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Effective language arts teachers of urban african american middle school students in the greater detroit area

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EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS OF URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE GREATER DETROIT AREA

by

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DEDICATION

To LaCretia Ciers

A student in my first grade class did not meet the requirements for promotion. As a new teacher, I failed her as a teacher, and it has caused me great pain to reflect on how I did not meet her diverse needs. I dedicate this research to her, and the millions of students like her, that sit quietly, and are never empowered to have a voice. Teachers have tremendous power to help or hurt students. As an urban educator, it is my quest to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The sadness that I still see in her eyes has driven me to seek out what effective teachers do, in spite of the wide range of learners and the perceived obstacles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am forever grateful to the support of my family and friends. My parents David and Gwendolyn Walker have been instrumental in their support, encouragement and babysitting skills with Faith and Hope.

To my children Faith and Hope, who keep me grounded and focused on being a mom. To my brother Nate, who may not know that his impromptu speech at my last graduation, and his belief in me to "go all the way" started my journey, and more importantly my believing in me. To my brother Dave, your support means more to me than you know-texting me prayers and jokes to give me a laugh.

I cannot begin to thank my "study buddy" Dr. Sherrell Hobbs. I could not have finished without your prayers, and persistent insistence of me producing-thank you!

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Thank you to the focus group participants. Ordinary teachers that achieve extraordinary results daily! It was an honor to sit among you and learn what it takes to be GREAT! Teachers who make a difference daily in the lives of the students they service. I am forever grateful for allowing me to hear your

wonderful stories of excellence. The sharing renewed my spirit and reaffirmed why I began this crusade to teach.

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> Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete?
> Proving nature's law is wrong, it learned to walk without having feet.
> Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams, it learned to breathe
> fresh air. Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one
> else ever cared.
>
> <div align="right">Tupac Shakur</div>

This poem by the late Tupac Shakur illustrates the possible in a seemly impossible time. Public education has had a storm brewing for some time now. The storm can be categorized as failure, and disappointment for African American students. The debate continues to persist on the underachievement of African American students. On the eve of massive layoffs, declining enrollment around the city and record numbers of school closures, the Greater Metropolitan Detroit area is under attack. But there is a group of effective teachers that stand ready to wage war and do battle with whom ever for the sake of their students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate why some teachers of African American students in the greater Detroit area are successful despite the perceived obstacles embedded in low-performing school districts. I was interested in learning about those experiences, practices, beliefs, attitudes, and understandings that may have contributed to the success of these teachers. The study focused on 6 middle school language arts teachers in urban schools in and around Detroit. Middle school is viewed as a unique ground for researchers.

Middle school students are vulnerable to multiple risks. For example, the process of social alienation that ultimately leads students to drop out of high

school often starts during the middle grades. It is between the ages of 10 through 14 when students engage or disengage from school and learning.

Transition to middle school has been associated with a decline in academic achievement, performance, motivation, and self-perception (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2002). Since the inception of No Child Left Behind a great deal of emphasis has been directed toward early interventions; specifically in reading instruction. Research suggests that public schools have the potential to positively impact achievement outcomes (Torgeson, 2003). As we wait for the outcomes of these early interventions we are loosing nearly 9 million students that are currently attending middle school in the United States (Juvonen, 2004).

This study focused on middle-school language arts teachers who are particularly charged with improving the literacy skills of adolescents. Adolescents that struggle with reading and writing develop a wide range of negative coping skills to compensate for their inability to read fluently such as disruptive classroom behavior (Strickland, 2001). Even with effective early interventions, many students continue to need intensive reading instruction beyond the primary grades. Focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews allowed teachers to share classroom practices and strategies that work for them and their urban students.

