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# The National Journal of Urban Education and Practice

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**Editor's Message**

This journal issue is significant, because it represents the 10th Anniversary Year of publications for NJUEP. Therefore, we go back to some basic issues in education and reflect on topics that continue to be important and pertinent in urban education. Dr. Samuels' article about schooling and social justice leads the way in his study about secondary social studies educators. His findings are powerful as we consider the importance of teaching for equity and social justice.

Dr. Wheeler moves our focus to literacy instruction for African American male students in her article that implores us the keep the faith. It is astounding to me that we are still struggling for better ways to teach African American males students, more than sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. This case study by Dr. Wheeler should prove invaluable as a model for teachers with similar challenges as they teach African American males.

Often, we think that African American males who have professional parents and live in neighborhoods that reflect success are free of problems that low-income students encounter in schools. Drs. Marrero and Marrero share narratives from African American mothers might be surprising for many readers.

Dr. Strunc's article us takes back to the social studies curriculum and causes the reader to ponder how the curriculum will impact urban students and educators, since the last election. With a focus on Texas she takes a look at implications that have an impact for our citizenry.

In the final article, Dr. Griffen examines our power structure and the role educational lobbyists play in the schooling of our children. His article is different, because he explores the impact of African American lobbyists, a topic that is rare, yet very significant in the education of children of color.

It is my hope that you will be inspired by these articles and see the need for continued research, exploration and innovation in urban education.

Norvella Carter, Editor

# The National Journal of Urban Education & Practice

## Volume 11, Issue 2, Fall 2017

## Contents

1 **Schooling for Social Justice: Approaches, Experiences, and Perspectives from Teachers Who Know How**
*Gregory L. Samuels*

14 **Keeping the "Faith": The Impact of Sociocultural Consciousness on the Literacy Instruction of African American Male Students**
*Tiffany R. Wheeler*

26 **Hearing the Voices of Married African American Mothers as They Descibe Their Son's Experiences with White Teachers in the Urban Secondary Schools**
*Somia Marrero and Otoniel Marrero*

39 **Rewriting Standards, Not History: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Texas State Board of Education's Social Studies Standards Revisions**
*Abbie Strunc*

52 **Advantages to Being Invisible: African American Educational Lobbyists Enact Reverse Interest Convergence**
*Aaron J. Griffen*

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# Schooling for Social Justice: Approaches, Experiences, and Perspectives from Teachers Who Know How

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**Abstract**

The study explores perspectives of secondary social studies educators who identify with teaching for social justice. Participants had the opportunity to: (1) explore their perspectives on social justice as a theory and pedagogy, (2) reflect on qualities they bring to the classroom regarding social justice, and (3) examine challenges and rewards related to teaching for social justice. Approaches for facilitating social justice learning are explored, as well as experiences and perspectives of teachers who facilitate a social justice framework in a large, urban school district. Findings suggest teaching for social justice involves inclusive content and pedagogy that is practical in nature and promotes equity and justice.

**Key words:** *critical pedagogy, equity, secondary education, social justice, social studies*

## Introduction

Despite the push to incorporate curriculum and pedagogy that is more inclusive and representative of various perspectives, hierarchical structures in society continue to influence education that lacks representation of marginalized populations and diverse voices (Kumashiro, 2000; Loewen, 2007; Takaki, 2008). Rather than continuing to utilize a narrow lens to analyze multicultural education, *A Different Mirror* (Takaki, 2008) should be employed to incorporate a comprehensive multicultural approach. Furthermore, success or oppression,

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should not be limited to certain groups, but rather consider how all people have faced challenges and made achievements throughout history, especially groups that have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised. Multiculturalism often focuses on just one minority and, even though this may deepen "our knowledge of a particular group, this approach examines a specific minority in isolation from the others and whole group" (Takaki, 2008, p. 6). Such isolation can be problematic as it encourages development of a narrow perspective often characterized by misrepresentations. Portraying people through a single lens can lead to the belief that there is no alternative lens (Adichie, 2009). Therefore, it is critical stories are not presented through a single, narrow lens or silenced entirely. Since consciousness of diversity is limited in education (Kumashiro, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Ndimande, 2004), attempts must be made to challenge the dominant narrative and the silencing of marginalized groups. Facilitation of social justice can aid in this process by encouraging learning that: (a) values differences between people, (b) highlights existing social injustice, (c) and encourages students to take actions that positively advocate for justice and counter hegemonic practices (Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, Henning, 2016; Lucey & Laney, 2009).

Teaching for social justice is a theoretical approach, as well as a practical method to promoting equity in learning environments, but it continues to be undertheorized and vague (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; North, 2009). Consequently, there is a need for further discussion of the topic to examine its meaning, purpose, and application. This study consists of efforts to further explore the meaning and purpose of social justice, as well as examine how teaching for social justice can be facilitated in the classroom. Teachers must engage in inquiry to take critical stances regarding their own practices (Giroux, 1993), thereby, reflexively and actively shaping curriculum and policies within schools. Subsequently, this study not only encouraged dialogue on teaching for social justice to further inform the body of research, but also provided a reflective experience for participants teaching in a large urban school district.

## Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study was informed by critical pedagogy and maintained goals of providing voice to marginalized populations, encouraging reflective thinking, examining power structures within society to challenge hegemonic structures, and advocating a more just society.

Historically and today, the intent of critical pedagogy is to center the experiences of educators who promote critical thought amongst learners in their classrooms and provide a channel for dialogue surrounding their experiences of teaching from a social justice approach. The intentions of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, one of the major architects of critical pedagogy, was not only to assume an emancipatory approach towards education, but to employ a framework that promotes active learners over docile listeners, and allows for the presence of praxis during the process of learning, while avoiding what he called the "banking concept". In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970), states that within "the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p. 72). As maintained by Freire (1970), many educators transfer knowledge to their students like empty containers and expect them to receive a collection of facts to be memorized, regardless of its

applicability and relevance to the students' lives. These ideas not only originated out of the politically-oppressed urban environments of Brazil in the mid twentieth century, but are equally as necessary today to embrace the diversity in social activist strategies in urban classrooms throughout America.

In today's climate of standardized testing, focus on rote memory, and significant evidence of misdiagnoses of learning and behavioral disabilities among urban student populations, the use of critical pedagogy to frame a study with a focus on social justice is appropriate. It provides opportunities for learners and educators to explore and navigate the hegemonic institutions and discriminatory policies in society and imagine solutions to a better education and lifestyle beyond the classroom.

## Social Justice

Social justice has become increasingly popular in teacher education and is all-encompassing of a range of practices and perspectives (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007), such as anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000), critical literacy (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Shor, 1999; Vasquez, 2004), culturally-relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010), multicultural and anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Schniedewind & Davidson, 2006; Sleeter, 2017), and urban education (Anyon, 2014). This multi-layered concept is centered on valuing the human rights of all people and is utilized by various "educators who set as a task the fostering of a more democratic society through classroom practices" (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009, p. 30). As referenced by Grant and Agosto (2008), Nieto (2000) contends "social justice is an individual, collective, and institutional journey that involves self-identity awareness, learning with students, developing meaningful relationships, developing multilingual/ multicultural knowledge, challenging racism and other biases, having a critical stance, and working with a community of critical friends" (p. 187).

## Teaching for Social Justice

Teaching for social justice is both a practice and philosophy that extends the concept of social justice; thereby characterizing it as a pedagogical approach to be facilitated in multiple contexts, especially urban school settings. Rather than considering society overall, teaching for social justice focuses on fostering equity and nurturing students as critical agents in educational contexts. Despite the presence of challenges in all classrooms, fostering equity and justice in historically marginalized communities becomes especially important based on the polarized issues prevalent in urban communities such as poverty and employment opportunities, race relations, trust of political and law enforcement officials, or healthcare availability. Whether related to gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, learning or physical ability, language, or sexual orientation, teaching for social justice is all-inclusive and asserts all students should be taught in a way that stimulates a consciousness of membership and promotes agency (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007), making this theory and practice an effective tool for both educators and learners who engage to make critical changes in society through various approaches.

When an educator devoted to teaching for social justice employs such a pedagogical approach, they do so knowing it will likely provide voice to marginalized populations and can be employed across content areas. "Teaching for social justice involves advancing children's moral and ethical development and helping children learn to (a) value differ-

ences between people, (b) identify social injustices in the world, and (c) take collective action to remedy the social injustices they find" (Lucey & Laney, 2009, p. 261). Furthermore, social justice education is intended to assist students in discovering and employing their own power and exercising their knowledge to create a more just society (Chapman, Hobbel, & Alvarado, 2011), not limited to, but frequently needed in urban educational spaces.

Social justice: (1) challenges, confronts, and disrupts "misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences," (2) provides "all students with the resources necessary to learn to their full potential," (3) draws on the "talents and strengths that students bring to their education," and (4) creates a "learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change" (Nieto & Bode, 2012, pp. 6-7). It is the responsibility of educators to promote learning environments that foster opportunities to exercise social justice with entry points for learning and numerous pathways to success (Ayers, 1998); thereby embodying, expecting, modeling, nurturing, and enacting inquiry toward progress and transformation for all students and classroom environments.

## Methodology

Purposeful sampling was used to select five participants who self-identify with teaching for social justice in alignment with the following criteria: (1) taught for three years or more, (2) teach at least one social studies course, (3) acknowledge concern related to oppression of marginalized groups, (4) incorporate topics within their lessons related to oppression of marginalized groups, (5) promote examination of injustice, and (6) encourage a more just and equitable society. All participants were full-time employees serving as social studies educators at the secondary level, with teaching experiences ranging from six to thirteen years in a large urban school district in the southeast region of the United States.

The following research questions were explored in the interviews: (1) How do educators who identify with social justice perceive teaching for social justice, (2) In what ways do

**Table 1.**
*Participant Profiles*

| Participant | Age | Years Teaching | Courses Taught |
|---|---|---|---|
| Anna<br>(white female) | 30's | 10 | American History<br>World History |
| Rose<br>(white female) | 40's | 13 | American Government<br>American Mosaic<br>American History<br>History of the Holocaust |
| Oscar<br>(black male) | 30's | 13 | African-American History<br>World History<br>American History |
| Jennifer<br>(white female) | 40's | 6 | American History<br>Civics |
| Hanna<br>(white female) | 30's | 11 | American Mosaic<br>Peer Counseling<br>World History<br>History of the Holocaust<br>Women's Studies |

educators who identify with social justice facilitate a social justice approach, (3) What experiences prompt educators to teach for social justice, and (4) In what ways are educators challenged and rewarded in facilitating a social justice curriculum?

## Data Sources and Analysis

I conducted interviews to gather data on participants' thoughts, experiences, and actions. Protocols were provided to participants one week prior to the interviews to allow time for review and encourage participants to reflect, recall related experiences, and consider information for a more efficient, reflective, and rich interview process. I interviewed each participant twice with each interview lasting approximately one hour.

Along with transcriptions, field notes and a researcher's reflective journal were used as additional data for research, both of which were used for self-reflection and increased awareness by encouraging consciousness of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, reflections, personal biases, and assumptions.

When analyzing the data, I began preparing a thorough description of each participant in narrative form, which served to provide an overview of participants' experiences, as well as stories that reveal their connection to teaching for social justice. I then provided a cross-case analysis to search for similar patterns and themes amongst the experiences of participants to present a holistic picture (Patton, 2015). From the analysis, concepts and thematic interpretations emerged and served to focus concepts and ideas in alignment with the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In addition, I attempted to be conscious of writing in a way that was inclusive to a wide variety of readers. As highlighted by Janesick (2011), hooks (1994) asserts "...any theory that cannot be used in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate" (p. 4).

## Findings

When considering how social justice is defined, findings revealed striking commonalities amongst participants. Along with teaching content that is often overlooked or minimized in daily instruction, participants asserted that teaching for social justice is a pedagogical approach that strives to meet the needs of students and increase student engagement. As highlighted in previous research, participants emphasize this approach centers learning as something students do, rather than something done to them (Shor, 1993). Key components of teaching for social justice were characterized as fostering both critical and independent thinking. Whether the strategy involves discussion, films or documentaries, journaling, sensory learning, current events, technology, poems, songs, or novels, teaching for social justice appeals to learners and makes learning relevant to learners and their lives. In addition, highlighting aspects of respect, appreciation, open-mindedness, and agency, the approach is characterized by an overarching theme of humanity and valuing classmates and others in society, even when they may not agree. Since the teacher is not the keeper of knowledge in a classroom where a social justice approach is fostered, but rather one who learns alongside students, it is critical to validate student knowledge and deem students' experiences official. In addition, to establish connections and relevance, participants assert it is critical students see themselves in the curriculum. Whether discussing race, treatment, differences, citizenship, or potentially biased perspectives, teaching for social justice goes beyond the mandated curriculum and includes material that represents all students and fosters a sense of equity and humanitarianism.

### *Approaches for Facilitating Social Justice Learning*

There were overarching themes related to characteristics of teaching for social justice, as well as sub-themes that aligned with a social justice teaching approach. When exploring how participants facilitate this framework, both content and pedagogy were emphasized as critical components in the process. Participants highlighted the need to teach content related to social justice issues while simultaneously employing methods to encourage students to think and discuss in engaging and meaningful ways. Intertwining both content and pedagogy, although participants implement a social justice approach to varying degrees throughout each class, content and pedagogy are continually examined. Findings were helpful, as they offered a clearer understanding of how this framework maintains itself as both a content and pedagogy.

### *Pedagogy*

When considering how participants define teaching for social justice, it is strikingly clear they make a direct connection to pedagogy; they think of teaching for social justice as an approach to teaching and strategies used in the classroom. When considering defining characteristics of teaching for social justice, every participant asserted, amongst other things, it is an approach to teaching that deviates from the traditional norm, particularly a lecture-style, teacher-dominated environment. In addition, each of the educators highlighted the act of "doing" something in the classroom or "how" something is done to promote the concept of social justice. They emphasized the importance of promoting critical thinking and discussion, as well as the value of incorporating journaling and reflection. Additionally, the value in current events was discussed, particularly current events that bring attention to historically-marginalized groups. In a second interview, Rose stated:

I think it's because I feel like it's who is in my group...I know that I have a lot of Mexican Americans in my groups. I know that I have a lot of immigrants. I know that I have kids that are illegal. Like the DREAM Act. Even if I have kids that are not illegal, I know that their parents are. We take time to talk about the Bill of Rights and the Constitution and we spend a lot of time talking about Amendment 14. So at the beginning of the year we can talk about how that's going to be the basis for Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement and to keep bringing that up all along. In the news they're talking about the DREAM Act, Amendment 14, Equal Protection, and everyone needs to be treated the same.

In relation to resources, participants underscored materials that promote sensory learning such as film, imagery, pictures, poetry, music, literature, guest speakers, and field trips. In a large or small urban school district, most of these resources are not only accessible, but able to be adjusted to various learning styles and levels. For example, Hannah reports taking her students to the local Holocaust museum to explore resources such as historical artifacts, photographs, and illustrations, as well as hear Holocaust survivors speak. In an equally effective manner, yet within the confines of the school, she provides insight after describing how she skillfully uses one picture of a lynching in her class. "The kids deserve to get upset at this picture. They have a right to get upset about that picture, but I have to navigate it so it still is teachable, so that we are still moving forward. We can get lost in the emotions. We have to acknowledge the emotions and we have to turn that into something else." By using foundational best practices and a creative use of resources and pedagogy, one may enhance the idea of the two-prong approach to

facilitating a teaching for social justice-styled lesson in the classroom.

***Content***

Along with pedagogical approaches, participants made direct connections to specific topics explored in their classroom. In relation to incorporated content, participants expressed that issues aligned with race, religion, sexual orientation, treatment, difference, and citizenship are often emphasized. Participants most heavily examined the topic of race, emphasizing slavery, abolition, lynching, the Civil Rights Movement, Affirmative Action, racial profiling, and current day implications of race and racism. Oscar informed me, "I use the poem and animated short film "Bid'Em'In" by Oscar Brown, Jr. to depict slave auctions during the Slave Era and "Strange Fruit", by Billie Holiday, to capture the racist act of lynching in America." The content present in these pieces allows him to facilitate learning with his students on topics surrounding the processes and mindset of those present during slave auctions and mental images of those persecuted through violence without the use of a textbook.

All five educators also explored religion and culture by discussing incorporation of the Holocaust, religious intolerance, current day genocide, as well as immigration, refugee policies, and amnesty. Women's rights, rights of the LGBTQ community, and Universal Human Rights were also discussed throughout the interviews. In relation to the hidden curriculum (lessons learned but not necessarily intentionally incorporated into the structured curriculum), participants asserted that teaching for social justice consistently influences character development and positive citizenship.

The educators in this study also explored the action of treatment in both the classroom and throughout society, specifically emphasizing teaching students to be mindful of how to treat others. Within these conversations, Jennifer clearly stated her efforts towards allowing students to "see themselves in the curriculum…I want them to feel relevant and involved and that they have a role in society...because kids are so visual today. I use a lot of YouTube stuff. Especially for them to see African Americans...strong males and females...reading Frederick Douglass excerpts or reading Sojourner Truth excerpts."

They also questioned how to best influence the concepts of learning to appreciate one another and believing differences are beneficial. When discussing citizenship, Hannah emphasized, "I think it's our job to create better citizens and build citizenship in the classroom. That is a part of it. We are all human beings and we need to treat each other kindly and equally. I see that as more of my role. The curriculum is important, but it's more important that we are creating citizens that are aware and want to make the right decisions." She furthered:

> It's that hidden curriculum, that piece that you're teaching that underlies all of your motives of why you're doing what you're doing. That ultimately, as they go out and become democratic citizens and start to make choices that are going to impact other people. I feel like I want to represent a voice that represents someone that they might not hear somewhere else. Because I can't trust that someone else is telling them that. I don't know. But to be a really well-rounded citizen, I think you have an obligation to consider social justice.

