felt accepted. The girls in the program would teach me how to dance. Some of the girls from the program would come over to my house and they would talk about me being the "White" person. They said they accepted me, but they also told me that when the revolution comes I would be as White as all the other Whites, so I needed to understand that.

When most of these teachers recognized how their students' race and culture differed from their culture, they are able to build a cultural bridge with their students. This bridge created a connection between home culture and school culture and strengthened the students' ability to engage in the learning.

Building Relationships with Students of Color; Maintaining High Expectations

The need for teachers to build relationships with students is not new information. Research studies such as Bondy's (2007) found that students who felt connected to their teachers had increased levels of engagement in learning and performed better academically. Lessard (2008) indicated that students who did not connect with their teachers, experienced poorer academic performance, higher absences, and higher dropout rates. Amy emphasized how race and culture were relevant factor when connecting with her students of color. She said, "You should deal with a student on a one on one basis...but you have to know the differences, even the differences within racial and cultural groups." Amy acknowledged that racial and cultural differences affected how she interacted with her students to connect and build relationships. Amy also shared her beliefs about high expectations saying,

> My biggest challenge is not letting their life stories affect my expectations of them. I took a lot of heat at first with my kids saying, 'You expect too much, you expect me to get an A.' I've noticed this more with my kids of color. I expect above average. When they walk in this room average is not acceptable. I expect excellence.

Amy, along with some other teachers in this study, understood that the importance to maintain high expectation for all of their students should not depend on the students' race and culture but on the teachers' belief that every student is expected to learn to their fullest potential.

However, when building relationships with their students, these teachers recognized the need to understand the racial and cultural differences and apply that understanding to nurture engaged interaction.

Engaging Students of Color; Facilitating Culturally Relevant Instruction

Ladson-Billings (1995) gave a clear message regarding the need for educators to provide culturally relevant instruction for students of color. With a predominantly White female teaching population and an increasing enrollment of student s of color in Usher County District, the message from Ladson-Billings appears to be prevalent. The personal and professional stories of the teachers in this district illustrated the potential paths to exploring issues related to race, culture and the academic success for students of color. The teachers articulated their beliefs that students should see their race and culture in their learning experiences. They further suggested that these experiences could be provided through culturally relevant instruction. While the teachers recognized the importance of culturally relevant instruction, they also expressed their awareness of implementation challenges. Diane shared her opinion,

> I think there is the constant reminder that we [educators] need to show kids people that are like them. We need to make the learning applicable. It's one of those things I know I'm supposed to do as a teacher. When talking about it, I think I'm good, but when it actually comes to me doing this [culturally relevant instruction] I guess I'm not so good, it keeps me challenged.

Throughout their professional experiences these five teachers recognized the need to connect to their students and realized that they needed to make some changes in their beliefs and teaching practices. Even though their change did not afford academic success for all of their

students, they continued to advocate the need to embrace the racial and cultural differences, and facilitate culturally relevant instruction as well as promote engaged interactions.

Conclusion

When the cultures between home and school are congruent, the classroom supports a learning environment that allows engaged interactions between the students and the teacher. In order for this congruency to take effect the system of education and teachers must be willing to recognize, understand and embrace the racial and cultural differences of the students. To recognize how students' race and culture differ from teachers 'culture is the first step in order to develop relationships and build cultural bridges. These bridges create connections between home culture and school culture.

Educators who maintain high expectation for all students and acknowledge that all students have the ability to learn, support the belief that every student is expected to learn to their fullest potential. Even though these premises might not always afford academic success for all of their students, high expectations in the learning should not depend on the students' race and culture but on the teachers' ability to engage all students in the learning,

When educators embrace the racial and cultural differences, have meaningful connections with their students, build genuine relationships by getting to know their students, educators may be able to provide and facilitate culturally relevant instruction to benefit the learning for students of color. I advocate for educators to facilitate culturally relevant instruction as well as promote engaged interactions.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Selection Criteria Questions

Why did you decide to become a teacher in an urban school district?

Can you share some of your interesting experiences in your interaction with students of color?

Challenging experiences with student of color?

Based on these experiences, how has your teaching changed over time?

Appendix B

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Tell me a little about yourself- your childhood and early education experience?

Tell me a little about your experience as a teacher?

Why did you decide to become a teacher in an urban district?

Over the years of teaching how has your classroom changed, what would you like to share?

Can you share some of your interesting experiences in your interaction with students of color? Challenging experiences with students of color?

What changes have you seen in student demographics/population since your teaching experience and how have that affect your teaching?

How has your professional development with Cultural Proficiency affected your teaching strategies?

How would you define success with students of color in your classroom?

Appendix C

Focus group Questions

What have you recognized/realized regarding the cultural and racial difference between you and students of color you instruct?

What prompted/influenced this awareness?

How has this awareness affected your teaching practices? What adjustments if any have you made based on this awareness?

How has the district's work with Cultural Proficiency influenced your teaching?

How might social justice and equality be advanced in the work of education for students of color?