Sharing and thoughtful reflection on successful (an on occasion, not so successful) classroom practices have the potential to create on-going and sustained dialogue among educators about particular factors and teaching

practices that account for the success of teachers who teach urban African American students in the greater Detroit area. Turning a critical lens on the experiences of effective urban teachers provided new insights in improving

urban education for African American students and sustain the efforts in a way that significantly impact the African American community. Urban teaching can be described as a dynamic intervention process. Teachers must become strategic in their methods to engage learners in a way that will foster achievement. To say the least teaching in large urban areas has been described as challenging. Teachers encounter a number of obstacles that range from budget shortfalls to extreme poverty and violence (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The growing unemployment rates and record numbers of home foreclosures and job losses have had a direct impact on public education. As our student populations become more diverse and the poverty rates increase. It is important to embrace understandings that will contribute to the success of large urban districts, particularly districts that serve African American students.

The greater Detroit area provided an extraordinary canvas for this research to occur. This area is the most racially segregated in the country. As the growing population of the United States becomes more diverse, our communities remain racially segregated and segregation continues to extract a high price in economics and social terms. A class action suit was filed in August 1970, by parents of students in Detroit Public Schools and the Detroit Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) against the Michigan State Board of Education and various other state officials of the state of Michigan. The suit alleged that the Detroit school system was racially

segregated as a result of policy, in particular, a state statue known as Act 48, which allowed for the state of Michigan to unconstitutionally interfere with a plan to desegregate schools, in direct violation of the United States Constitution. The District Court ruled that the Detroit Board of Education submit desegregation plans for the Detroit-area schools only. The court also ordered the state to submit desegregation plans for a three-county metropolitan area, excluding 85 outlying school districts in the three counties because there was no claim that these outlying schools had committed constitutional violations.

Subsequently, the District Court found that the plans submitted by the Detroit Board of Education were inadequate to accomplish desegregation. In addition, the court determined that schools were not allowed to deny students their constitutional rights simply based on school district lines. As a result, the court appointed a panel to create a desegregation plan that would apply to the Detroit Public Schools as well as 53 of the 85 outlying schools.

Respondents appealed, and the Court of Appeal affirmed, in part, the decision of the District Court that a plan for desegregation in the Detroit schools and the 53 outlying schools was appropriate. However, the Court of Appeals remanded the decision to exclude the remaining outlying schools and ordered that all school districts be included in the plan so that the impact of implementing such a plan on these schools could be examined.

On a petition for certiorari to the United States Supreme Court, the Court reversed and remanded the decisions of the District Court and Court of Appeals stating that the decision of these courts were based solely on discrimination found only in the Detroit schools and that no evidence of discrimination in the

outlying schools was found. The facts did not permit a federal court to impose a remedy for a specific school area on a district wide basis. The lower courts were directed to issue a decree to create a desegregation plan in the Detroit area schools. Milliken v. Bradley, 418 U.S. 717 (1974), was an important United States Supreme Court case. It was a strong effort to desegregate the most racially segregated area in our country in the aftermath of the Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) decision. The decision of the Court had a resounding affect in the Detroit schools and the racial demographics of the city and its surrounding suburbs. Desegregation of schools was often the catalyst for "white flight"- white flight has had a dramatic impact on education. For example, Baltimore's Clifton Park Junior High School had 2,023 Whites and 34 African American just after desegregation; 10 years later it had 2,037 African American and 12 Whites (Friedman, 2002).

The efforts to desegregate schools in the metropolitan Detroit area left the city and neighboring cities even more racially segregated. Stephen Higley (2008) depicts how the city and the surrounding areas remain racially segregated.

City	White	Black	Other
Birmingham	96.1%	.9%	3.0%
Bloomfield	90.7%	1.6%	7.7%
Detroit	12.3%	81.6%	6.2%
Farmington Hills	82.7%	6.9%	10.1%
Highland Park	4.1%	93.4%	2.4%
Inkster	25.1%	67.5%	7.4%
Novi Township	94.8%	0.0%	5.2%
Oak Park	47.5%	46.5%	7.0%
Pontiac	39.1%	47.9%	13.0%
Royal Oak	94.8%	1.5%	3.7%
Royal Oak Township	22.7%	71.5%	5.8%
Southfield	38.8%	54.2%	6.9%
Troy	82.3%	2.1%	15.6%

(Privilege, Power and Race by Stephen Higley, 2000)

Urban districts were chosen for this study because the urban districts across the country face a myriad of challenges. For example, in recent years Detroit has had several reform efforts and they have all failed; the district has had a record number of superintendents, and the largest number of school closings in Detroit's history. Several districts in Michigan are now under an Emergency Financial Manger due to climbing deficits. Detroit has closed sixty-five schools accounting for nearly a quarter of the buildings in the district since 2005 (www.wsws.org, 2007). Now with an emergency financial officer at the helm another forty schools have been identified to close by June 2011 (www.mde.org, 2011).