***Experiences Prompting a Social Justice Approach***

In this study, I attempted to unveil not only the experiences that prompted educators to teach for social justice education in the classroom, but encouraged reflection on their lived

**Table 2.**
*Characteristics of a Social Justice Approach*

| Characteristics of Teaching for Social Justice | Participants Noting Highlighted Characteristics | Sub-Themes |
|---|---|---|
| **Pedagogy** | Anna<br>Rose<br>Oscar<br>Jennifer<br>Hannah | Act of Doing<br>Deviate from Traditional Lecture Style<br>Way of Approaching Topics and Content |
| **Race** | Anna<br>Oscar<br>Jennifer | Biased Perspectives<br>Criminal Justice System<br>Injustice & Exclusion<br>Justice<br>Racial Profiling<br>Connected to Treatment and Difference(s) |
| **Treatment** | Anna<br>Rose<br>Oscar<br>Jennifer<br>Hannah | Current Day (Society & Classroom)<br>Historical (Holocaust, Civil Rights Movement, Human Rights, Genocide)<br>Humanity<br>Connected to Difference(s) |
| **Differences** | Anna<br>Rose | Respect & Value Others<br>Similarities<br>Connected to Treatment |
| **Citizenship** | Rose<br>Oscar<br>Hannah | Classroom & Society<br>Create Informed, Good, Better Citizens<br>Hidden Curriculum<br>Role of Educator<br>Connected to Treatment |

experiences outside the classroom. My goal was not to limit our conversation to participants' experiences surrounding oppression of marginalized groups, injustices throughout society, or their thoughts on a more just and equitable society, but to encourage discourse on participants' experiences and interpretations, as well. Ultimately, the goal was to further inform the body of research and provide a reflective experience for social studies educators and teachers in large urban classroom environments and school districts.

When encouraged to discuss experiences that prompted these educators to teach for social justice, they reflected on moments throughout their childhood and adolescence, and extended their reflections until recently. Many of the cited stories captured moments involving family members and persons in their hometowns or current communities. The context of their stories varied, some positive or neutral in tone while others were negative, however, all participants discussed the influential role of family and/or community on their identity as a proponent of social justice.

Even though family background was not the focus of this study, during the interviews, it became clear participants' families not only influenced their experiences, but influenced their interest and understanding of social justice, as well. Moreover, these individuals highlighted how their life experiences extended beyond the circumstances of their families and often tended to take a different direction than their family members. For example, nearly all participants discussed minimal exposure to racial, cultural, and religious diversity during their youth. Some even expressed frequent exposure to close-minded family members and derogatory comments, or slurs, in relation to racial, cultural, and religious diversity. Several participants noted obstacles in relation to overcoming adversity in relation to minimal economic opportunities, family hardships, and cultural challenges. Regardless of the challenge, all participants discussed questioning negative or close-minded comments made by relatives, as well as their consistent desire to embrace diversity and difference. They also discussed the positive influence of educational experiences, highlighting interactions with college professors, exposure to diversity during internship experiences, and the reflective experience of considering what was missing from their middle and high school courses.

This collection of information is relevant to researchers and practitioners in the field as it encourages us to take notice of our own lived experiences, those of the teacher candidates in our programs, teachers in the field, and others who critique or are proponents of teaching from a social justice approach. James Baldwin advises us to, "Know from whence you came." As such, delving into experiences and personal histories eventually allows us to uncover such experiences in our research and teaching practices within the field of teaching for social justice.

### *Perspectives Regarding Challenges and Rewards*

In addition to approaches for facilitating social justice learning and experiences prompting a social justice approach, findings highlight perspectives regarding challenges and rewards. Whereas there are challenges and rewards associated with employing any approach to teaching and learning, participants agreed this was especially true when considering teaching for social justice. In relation to challenges, they emphasized ideas that are frequently referenced amongst most educators, regardless of what or how they teach. For example, they gave voice to the challenges associated with accommodating various learning styles of students, knowing how to effectively navigate the barrier of language with English

Learners, gaining access to technology for use in the classroom, and covering the benchmarks in a district or stated-mandated curriculum in the time allotted for any given course. Participants also discussed the challenge of navigating potential backlash or negative consequences that may result from incorporating controversial or difficult topics in the classroom, as well as internal struggles experienced from a social justice teaching approach.

In relation to rewards, these five educators emphasized increased engagement, witnessing students of multiple backgrounds experience success, increased achievement for English Learners, and fostering a culture for learning that extends beyond the district or state-mandated curriculum. By educating from a social justice approach, participants believe they can encourage students to realize the hierarchical structures in society and the oppression resulting from inequities throughout society, which directly connect to dynamics present in the classroom. Imagining possibilities of a more just and equitable society and implementing a social justice approach serves to create critical agents in the classroom.

Participants also expressed the value in reflecting on the traditional, yet unequal relationship between teacher and students, citing the importance of learning alongside their students and being able to internalize the idea that they too are also active learners in the process. When asked about ways she embraces the philosophy of teaching for social justice, Anna responded by saying, I try to "embrace it by learning as much as I can and realizing that I am as much of a student as my kids in the classroom." She continued, "By sharing that with them, it helps a little in saying, 'I don't have all of the answers either, but I just read this cool book or I just read this interesting news story' and for them to see that I'm trying to figure it out as much as they are.". Such ideas are aligned with those asserted by Nieto (2000) when Anna argues, "social justice is an individual, collective, and institutional journey that involves self-identity awareness, learning with students, developing meaningful relationships, developing multilingual/multicultural knowledge, challenging racism and other biases, having a critical stance, and working with a community of critical friends" (p. 187 ) and can be beneficial to both teacher and students while employing a social justice approach to teaching.

## Discussion

As highlighted by Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, and McQuillan (2009), teaching for social justice is a subjective concept that is viewed as ambiguous by many and, given its under-theorized and vague meaning, there is a likelihood it exists only in name. Commonalities emphasized by participants in the study seem to contest this perception by underlining the inclusive and practical nature of teaching for social justice. For example, when considering how social justice is defined, the findings from the study revealed prominent commonalities amongst participants in relation to content, pedagogy, experiences, and perspectives.

Chapman, Hobbel, and Alvarado (2011) argue, "For many teachers, social justice remains an espoused ideal with little practical application" (p. 539). Findings from this study seem to challenge this argument by highlighting the inclusive and practical nature of teaching for social justice as both a content and pedagogy, especially in relation to the similarities voiced by practicing teachers in a large urban school district.

Participants agreed with Adams, Bell, & Griffin (2007) in that teaching for social justice is all-encompassing of a large range of practices and perspectives. As expressed by these educators, there is not one sole method of defining the concept, but rather an element of inter-

pretation is involved. However, their interpretations had multiple commonalities. For example, they consistently highlighted that teaching from a social justice approach involved both content and pedagogy. Participants frequently referenced content such as race, religion, sexual orientation, treatment, differences, and citizenship, while consistently making connections to the overarching ideas of humanity and justice. These connections helped to further reinforce the idea that this multi-layered concept is centered on valuing the human rights of all people and can be employed by various "educators who set at task the fostering of a more democratic society through classroom practices" (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009, p. 30).

Considering the criticism of teaching for social justice in that critics contend the theoretical approach is vague and ambiguous in meaning and exists only in name (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, and McQuillan, 2009), given participants presentation of a relatively clear and explicit explanation of this theoretical approach, the contradiction establishes a connection to ideas fostered by critical theory that is worth exploring. Critical theory lends itself to teaching for social justice in that it seeks to expose power dynamics, highlight and challenge hegemonic structures that result in continued oppression and marginalization, and strives to bring about a more just society (Merriam, 2009). It is provoking to consider critics may argue against the usefulness and practicality of teaching for social justice in attempt to further reinforce established power dynamics and hegemonic structures, thereby, continuing to oppress and marginalize underrepresented populations and voices such as those often present in urban educational spaces.

Attempting to encourage the continued silencing of marginalized populations, teaching for social justice promotes awareness and emancipatory knowledge to identify and question sources of hegemony with the intent of empowering oppressed groups and promoting democratic change in relation to marginalized populations (Freire, 1970; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Perhaps critics attempt to portray this theoretical approach as weak and fallible in attempt to discredit it as both a content and a pedagogy. Even though teaching for social justice may be broad in nature, in its efforts to be inclusive, it is not by definition unclear or vague or by theoretical approach impractical, but rather an inclusive and practical approach to foster democracy and promote equity in the classroom.

## Conclusion

Echoing a statement made by a local school board member, Ladson-Billings (2006b) asserts, "Patriotism is not what you say; patriotism is what you do" (p. 588). Connecting this idea to the study, it is helpful to think of teaching for social justice as not only something teachers say, but also something teachers do. Using this style of education, race, religion, gender, and sex are considered inclusionary rather than exclusionary components (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Whether it is considering gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, learning or physical abilities, language, or sexual orientation, teaching for social justice is all-inclusive and contends all students should be taught in a way that stimulates a consciousness of membership and agency within students (Greene, 1998).

This study served to further investigate the overarching theme of teaching for social justice, but it was also an effort to more clearly understand how teachers who identify with this theoretical approach and pedagogical style identify with and facilitate teaching for social justice as both a content and pedagogy. Findings revealed commonalities in how partici-

pants define and interpret social justice as both content and pedagogy and how they facilitate a social justice approach in the classroom. Additionally, findings highlighted similarities in the influential power of experiences in the lives of participants and the role these experiences played in both their personal and professional lives. Connecting to the idea of experience, exposure was also a seemingly powerful element in that content and people with whom participants were exposed influenced their personal interpretations and understandings. Findings also revealed teaching for social justice is not always implemented easily and without challenge or resistance.

Although rewarding, such an approach takes courage and commitment and requires standing up for what you believe. Participants emphasized, even when others do not back or support them, they try to maintain a sense of urgency and hold fast to giving voice and empowering marginalized and oppressed groups. Although many are critical of this framework, the study serves to argue teaching for social justice is inclusive and practical in nature and serves to promote equity and justice in all areas, particularly historically disenfranchised communities serving diverse populations.

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# Keeping the "Faith": The Impact of Sociocultural Consciousness on the Literacy Instruction of African American Male Students

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## Abstract

In the over sixty years since the *Brown v. Board* ruling, many African American students have had a difficult time prospering in the United States educational system. In particular, African American male students seem to experience academic underachievement at a higher rate than students from other racial, ethnic, or gender groups. Some theorists argue that culturally responsive instruction can improve educational achievement for African American students. It is also critical that teachers develop a sociocultural consciousness to better comprehend social inequalities and how they connect to schools. This paper presents a case study of one culturally responsive African American teacher whose sociocultural consciousness enabled her to effectively enhance the literacy development of her African American male students.

## Introduction

In the sixty-plus years since the *Brown v. Board* ruling, many African American students have had a difficult time prospering in the United States educational system. In particular, African American male students seem to experience academic underachievement at a higher rate than students from other racial, ethnic, or gender groups (Davis, 2003; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2003). Although the failures and problems that African Americans experience in school have been well documented, much less attention has been given to

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the successful environments and instructional practices that have increased African Americans' academic performance. In recent times, some researchers have focused on highlighting the culturally responsive pedagogical practices utilized by teachers, particularly African American teachers, who are demonstrating success in teaching African American students (Foster, 1993; Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Yet, studies about effective pedagogical practices that teachers use to address African American students' literacy needs are limited. In particular, there is very little research about the literacy pedagogy of African American teachers who are improving educational experiences for African American students, especially African American male students. While it is important to note the unique challenges that African American male students encounter in schooling, much of the professional and popular literature focuses primarily on their academic struggles. More research studies need to document the ways in which African American teachers' pedagogical practices are contributing to the literacy development of African American male students.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the literacy instructional practices of two African American primary teachers and discuss how their teaching reflected a culturally responsive pedagogy.

The study was guided by three primary research questions:

1. What types of instructional practices, strategies, and approaches do the teachers utilize during literacy instruction?
2. To what extent do these instructional practices, strategies, and approaches reflect a culturally responsive pedagogy?
3. In particular, how do the teachers' instructional practices, strategies, and approaches support the communication styles and contribute to the literacy development of African American male students?

This paper will provide a case study of one of the teachers, "Faith Brown," (pseudonym) who was featured in the study. This paper will examine the culturally responsive instructional practices that she utilized to support the literacy development of her students, especially her African American male students. This case study also illustrates how Faith Brown's sociocultural consciousness enabled her to empower her African American male students and enhance their emerging literacy development.

## Theoretical Framework

Various theories have attempted to explain the educational achievement problems of African Americans. Deficit-deprivation theories support the notion that African Americans are genetically inferior or culturally "deprived" and do not promote behaviors that will help them succeed in school (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Deficit theorists assert that African Americans have a lower I.Q. than White students due to inherited traits, and suggest that these inherent differences are immutable and no substantial changes can really occur in African Americans' academic performance (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Some theorists suggest that some African Americans, especially males, underachieve because of concerns about peer pressure and perceptions of academic achievement as "acting white" (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

However, critics argue that the aforementioned theories problematic because they fail

to examine the school-related factors that lead to the underachievement of African American students. Some educational theorists posit that African American students have difficulty succeeding academically because of the cultural discontinuity, or mismatch between home and school cultures, that they experience at school (Au, 1993; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Schools typically reflect the cultural norms, language and communication styles, attitudes, values, and beliefs of White, middle-class culture, which may be very different from the cultural experiences and belief systems of many African Americans. Additionally, proponents of the theory of structural inequality maintain that schools are designed to reproduce the inequalities in United States society, where African Americans and other people of color comprise subordinate or oppressed groups, while those who are European American and middle-class belong to the dominant group in society (Gollnick & Chinn, 2004; Thompson, 2004). The theory of structural inequality becomes evident in the ability grouping and academic tracking practices that place African Americans, especially males, disproportionately and consistently in low-achieving reading groups and classes, while elevating mainstream European American students to higher performing groups (Gollnick & Chinn, 2004; Irvine, 1990; Thompson, 2004). African American boys are often perceived by teachers as disruptive and aggressive, are suspended more often than their European American counterparts, and may receive less encouragement and support to achieve in school (Davis, 2003; Kunjufu, 2005; Thompson, 2004).

In order to address cultural issues that often been ignored in education, some multicultural scholars have constructed a theory of culturally responsive pedagogy that holds promise for increasing academic performance (Gay, 2010; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2009). While culturally responsive pedagogy can be defined in various ways, Gay (2010) suggests that culturally responsive teaching is characterized by "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them" (p. 31). Many scholars agree that culturally responsive teachers are caring, culturally literate, and have high expectations for their students (Ford & Kea, 2009; Gay, 2010; Noddings, 1992). Culturally responsive teachers affirm their students' cultural identities, incorporate multicultural content in a meaningful way, and connect instruction to students' real-life experiences (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally responsive teachers have a broad repertoire of holistic instructional strategies that focus not only on students' cognitive growth, but their social, emotional, and moral development as well (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As well, culturally responsive teachers value their students' home culture and attempt to build positive relationships with students' parents and families (Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

One major characteristic of being a culturally responsive teacher is developing a sociocultural consciousness (Howard, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Villegas & Lucas (2007) define sociocultural consciousness as "the awareness that a person's worldview is not universal but is profoundly influenced by life experiences as mediated by a variety of factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, and social class (p. 31). Villegas & Lucas (2007) further note that "teachers need to look beyond individual students and families to understand inequities in society" (p.31). In order to become socioculturally conscious, teachers must critically examine their own sociocultural identities and recognize the connections between school and society so that they can bet-

ter relate to the students who experience socio-cultural realities that may differ from their own (Howard, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

## Methodology

The proposed research questions that guided this study were addressed through a qualitative research design, and my research is presented in the form of a descriptive case study that utilizes ethnographic methods. Patton (2002) notes that case studies often involve "organizing the data by specific cases for in-depth study and comparison" (p. 447). This paper presents a case study of one of the teachers who participated in the study, and her approaches to culturally responsive literacy instruction will be compared in an in-depth manner.

This study elaborates upon and extends the work of culturally responsive instruction for African American students, especially African American male students. This four- month study took place in a local public school district in a mid-size city in the Southeastern part of the United States, which serves over 35,000 students and currently has 33 elementary schools. African American students comprise 23.8 percent of the student population in this district. In order to locate potential participants for the study, the researcher utilized the "community nomination" process of selecting participants, which has been utilized by researchers such as Foster (1993) and Ladson-Billings (2009). Community nomination means that "researchers rely upon community members and community-sanctioned vehicles (for example, community newspapers and organizations) in order to judge people, places and things within their own settings" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 181). The researcher began the selection process by asking some African American parents in her church whose children attend schools in the district to "nominate" elementary teachers whom they feel are effective in teaching their children and improving the academic performance of African Americans (Foster, 1993; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009). They noted that effective teachers of African American students are not prejudiced and do not make assumptions about their child's abilities because they are African American. Some parents also said that effective teachers keep their children interested in learning and push them academically. The parents also mentioned that effective teachers truly care about their children and treat them like their own. The researcher also contacted district administrators, principals, teachers, colleagues, and university professors to ask them to nominate teachers whom they think are particularly effective in teaching African American students, especially African American males.

Eleven teachers in the local district were "nominated" by parents and professional educators. Based on initial interviews and classroom observations, two teachers exhibited the most culturally responsive instructional practices and provided the researcher with the best opportunities to address the research questions that guided the study. Coincidently, both teachers selected for the study happened to teach at the same school and were African American.

Pseudonyms were used to refer to the school and the teachers in the study. "Faith Brown" taught kindergarten and "Sharon Parker" taught second grade at "Frederick Douglass Elementary." Frederick Douglass Elementary has a predominantly African American student population. At the time when the study was conducted, approximately 500 students attended the school, and over seventy percent of the students were African American, over fifteen percent were White, over ten percent were Hispanic, and the remaining were characterized as American

Indian or "other." Eighty-four percent of the students received free or reduced lunch.