Appendix D

Participants Narrative Plot Lines

Name	Demographics	Childhood	Career
Amy	Age: 31 Teaching experience: 11 Level: High School School: Hill Grove Subject: Soc. Studies and AVID	Grew up in Whiteville Born in rural community Attended school in suburbs Limited interaction w/diversity Encountered differences as a teacher in inner city summer school program	Taught in Detroit High School suburbs (predominantly White) Elementary inner city summer program (predominantly African American) Relocated to Usher County Taught @ Hill Grove High School predominantly Hispanic)
Lisa	Age: 28 Teaching experience 5 Level: High School School: Hill Grove Subject: Language Art and AVID	Move a lot to many different states Born in Usher County Attended schools in suburbs Lived an upper middle childhood Inspired by grandfather Taught to embrace all cultures and races Dated and African American not acceptable to mother	Student taught in predominately African American classroom Desired to teach in urban school Only taught at Hill Grove (predominately Hispanic)
Susan	Age: 55+ Teaching experience (30 years as an educator) Level: Middle School School: Garden Grove Subject: Art	Grew up in Christian home environment Taught to do what was the right thing to do for people Originally wanted to become a social worker but went into education as a career Third child of four siblings Did not share much information on childhood education	Began teaching career in Usher during desegregation Diversity trainer for Usher district Moved to New York to work in an Art Museum Call by administration to returned to Usher after 2 years in New York to help open an alternative school Became a school counselor while at alternative school Left district to work with Red Cross as AIDS educator Returned to district to write health curriculum and counsel part-time After 30 years of being out of the classroom return to classroom to teach Art

Participants Narrative Plot Lines cont.

Diane	Age: 26 Teaching experience: 4 Level: Elementary School: Lyons Subject: 4th grade	Child of missionary parents Grew up in low income Hispanic or African American neighborhoods in Usher and Los Angeles In Usher attend Christian Schools In Los Angeles home schooled Described herself as a third culture child Did not fit in neighborhood or school she attended Believed she was "in it but not of it"	Only taught in Usher Elementary schools Student taught in predominately Hispanic School (Title 1) Intentionally chose to teach in a high poverty/high minority school with low test scores
Jaime	Age: 28 Teaching experience: 5 Level: Elementary School: Lyons Subject; 4th grade	Grew up in a drug addicted environment Attended school in Usher through 1st grade Moved to suburbs at age 7 Poor so did not fit in suburban culture Ostracized through educational experience Labeled by teachers Did not connect or make friends in suburban community Had friend outside of community who were African American and/or Hispanic Played basketball Decided to teach junior year of high school Did not want to teach in suburban school due to personal experience Connected better with friend in urban community	Student taught in predominately Hispanic elementary school Was recruited to teach at Lyons To her surprise struggled to obtain respect from students and parents Determined to connect and build relationships with student and parents Believed student were coming from similar environment as she grew up in Believes she has a great relationship with students and parents after learning how to connect.

Inspiration Amv's Plot Line

Amy

Whiteville

Amy

I'm from a German family. My grandparents speak fluent German. And my mom used to say words to me in German growing up. And it was a German/ Catholic community. was born and raised in Lacrosse, Kansas, predominantly white community. So I was born and raised in what I now refer to as Whiteville. I don't ever remember having a teacher of color my whole life. Always white teachers.

I didn't go to school with an African American student until eighth grade. I think we had three African American students in our school. I had an eighth grade English teacher that, le Middle School. And he was the coolest teacher. And there was something different about him, and he related to us in a way that he made it fun, and I trusted him, he made me want to write essays and I hated to write. He said to me you need to figure out what you're going to do so that you have a plan. I said, I really would like to teach. And I look back because it was kind of him that started that. And I ended up student teaching at that same school.

I teach social studies. I have mostly government and AP government, but I'm also an avid teacher.

Detriot

Detriot

I moved to North Carolina, I immediately taught in a suburban district. And somebody told me to become a better teacher, I needed to teach summer school in inner city Charlotte NC. Iwas frightened because I had never done it before, so I did it one summer, and it was 10 black kids, and I struggled. I couldn't relate. I didn't understand their culture. They didn't understand me. I mean, some of the kids were touching my hair and saying I never felt a white teacher's hair before. And I loved that. And that kind of sparked it where I was like I want to learn more. And so I always taught inner city summer school, even though I was teaching suburban high school the rest of the time.

?

I think it was the fear of the unknown because being raised, in a white family, I knew that how I was brought up, was how I would treat those kids.

Divorced, left Detroit, became a single mother and returned to "Whiteville". Lived in my parents basement, received welfare and attempted to find a job

Took a job at the 2nd largest urban high school in the state. Predominately Hispanic Student. i did not know their culture but Iwas willing and determined to learn

Appendix E

Research Consent Letter

WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Department of Educational Leadership

Consent Letter

PURPOSE: You are invited to participate in a qualitative study investigating how racial and cultural differences between teachers and students affect teaching practices and students learning. The research will further examine how research participants- teachers see themselves in their relationship with students.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION: You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a teacher in an urban school district. There will be no more than 6 teachers in total from different schools in Wichita Public Schools District, associated with this research.
EXPLANATION OF PROCDEDURES: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview, discussion groups with questions related to the research and we will ask for your permission to observe you and your class for one day at your convenience. Findings from the research may be presented at regional, national, or international conferences and may result in publication in scholarly journals.

DISCOMFORT/RISKS: There are no discomforts or risks expected during this research.

BENEFITS: It is expected that the results of this study will provide urban education systems with information regarding the affect cultural and race of white teachers and students of color affect teaching practices and students' learning.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All information collected in this study in which you may be identified will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission. Any data gathered will remain in the possession of the principal investigator. Participants in the study will remain anonymous.
REFUSAL/WITHDRAWAL: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your decision not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this research, please contact Dr. Mara Alagic at 316.978.6974. If you have any questions pertaining to your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

Your signing of this consent letter will be taken as evidence of your willingness to participate and your consent to have the information used for the purposes of the study. You may keep a copy of this cover letter and explanation about the nature of your participation in this study and the handling of the information you supply.

Mara Alagic

Name and signature of principal investigator

3/27/10

Date

ORA-March 2010