Reform efforts that failed did not take into account the voices of teachers. A vast majority of teachers have limited roles in shaping school and building level decisions that impact their experience in schools (Emerick, 2007). Teacher voice is critical to curriculum development and school improvement. Linda Darling-Hammond explains that when prescriptive policies are created without teacher input, a school's ability to meet the needs of students and parents is reduced (Darling-Hammond, 1997). The changing face of our students, parents and staff warrant input from teachers as we rise to meet urban challenges.

Data collected in this study may assist in better preparing teachers through the use of specific strategies, professional trainings, environmental factors, classroom practices and administrative supports needed to achieve successful outcomes for African American students. Furthermore, these case analyses have the potential to inform theories regarding the education of African American urban students as well as contribute to best practices in education. Its was my intent that this study may contribute to: (a) Better understanding the influence of teachers on African American students in urban districts; (b) Better understanding the influence of teachers on African American students in non-urban districts; (c) better understanding the influence of teachers on students in urban districts from ethnic backgrounds other than African American. It is my hope that this research may inspire teachers in impoverished, low-performing schools to persevere and help African American students to succeed in school that embraces high achievement regardless of stigmas that may be associated with a low-performing school district.

Statement of the Problem

Public school systems throughout the United States have failed minority students, specifically African American students. Disproportionate under-achievement of African American students may suggest that teacher effectiveness with this student population has been limited (Howard, 2002). Effectively teaching African American students continues to be one of the most pressing issues facing educators. Despite the plethora of school restructuring and educational reform efforts, the continuing underachievement of African American students remains a consistent occurrence in U. S. schools, specifically urban public schools (National Assessment of Educational Programs [NAEP] 2004). Challenges currently facing America's urban public schools illustrate the need to examine and carefully craft possible solutions. Though there are exceptions, America's urban school districts fail to educate too many of the youngsters they serve. Forty of the nation's 100 largest school districts graduate fewer than sixty percent of the students they enroll as high school freshmen (Rotherham & Mead, 2007). Fourth-graders from large cities score fifteen points lower on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading than their non-urban peers (NAEP, 2005). This is a national crisis with serious economic, social and moral implications.

One in seven American students is currently enrolled in a large urban school district (Great City School, 2002). Our economic growth and standard of living depend on the skills of these future workers. Urban enrollment presents a demographic shift. During the twentieth century, urban schools did not need to educate all kids well to give them an opportunity at a middle class life in an

economy largely built around manufacturing. However, failure to obtain a high-quality education can have dire implications for the economic prospects of today's youth. But it also matters for states and nations because in today's hypercompetitive and globalized marketplace, standards of living are keenly tied to high skill and high knowledge jobs.

Although some gains have been made in the education of African American students over the past 40 years, fewer gains have been made in other areas affecting their ability to learn. For example, research has shown that despite lower average family incomes and less parental education, African American 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds (53%) participate in preschool programs at a higher rate than European Americans (44%; Patterson, 1997). Today more African American males are in jail than in college (Ladson-Billings, 1999) and African American students are 2 to 5 times more likely to be suspended from school than White students.

Compelling research indicates that African American students are overly represented in special education classes. The dropout rate for inner-city African American students in Michigan is 36% and rising. Although graduating from high school does not guarantee a successful life, a life without a high school diploma is sure to lead to an unproductive life both economically and socially. A good education was once viewed as the only way African American people could achieve a better life. Much has been written about how schools could respond to the needs of African American students and how teachers could alter curricula and teaching practices to meet those needs. Curriculum is at the center of education (Cohen and Ball 2000). With the introduction of standards-based

reform, teachers find it increasingly important to have a curriculum that is aligned with state standards and assessments as well as professional development that supports them in teaching. They also seek a curriculum that is sufficiently detailed to offer them guidance and options without confining them to rigid patterns of pedagogy. Researchers suggest that teachers who teach African American students should include a culturally sensitive approach that will build upon what students bring to the classroom (Howard, 2001).