Participant observation was the primary mode of qualitative inquiry utilized in this study. Acting as an observer and participant in the classroom was effective in allowing the researcher to gain insight about the teachers' instructional practices and interactions with the students in their classrooms. During the observations, the researcher took detailed field notes, audiotaped classroom episodes, and made a special effort to document classroom events and activities that related closely to my research questions. The researcher conducted audiotaped interviews with the teacher participants and other school personnel, to provide additional insight about the teachers' instructional practices. The field notes and audiotapes from classroom observations and interviews were transcribed were transcribed and coded for patterns and themes related to the research questions that guided the study.

## Findings

The findings of this study suggest that Faith Brown, the featured teacher from the study who is highlighted in this paper, displayed several characteristics of culturally responsive teaching during literacy instruction, and, in particular, utilized a variety of strategies and approaches to support the literacy development of African American male students. This paper will focus on the ways in which Faith Brown displayed a sociocultural consciousness that supported her relationships and guided her literacy instructional approach for her African American male students. In particular, Faith Brown utilized alternative approaches to discipline and implemented culturally responsive instruction to support the literacy development and communication styles of her African American male students.

### Supporting African American Male Students in the Classroom: Approaches to Classroom Management and Discipline

During literacy instruction, while Faith Brown was concerned about the academic and social progress of all of her students, she made a concerted effort to support the communication styles and literacy development of her African American male students. She was keenly aware of the struggles that African American male students have faced to achieve academically in America's schools. Ms. Brown displayed a sociocultural consciousness in her approach to teaching African American male students, as she had a very strong sense of stratification in American society and the ways in which African American males are relegated to a lower status.

In particular, Faith Brown was very concerned about the way that teachers in school often treat African American boys. She noted that school (and teachers) present different values, customs, and "different ways of doing things" from African American culture, and asserts, "African American children are being judged on values that don't come from their community." She sees a lot of ignorance and fear from White teachers in dealing with African American boys and believes that "Black males get labeled very quickly by teachers because of their fear and lack of understanding." As a socioculturally conscious teacher, Ms. Brown is committed to helping African American boys, in particular, to achieve success in school and in life. During an interview, she acknowledged that part of her role as a teacher of African American male students is to help them prepare for the realities of life in mainstream America, as illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

Yes, we have to be able to function and

compete to be successful in this country, but for African American boys, they have to be stronger. They have to be more determined. Their self-confidence and self-esteem has to be at the top of the list, because just due to being African American males, they're gonna encounter situations that no one else will. There will be tests for them to pass, life situations. And if they can't handle it, they're gone. They won't get second chances, and as a mother and a grandmother of African American males, I can relate [to] and understand that.

An important feature of Ms. Brown's philosophy and approach in teaching African American males related to discipline. One way that she supported the literacy development of African American males was by ensuring that they did not miss instructional time due to discipline-related issues. Many teachers in the school system used an "in-house" suspension program where students are sent for a certain amount of time as a form of punishment for violating classroom or school rules. Although children are usually given work to do from their homeroom teachers, they miss a considerable amount of instruction time when they are away from the classroom. In the schools across the district, including Frederick Douglass Elementary, African American male students are typically assigned "in-house" suspension much more often than other students, which means that they also miss valuable classroom instruction time. Faith Brown was very cognizant of this issue, and she refused to send children to in-house suspension, as she explains here:

I see it as a place for children who are having intense behavioral issues. And, I really don't feel that's a large number in the student population… Sometimes, they don't want to listen. Sometimes, they do have difficulty sitting still, but I truly believe in my heart, when those situations arise, it's my duty to redirect those behaviors because it's very difficult for little people to sit in a small space with 18 to 24 other children and not become restless and not become talkative…I should be capable of knowing my students, knowing when they're tired, when they need to go for a walk around the building, get a drink of water, when there's movement needed. I should be able to maintain their interest with my lessons, whether it's whole group, small group or one-on-one activities. But, I still think many times it's not the children; it's us the teachers because often we don't know the children…So sometimes, we create problems that are completely avoidable.

Ms. Brown was also dismayed about the high percentage of African American males in her school who were sent to in-house suspension. She remarked, "African American males seem to be an endangered species, but at five-years-old, they've already been written off. That's very frightening to me because I have a son and grandsons. I don't want them to come to school and be put out of the classroom because they're misunderstood." Another teacher sent one of the African American male students in her literacy group, Rodney, to in-house suspension. Although he worked with Ms. Brown for the majority of the literacy block, he was pulled out of Ms. Brown's classroom and worked with a reading intervention teacher for thirty minutes. Although Rodney was very active and had to be redirected by Ms. Brown from time to time, he was not having any particular problems when he was in Ms. Brown's class that morning. However, the reading intervention teacher sent him out of the classroom almost immediately after she picked him up from Ms. Brown's class for not walking in the hall properly. Ms. Brown was visibly upset about this situation and seemed perplexed by the teacher's decision.

Additionally, Ms. Brown did not utilize the

school-wide "ticket" system for behavior management, where students pull a card or a "ticket" for misbehavior and for each ticket they pull, the punishment becomes harsher. For example, if students are obeying classroom rules, their ticket stays on "green," which is desired. If they violate a classroom rule, the teacher may ask them to "pull a ticket," and they would be on yellow. Being on yellow is also considered "Strike 1" and students may have to have a five- minute time out or lose five minutes of recess. The ticket system continues in this manner until one of the final consequences is being sent to SAFE. Ms. Brown referred to the ticket system as "public humiliation." Faith Brown firmly believed that "if you treat people with dignity and respect they will respond to you accordingly. There is a way to correct children without dehumanizing them."

Ms. Baxter, the principal at Frederick Douglass Elementary, noted that classroom management was a definite strength for Ms. Brown, as indicated in the excerpt below:

Ms. Brown just infuses her routines and day with providing clear, explicit instruction for the children and just infusing it with lots of character, honesty, trust, integrity, responsibility, so her management is just outstanding. I think what Ms. Brown is doing is really empowering the children, especially the African American boys. Her just constant infusion of character is empowering these little children.

## Supporting the Communication Styles and Literacy Development of African American Male Students

In addition to supporting African American male students by using positive approaches to discipline, Faith Brown also utilized culturally responsive practices and strategies that supported the communication styles and contributed to the literacy development of their African American male students.

One way that Faith Brown supported the communication styles of African American male students in her class was by the frequent use of the "call-response" interactive style in her teaching (Gay, 2010; Kochman, 1981; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997). As a sociocultural conscious teacher, one of her main goals for instruction was to empower her African American male students to counteract the negative societal messages that they often receive about themselves. Ms. Brown often said statements like "I am a leader" and asked students to respond by repeating her phrases. Ms. Brown shared why she utilized positive chants with the children:

The positive chants- 'I am somebody'; 'I'm above average'; 'You will succeed'; 'I will go to college'…I want them to say these things. Some of them may not hear it [anywhere else]. It may be the only time, but if they keep hearing it, maybe as a freshman in high school, they'll say, 'You know, Ms. Brown told me that, that this was possible for me, that I can do it.

The African American students in Ms. Brown's literacy group, especially the males, seemed to respond well to the call-response interaction style. There were some occasions when they would respond to Ms. Brown's statements without being prompted. For example, Jason, an African American boy, was making words with plastic letters with Ms. Brown and another student. He was having a little trouble concentrating on the activity, so Ms. Brown reminded him, "You can do this, Jason. Just get focused." He responded, on his own, "I can do this." Ms. Brown responded back, "Yes you can." From that point on, Jason had no difficulty focusing and completing the activity as directed. The call and response method of repeating the positive phrases seemed to instill the phrases in the students' minds and helped them to exhibit

positive behavior, as well as focus on their academic work.

In addition to validating their cultural communication styles, Ms. Brown contributed to the literacy development of her African American male students in a variety of other ways. For example, Ms. Brown incorporated literature that showcased African Americans, particularly African males, and focused on subjects that were of interest to African American male students. Sometimes she selected books about sports and entertainment figures like Muhammad Ali. She also read books about African American inventors such as George Washington Carver and Lonnie Johnson. Ms. Brown believed that it was important to bring in books like that to let her African American male students see "African Americans in positions of success and leadership and letting them know that it's possible." Ms. Brown also tried to make the concept of African American leaders relevant with "current leaders, current figures, local people, ministers, police officers, people within their school and their community that they can relate to." Ms. Brown shared additional thoughts about why she made a deliberate effort to bring in examples of African American male role models for her students:

School, you know, we're all aware, is basically a female, white, female occupied group. They don't see any Black males in schools. They see very, very few. So, I guess it would make them wonder, 'What's wrong with me? Where am I?' In this building, we have two African American males, and those are the two custodians in this building.

Another important way that Ms. Brown supported her African American male students' communication styles and literacy development was by incorporating music and movement activities into instruction. African American students, especially boys, tend to respond well to instructional activities that involve rhythm and movement (Diller, 1999; Kunjufu, 2005; Sanacore, 2004). Ms. Brown included movement activities for about 10-15 minutes as part of her daily literacy instruction. She and her instructional assistant would lead the activities, which were accompanied by songs on a compact disc. The children were allowed to move all around the classroom during the movement songs and activities to expend their energy. They also strengthened their listening skills by following directions as they listened to the songs and demonstrating the appropriate body movements.

## Discussion

This study supports and elaborates upon previous research about culturally responsive teaching. Although the study was brief (approximately four months) and limited by the number of teachers who participated in the study, the findings reveal important insights about culturally responsive instructional approaches for African American students, especially African American male students. This study suggests that African American male students benefit immensely when teachers possess a sociocultural consciousness. Ms. Brown related well to all of her students, but she had especially good relationships with her African American students. When I asked Ms. Brown if she felt that she was an effective teacher of African American students, she thoughtfully responded, "Yes, they're my soul." She also demonstrated a sociocultural consciousness in her approach to teaching African American male students, as she was also very mindful of society's prevalent view of African American males as being disruptive and aggressive and made deliberate attempts to help her African American male students develop a positive self-concept. Ms. Brown's shared cultural frame of reference positively influenced the relationships that she had with

her African American male students. Ms. Brown was a mother and grandmother of African American males and was very calm and patient in her interactions with her African American male students. She modeled an ethic of care for her African American male students that is reflected in the research literature about the instructional practices of effective African American teachers (Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noddings, 1992; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Ms. Brown's care and concern for her African American male students extended far beyond the school year, as she felt a strong sense of responsibility to prepare them for future hurdles that they may face in life as African American males.

Additionally, Ms. Brown attempted to make school a positive experience for her African American male students. Her sociocultural consciousness enabled her to incorporate aspects of African American culture during literacy instruction, including literature about African Americans and rhythm and movement activities, to keep them interested and motivated in learning and to reduce behavioral problems. When dealing with behavior issues, Ms. Brown was generally firm with students and tried to focus on positive ways to redirect their behavior and to minimize the loss of instructional time. Ms. Brown was fully aware that disproportionate numbers of African American boys are suspended from school and typically sent to "in-house" suspension programs more often than other students, and she did not want to perpetuate that practice. As well, Ms. Brown also made connections to the disproportionate numbers of African American males who are in many prisons across the United States, and as a socioculturally aware teacher, she wanted to make sure that her African American male students saw themselves as future leaders and scholars, not criminals.

This study suggests that African American male students experience more academic successes when teachers make a deliberate, intentional effort to implement instructional strategies that connect to their learning styles and cultural experiences. Teachers also need to be more patient and tolerant in their actions with African American boys and find alternatives to sending them outside of the classroom for behavioral issues. For example, Ms. Brown found that just taking the time to talk to the students individually about their behavior often helped to redirect them. Also, Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran (2004) assert that teachers need to examine their own biases about different cultural groups, including African American males, and make an effort to utilize culturally appropriate classroom management strategies. They also recommend that teachers monitor their behavior in terms of equitable treatment of diverse students and ask questions of themselves, such as "Are we more patient and encouraging with some? Are we more likely to chastise others? Do we recommend corporal punishment and suspension for African Americans and in-school suspension for European Americans?" (p. 32). Teachers need to think very carefully about equitable ways to redirect children so that some students, such as African American males, are not consistently punished more harshly than other students.

## Implications for Teacher Education

This study has important implications for teacher education. While the teachers in this study were African-American, approximately seven percent of America's teachers are African American (Irvine, 2002; Sleeter & Milner, 2011). Enrollment in schools, colleges, and departments of education is 86 percent White, seven percent African American, and three percent Latino (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). Most practicing and prospective White teach-

ers are themselves the products of White neighborhoods and predominantly White colleges of teacher education (Howard, 2006). Consequently, since many White teachers often have limited interaction with African American students before they begin teaching, the potential for cultural "clashes" or misunderstandings between White teachers and African American students becomes greater.

However, researchers indicate that the culturally responsive practices described in this and other studies can be utilized by teachers of various racial backgrounds and successful teaching of African American students is not limited to African American teachers (Foster, 1993; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teacher education programs must play a critical role in preparing preservice and inservice teachers, who are predominantly white and female, to work effectively with African American students and students from other culturally diverse backgrounds. Ms. Brown offered the following suggestions about how to prepare teachers to work in a school like Frederick Douglass Elementary:

I think exposure, having really open discussions, because you know, we all have biases. We all have stereotypes and myths that we have heard about people that are different from us. The students need to come in and do their practicum and student teaching experiences in high poverty schools. Sometimes when a child is talking back or being smart, maybe that's just the way it is in their home. So we have to teach them the respectful way to behave and do things and not get offended or take it personally and not be so quick to put a child out of the classroom or send them to the office.

The insights that Ms. Brown shared are also echoed in the research literature about culturally responsive pedagogy and sociocultural consciousness. For example, Ms. Brown mentioned the biases and stereotypes that we all have about different cultural groups. Teacher education programs need to provide opportunities for students to deeply reflect on their own biases and assumptions about various cultural groups, which Howard (2006) refers to as the "inner work" of culturally responsive teaching. While all prospective and practicing teachers need to engage in the inner work of teaching, since the majority of the teaching force is White, researchers have also noted that White preservice teachers need to explore the concept of "Whiteness" and "White privilege" and how their experiences as White people influence their assumptions about their students (Howard, 2006; McIntosh, 1988; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). As well, teacher education programs need to help beginning and inservice teachers develop a sociocultural consciousness and provide opportunities for them to learn more about social inequalities and how social stratification is often replicated in school settings, so that they do not perpetuate inequitable instruction in their classrooms (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

In order for teachers to become more culturally responsive and socioculturally conscious, Gay (2010) also suggests that teachers move toward culturally responsive caring by acquiring a knowledge base about ethnic and cultural diversity in education and engaging in dialogues about cultural diversity. She recommends that teachers read scholarly literature in the social sciences, education, and literary fields to gain insight about the histories, cultures, and contributions of various ethnic groups. Teachers need to learn instructional strategies and approaches that build on students' prior knowledge and cultural experiences and make learning relevant in their lives (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Ms. Brown also stated that preservice teachers must have field experiences in their teacher education programs, such as practicum

and student teaching, in culturally and socioeconomically diverse settings. In order to be better prepared to work with African American students, Ladson-Billings (2009) recommends that teacher education programs "systematically require teacher candidates to have prolonged immersion in African American culture" so that they learn how to get more connected to the community (p. 134). She also suggests that teacher educators make a concerted effort to place preservice teachers with teachers in the schools who successfully demonstrate culturally relevant teaching practices for African American students.

## Conclusion

This paper is derived from a study which investigated the literacy pedagogy of two African American primary teachers and focused specifically on the culturally responsive literacy instructional practices of one of the teachers in the study, Faith Brown. The findings reveal that Faith Brown displayed several characteristics of culturally responsive teaching during literacy instruction and possessed a sociocultural consciousness that enabled her to make a deliberated, concerted effort to improve the educational experiences of her African American male students. The cornerstone of Ms. Brown's pedagogy was a genuine caring approach to working with her students, and her ethic of care was demonstrated through the relationships that she developed with her students and families, the affirmation of her students' cultural identities during instruction, and the intentional efforts that she made to support the literacy development of their African American male students in the classroom.

While this study adds to the growing scholarship about culturally responsive literacy instruction, studies about effective literacy instructional practices for African American students, particularly male students, remain very limited, and more research needs to be conducted in this area. Also, although the study featured African American teachers, as stated earlier, the teaching force is comprised primarily of White, female, middle-class teachers. Future research studies need to examine the culturally responsive practices and sociocultural consciousness of teachers, especially White teachers, who may not necessarily share the cultural or ethnic backgrounds of all of their students but demonstrate effectiveness in teaching them and make a diligent effort to incorporate aspects of their students' culture into instruction. Addressing issues like these will provide tremendous and necessary insights about how to meet the critical challenge of increasing the academic and social achievement of African Americans and other culturally diverse students.

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# Hearing the Voices of Married African American Mothers as They Describe Their Son's Experiences with White Teachers in the Urban Secondary Schools

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## Abstract

This study was conducted as a qualitative study of five married middle-income African American mothers' perception of their African American sons' White teachers in an urban secondary school district. The study was intended to hear the voices and perceptions of the five African American mothers' who have or had a son who attended a secondary urban school in their community. The African American mothers would share their perceptions their sons' personal interaction with their White teachers. The first purpose of this study was to broaden the limited research on mothers' perception of White teachers' interaction with their African American male students. The second purpose was to investigate the challenges that African American male students face with their White teachers. The results revealed that mothers perceived White teachers demonstrated: (a) lack of interactions with African American males, (b) lack of care towards African American males, (c) a lack of cultural competence, (d) the teachers' lack of understanding of the mothers' preparation of the success of their children, (e) preferential treatment toward students, and (f) low expectations for students.