Lev Vygostky (1931), a Russian social psychologist, was one of the first theorists to embrace this notion of culture and cognition. He made the case that humans use "various psychological tools, such as reading and writing to aid in their thinking and behavior. He called these tools "signs." He added, "We cannot understand human thinking without examining the signs that cultures provide" (pp. 39-40). Because cultural signs have a major impact on cognition, in order to rectify the academic underachievement of African American student's, educators should recognize the cultural signs that the students bring to the classroom and design more compatible course work and instruction (Au & Jordan, 1981; Foster, 1993; Heath, 1983; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers can create lessons that are more relevant, rigorous, and produce results.

Significantly, African Americans students in early elementary school perform at about the same level as their European American counterparts on most tests of mental and social development. However, by fourth grade, the academic achievement of African American students lags behind that of European American students. The 2004 and 2006 NAEP data revealed that the majority of African American students in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades have not

reached grade-level competence in reading, mathematics, history, and geography. Less than 25% of African American students are at or above grade-level proficiency in these subject matters.

Even before they enter school, at least one third of the nation's children are at risk for school failure, with most of these youngsters living in poverty. Although education cannot solve all the societal problems that poor, African American children face, it remains an important and powerful weapon against poverty and crime (Strickland, 1994). Teachers' ability to help these children become literate can have a profound effect on their lives as well as on society in general. For these children, the successful application of what is known about teaching and learning of literacy becomes even more important (Perkins, 2004)).

No Child Left Behind Legislation

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is an example of the latest federal legislation to bring substantial changes to K-12 education. This legislation promised an important shift in efforts at all levels to improve the quality of public education (Rittner & Lucas, 2003). "It is built on four common-sense pillars: accountability for results; and emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research; expanded parental options; and expanded local control and flexibility" (US Department of Education, 2002). Thompson (2002) added that NCLB seeks to close the persistent achievement gap through a multifaceted and comprehensive approach that promises to (a) achieve excellence through high standards and accountability, (b) make literacy a priority, (c) improve teacher quality, and (d) improve science and mathematics instruction. Within this era of educational accountability as the main thrust of educational reform efforts and endorsed by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, urban inner city schools are expected to be subjected to repercussions of accountability systems, including annual publication of low performing schools, a majority of which are inner city schools. Although well intended, NCLB has had little impact on the achievement of African American students. Most urban schools fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP; Michigan Department of Education, 2008). Extensive help is required to improve student achievement in these schools. Preliminary evidence indicates states and districts often are slow to aggressively improve or overhaul failing schools as a result of the lack of funding needed to meet federal mandates of NCLB (Brady, 2003).

Even though the NCLB legislation requires schools nationwide to implement rigorous systems for accountability, other factors must be addressed when considering how to reform low-performing school districts. Dandridge, Edwards, & Pleasants (2000) pointed out that drug and alcohol abuse, high crime rates, incessant violence and extreme poverty are just a few negative environmental factors that result in challenging educational circumstances for urban inner city schools.

Michigan Urban School Districts

Just 31.9% of Detroit students graduate in four years, according to the first major study in Michigan conducted using a method now mandated by the federal government. The 2006 study, conducted by the, Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, examined the number of ninth-graders in Detroit and the state as a whole who left high school with a diploma after four years. The study began in fall 2002 and in each subsequent year through June 2006. Detroit has lost 40,000 students across the district over the past decade, failing from a peak of close to 141,000 in 1994 to the current 117,000 (National Association of Educational Progress, 2004). According to school district estimates, the student population is expected to be less than 100,000 for the 2008-2009 academic years. The last time the city school enrollment was that low was in the early 1920s.

The problem that needs to be addressed in an ongoing, sustained manner is why students are leaving Detroit schools at such a rapid rate. The problems in the Detroit school system are a direct function of the decay of the city's infrastructure, resulting from decades of economic decline. Once the car

manufacturing capital of the world, the "Motor City" is now dotted with closed auto plants and empty spaces where they once stood. This decrease in manufacturing has resulted in a corresponding decrease in population, from close to 2 million in the 1950s to now below 900,000 today. Detroit has lost the most people of any other city in the United States (www.census.gov). In 1998, a city consultant found 36,000 abandoned structures in Detroit, 8.8% of the total units in the city, of which 10,000 were considered "open and dangerous." No other major city in America has suffered the same degree of decay and devastation (Reese, 2006).

Population that remains in the city has become more marginalized. Michigan has the highest official unemployment rate of any state, climbing to 15.3% in September 2009. National unemployment rate is 9.5 % (United States Department of Labor, 2009). Economists expect Michigan's rate will rise to double digits in future months if the domestic auto industry's financial troubles fail to improve (Michigan Live, 2008).Within the Detroit city limits, jobless rates are in the double digits, with youths experiencing the highest unemployment rates. Further, Michigan has been hurt by the weakening of the national economy. Over the past four months, the state has lost 64,000 jobs. Jobs that remain are increasingly within the service sector. In midtown Detroit, approximately 40% of the population was earning under $10,000; with almost 75% in that same area making less than $30,000 annually. Better-paying auto jobs have been replaced with jobs in retail, fast food, and other low-paid industries. Many workers must travel to the suburbs to find jobs, at small manufacturing plants. Low employment rate and economic decline of the city has had a significant affect on the public education systems in the Metro Detroit area.

City population is declining, student enrollment is decreasing, state and federal requirements are becoming more rigorous, most schools are not making AYP, the city's dwindling tax base cannot sustain the present school configuration, and as a result, schools districts have no choice but to close schools. Many parents, concerned over the perceived deterioration of the public schools, have enrolled their children in public school academies (charter schools). Many of those who can afford to, have relocated to the suburbs, enrolled their children in public school districts outside of the city, or enrolled their children in private schools. As a result of these combined factors, nearly 30,000 students have left the Detroit school system in the last eight years (2000-2008). Of the students who remain in the public system, 90% are African American and more than 70% come from families living below the official poverty level.

However, even in a district with a unique set of challenges, some teachers have been successful. Often unnoticed in the plethora of negative media reporting and empirical research are those teachers who help students excel in districts where educational resources are considered deplorable. Contemporary educators agree that teaching in an urban high-poverty school can be challenging and demanding, even for the most experienced and competent teacher (Brown, 2002; Delpit, 2005; Haberman, 2006; 1995; Jones and Sandidge, 1997; Kopetz et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Stafford and Haberman, 2003; Dill and Stafford-Johnson, 2003; Weiner, 1999). Nevertheless, many educators choose to tackle the unique and often pervasive difficulties of teaching in high-poverty schools in urban areas. Some of these teachers have overwhelming student success and speak of a personal moral commitment (Brown, 2002; Haberman,

2006, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000).This study used focus groups and interviews to learn from the teachers' perspectives those consistent methodologies, innovative teaching strategies, sources of support, experiences and personal attitudes and beliefs, they believe created a learning environment that fostered academic success for African American students.

Research Questions

1. What professional factors and social contexts (e.g., inservice training, teacher education programs, school environment, administrative support, etc.) contribute to teachers' effectiveness when working with African American students in the greater Detroit area?

2. To what extent are the personal and professional beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences of successful teachers of African American students' congruent with components of culturally relevant pedagogy?

3. What classroom practices do successful teachers use to provide effective instruction for African American students? How did these teachers come to acquire and implement these practices? What was the evolution of the development of these practices?

4. What professional obstacles have these teachers confronted? How did they respond to or engage these obstacles (e.g., curriculum choices, programs, services, policies and procedures)?

Significance of the Study

This research is important because children's lives are at stake. Urban school districts across the nation face the tumultuous task of educating youth with limited resources. Detroit Public Schools, one of the largest public school systems in the country, now faces a growing deficit of more than $400 million dollars. Teachers agreed to a $250 reduction per pay in an effort to help the struggling districts. More than 1700 teachers and administrators slated to be laid-off. Yet teachers are still preparing to greet the youngsters with a smile and an expectation of excellence despite the destruction.