This study contains actual conversations of the mothers' narratives. The data collected in the study was collected through semi-structured interviews, field notes, and open-ended questions.

## Introduction

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Historically, as a Nation, this country has wrestled with social inequalities regarding race, education, economic status, and gender. African American students are rarely perceived as high achieving students that can perform at high levels of proficiency that will advance them to the next level (Ford, 2012; Harper, 2012; Milner, 2015). Currently, standardized tests continue to report that African American students lag far behind White students (NAEP, 2013). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that the achievement gap scores have increased for 9 and 13-year-olds since the 1970's, however, the performance level has not improved for 17-year-olds (2013).

There is an abundance of studies about poverty level and low-income African American students (Chapman, 2013; Hayes, 2011). However, very few studies have explored married middle-income African American mothers describing their son's' experiences with White teachers in urban secondary classrooms. According to Hayes (2011), too often, parents believe that teachers and administrators have difficulty knowing how to educate their children, because of low expectations and deficit mindsets.

In prior studies about parents, the focus has been on parents of low-income African American students (Chapman, 2013; Hayes, 2011). A large proportion of these studies focused on the over representation of African American students placed in special education programs and the under-representation of African American students placed in advanced programs. It is of interest to me that researchers have found that often, parents do not believe teachers hold the principles of social justice as a standard for their African American children (Williams, 2009). Social justice is "a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity" (Nieto, 2010, p. 46). Teachers that embrace social justice can confront the stereotypes and biases that aid inequality and discrimination against African American students. Socially just teachers can implement scholarship that encourages critical thinking and prepares African American students to become productive, successful citizens (Nieto, 2010).

As noted by Harper (2012), African American students have progressed academically over the centuries. Currently, however African American boys appear to have even greater challenges academically than African American female students (Bailey, 2003; Grantham, 2004; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Noguera, 2003). Spilt and Hughes (2015) conducted a study of 657 students in at risk situations. Their study concluded that African American children are less likely to create meaningful relationships with their teachers. The result was more possible conflicts between the two and less productive academic outcomes. The groundwork for underachievement, for students found in danger of failing, is being developed at the onset of their educational experiences. This is based on the relationships developed by teachers responsible for the academic development. These are teachers who serve the vital role of inspiring students with the promotion of academic success or hindering that success by way of obstructive relationships. Ford & Moore (2013) found one of the factors which contributed to the academic attainment of African American students is educators who "adopt a social justice or civil rights approach to their work, which means an equity-based and culturally responsive approach in philosophy and action". This approach cannot be adopted by teachers who are in conflicting relationships with students. Thus, teachers who resort to unfair disciplinary actions against African American students or any other students for that matter cannot justifiably develop positive

relationships with those students. This includes teachers who sensationalize behaviors by African American students as being disruptive and escalate minuscule incidents into events requiring office referrals and suspensions.

In urban schools, students state negative and conflicting relationships with teachers as barriers to positive educational experiences (Vega et al., 2015). Furthermore "a lack of support from school personnel" (Vega et al., 2015) can potentially have detrimental effects on the achievement of students of color. If teachers hold negative perceptions or diminished beliefs and do not reaffirm their African American students (Tatum & Muhammad 2012), then support for African American students will tend to lag. This exacerbates the achievement gap even further. Among the relationships that promote positive educational experiences are teachers that use multicultural curriculum and anti-racism education (Wiggans & Watson, 2016) interpersonal caring (Caruthers & Poos, 2015; Williams & Bryan, 2013). A need exists for teachers to acknowledge the discrimination students face in their society. Such discrimination affects how they perceive their teacher, particularly their white teachers. If students have perceptions of their white teachers as being part of an institution of racism and discriminatory practice or simply as being unfair in the classroom, it then is incumbent upon those teachers to enact teaching practices and an element of caring centered environment that will negate those thoughts in the students. Teachers were referred to as one of the vital social supports for student success in high school (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008; Williams & Bryan, 2013). While parents and peer support ranked in higher importance for the students, clearly teachers have a direct influence on learning and can contribute greatly to the negative or positive outcome for students. Attendance and participation contribute to success in school for many students. The teachers contribute to the school climate. Negative perceptions about their teachers and school in general results in chronic absences by students. This is particularly true for African American students. Negative climates contributed to increases absences, while positive climates contributed to more consistent attendance in school (Van Eck, Johnson, & Bettencourt, 2017). The impact that one teacher can have on a student's school/learning environment, academic success, resilience, and life cannot be underestimated. At the same token community and home support, particularly support from African American mothers who serve as advocates for their sons, is seen as a necessary and contributing factor for their success in school.

In far too many instances African American mothers find themselves at odds with their sons' teachers regarding behavior, academic, and disciplinary issues. Wallace (2013) pointed to conflicts between parents and teachers in urban settings, as being far ranging and leading to severe consequences for African American male students. Wallace (2013) found that even in cases when African American parent involvement and support is present, negative perceptions about their interactions in school exist among teacher and staff. This is compounded in the present arena of high stakes testing where a higher emphasis is being placed on student test preparation and performance with less quality time on building relationships among teachers and students. Boykin (2014) felt that assessments should be coupled with a schooling purpose that emphasizes more human capacity building rather than sorting and selecting. This is in stark contrast to the present school environment of ranking, sorting, and placing students according to what is deemed as intelligence based on test results. There is a scarcity of research that

focuses on hearing the voices of African American mothers, therefore additional studies are warranted. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to examine and interpret the experiences of middle-income African American mothers as they describe their sons' experiences with White teachers' in predominantly White urban secondary classrooms and the parental advocacy they exercised for their sons. Knowing the experiences of African American male students in secondary classrooms could give educators a better understanding of how to provide essential tools to help these students successfully matriculate to higher education. Such issues of understanding African American males' experiences in secondary classrooms and the lack of support within the system, discrimination and low educational expectations from their teachers have not been significantly explored or considered in the educational system as potential results of high dropout rates or low college enrollment. For African American males, their lack of matriculating to higher education is greatly influenced by their poor secondary classroom experiences. The study was guided by three primary research questions:

1. How do middle-income African American mothers describe interactions between their sons and their son's' White teachers in a predominantly White urban secondary classroom?
2. How do African American mothers describe the impact of their role as an advocate for their sons in white urban secondary classrooms?
3. How do African American mothers describe and exercise parental advocacy for their sons in predominantly white secondary urban classrooms?

This study was primarily focused on how married middle-income African American mothers make meaning of their sons' education in an urban school district taught predominantly by White teachers. It seeks to explore their concerns regarding not only the academic achievement of their sons but also how their sons are perceived and treated by the teachers. Using the lenses of Critical Race Theory, Storytelling, and Black Feminist Thought, the study reports on how the mothers of African American male students advocate on their behalf and the role they take as advocates making sure their sons receive a quality and just education. If teachers are cognizant of the stories of these mothers, specifically the experiences of their sons in school, then they too can become advocates for these students. The teacher can help improve the culture of learning for African American males.

## Theoretical Framework

The framework guiding this research is Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory originated in the legal field founded by Derrick Bell during the 1970's. Bell argued that race and racism needed to serve as an important critique of the U.S. political, social and historical structures to better describe the social and injustice that existed within schools (Crenshaw, 1995). Similar to its foundational work in law, CRT has moved across disciplines including entering into the field of education where scholars Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate acknowledge race and racism as contributing to social injustices in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Milner (2007) describes CRT as an oppositional framework against traditional scholarship that often ignores and/or downplays both the historical and contemporary effects of race and racism with American students of color in public schools across the United States. Some critical race scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2007; Lynn & Dixon 2013) contended that the introduction of CRT in the field of education was essential and timely in

that it provided a critical critique of the poor and inequitable schooling experience of students of color. It challenges the dominant dialogue of race and racism in education by looking at how educational theory and pedagogy are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ortiz & Jani, 2012).

Therefore, using CRT as a theoretical framework, it provides educational scholars, educators, and parents the opportunity to talk about race and racial inequalities that become ingrained within the social structure of the United States and reflecting the society including our secondary classrooms. The five tenets of CRT in education identified by Delgado & Stefancic (2001) include: (1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (2) the challenge to the dominant ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) the interdisciplinary perspective. For the purpose of this study, however, only two tenets of CRT are explored: interest convergence and narrative storytelling.

The third tenet of CRT, the commitment to social justice, calls for a re-examination of social systems, such as legal, educational, and media, and asks how these systems establish social policies that produce and normalize racial discrimination (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). While committed to social justice, the critical race framework exposes the interest convergence of civil rights gains in education and seeks to operate its research agenda towards eradicating racism, class oppression, poverty and to empower people of color as well as other marginalized groups and communities to eliminate inter-connected structures of oppression (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

This framework exposes the inequalities and inadequacies in public schools (Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Jay, 2003) and seeks to improve the achievement gap for students. In order to understand inequalities and inadequacies in schools, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) linked race and property as a significant construct. Their research indicates that racism accounts for inequalities such as suspension and dropout rates among students of color, more specifically, African American males. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) also connects residential property values to the quality of schools. This connection shows how poverty and low social status is racialized among some people of color that have access to property with lower values (Lynn & Parker, 2006). This in turn, affects the quality of the public schools that are in the area.

According to Jay (2003), the interest convergence examines the hidden racial curricula in schools. She argues that schools should use a progressive multicultural curriculum that is inclusive to all students. Likewise, Lynn and Parker (2006) argues schools should create a more inclusive curriculum and policy that embrace students of color, instead of a White academic hegemony that has shaped the discourse on education and the achievement gap.

Researchers have studied the experiences of African American males and the inequalities in education they face on daily basis. Duncan (2003) found that African American males were subject to subtle yet hurtful microaggression. Microaggression is defined as "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). For African American males and other racially marginalized students, microaggressive behaviors often leave them feeling inadequate which eventually can cause their level of performance to drop in school.

A study was conducted by DeCuri and Dixon (2004) examining the impact of racism on African American students who attended a predominately White private school. The

study concluded that the interest convergence principles occurs when the social and civil rights of African American students are only valued when Whites have a personal gain. (DeCuri & Dixon, 2004). This occurs in instances when African American males are recruited as athletes. Furthermore, in the case of African American scholar athletes, perceptions are made of them exclusively as asset to the sports team. The academic qualifications are often ignored.

Finally, researchers found under interest convergence principles of CRT, a concept of colorblindness. According to DeCuri & Dixon (2004), colorblindness is the conception that color is not seen or used when making a variety of judgments. However, their study concluded that the school softens racial incident with disciplinary ramifications. In addition, African American students were the only ones subject to follow the school rules. Schools districts with an increasingly number of African American students and students of color should try to understand the history and culture of these students. Race and culture are important should be considered when considering the academic achievement of African American male students. One of the major steps in addressing these issues is recognizing that race is a factor even in elite school settings.

Storytelling is an essential tenet of CRT. This tenet recognizes the experiential knowledge or the voices of African Americans. Storytelling is a reliable source for critically examining the stories of society's dominant class (Ladson-Billings 1998, and Yosso, 2005). The use of counter-stories is appropriate and critical in analyzing certain phenomena which provide students of color a voice to tell their narratives regarding marginalized experiences that would otherwise remain unknown and unheard (Eggleston & Miranda, 2009; and Hiraldo, 2010). This tenet of CRT gives voice to the marginalized through hearing their stories through various forms of societal/family communication and expressions. Students frequently share these in the classroom.

According to Ladson-Billings (2010), counter storytelling can be used to expose the ideologies of the dominant culture about race which disseminated racial stereotypes of marginalized groups and also connect the experience of others who share in the similar plight. Storytelling focuses on the lived experience of African Americans. It illustrates the struggles and challenges students have experience in society. Society tends to blame students of color and their parents for their failures in school. These schools are inadequate in their abilities to serve the majority of the students in becoming successful and productive members of the larger society.

CRT is applicable to this study for it relates to the race factor being examined. Specifically, CRT addresses the research questions of whether race may influence the interactions White teachers have with African American male students. Therefore, CRT can be used as an existing theory upon which this study can build. Part of what this study entails was based on the notion that race in urban schools' controls how they operate on a routine basis. It also guides how African American mothers' describes issues of domination, oppression and social injustice for their sons' in the classrooms. Using critical race theory as the theoretical base for inquiry about African American mothers describing their sons' experiences in predominantly White urban schools and the effects of race are presented through narrative storytelling. These stories will give life and essence to the lived experiences of African American males attending urban secondary schools.

According to Collins (2009), the importance of Black feminist thought is to under-

stand the experiences and ideas shared from the perspective of Black women. Additionally, Black women experiences are theorized from their standpoint of identity, community, and the larger society. Scholars acknowledge that there are various platforms that exist when refereeing Black women's viewpoints as it relates to Black feminist thought. The most prominent lenses formed to study the lived experiences of Black women are, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2002b/2009). Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995); Womanism (Walker, 1983); and Critical Race Feminism (Wing, 1997). Each of these lenses depicts African American women as agents of change and creators of knowledge. This is particularly evident in the intersecting works contributed by African American women who blur disciplines offers new ways of understanding a collective experience. Furthermore, for this study, BFT is used to examine and explore the different positions and perspectives of African American mothers. Therefore, Collins (2009) considers four tenets when conceptualizing Black feminist thought for both theory and method: (1) the concept was established based on the daily living experiences of the African American women, (2) African American women share a commonality of combating inequalities of societal issues of racism and sexism, (3) the ethic of caring and (4) the ethic of personal responsibility. All of these tenets certainly convey the work of African American mothers.

Black women have historically been affected by intertwining systems of race, class, and gender oppression. Black women realize that Whites superior status in society is not because of their intellect, talent or humanity, but solely due to advantages of racism (Collins, 2009). Collins (2009) argues "Black women intellectual best contribute to Black women's group standpoint by using their experience as situated knowers" (p.22). Black feminism solidifies the struggles of Black women and accounts for events from their history. This includes but is not limited to their struggles and contributions.

## Methodology

The research questions that guided this study were addressed through a qualitative research design. Qualitative research in general, and phenomenology in particular, is concerned with describing and understanding human phenomena from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Crewsell, 2005). This study elaborated on listening to stories and perspectives of middle- income African American mothers meant facilitating an essential component of their culture and principle of CRT. Hence, storytelling was necessary to give voice to and hear the voices of the participants. Storytelling is a qualitative approach to enhance the questions to the participants. It also allows understanding complexity, developing empathy, establishing common ground, and eliciting participation and collaboration with the participants.

In an effort to ensure children's success in schools, even before integration and especially now, middle-income African American mothers have made difficult, but purposeful decisions based on beliefs about the best interests of their children. Often, given their income levels, they move to suburban towns and prestigious city communities and enroll their children in schools they perceive to be on the cutting edge of academic achievement. However, these middle-income parents report obstacles of educational opportunities despite strategic planning for their children, including a lack of teacher-student connections, police violence, and ongoing patterns of racism in school and society (Williams, 2009; Wallace, 2013). Researchers have found that student and teacher relationships are not prevalent in

large urban schools when the majority of the students are of color and have low-income backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 2015). However, parents in suburban towns and top-notch city schools are experiencing some of the same challenges of educating their African American children as their inner city counterparts (Williams, 2009; Kozol, 2012; Weis, 2013).

In order to gain a better understanding of the how the middle-income parents are perceiving their sons' teachers and their educational experiences, it was important to describe the environment in which their learning was taking place. The urban school district in which the study will be conducted is located in the southwest region of the United States. This school district is classified as a public suburban school district. It has a rich tradition of academic excellent. It consists of mostly middle-income to upper-middle income communities.

This school district has transition from a rural to suburban district over the decades. Bordering seven other school districts, it ranks among the top largest school districts in its state. It holds the record for being one of the largest district in terms of student enrollment nationwide. There are over 185 squares miles of acreage within the borders of the district. The student enrollment is over 115, 000 for the 2015-2016 school year. There are 89 campuses (54 elementary schools, 18 middle schools, 13 high schools and 4 alternative schools) within the district. This urban/ suburban community has students that come from all socioeconomic backgrounds. The district serves over 850 subdivisions and apartment complexes within their borders. The student population of the district includes 16.51% African American, 8.59% Asian, 43.6% Hispanic, 2.3% Multiracial, 0.59% Native American, 0.08% Pacific Islander and 28.32% White. There are 100 languages and dialects spoken within the student body. However, over the last latter half of the 20th century, the district has seen an increase in class sizes, a more diverse student population, teacher and administration turnovers, increase in low-income students and cuts in the school budget. The district zoning covers a portion located in the city. Although the district does not consider itself to being an urban school district, a portion of their schools have a city address.

This suburban school district is also beginning to develop some of the same issues that urban schools have dealing with for decades, yet it remains to call itself a suburban school district. For this study, I am considering the district as an urban school district based on higher class sizes, increase in student diversity, location (based on school zip codes) and the issues they are facing that are similar to an urban school district. The graduation completion rate for the graduating class of 2012 was 50%. In the school year of 2013-2014, the professional staff consisted of 7,759 teachers, counselors, supervisory personnel, attendance officers and administrators. The average years of experiences for teachers was 11.6 years. In January of 2012, the school district added its own police department. The police officers are responsible for the districts 107 campuses, including the protection of life and district buildings and assets. The police department has a 5,000 square-foot facility. The district police department has uniformed and armed officers patrolling the interior and exterior of all campuses. Officers are present at all primary and secondary athletic events. The police officers have the authority to make arrest on and off the school premises. They are also authorized to issue traffic citations to student and non-students. The school district received a multi-million-dollar bond for campus security upgrades in 2014. The bond was issued for $55 million and included upgrades for nearly 4, 000 surveillance cameras to be installed on

campuses. The school district has a television channel on the local cable provider or you could also stream the channel on the district's website. The district also plans to add video monitors, panic buttons, bullet-resistant glass and two-layered security doors at all visitor entrances for their campuses. Additional upgrades included purchasing new buses, tri-boxes, digital radio system with five new radio towers and replacing old radios.