The research of Milner (2002) revealed that successful teachers of African American students face several challenges, including under-funded schools with meager resources. Students who they serve often are victims of poverty, racism, oppression, exposure to community violence and other forms of abuse (Jipguep & Sanders-Phillips, 2003). Prior research addressed the question of how teachers overcome these obstacles, but the emergence of accountability systems that make "low-performing schools" known to the public and the unique set of circumstances that embodies urban schools provide a strong incentive to revisit the issue. Moreover, the greatest benefactors of a national accountability movement are expected to be children from low income and African American backgrounds who can benefit from being exposed to effective teaching strategies (Townsend, 2002).

Limitations of the Research

Several limitations were inherent in this study, including:

- Middle school teachers are the focus of this study. Because middle school teachers may use strategies and methods that are effective at this level, the findings may not be generalizable to either elementary or high school.

- The teachers work in schools with high percentages of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Strategies and methods that are effective in these building may not be applicable to schools with higher socioeconomic statuses.

- The teachers work primarily with African American students. Findings may not be relevant to teachers who work with other ethnic/racial student populations.

- Classroom observations were not utilized to confirm classroom practices participants discussed in the focus group sessions or individual interviews.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are made for this study:

- Learning from teachers about those social factors they believe have contributed to their effectiveness with African American students will provide important insights and perspectives that will inform other teachers and administrators.

- Giving voice to culturally relevant strategies and practices of successful teachers in the greater Detroit area will create understandings and provide a missing but critical perspectives in successfully educating African American students.

- Teachers participating in this study had the opportunity to articulate, some for the first time, those factors which contribute to their success with students. In so doing, these teachers reflected on their teaching practice which may contribute to their own personal or professional development.

Definition of Terms

Effective/Effectiveness   Effective teaching is a continual learning

                                                        process that consists of: Verbal ability; content

knowledge; educational coursework; teacher certification; and teaching experience (Stronge, Tucker & Hindman, 2004).

Strategies   Carefully devised plans of action to achieve a goal, or the art of developing or carrying out such a plan.

Classroom Practices   Interactions between teacher and student for instructional purposes as well as classroom structure and overall learning environment.

Culture   The beliefs, customs, practices, and social behavior or a particular nation or people.

Middle School   A school for children between the ages of about 11 and 14 years, depending on the school's location.

Summary

More than a century ago, considerable disparities among students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds were found in nearly every aspect of education from achievement to facilities. Similarly, the 2004 profile of educational opportunity for a significant segment of African-American children mirrors that of the early 20th century. Predominately African American and minority schools most often are housed in crumbling facilities, suffer from low budgets, and lack essential resources needed for effective instruction (Sullivan, 2004). Studies indicated that many practicing teachers are not prepared to successfully instruct African American students (Grant & Sleeter, 1996; Spindler, 1974). Concern

about low academic performance of urban learners has a long history and disparities in teacher quality between urban and non-urban schools have been well documented (Haberman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000; Lankfored et al., 2002).

However, some teachers are exceptional in their performance. Exploring the effective practices and methodologies and understandings that they use to achieve success is important to help improve academic outcomes of other African American students. By investigating the consistent strategies that effective language arts teachers use to teach African American urban students, this research can help educators understand how to restructure school reform efforts to better serve students of color.

Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 presented an overview of the study, including the purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study, limitations, assumptions, and definition of terms. A comprehensive review of related literature is the focus of the second chapter. The methods that will be used to collect and analyze data will address the research questions posed for the study included in Chapter 3. The fourth chapter of the dissertation provides the findings of the study, including a description of the sample and results of the focus groups. The conclusions and recommendations for practice and further research will be included in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2 Review of Literature

The Struggle Continues

> "The educational system of a country is worthless unless it revolutionizes the social order. Men of scholarship, and prophetic insight, must show us the right way and lead us into light which is shinning brighter and brighter."
>
> Carter G. Woodson

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the research and theory on identification of specific effective instructional strategies and methods used by teachers of African American students. Included in this review of literature are: school reform movements; the achievement gap of African American students; effective teachers of African American students; culturally relevant teaching; and culturally relevant literacy practices for African American students.