## Findings

African American mothers' responses to research question one: "How do middle-income African American mothers describe interactions between their son's and their sons' White teachers in urban secondary classrooms?" According to the data, six of the mothers describe either unpleasant or hostile interactions with their sons' teachers. One parent noted the unwelcoming introduction her child was given in his advanced placement classes by the teachers who warned him immediately about the workload. The parent and student perceived a lack of faith by the teachers in her son's ability to complete the required tasks for the class. The participants described numerous negative interactions their sons had with their teachers, however, they did note that their sons failed to receive positive interactions. Their sons also did not enjoy the meaningful relationships and positive interactions that other students enjoyed with their teachers. This lack of meaningful relationships becomes more prevalent in situations where students and their families may be experiencing problems. One mother stated, "It was as if my child was being discarded the minute he got into trouble". Often times teachers will gravitate to students who are doing well academically, are not problematic and have a commonality with the teachers. The mothers indicated that in the classroom where their sons did not have any issues with the teacher, there was no personal connection, no relationship formed. They felt like their son was just a number in the class.

Research question two asks: "How do African American mothers describe the impact of their role as an advocate for their sons in White urban secondary classroom?" According to the data, the mothers described their roles as advocates by having parental presence, actively being involved and showing their mother empowerment by letting their voices be heard. Six out of the six participants made sure that they were present at the open house, freshman orientation, every meet the teacher, conference, school meeting, and school activity that involved their sons.' They were very adamant about responding to every letter, email, and phone from the teacher concerning their sons' academics and behavior. All of the participants noted that her husbands would also attend meetings to show the teachers and administrators that their son has supportive parents at home who are invested in making sure their son is successful academically.

The participants did not want their sons' teachers, administrators or the school in general to assume any negative stereotypes about their son or his family. Although their sons are attending predominately White middle-income schools, that does not mean that the teacher always viewed the mothers to be educated, involved, married and available to assist in the academic success of their son's. The African American mothers' all expressed when they visited the school they were well dressed and articulated with authority and genuinely showed concern for their sons' education.

Research question three asked: "How do African American mothers describe and exercise parental advocacy for their son's in predominantly White secondary urban schools?" According to the data, the mothers express

being proactive with classroom support especially in advanced placement classes and showing their advocacy by being visible. Three of the six participants said they felt that the most challenging class for their sons were the advanced placement course. These classes were not challenging because of the rigorous coursework; however, participants indicated it was challenging because the White teacher did not want their sons' in the class.

The African American mothers' all spoke as if they were on a mission to advocate for their sons'. As their sons' were confronted daily with unfair experiences in the classrooms, these mothers' made sure they were voices were heard by often approaching the teachers,' counselors and administrators with their concerns. All of the mothers' interventions and interactions with the school and teachers illustrated that they will stand up for fair treatment on behalf of their sons. By exercising their parental advocacy, these mothers' actions at school served as a role model for their sons to self-advocate in future situations.

## Discussion

While the achievement gap has been closed, the disparity which remains is one that should alarm parents, teachers, administrators, and all stakeholders within the educational arena. Hence, the present achievement gap and low academic achievement for African American students, particularly African American males, should be a cause for alarm for all of America. We must ask ourselves as a society if the continued educational failure and marginality for African American students will remain acceptable or we reverse this sad trend and uplift/educate the totality of our masses. Dyce (2013) states "it is time for concerned constituencies to conduct a careful examination of the socio-cultural, political, and economic consequences of an education system that is failing a large segment of the American populace" (p. 165). The prevalent educational hegemony existing within our schools must come to end if we are to develop and uplift ourselves. African American students do not hold cultural deficits leading to underachievement in schools but rather one who is underperforming due to deficit schools and teachers.

It is detrimental that two of the most important factors (parent and teacher) for school success for African American male students can be odds with one another in instances that are critical for the student. Parental involvement is vital to the success of teacher instruction and interactions in the classroom. However, the role of the teacher cannot be minimized with or without this parental involvement. "Educators can play a significant role in transforming potentially negative situations into positive school experiences among urban youth" (Vega, Moore, Miranda, 2015). Teachers hold a great deal of influence on students that have a great impact in their future. Understanding the culture of African American student and being sensitive to that culture can diminish a significant number of problems that occur in the classroom. Meaningful relationships promote meaningful work and also alleviate crisis when they originate or rather keep the crisis from occurring. Teacher must advocate for their students by establishing those relationships with them and their parents. They must also embrace the advocacy of the mothers whose voices have been heard in this study.

The researcher believes that this study adds to the literature by highlighting the advocacy role of the mothers. These mothers have fought for equitable educational opportunities on behalf of their son's and have assisted in helping their sons overcome unfair and negative classroom experiences. This study indicated that these mothers generally care about

their sons and have high expectations for them to be successful. It is the researcher greatest hope that educators will recognize the voices of the mother's and take their concerns into consideration when addressing these major issues of African American male students.

## Implications for Future Research

1. Replica the study with mothers and-whose sons are enrolled in a Charter-School, Private or Parochial School. This would help reveal whether or not parents are having similar perceptions and experiences with their sons' teachers.
2. Replicate the study using mothers of Caucasian students enrolled in the same school district. Such a study would help distinguish the experiences of Caucasian students from African American students, noting any similarities or differences. It would also help to identify whether or not Caucasian students receive favorable treatment or have established more meaningful relationships with their teachers.
3. Interview high school teachers from the same district to identify their perceptions of African American male students. This can shed light on how teachers view these students with regards to their behavioral styles, cooperation, motivation, and capacity to learn.
4. Replicate the study with mothers and fathers working with a White teacher of Latino students. Numerous studies have placed African American and Latino students under the category of students of color, particularly when it comes to academic achievement challenges. Such a study will give insight on whether mothers of Latino male students are having positive interactions with their son's teacher and whether they hold favorable views of these teachers.
5. Replicate the study using mothers of African American males in middle and elementary schools. This will identify any patterns in teacher/son and teacher/parent relationships that may be beneficial or detrimental to the academic achievement for the students.
6. Replicated the study with African American mothers and fathers working together with teachers in a collective advocacy for African American male students in urban secondary schools.

## Conclusion

Despite the numerous denial that race is a factor in our society and schools, this study is an attempt to offer another view on addressing the concerns of the achievement gap among African American males. There is a plethora of research on achievement gap of African American males and their low- income parents, in urban settings. However, this study focuses on middle-income African American families living in affluent primary White communities and have exposure to cultural capital which has enhanced their son's educational experiences.

These middle-income African American mothers and their families purposefully made decisions to increase the quality of life for their sons. However, in selecting this school district mothers communicated their sons have experienced racism, exclusion and unfair treatment in the classroom. Mothers advocated for their sons and supported them through painful realizations that their teachers held negative perceptions of them and failed to recognize or embrace their rich cultural heritage that they bring to the classroom.

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# Rewriting Standards, Not History: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Texas State Board of Education's Social Studies Standards Revision

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## Abstract

The Texas State Board of Education's (SBOE) revisions of the social studies learning standards have produced ripple effects across the state; these effects could impact social studies curricula in other states (Collins, 2012). Every ten years the board reconsiders and revises curriculum in all subjects (Texas Education Agency, 2017). The SBOE, led by a conservative bloc, produced learning standards for the more than five million students in Texas that move the curriculum with a bias toward conservative ideologies (Stutz, 2010, Jan 16). Because Texas is one of the largest consumers of textbooks, journalists, educators, and liberty interest groups fear the conservative viewpoint will impact other classrooms around the nation. The fear stems from the conservative slant embedded in the social studies curriculum and the way in which this bias fosters feelings of exclusions from students who may not agree, look like, or sound like the construct of a model citizen developed in the curriculum. The 2016 presidential election results also highlight the concern: voters in urban areas supported Clinton, while rural areas voted for Trump (Carey, 2016). The conservative bias in the curriculum does not engage many urban students or educators.

## Concern for Students

The battle for Texas curriculum standards has been ongoing since the 1960s when Mel and Norma Gabler first brought up a list of curricular ob-

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jections they had to the SBOE (Collins, 2012). Their interest in the content of textbooks arose over objectionable material in their children's school books. During Norma Gabler's testimony she suggested conservative ideas should be emphasized in the curriculum. Their influence moved beyond the hearings when they published a list detailing factual inaccuracies in Texas history books (Martin, 2007). The SBOE's revision process for learning standards in Texas curriculum became more politicized as external groups became interested in influencing textbook content. The board began passing amendments that advanced a conservative viewpoint. Outside groups were concerned the ideological stance evident in the curriculum will be spread, via textbook companies, across the nation. Scholars have found disturbing numbers as to the extent of the curricular influence from Texas:

> Keith Erekson, director of the Center for History Teaching and Learning at the University of Texas El Paso…says he's seen estimates that the proportion of social studies textbooks sold containing the basic Texas-approved narrative range from about half to 80 percent (Collins, 2012, p.111).

Textbook companies often use generic language for content to appear less biased. The resulting textbooks are general, vague, and largely uninspiring (Collins, 2012). One of the most distressing consequences of the textbook battles is that "'current history textbooks … have lost their compelling narrative"' (Shorto as cited in Collins, 2012, p. 116). Textbook companies reduce important subjects, such as U.S. history, to boring and mundane topics to support profit and client satisfaction over content that is often messy, complicated, and fascinating. There is concern in the scholarly community that these standards will produce students that "are more delusional about their country's history than North Korea's Kim Jong Il" (Ruth, 2010, p. 15A).

Throughout the learning standards there exists a "complete lack of context" for specific people, ethnic groups, and events (Erekson, 2012, p. 13). Muñoz and Noboa (2012), while working on the eleventh grade U.S. History course revisions, highlight a much larger problem within social studies curriculum. The ideology, vision, and desire to include "people like me", prevented the board from creating a set of learning standards that would benefit all students throughout the state of Texas (p. 53).

Currently there is an imbalance in the presentation of textbook topics for understanding complex subjects. For example, the concept of civil disobedience is presented as the ability to fight against taxes or other unwelcome aspects of government control, instead of a means by which citizens can demonstrate their disapproval of war or social issue policies (Erekson, 2012, p.13). Other concepts such as "the free enterprise system" has only benefits, while the Great Society, Title IX, and affirmative action are portrayed as having "unintended consequences" (Erekson, 2012, p.12). These inconsistencies within the curriculum do not provide Texas students with a sound social studies education that is reflective of the multidimensional, twenty-first-century world in which they live. Instead, it presents an ideologically slanted, hodgepodge version of social studies education, which will most likely confuse students once they enter a different educational environment. Written curriculum should seek to promote critical thinking, reasoning, and unbiased accuracy that supports diversity in a democratic society in the twenty-first century.

### *Research in Context*

The responsibility for selecting and approving the curriculum for public schools in Texas allows the SBOE a great deal of power and influence regarding what school children

in Texas learn. The extent of this influence became apparent during the 2009 – 2010 work of the SBOE in which the newly revised curriculum standards for science and social studies courses were up for approval by the SBOE (Stuz, 2010, Jan 9; Stutz 2010, May 17). Texas Education Code states that "the Texas State Board of Education, with the direct participation of educators, parents, business and industry representatives, and employers shall by rule identify the essential knowledge and skills of each subject of the required curriculum that all students should be able to demonstrate" (Texas Education Code, 2011). The SBOE chose to implement this statute through a process which allowed educators, and other committee members, to revise the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS).

To initiate this process, SBOE members could select an individual to participate in one of the eleven subject matter committees formed to write the initial draft of social studies TEKS. Not all board members elected to nominate a representative to sit on the TEKS review committees. Once the TEKS Review Committees were in place, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), directed by the SBOE, gave committees the process in which they would review the existing TEKS to create new learning standards. The committees had to complete the first draft of the new TEKS by July of 2009 for the board's consideration. One of the requirements for the committees to submit their subject's proposed TEKS was that the committee had to unanimously agree on the content (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

### *Analytical Framework*

Two frameworks were used in this research: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and thematic analysis. CDA is a research methodology which provides tools to explore and address issues of power, inequality, and rights and freedoms. It functions to reveal the meaning behind language in text (Rogers, 2011; Bryman, 2008; McGregor, 2004). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research methodology which generates themes from the documents analyzed (Bryman, 2008). The Texas SBOE meeting minutes were analyzed using a thematic approach – not coding or counting the frequency in which specific words appeared in text. The research examined four main questions: 1) Does the Texas SBOE promote democratic education, as defined by educational theorists? 2) Does the Texas SBOE meeting minutes promote citizenship education, as defined by educational theorists? 3) Does the language of the Texas SBOE meeting minutes encourage a balance or imbalance of power amongst students and teachers? 4) Does the language of the Texas SBOE meeting minutes encourage a balance or imbalance of power among students?

The framework used in this CDA included significance, activities or practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge. Gee (2011) suggests that "language-in-use is a tool, not just for saying and doing things…to build things in the world" (p.30). Language use created "social practice" (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Gylnis O'Garro, 2005, p.369). Social practice, according to CDA scholars, was the process by which language produced social interactions among people. Rogers et al (2005) pointed out that "language cannot be treated as neutral, because it is caught up in political, social, racial, economic, religious, and cultural formations" (p.369). Therefore, all of Gee's building tasks and the language in the texts represented the process of building the power structures for the political and educational discourse in Texas. As I read through the texts of the documents, I looked for the "social practice" created by the texts and the relationships

that build an identity of democratic participants in education (Gee, 2006, p. 369). This process helped to make meaning of the impact on the education of these curricular standards (Rogers et al, 2005).

The document analysis focused on answering Gee's (2006) seven building tasks: 1) significance, 2) activities, 3) identities, 4) relationships, 5) politics, 6) connections, and 7) signs and systems knowledge (Gee, 2006, p. 13). These building tasks were applied to understand language, words and phrases that could determine the "*dominant discourse*" regarding the intent of the SBOE to promote democracy and freedom of choice for all in developing learning standards. This analysis sought to disclose the relationships among teachers, students and the new curriculum standards and explore whether an imbalance of power was created for those who do not share the same ideological stance evident in the SBOE meeting minutes.

## Texas Construct of Citizenship and Democratic Education

### *Significance*

Throughout the pages of the SBOE meeting minutes from the spring of 2010, many significant areas of language are evident. The pages of public testimony provided evidence of the many groups concerned about the content in the revised social studies curricula. It is unwise to speculate regarding the content of each person's testimony, but the organizations and affiliations of the volunteers who freely came to participate in state government provide insight. The diversity of speakers, in comparison to a social studies curriculum lacking diversity, suggests a very strong response to the proposed curricular revisions. Many speakers urged the board to reconsider or alter some of the learning standards from one meeting to the next. For example, former Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, asked the board to reconsider the learning standards before taking a final vote. Ben Jealous, the president of the NAACP, mentioned concern for the quality of the social studies standards, along with State Representative Helen Giddings, and Representative Trey Fischer Martinez, president of the Mexican American Legislative Caucus (Stuz, 2010, May 20).

Another area in which language is significant includes the end of each of the three public hearings. At the conclusion of the January 13 meeting, Mary Helen Berlanga moved to extend public testimony for an additional day. The motion failed, and the chairperson Gail Lowe concluded the meeting. In the March meeting, the language intensifies the significance of the board's seeming disregard for the concerns of the people that testified. Once the public testimony finished, the board immediately moved into amending social studies TEKS. The actions of the board were consistent in the May meetings. The board dutifully heard public testimony late into the evening, but as they reconvened the next day, further amendments of the social studies TEKS continued. This is of particular *significance*, because the phrase "holding elected officials to their word" is actually in the government TEKS, yet the board appeared to ignore all of the individuals who came to express concern or interest in the revision of the social studies curricula (Texas Education Agency, 2012). Finally, a telling example of the significance given to specific language emerges from a disagreement between board members as revisions were being proposed to the U.S. history since 1877 course. TEK 113.41 (c) 24 B initially read:

> Describe the impact of significant examples of cultural movements in art, music, and literature, such as Tin Pan Alley, the Harlem Renaissance, the Beat Generation, rock and roll, the Chicano Mural Movement, hip

**Table 1** [1]

*Organizations Represented at SBOE Public Hearings for Proposed Social Studies Curricula*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Admiral in the Texas Navy (2) | Multicultural Alliance for Social Studies Advocacy | Liberty Institute (3) |
| Jewish Community Relations, Greater Dallas | Constitution Society (2) | Fair Park Bible Fellowship |
| Texas Freedom Network (2) | America's Last Patrol | Southern Methodist University, Dept of Anthropology |
| Williamette University Center for Religion, Law, and Democracy | La Union del Pueblo Entero | National Japanese Memorial Foundation |
| Trinity University Chaplain | Proyo Azteca, City of San Juan | UT El Paso |
| Retired Educator | Mexican American Farm Workers Organization | Go for Broke National Education Foundation |
| Houston Public Library | League of United Latin American Citizens (7) | Texas Navy Association |
| Spurlock Law Firm | Movimiento Estudantil Chicano de Azteca | Japanese-American Citizens League (2) |
| Public School Teacher | Anti-Defamation League | Center for Islamic Pluralism |
| National Council of Jewish Women, Greater Dallas Area (4) | UT Brownsville | Japanese-American Veterans Association |
| Texas State Historical Association | Bexar County Czech Hertitage Society | Palestinians for Peace and Democracy |
| Texas State Representative (14) | Texas State University | Texas State Teachers Association (National Education Foundation) |
| G. P. Properties | Texas Indigenous Council | Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays PFLAG |
| Americans United for Separation of Church and State (2) | Texas Family of Incarcerated Youth | Midlothian ISD Project Ca$h (5) |
| Round Rock High School | Texas Holocaust & Genocide Commission | Palestinian-American Cultural Center – Houtson (2) |
| American G.I. Forum (4) | UT/US Latino WWII Oral History Project | Equality Texas Foundation (2) |
| Coalition for Education Reform (3) | Sikh Coalition (2) | Turtle Clan – Payaya Nation |
| Auxiliary of Disabled Veterans | National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (4) | Austin ISD |
| American Civil Liberties Union, Texas (2) | Carrizo-Comecrudo Tribe of Texas (2) | Texas Eagle Forum |
| Texas Council for Social Studies | Hindu-American Foundation | A+ Writers and Consulting |
| Lovejoy ISD | Texas AFT (2) | |

[1]Any organizations or groups which have a number in parenthesis next to the name represents the number of representatives who spoke at any of the three public hearings.

hop, and country and western music on American society (2010).

This TEK was first revised in January when Dr. McElroy proposed an amendment to strike hip hop from the standard, and replace it with country and western music. The motion was unsuccessful. After several additional amendments and discussions the final learning standard included the Beat Generation but not hip hop. If the intent of the learning standard is for students to learn about important cultural events in art, music, and literature, why would hip hop be excluded? It gives the impression that the culture associated with the hip hop movement was not part of the vision for social studies content held by many on the board.

***Activities***

It is also important to study the activities encouraged by the curriculum (Gee, 2006). It is interesting to note that the language and actions of the board, as documented in the text, do not promote any activities. The verbs used throughout the TEKS require cognitive processes, i.e. thinking, analyzing, evaluating, but do not ask students to perform any physical activities. In the standards, only the generic social studies skills TEKS ask students to create a product, but the document is vague concerning the product students must create.

Furthermore, the actions from the board indicate that they will allow citizens to come and testify during the public hearings, but only for a certain length of time. Once enough people voiced their opinions, (as determined by the board chairperson) the board was satisfied. For example, at the January 13 meeting, numerous people came to speak at the public hearing, but at the end of the day, no more additional public testimony was allowed. Overtly, the board's actions were consistent with the social studies curricula's directive that students learn about the role of public officials to be responsive to the people; however, there are no actions within the meeting minute texts to demonstrate that the board addressed the concerns of the people. It seems with each month's increasing number of people who signed up to testify at the public hearings the board potentially ignored many of the concerns voiced by the people.

***Identities***

The meeting minutes from the Texas SBOE spring of 2010 carefully construct the identity of a citizen for students from attendance and participation in social studies courses. During the January 14 meeting, the first two motions and amendments added the term "good citizens" to several elementary grade level social studies courses. This is important to note because it is a subjective, value-added term. In whose opinion is the basis for what makes a "good citizen"? From the board's 2010 spring meetings, it is obvious a majority of the board worked to insert beliefs which they determined make "good citizens".

The board builds upon the identity of a citizen as individuals who value a strict interpretation of the Constitution, limited authority in the national government, and a preference for a free enterprise economic system. In several amendments the board voted to add patriotism as an illustrative example of good citizen contributions (Texas Education Agency, 2012). Additionally, the board passed three general amendments at the March 10 meeting which removed the phrase "democratic republic" and replaced it with "constitutional republic" in all social studies courses. Continuing, the fourth general amendment replaced "democratic societies" in favor of "societies with representative governments" in all social studies courses. Lastly, the fifth blanket amendment required that any social studies course that used the term "free enterprise" mandated an additional sentence be added. The new sentence required that "students identify the role of free enter-

prise within the parameter of this course and understand that this system may also be referenced as capitalist or free market system" (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

A citizen is identified as one who desires a limited national government, values the importance of the individual, and supports a free enterprise economic system. In the U.S. history since 1877 course, the curriculum requires that students "understand how the free enterprise system drives technological innovation and its application in the marketplace" to underscore the belief that this particular economic system is the best available (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

***Relationships***

The relationship between the government and curriculum built is influenced by the dominant board members, who manipulated the curriculum to reinforce the dominant party's political beliefs in the public school curriculum. Ten of the fifteen board members, in the spring of 2010, were elected to their positions as Republican Party members. Though some of the board members were more extreme in their political beliefs, the language found throughout the Texas SBOE meeting minutes consistently reveals a preference for Republican Party language and associated values. Several board members voted to approve general, blanket amendments which used language associated with Republican beliefs, such as "societies with representative governments" in place of "democratic societies" (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

Moreover, the majority on the board voted in favor of language which emphasized the role of a Judeo-Christian heritage in United States government, along with subtle attempts to subvert the accepted practice of separation of church and state. The Constitution does not actually contain this language. A few board members highlighted this point with a proposed amendment to the government curriculum. Students were asked to "examine the reasons the Founding Fathers protected religious freedom in America…and compare and contrast this to the phrase 'separation of church and state'"(Texas Education Agency, 2012). This amendment insinuated that the intent of the Founding Fathers was to embrace Christian principles in government. American Exceptionalism further supports the belief that the United States was meant to be governed by Christian principles because many people, including Alexis de Tocqueville, believed that God favored the people of the United States (Gutek, 2004). At the same time, the amendment subtly created doubt as to the constitutionality of the applied principle of separation of church and state in landmark Supreme Court cases. This notion aligns with the stated Republican Party belief that the role of the judicial system in the United States is simply to interpret the law and the Constitution, not create policy from the bench (Republican Party, 2013).

***Politics***

The fifth building task seeks to understand how discourse established political norms for society. Lakshmanan (2011) adds that this task seeks to understand "what is being communicated as to what is taken to be normal, right, and good, appropriate…high or low status" (p. 90). Citizens in Texas are portrayed to be individuals who regularly vote, pay taxes, follow the rules, demonstrate patriotism, and embrace a vision of government that desires to uphold the Constitution with a limited national government. This represents both conservatism and American Exceptionalism. Conservative ideology would embrace the notion of a strict, or traditional interpretation of the Constitution, while American Exceptionalism supports the belief that "Americans created the best of all possible systems – a republican form of

government, democratic institutions, and a free-enterprise economy" (Gutek, 2004, p. 165). At the last meetings in May, Ms. Dunbar proposed a blanket amendment that would insert a statement into the introduction of all social studies courses that reads: "[s]tudents understand that a constitutional republic is a representative form of government whose representatives derive their authority from the consent of the governed, serve for an established tenure, and are sworn to uphold the Constitution" (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

Also noteworthy, is the repeated emphasis on a free enterprise economic system in almost all of the social studies courses. Even the title of the economics course, *Economics With Emphasis on the Free Enterprise System and its Benefits*, reflects the Republican Party (2013) statement of support that a free enterprise economic system leads to prosperity. Board members motioned to add the benefits of a free enterprise economy in numerous TEKS, including the requirement that students in elementary grades "explain how government regulations and taxes impact consumer costs (2012). Seemingly every opportunity in which some of the Republican board members had to include discussion of the free enterprise system was taken full advantage. McElroy found it important to move that students "understand the influence of scientific discoveries, and technological innovations, and the free enterprise system on the standard of living in the United States" so that students would associate scientific and technological innovation with a free enterprise economic system (Texas Education Agency, 2012). In the documents I found only references to the benefits of a free enterprise system. There are no instances in which the quality of or disadvantages of the economic system are questioned.

### *Connections*

In a study of the language in the SBOE meeting minutes, it is important to uncover connections between the students and the curriculum through CDA (Gee, 2006). The connections among the curriculum and students which exist continue to follow the emerging trend, which reflects a preference for Republican Party ideology. In one of the final May meetings, Ms. Knight proposed a change to a learning standard in sociology which would "differentiate between sex, a biological and physical characteristic, and gender, a social construct, and discuss how gender and socialization interact" (Texas Education Agency, 2010). The motion failed. This possible change does not align with the conservative paradigm. In conservatism, maintaining traditional social structures is important (Gutek, 2004). The traditional gender structure accepted in conservatism does not support the belief that there could be differences in sex, and was not acceptable as an addition in the curriculum.

These actions and word choice help to connect students who support conservative or American Exceptionalism ideology; the actions and diction reaffirm those ideological beliefs. At the same time, these actions disconnect many young adults from the social studies learning standards because they identify with other ideological beliefs, such as a liberal philosophy. Students who are racial minorities most likely disconnect with the learning standards. It is important to note the absence of racial diversity in the standards. The people, events, and legislation not covered in the curriculum are just as important as those who are. The absence of racial diversity implies that the other stories of American history are not the knowledge worth knowing (Rogers et al, 2005).

Moreover, it is possible that the value-based, subjective statements, such as "good citizenship", found in several social studies

courses disconnect students from the curriculum, regardless of their political party affiliation. As Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin (2002) report, the notion of citizenship and behavior that is considered consistent with political participation, varies greatly among adults in the United States. Young adults do not share the same views of citizenship and participation held by adults in their mid-thirties and older. Edwards (2009) notes that even with the 2008 presidential election, with President Obama as a very appealing candidate to many 18 -24 year olds, that age demographic still represented the smallest percentage of voters.

***Signs and Systems of Knowledge***

Finally, the SBOE meeting documents provide an excellent opportunity to determine how the Texas SBOE attempted to influence what students in Texas know and believe (Gee, 2006). The Texas SBOE used social studies course revisions to effect what way students across Texas learn by amending the proposed social studies TEKS. The board assigned which standards contained the important content through the use of the word "including" as a designation of required mastery. Equally important are the learning standards which include the words "such as" to indicate potential use. The standards where the board changed the wording from "including" to "such as", or vice versa, reflect the partiality of several board members for conveying the information worth knowing to students. The standards without either of the previously mentioned phrases do not mandate that students prove mastery or provide a possible example for teaching purposes. Finally, the remaining standards are noticeably left out, in as much as teachers are pressured to teach, or not teach the content.

Indeed, the majority of the board made motions, and voted for changes to the social studies curricula which produced social studies courses with an obvious preference for conservatism and American Exceptionalism (Gutek, 2004). The system of knowledge throughout public schools in Texas advocates an educational system promoting limited national government, penchant for individual rights, and preference for a capitalist market structure.

## Conclusion

Educational philosophers, such as John Dewey, Paolo Friere, Alfred Bandura, and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, provide the current understanding of democratic and citizenship education, and the ways in which these instructional practices should appear in the classroom. James Gee's (2006) seven building tasks produce the framework of analysis for the CDA, which exposed the power structures imbedded in the meeting minutes of the SBOE. The emergent themes demonstrate the influence of the conservatism and American Exceptionalism evident in all the Texas social studies curricula (Gutek, 2004).

Educational theorists' construct of democratic education allows for a system in which all participants have the opportunity to determine the curriculum together. There are not top-down power structures (Dewey, 1916; Friere, 2009). Students and teachers are not cast aside in the development of democratic education, but allowed to voice ideas, concerns, and areas of interest. The goal of this collective partnership is twofold: first, democratic education intends to improve the educational experiences of all participants, and second, democratic education involves "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Democratic education is closely associated with the concept of citizenship education. Several educational philosophers highlight the need for social learning through a variety of

instructional activities that encourage critical thinking, student choice, and permits students to construct meaning from educational experiences (Dewey 1916; Freire, 2009; Bandura, 1993). Democratic education accentuates the need for students to use community in the development of the whole person (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

At the same time, citizenship education focuses on the task of maturing students into citizens, who are willing to participate in the current government because they associate civics with problem solving, inquiring into social issues, and attaching personal, meaningful, experiences to the government (Dewey, 1938; Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2008).

The Texas SBOE meeting minutes do not create democratic or citizenship education that would be supported by educational philosophers. The meeting minutes reflect the work of conservative board members to infuse the curriculum with conservatism. Instead of allowing participants a voice in the determination of the content, the SBOE dictated the learning standards. The entire process failed to represent democratic or civic educational philosophies. The curriculum is a top-down power structure, there are no examples of philosophers' democratic educational activities in the government curriculum, and several of the board members successfully inserted bias in favor of American Exceptionalism and conservatism in the language of the TEKS.

## National Government with Limited Authority

The focus of the SBOE meeting minutes on the benefits of a limited national government creates one area in which there is a balance of power among teachers and students. Initially, there is balance in authority between students and teachers as a result of the curricular origins. The state of Texas requires school districts throughout the state to use the curriculum approved from the TEA and SBOE. This places teachers and students equally without power as to the choice and variety of the curriculum. Both groups are subject to the assigned curriculum. Both teachers and students are told the knowledge worth knowing from the state. Neither group has the opportunity to contribute to Friere's "naming of the world" (2009).

CDA allows for a richer understanding of the ways in which language impacts and controls social situations. Language used by the conservative SBOE members in the meeting minutes generates an imbalance of power among students. A majority of the SBOE minutes contain words and phrases which slant the curriculum toward conservative beliefs, such as the benefit of a limited national government (Gutek, 2004). This bias creates a set of political norms which embrace those whose ideological stances align with conservative perspectives. Students who believe the national government should be responsible for administering programs, ensuring equity among groups, and maintain a general concern for the collective good, are left with a sense of isolation or rejection. When students do not view civics courses as relevant to their lives, they are much more likely to disengage from the content.

## Importance of Individual Rights over the Collective Good

A second theme that emerged is the importance of the individual in democratic and citizenship education. While the notion of democratic education conceptualized by many educational theorists urges a cooperative education system where teachers and students work together, the Texas SBOE developed a curriculum which repeatedly places emphasis on the importance of the individual (Dewey,

1916; Bandura, 1997). A majority of the board voted to define democratic education by using the term representative government. The Texas construct of democratic education is a system in which Texas SBOE members are elected to serve the people of Texas by administering and creating education policy (Texas Education Agency, 2017). The implication being that suggestions for representation of the public are accepted, while other credentialed individuals, serve on committees to develop educational policy or curriculum and the board will act in a manner that reflects the preferences of their constituents. In practice, once the people of Texas cast their votes for each respective board member, the board member becomes that districts "expert". The SBOE members are granted, representative authority to determine the knowledge worth knowing for teachers and students in Texas. Democratic education in Texas is more representative, than democratic.

The curriculum excludes those who do not agree with this interpretation of democratic education. Many people, who did not agree with the SBOE curricular changes, were allowed the opportunity to speak at a public hearing, but in the end, the board embraced their trustee role. Many critics from around the state, nation, and parts of the globe, were largely ignored (Stutz, T. 2010, May 20).

### Free Market Structure Preference

A final theme which emerged is the obvious preference of a capitalist/free market economic structure. American Exceptionalism identifies capitalist economies as superior to others (Gutek, 2004). Students and teachers do not have the freedom to discuss and choose the economic systems they might like to study. Teachers and students also do not have the ability to categorize the economic system of the U.S.

Instead, the Texas SBOE inserted the benefits of a capitalist market structure at every perceived opportunity. The U.S. history since 1877 course directs students to relate a capitalist market structure to scientific discoveries and technological innovation as a reason why the standard of living continues to increase in the U.S. To extend this perspective further, a sub-learning standard directs students to "understand how the free enterprise system drives technological innovation and its application in the market place" (Texas Education Agency, 2012). The majority of the board attempted to imply that in a democracy, the only logical economic system is a capitalist/free market structure.

The SBOE promotes a capitalist market structure through the manner in which economic TEKS are framed. A TEK in the sixth grade curriculum was amended to ask students to compare and contrast the benefits of a capitalist market structure to other economic systems. Another proposed amendment to the sixth grade curriculum included the directive for students to "understand the poor record of collectivist, non-free market economic systems to deliver improved economic development over numerous contemporary and historical societies" (Texas Education Agency, 2012). This particular TEK does not allow for students and teachers to examine areas in which collectivist economic policies or systems have benefited participants in the policy or economic system. The language used by the conservative board members implies that there are no collective economic policies or systems that benefit people. Even the title of the mandated economics course in Texas explicitly states the bias in the course title: *Economics With An Emphasis on Free Enterprise and Its Benefits*. Democratic education in Texas supports the use of a capitalist market structure.

Citizenship education in Texas promotes that citizens not only accept, but embrace a

capitalist market structure. The majority on the board, attempted to connect the notion of citizenship in Texas directly to the concept of citizenship in Texas. The board left out references to other groups and even suggested that those who do not embrace a capitalist/free market structure were not "good" citizens: The meeting minutes I analyzed contains only references to the benefits of capitalism. There are no instances in which the quality of or disadvantages of the economic system are questioned. The notion of citizenship education in Texas singularly promotes the beneficial components of capitalist market economies. What is not referenced in the SBOE meeting minutes is that the gap between the rich and the poor has only grown in the 20th century (Slater, 2001). This relates directly back to the second theme, the importance of the individual.

The overwhelming support and consideration for a capitalist market structure excludes many. Notably, any student, or teacher, that supports a Marxist economic system is intentionally excluded. Students or teachers who do not classify the U.S. as economy as a capitalist or free market are also excluded from the curriculum. Persons who do not accept the notion that a free enterprise economic system is equitable, fair or the best system are also excluded. The economically disenfranchised, socialist, and/or communist economic systems advocates, fair trade supporters, persons interested in altering minimum wage, essentially any people that do not support a capitalist market structure are excluded. These perspectives have little credibility according to the majority of the SBOE.

Finally, the questions of power and imbalances of power between teachers and students, and among students depend upon the outlook of each individual in Texas classrooms. Students and teachers, who believe in the superiority of a capitalist system align with the political and social norms accepted by the majority of the SBOE. This assigns them a place of importance in the Texas societal hierarchy. These are the people included and accepted in democratic and citizenship education. At the same time, the students and teachers who do not support a free enterprise economic system are relegated to second class citizenry. The language in the documents reveals little, if any support for opposition to a capitalist/free enterprise economy.

The purpose of this CDA was to uncover the hidden power structures imbedded in Texas SBOE meeting minutes. One of my primary concerns involved comprehending what democratic and citizenship education represent in Texas. The meeting minutes from the Texas SBOE demonstrated a minimal commitment to including all students in democratic and citizenship education. The basic structure, function, history, and philosophical influences of the U.S. government are in place. However, I uncovered considerable preference toward conservative perspectives. Those who think, feel, look, and act differently than the majority of the Texas SBOE were under represented in the meeting minutes, or left out of the revised learning standards completely. Right now is the opportune time to address the biased viewpoints evident in the social studies curriculum. TEA issued an application for volunteers to form committees intended to "streamline' the social studies TEKS. The committees can include parents, community members, educators, and business representatives. SBOE members have the ability to review applications and nominate applicants to specific committees (Texas Education Agency, 2017). Participation from diverse viewpoints, including those who would represent the interests and concerns of urban education, are critical. Fairclough (1993) would argue that it is not possible to produce bias free policy, but policymakers, teachers, students, and the people of Tex-

as can fashion a more inclusive social studies curriculum that acknowledges the complete past of the U.S. If the curriculum is to be more inclusive, then citizenship education must become citizenship participation.

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# Advantages to Being Invisible: African American Educational Lobbyists Enact Reverse Interest Convergence

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## Abstract

This study explored the complex set of factors surrounding the world of four African American educational lobbyists by presenting their varied perspectives and meanings of how they interpret their role in education. African American educational lobbyists are at a distinct disadvantage in their ever changing social and political environments due to limited mobilized interests for education and the limits of African American representation in the legislative process. The following question guided this study: How do these African American educational lobbyists describe their influence or impact on education? *Reverse Interest Convergence* is introduced as a strategy utilized by African American educational lobbyists in their attempt to impact and influence education for Black and Brown children academically, socially and economically. Through reporting the experiences of African American educational lobbyists, we are able to hear their voices as they relate to their impact on education and thus allow them to discover their invisibility (Dubois, 1938).

*Key terms*: African American, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Interest Convergence, lobbyist, mobilized interests.

## Introduction

Educational reform dictates the neoliberal ideology and belief that "open, competitive and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state

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interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p. 350). With the confirmation of Secretary Devos, *school choice* is a neoliberal tool toward that development. According to Jessop (2002), "neoliberalism involves enhanced state intervention to roll forward new forms of governance (including state intervention) that are purportedly more suited to a market-driven (and, more recently, also allegedly knowledge-driven) globalizing economy" (p. 2).

## Background

As we view the current state of public education, there looms the growing disenfranchisement and marginalization of the United States of America's urban youth, specifically children of color – African American and Hispanic. As Donald Trump stated during the 2016 presidential election, "You live in poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, and 58% of your youth is unemployed. What the hell do you have to lose?" (as cited in Bump, 2016).

Urban children of color are voiceless and therefore have provided no input as to how to best provide "least restrictive environment" and best "free and appropriate public education" for themselves. Since they are unable to provide a voice for themselves, they are left only with limited hope that through grassroots efforts of their parents, communities, schools, school systems, and others (interest groups), they may find a voice to champion their inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. However, one cannot and does not have a voice when one's socially defined position and status renders them invisible and therefore "rationalized out of existence" (Ellison, 1980, p. 4).

## Theoretical Framework

*Critical Race Theory (CRT)* is the theoretical framework for this study. The purpose for using CRT was to find the voice of African American educational lobbyists. CRT is both an outgrowth and a separate entity of critical legal studies which began by Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman. It has a number of premises: "Racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society" (Bell, 1992, p. ix); the use of storytelling to challenge racial (and other) oppression; and interest convergence.

What makes CRT significant to this study is its view on race. In this study, African American educational lobbyists provided stories related to their experiences as a lobbyist in the Unites States and what characteristics they display in order to be successful at their craft. *Interest convergence*, the third tenet of CRT, was studied closely to determine how, when, and if interests converge or diverge when African American educational lobbyist attempt to gain access to legislators or to the policy making process.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine and interpret the life experiences and lobbying practices of four African American lobbyists in the United States and to provide a national snapshot of how legislators view the importance of education for marginalized groups. Through the experiences and perspectives of African American educational lobbyists, one is able to identify policies enacted to prohibit educational mobility for marginalized groups, particularly children of color. The following question guided this study: How do these African American educational lobbyists describe their influence or impact on education?

## Review of Literature

Blumer (1958) provides that race prejudice exists basically in a sense of group position rather than a set of feelings which members of one racial group have toward the members of another racial group – individually (p. 3). To ignore race when discussing African Americans or any other racial group would render the group invisible conceptually for it is through four types of conceptual feelings of race that "White", "Black", "African American", "Native American", and "Negro" became a way to substantiate and divide groups into positions of superiority and inferiority:

> 1) a feeling of superiority; 2) a feeling that the subordinate race is intrinsically different and alien; 3) a feeling of propriety claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage, and 4) a fear of suspicion that the subordinate race harbors designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race (Blumer, 1958, p. 4).

Through these conceptual feelings, African Americans and other racial groups, particularly people of color in general have had to endure a history of subordinate status influenced by legislative and judicial decisions which ensured that the dominant group remained dominant and those who were deemed subordinate and inferior remained dominated and marginalized.

## Historical Context

Throughout the history of American education, there have been a series of compromises made at the expense of marginalized groups in favor of those in power. A few examples are Brown v. Board of Education, 1954 and the removal of African American teachers and administrators along with school closures in African American communities; Sputnik, 1957 and the focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) and the establishment of *de-facto segregation* through magnet schools in communities of color; and the National Defense Act, NDEA, 1958 and the re-establishment of southern state control of education.

### *Powell Amendment*

One of the most significant to this study is that of the Powell Amendment in relation to school desegregation during negotiations for the National Defense Act (NDEA) in 1958. William Clayton Powell was an African American legislator who saw the passing of NDEA as an opportunity to ensure that desegregation was occurring in the southern states. The focus of the Powell Amendment was to deny federal funding to districts who had not desegregated. There were unintended but supported consequences represented by three main arguments against racial desegregation of schools in this era.

> The first was that people would not accept it and violence would result. The second was that school integration would cause white parents to leave the schools, making desegregation much more difficult. The third was that the policies would make the school life more difficult for African Americans and harm their progress (Watras, 2008, p. 353).

Although the Powell Amendment was added to a 1956 federal funding bill – which failed – it was attached in the final moments of the passing. Mobilized efforts ensued. As the final vote neared, assurances were provided that integration would not be a mandate to receive funding and that all "discriminatory language" was excluded from the bill. As a result, the Powell Amendment was taken off the bill. Admittedly, Elliot added "that the situation was tragic and that it hurt [B]lack people who needed new and improved school facilities more than [W]hites" (Urban, 2010, p.

68).

### *African American Educational Lobbying*

There is a dearth of history of African American educational lobbying. Presently, which like other aspects of lobbying, educational lobbying is limited to political and economic interests. To lobby for public education is often done in association with a larger ideal such as curriculum reform in order to enhance scientific research or to develop scientists and engineers in order to compete on the global market.

There is a segment of our "American" populace who believe that there is no immediate return save for those in private schools who are expected to be the future leaders. "Can you really buy your way to better education for these children? Do we know enough to be quite sure that we will see an actual return on the investment we make?" (Kozol, 2005, p. 89). Public education is not investible according Secretary Devos who believes that "teachers in charter and private schools are much more likely to lead the way toward better education—the kind that will actually prepare students for our current times and move us away from standardization and testing" (Rizga, 2017, p. 3).

### *Historical Parallels*

The primary reason for a lack of history is similar and not-dissimilar for the reason why there are a small percentage of African American principals – 6.9%, and teachers 10% despite 16% of all public school children being African American (NCES, 2103). What desegregation did for African American teachers and leaders is what occurred with African American legislature after 1901 where there were no Black members of Congress. Between 1887 and 1901, just five [B]lacks served in Congress (USHR, 2013). Due to rural and agrarian Blacks moving north towards the industrial cities, Black votes and representation virtually disappeared.

What furthered the lack of participation was the hostility and outright violence during this era of Jim Crow which forbade and limited the Black vote. Southern law makers, eager to resolve and reverse the post Civil War Reconstruction policies, attacked any form of legislation attempting to support or protect Black interests and rights, much to the upheaval of reconstruction supporters.

The Executive Orders signed into law by President Trump are an attempted repeat of post Civil War Reconstruction as he attempts to dismantle laws put into action by President Obama to protect marginalized groups for governmental and societal overstep. The results of the Executive Orders to ban Muslims from specific countries and require holistic deportation of illegal citizens is unearthing old "American" fears and confirmations of discrimination and segregation found during Jim Crow.

### Congressional Black Caucus

With the emergence of the Congressional Black Caucus in 1971, the important "permanent interests" of Black Americans could be addressed in addition to the advancement of a Black member in the institution (Congress) in order to push legislation, with sometimes potent results (USHR, 2013). By the end of the 1960s, with the establishment of multiple black caucuses in law, school boards, and mayoral boards, "[B]lack power" had fostered two remarkable developments in Black politics in the United States (Smith, 1981). It had contributed to the development of a black ethnic tradition and to the development of an emergent independent Black organizational structure.

Despite these emerging opportunities, African American educational lobbyists and Af-

rican American lobbyists in general are still limited in their role in education more so than other areas. This is primarily because public education remains an area viewed as having a lack of investment return and has been argued will not improve with increased resources - "the necessity of efficiency" (Bierlien, 1993). The African American educational lobbyists' primary role is to be the "Black Face" and representative of their firm or interest group with the Congressional Black Caucus and is seldom regarded in the same light and expectation as their White counterparts – "they are invisible" (Ellison, 1980).

***Lobbyist Ability to Impact and Influence***

Wolman and Thomas (1970) discussed the direct relation to access or the lack of access to Black interests, Black groups, and Black influence in federal policy. The study was to identify problems with and possible prohibitions to Black access to policy decision making. The authors found an absence of [B]lack access and effective [B]lack participation at crucial stages in the process (p. 877). The crucial stages in the policy process are innovation and formulation, legislation consideration, appropriation, and implementation (p. 32).

Gaining access at the right point in the policy making process is critical in this situation for if you are not attempting to influence policy at the right stage, often a lobbyist's efforts will not result in making any significant impacts. An example of this is that for Black groups and interests are often driven by Civil Rights at the federal level. "The principle thrust of groups like the NAACP has been towards achieving integration - particularly in the area of education." (Wolman & Thomas, 1970, p. 879) But the NAACP had not made organized efforts to influence policy at the innovative and formative stages where the initial design development and drafting of decisions are made.

Their involvement in the policy process does not occur soon enough to influence substantially the shape of the final product.

Since race was the topic of discussion in the Wolman and Thomas study, the findings of the study lent itself to a look through CRT – Critical Race Theory. One aspect of CRT was evident immediately in the study, "interest convergence" which is where the interests of Whites and people of color intersect (as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1998).

***Building Relationships***

Carpenter, Esterling, & Lazer (2004) *Friends, brokers, and transitivity: Who informs whom in Washington politics,* and Brown (2009) They *must be discontented: racial threat, black mobilization and the passage of school closing policies,* both identify and develop corollary relationships which drive policy decisions. Significantly, the purpose of the current study is to determine and discover how African American educational lobbyist impact education and economic policy decisions and provide Urban schools with access to those lobbyists who impact policy. It is imperative according to both studies that one not only knows who is talking to whom, but also why who is talking to whom.

Brown (2009) discusses a corollary pattern between policy and Black mobilization. She utilizes Blumer's (1958) theory that race prejudice is a group-based rather than individual phenomenon (p. 1392). Together, both studies prove that national policy is a group effort rather than an individual effort as there is less loss. "Mobilization theory" argues that providing information subsidizes the receiver's activities, enabling her to become active in an issue at lower cost; groups strategically provide information to those with similar interests" (as cited in Carpenter et al., 2004, p. 226).

The back drop for Brown (2009) is the

Brown vs. Board of education decision. Through the use of comparative analysis (using both quantitative data and qualitative methods), Brown (2009) was able to determine that the development of "[W]hite flight" academies and the closing of schools were not necessarily the result of racial growth in areas but of racial mobility. This further significance is in being able to identify policies enacted to prohibit racial mobility. The importance of gaining access to those who impact policy regarding urban schools is provided in this study.

## Methodology

This study uses an emergent design where the experiences of African American educational lobbyists are reported, utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) – interest convergence. This study introduces the concept of *Reverse Interest Convergence* as a strategy for African American educational lobbyists to impact and influence educational decisions. "The process for qualitative research is emergent…the key idea…is to learn about the problem or issue from the participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 175).

### *Data Sources and Evidence*

Purposeful sampling and emergent design are impossible to achieve without interaction. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible to others, providing visibility to the otherwise invisible. Qualitative research informs the invisible that they are invisible and thus provides them a voice, a new sense of reasoning – it allows them to become alive. "I myself…did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (Ellison, 1980, p. 7).

### *Participants*

This study used a semi-structured interview format of 95 questions that was informal. The participants were four African American educational lobbyists in the United States that lobby for education with a minimum of five years lobbying experience. The goal was to identify interest convergences between groups and educational policy and practice fiscally.

Pseudonyms are utilized in place of names: "Joy" the Bantering Prophetess, "Irony" the Hidden Prophetess, "Truth" the Absolute Prophet, and "Justice" the Dimensional Prophet. For example, "Irony" received her name because she made it clear that she was not a lobbyist but an advocate, the irony being she was being interviewed in a hotel lobby. The term lobby was coined as a result of interest group representatives often waiting in a hotel lobby to advocate for their particular group.

### *Systems and Communities*

The participants for this study serve their communities in which they conduct their act of lobbying in various capacities. There were three systems identified for this study – two at the state and one at the federal level. Three participants lobby at the state level and one lobbies at the federal level. Pseudonyms were provided for the systems (1, 2, & 3) and the communities (A, B, & C) in which the participants work in addition to any mentioned of cities, neighborhoods, key buildings and officers, or higher learning institutions. *Table 1* shows the participants and the system demographics in which they work. *Table 2* shows the participants and the community demographics in which they work. "Joy" and "Irony" work in the same system and in the same community found in *Table 1 and Table 2*. A system represents a state and a community represents a city.

**Table 1**
*System Demographics*

| Participant | System | Population | Land area | Ethnic Breakdown | African American Owned Business |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| "Joy"<br>"Irony" | 1 | 26,966,958 | 261,237.71 sq. miles | W – 70.4%<br>H – 37.6%<br>AA – 11.8%<br>As – 3.8% | 7.1% |
| "Truth" | 2 | 10,097,343 | 57,513.49 sq. miles | W – 59.7%<br>H – 8.8%<br>AA – 30.5%<br>As – 3.1% | 20.4% |
| "Justice" | 3 | 318,857,056 | 3,531,905.43 sq. miles | W – 77%<br>H – 17.1%<br>AA – 13.1%<br>As – 1.2% | 7.1% |

NCES (2015). Digest of education statistics. *Institute of Education Sciences*

**Table 2**
*Community Demographics*

| Participant | System | Community | Population | Land Area | Ethnic Breakdown |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| "Joy"<br>"Irony" | 1 | A | 912,791 | 297.90 sq. miles | W – 68.3%<br>H – 35.1%<br>AA – 8.1%<br>As – 6.8% |
| "Truth" | 2 | B | 456,000 | 133.15 sq. miles | W – 38.4%<br>H – 5.3%<br>AA – 54%<br>As – 3.1% |
| "Justice" | 3 | C | 658,813 | 61.05 sq. miles | W – 43.3%<br>H – 10.1%<br>AA – 49.5%<br>As – 3.9% |

NCES (2015). Digest of education statistics. *Institute of Education Sciences*

## Procedures

An informed consent form was provided to each participant. The form included the purpose of the study, their rights as research participants, asked for their willingness to be recorded, and ensured their confidentiality. Participants were interviewed using a Sony IC digital recorder. The recorder has a rechargeable battery and retractable USB drive for easy charge and safe confidential storage of recorded data.

Observation notes were made of the environment in which the interviews took place and about the surroundings. Participants were not observed in the act of lobbying, however. During the interview, I documented facial expressions, smiles, body language, clothing, environment, and dialogue prior to and after the interview, including foods and small talk conversation.

### *Coding and Emerging Themes*

As I collected the data, I immediately began identifying potential codes and themes. During the transcription process, I listened to the interviews again attempting to catch any nuances that potentially would not show up on the transcription. A human transcriber did the transcriptions. I was provided a total of four transcripts (1 from each participant) totaling 210 pages of collected interview data. All transcriptions were left as is without making any edits or revisions to the manuscript so as to not taint the meaning of the data. "Some historians and linguists regret the practice of editing our speaker's hesitations, repetitions, and unfinished thoughts, and encourage transcribing practices that will "convey the cadences of speech as well as its content." (Ritchie, 2003, p. 68)

### *Research Design*

I used the Constant Comparative Method (CCM), Narrative Analysis, and Interpretive Analysis. The goal was to identify interest convergences between groups and educational policy and practice fiscally. This study reviewed positions of power in relation to meritocracy, desegregation and integration noting that although the U.S. is a diverse nation of immigrants those in power to encourage legislatures to fund difference making policies are of the mainstream group. There is minimal representation of the diverse interests of the U.S. diverse population.

## Trustworthiness and Credibility

In order to establish trustworthiness and credibility for my study, I established positionality and triangulated the emerging information and themes from the collected data. I first established my positionality as the interviewer and researcher in relation to the research environment and participants. I then ensured reliability of collected data by checking transcripts to make sure they did not contain obvious mistakes during transcription (Cresswell, 2009). After the interviews were transcribed, I began the analysis and conducted follow up interviews, including having participants respond to data or concepts mentioned in the other participant interviews.

### *Postitionality*

Positionality must be studied and identified from multiple vantage points: the researcher, the African American educational lobbyists individually, the African American educational lobbyists in comparison to one another, and the African American educational lobbyists in comparison to the researcher. Therefore, my role as an assistant principal during the study provided me no insider status nor did the fact that I am African American like the participants in this study provide me any insider status.

Insider scholars have been characterized as total insiders, where researchers share multiple identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, and class) or profound experiences (wars, family membership; and partial insiders, who share a single identity (or a few identities) with a degree of distance or detachment form the community (Chavez, 2008). My being an assistant principal at the time of the study and currently a high school principal with no political affiliations or any connections to the lobbying field or politics makes me an outsider in this study.

### *Member Checking*

After the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed. The data was analyzed. As themes began to emerge along with categories, information that appeared contradictory or not mentioned by all participants was collected. The analyzed data and information was then shared with the participants for reaction, response and clarification.

### *Triangulation*

Putten and Nolen (2010) accomplished triangulation through sequential data analysis, comparing findings and validating emerging themes, making corrections, and identifying areas of further analysis. Triangulation for this study was established by collecting data from multiple sources – four African American educational lobbyists – on the same topics. Furthermore, multiple analysis was conducted on the transcribed interviews including the constant comparative method, resulting in a comparison of themes with one interview and then a comparison of themes with two interviews and then with three and the fourth interview.

## Plan for Analysis

During the reading and re-reading of the four manuscripts and then comparing the manuscripts to themselves then with one another, the constant comparison method provided opportunity to identify emerging themes and then compare them to another. While coding, the themes were compared to previous themes in the same manuscript and in the other manuscripts to define categories. Additionally, in doing so, a comparison of themes across analysis allows for multi-data sources, resulting in recurrent events.

## Findings

### How do These African American Educational Lobbyists Describe Their Influence or Impact on Education?

Some may infer that African American educational lobbying interests are entirely that of African American interests. This is often the case with any person of color who is in the position to impact or affect change. Societal structures tend to influence this assumption seeming that whenever there is an issue impacting African Americans negatively, there is a *Black face* present to speak against thus perpetuating a sense of militancy and opposition to American values.

### *The Necessity for Advocacy Among the African American Community*

Being the only federal African American educational lobbyist in the group of four, "Justice" the Dimensional Prophet made mention of the "necessity for advocacy among the African American community" when describing his influence or impact on education. He lamented the following when asked "How he felt being an African American impacted whether or not his view was solicited on policy matters, specifically education":

> …the other thing that's con- that's uh, concerning to me Aaron that you need to know is that um, and that's -- you're well aware of -- that there is not a whole lot of

> African American lobbyists out there. I mean, I can count them on my hand. And, to consistently, consistently be -- be one of the very few African American lobbyists in a room and even more so, African American male in a room very *disconcerting. And, it -- it doesn't matter where I'm at -- whether it's a committee hearing, whether it's um, a uh, uh, a education group that's sponsoring a briefing, I can look out in the audience and only can see a small handful of us. Very disconcerting. And, they're talking about policies like closing the achievement gap, like -- like providing effective teachers, like, you know, working in the inner city areas, and making sure that effective teachers are in high needs schools that uh, directly affect us and that there is only but White people talking about these things. And, that there are not Black people on these panels that are not testifying, that are not um, you know, getting the coverage in the media on policies that directly affect our communities.

He goes on to discuss the disproportionate amount of African Americans running for office, stating again "We are just not there". The significance in this admission, rather than finding, is that the literature refers to the underrepresentation of African American interests. When Milbrath (1963) wrote his seminal work, *The Washington Lobbyists*, he admitted that a limitation to his study was that there was person of color interviewed nor than any person of color participates. His study included interviews and a survey. There were none available to add to the study - hence, the significance of these findings in sharing how the African American lobbyists describe their influence or ability to impact education.

The African American educational lobbyist's ability to influence and impact education hinges on the ability to impact the entire process, *the system*. One recognizes that the sole purpose of the African American educational lobbyist should not be to advocate for the needs of African American students alone. However, if everyone is advocating for everyone; how can we achieve equity? "Irony" the Hidden Prophet claims the following:

> Uh, most lobbyists I know, who are in education, do not lobby for African American students. Just money. And, the resistance is perceived to be stronger when lobbying for African American, Black serving institutions than for anybody -- for somebody else.

"Truth" the Absolute Prophet shares this testimony:

> There's some African Americans, like okay, yeah, I don't want to be known for Black lobbyist, I'm a lobbyist. Okay, or I don't see color. Uh -- uh -- some will say they don't see color.

To claim not to see color is a denial of the existence of the uniqueness that the person of color has. Again, I pose the question, if everyone is advocating for everyone; how can we achieve equity? I pose the question again because advocacy should be based on needs. It has been revealed in this study and in the literature that one cannot approach a White decision maker with the need to ask for funds or allocations specifically for African America children, ie. Powell Amendment. According to "Justice" the Dimensional Prophet,

> …in order to be effective, in order to get an audience, in order to get time before a legislator, you really got -- you really have to package your issue as an issue that will affect all kids.

"Justice" the Dimensional Prophet attempts to explain,

> It's kinda difficult to explain, I -- I mean, a lot of it has to do with, I mean, racism is still there, you know, bias is -- racial bias is still there, I not -- you know, I'm not

> ignorant and I'm not uh, I know, you know, that it's still out there, but, it -- policymakers -- most of the policy makers are White. Most of the policymakers that are White are in leadership positions, whether it's chamber leadership or commun- or committee leadership. You can't go to them with a issue that just affects the African American community, because it's -- they're just going to not consider it a priority, not gonna have it -- they're not gonna make it a priority. If you can package the issue that affects the African American community as an issue that affects all kids or at least kids that are disadvantaged, it will increase the chances that the policymaker will view this as a priority.

"Irony" the Hidden Prophetess adds that the superintendent, whom she deems is essentially the lobbyist for the school district has to package his proposal using the purposive lobbying strategy to the legislature in order to secure funding to impact achievement:

> A superintendent cannot go to a legislator and say I need more money for my Black student programs. Because we're hemorrhaging Black male students. And, I need more money targeted for them so that my board can approve programs for us and our schools to do specialized training for our African Americans. In the modern climate, political climate, that's a non starter.

Her solution:

> …you can hire me to go have that conversation. And, then I can lump you in with several other schools. And -- and get a pot of money.

The findings show that three of the four participants in this study are clear that their interests are more than African American educational interests despite an apparent passion each voiced during their responses to educational questions. Only "Irony" the Hidden Prophetess expressed that her entire lobbying interest is Black and Brown children, "minority population children".

From their responses in describing their influence or impact on education came eight sub themes: Community, Education, Learning, Occupation, Influences, Funding, Power, and Access. The continual reemergence of these themes all appeared to the tied to African American achievement through advocacy, lumping achievement, navigating biases, packaging deals, and mobilizing interests. Through these reemerging themes came a new finding – *reverse interest convergence.*

## Reverse Interest Convergence

In order to mobilize interests, which focus on African American achievement, the opposite has to occur - *reverse interest convergence*. Interest convergence is when the mainstream group accepts the marginalized group proposition only to benefit the mainstream group; reverse interest convergence is when the marginalized group accepts the mainstream group proposition to the greater benefit of the marginalized group versus doing so to assimilate or accommodate.

## Reverse Interest Convergence to Mobilizing Interests for Education

Recognizing that certain tactics such as networking and grassroots and grasstops advocacy may be recognized as *purposive lobbying* and potentially *hegemonic* in nature, when the African American educational lobbyist's interests converge with others in order to benefit that of African American educational interests, we have *reverse interest convergence.* It is the giving in to the mainstream purposely to ensure the greater outcome for the marginalized. To ensure that is the case, where the convergence ultimately benefits African Ameri-

can educational interests in the form of equitable funding and additional resources such as technology or books for new libraries, care must be taken to ensure that the end is justifying the means.

"Irony" the Hidden Prophetess uses the pigeonholing or perception that she only can work with African American children as her niche. She has made it hers. She accepted that reality and decided that is exactly what she will do. Seeing both these statements as *reverse interest convergence* would have one to consider the mind set and the purpose of the interest going in to the negotiations and consider the pre-expected outcomes they are hoping to achieve. Converging interests will allow for a planned "reverse" convergence with the goal of benefitting the primary group versus doing so to accommodate other's disinterest. Under reverse interest convergence are three tenets:

> Tenet 1 - Purposely advocating only for African American and Latino children
>
> Tenet 2 – Purposely negotiating pre-designed outcomes
>
> Tenet 3 - Knowingly accepting assumptions in order to gain advantage.

All are utilized interchangeable and strategically to ensure the expected outcome is achieved and that the ability to influence and impact educational policy is sustained.

***Tenet 1 - Purposely advocating only for African American and Latino children***

"Irony" the Hidden Prophetess admits her primary purpose of advocacy is for the benefit of African American educational interests, purposely advocating only for African American or Latino school children:

> I carved out a little niche…when you see me coming a Black or Brown child has been hurt… I'll say it like this, if you're in the camp of doing it on behalf of students, you think that you're really serving -- especially, minority students, uh, there are -- there are lobbyists out there who happen to be Black. I'm very proud of being a Black lobbyist. {LG} Not the same thing in my book. Uh, I am community focused and student driven. And so for that reason, when you see me coming you know I'm crying foul if there's something that a policy being advocated or a rule being debated, uh, that I see having an adverse impact, intentionally or not intentionally on students of color.

***Tenet 2 – Purposely negotiating pre-designed outcomes***

"Justice" the Absolute Prophet shares that strategically packaging deals as a deal to impact all student achievement is an effective way of ensuring African American achievement is impacted positively, purposefully negotiating pre-designed outcomes:

> In order to be effective to get an audience, you really have to package your issue as an issue that will affect all kids…. If you can package the issue that affects the African American community as an issue that affects all kids or at least kids that are disadvantaged, it will increase the chances that the policymaker will view this as a priority.

***Tenet 3 - Knowingly accepting assumptions in order to gain advantage.***

"Joy" the Bantering Prophetess uses perceptions about her to her advantage. As earlier noted, "Joy" the Bantering Prophetess is a "Triple Asset". She is female, African American and a lawyer. However, similarly to "Justice" and "Truth", the assumption is that she will only lobby for certain interests. By knowingly accepting assumptions to gain an advantage, "Joy" is able to use this tenet of "reverse interest convergence" to the benefit of African American achievement:

> "if you want me for my expertise, I can talk to anybody. And, that's not related to, you know, what color they are, what race they are. Um, now sometimes that may be a benefit, and that's gonna be a little bit of extra because I may have some insight that you don't know"… you pick up the phone and the staff doesn't even ask questions, they just put the member on the phone. That is not -- you know, and I'm not talkin' bout with another, you know, African American legislator or something like that, I'm just talking about in general.

"Reverse interest convergence" in another context may be viewed as hegemonic, self fulfilling prophecy which allows for failure to occur, a fear of freedom pointed out by Freire (1993). However, when the tactics are purposeful, they cease to be hegemonic and become advantages.

## Discussion

The lack of access for African American educational lobbyists is largely due to the lack of political mobility of the African American constituency. "At the innovative and formative stages of policy process, relatively few [B]lack leaders have sufficient personal prestige or professional status to guarantee their inclusion, formally or informally" (Wolman and Thomas, 1970, p. 893). Further research literature reveals that African American lobbyists in general also lacked credibility, which intern hinders their ability to engage in the process in a timely manner.

## How do These African American Educational Lobbyists Describe Their Ability to Impact and Influence?

### *Focusing on African American Education Achievement*

When focusing on African American Achievement, the ability to impact and influence is limited to mitigating factors similar to those that halt African American education achievement found in the literature despite describing their ability to influence, positively (Haynie, 2002; Milner, 2002; Jaffe, 1992; Wolman & Thomas, 1970). The African American educational lobbyists in the study all share the ability to lobby for African American interests successfully with the support of their firms. They have the ability to lobby successfully because they have built upon the credibility they all share.

Their credibility took time to develop however. Each participant has over 15 years of lobbying experience. A new lobbyist would not have the same success. Because of the experience they had, the participants in the study are able to garner the access and the ability to influence and impact. Starting out that was not the case.

### *Reverse Interest Convergence*

There are three identified tenets of reverse interest convergence that emerged from this stud in which the marginalized group accepts the mainstream group proposition to the greater benefit of the marginalized group versus doing so to assimilate or accommodate:

Tenet 1 - Purposely advocating only for African American and Latino children

Tenet 2 – Purposely negotiating predesigned outcomes

Tenet 3 - Knowingly accepting assumptions in order to gain advantage.

Interest convergence is when a mainstream group accepts the marginalized group proposition only to the economic benefit of the marginalized group. Reverse interest convergence is the opposite; those marginalized accept the mainstream proposition to the greater economic and resource benefit of the marginalized group. The African American educational lobbyists in this study accomplished this

through purposeful strategy versus doing so to assimilate or accommodate.

Although viewed as a purposive tactic that I deemed detrimental earlier in the study, packaging an issue holistically in order to benefit African American children mostly would be an example of *reverse interest convergence*. One may consider the above mentioned tenets as ways to maintain status quo or to the benefit of the African American educational lobbyists themselves; however, all four mention those tactics and strategies as ways they have learned to navigate the system, ways they utilize the system they learned when performing their acts of lobbying, and ways they recognize how the system becomes an impact factor in influencing policy.

Both "Justice" the Dimensional Prophet and "Irony" the Hidden Prophet admitted to using the packaging approach to benefit African American achievement interests while "Truth" and "Joy" accept their marginalization and use it to their advantage. All four share the strategy of negotiating with a plan for predesigned outcomes, forcing a win-win for those they represent. Recognizing that this tactic is identified as purposive lobbying and potentially *hegemonic* in nature, when the African American educational lobbyist's interests converge with others in order to benefit that of African American educational interests, we have reverse interest convergence.

To ensure that is the case, where the convergence ultimately benefits African American educational interests in the form of equitable funding and additional resources such as technology or books for new libraries, care must be taken to ensure that the end is justifying the means. As in the case of "Irony" the Hidden Prophet who decided to use the pigeonholing or perception that she only can work with African American children as her niche. She has made it hers. She accepted that reality and decided that is exactly what she will do.

Seeing both these statements as "*reverse interest convergence* would have one to consider the mind set and the purpose of the interest going in to the negotiations and consider the pre-expected outcomes they are hoping to achieve. In other words, knowing this term should allow for a planned "reverse" convergence with the goal of benefitting the primary group versus doing so to accommodate other's disinterest.

## Recommendations

This study provides a snapshot of the incompleteness of the African American educational lobbyist. According to Birnbaum (2006) very few African Americans get the experience they need to become professional lobbyists. The number of African American lobbyists in general are low, which makes the number of African American educational lobbyists even lower. As of 2009, there were approximately 40,000 lobbyists at the state and federal levels and 40,500 in 2014 according to Lobbyinfo.com. The total number of registered federal lobbyists was 29,702. Of these 29,702, only 200 were African American PoliticalMoneyLine.com (2013). However, according to Fang (2014) the number of registered federal lobbyists in 2013 dipped to 12,281, the lowest since 2002. There is a need for the specific development of African American lobbyists. Three recommendations to fulfill this need are as follows.

1. Mentoring for African American Lobbyists
2. Providing Legislative Process and Advocacy Courses
3. Developing Internship Opportunities in Lobbying Fields of Choice

African American lobbyists need to fill this need as mentors, providing internships and assisting with the course development in

the legislative process and advocacy. Freire (1993) states, "The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption" (p. 36). The oppressed in this study are the African American educational lobbyists as indicated by lobbying factors they must avoid in order to be effective, gain credibility, and focus on African American educational achievement.

If the oppressor is doing the mentoring, providing the internships and developing the courses, the oppressed remain oppressed because they will be developed according to the perception of the oppressor. Only when one knows that they are incomplete can they become complete (Freire, 1993). It is through the snapshot of incompleteness that the recommendations for African American educational lobbyist's development can be enacted.

## Implications for Future Study

"Justice" the Dimensional Prophet lamented on multiple occasions that "educators are not a part of the process and our often left out of the decision making despite decisions impacting them the most when education policy is debated and enacted". Educators of color voices are not being heard. Therefore, recommendations for future study include hearing the voices of educators of color and their role in advocating for education and a study using LatinCrit Theory to determine the interest convergence related to educational policy and advocacy for undocumented and migrant students.

## Conclusion

This study examined and interpreted the life experiences and lobbying practices of four African American educational lobbyists in the United States and their positions of power in relation to meritocracy, desegregation and integration. To gain access in order to impact and influence educational policy, African American educational lobbyist must plan for a purposeful outcome through packaging of policy that provide for the group in order for the greater benefit of the marginalized, they must purposefully find opportunities to advocate for children of color, and they must accept their marginalization and pigeonholing as an advantage – it makes them invisible. "I became alive once I discovered my invisibility" (Ellison, 1980, p. 7)

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# The National Journal of Urban Education & Practice

Volume 11, Issue 2, Fall 2017

i. **Editorial Review Board**

ii. **Call for Manuscripts**

iv. **Call for Proposals—Guest Editorship**

v. **Editor's Message**

**Table of Contents**

1 **Schooling for Social Justice: Approaches, Experiences, and Perspectives from Teachers Who Know How**
*Gregory L. Samuels*

14 **Keeping the "Faith": The Impact of Sociocultural Consciousness on The Literacy Instruction of African American Male Students**
*Tiffany R. Wheeler*

26 **Hearing the Voices of Married African American Mothers as They Descibe Their Son's Experiences with White Teachers in the Urban Secondary Schools**
*Somia Marrero and Otoniel Marrero*

39 **Rewriting Standards, Not History: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Texas State Board of Education's Social Studies Standards Revisions**
*Abbie Strunc*

52 **Advantages to Being Invisible: African American Educational Lobbyists Enact Reverse Interest Convergence**
*Aaron J. Griffen*