School Reform Movements

School reform movements have been part of the educational landscape for at least the last two decades. Perhaps this is because "Schooling has become an institution that dominates time and consciousness, affecting our assumptions about what is important" (Deschenes, Cuban, Tyack, 2001, p. 46). School reform initiatives mirror the social fabric of American life and consequently promulgate agendas of educators, social scientists, and politicians. Darling-Hammond (1997) noted that school reforms come in "waves," with each wave promoting a different educational focus.

Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) offered an historical retrospective of educational reforms in America. According to these researchers, in the first half of the 19th century the objective of providing all children an education emphasized equality of opportunity. Significantly, these reforms adversely affected "students who have not been able to do what educators wanted them to do" (p. 525).

Equality of education was not intended for African American students at this time in our nation's history. The hope for schools of this period was that by exposing poor students to school, they could achieve what the fortunate already possessed. This exposure took place in an ungraded, usually rural, one-room schoolhouse where the three Rs (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic) were taught along with citizenship. However, children who did not function well in this setting often were labeled "dunce" or "loafer" and could be whipped for their failure to be responsible for their learning (Deschenes, et al.).

In the latter half of the 19th century, reform movements introduced the graded school where all children were taught the same content at the same time, and academic failure was seen as coming from "deficits of character" (Deschenes et al., 2001, p. 531). Students were labeled "shirker" or "depraved" and were "held back" if they failed to learn. In a similar manner to Deschenes, et al., Darling-Hammond (1997) referred to schools during this period as large, impersonal, factory model schools. In particular, schools that served poor students focused on teaching basic skills, rather than higher order skills. These schools projected "the image of a moving conveyor belt on which students were placed, while teachers performed a predetermined series of operation on them" (p. 38). Schools adopted the factory model as the basis for the education of children (Gainey, 1993).

Around the early 20th century, a new Progressive reform movement re-emphasized the need for equal opportunity for all students, including children of immigrants. This movement introduced testing that "differentiated" or tracked" students into specific curricula or vocational programs. Students were either

"normal" or "handicapped or retarded," and groups of students, like immigrants or Blacks, were unofficially segregated. This approach enabled teachers to "teach different things in a different way in a different place (Deschenes, et al., 2001, p. 532). Labels used during this period include "pupils of low I.Q., ""limited," "slow learner," or "occupational student" Deschenes, et al.).

By the 1940s and 1950s, schools focused on fundamentals and rote learning. Not until the Soviet Union challenged America in 1957 by launching Sputnik, were curricular reforms aimed at preparing students to think critically. These reforms were initiated by the National Science Foundation and the Department of Education (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Deschenes et al. (2001) noted that by the late 1950s, the civil rights movement forced equal access to education and demands were made to adapt schools to meet the needs of the child, including programs to equalize resources or compensate for past discrimination. Labels like "educationally deprived" or "culturally different," suggested that the blame for unequal access was with the school, but other terms, like "educationally difficult" and "unwilling learners," continued to focus the cause of the trouble on the students.

In the years spanning from 1960 to 1970, much of "early compensatory education continued to be based on a concept of deprivation and cultural deficit" (Deschenes et al., 2001, p. 534). Reformers challenged the use of large-scale intelligence tests that resulted in tracking and asked why minority groups were over represented in classes for students with mental retardation. Such questioning brought attention to the linguistic and cultural differences of students and reformers called on federal and state government and local districts to

improve schooling for all students including students with special needs (Deschenes, et al.).

Jennings (2002) pointed out that the main goal of federal aid during this time, was to increase equity in education through assistance to help educate groups of children, such as poor, migrant, or limited English proficient students and students with disabilities. President Johnson increased the federal role in education in 1964 with the passage of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which included Headstart and Title I programs, part of his war on poverty. During the 1970s, states also began to rely on a minimum competency testing movement to reform schools, ensuring that students would earn at least minimum requirements to be productive citizens (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

In the 1980s, issues in education reform included educational accountability, lengthening the amount of time students spent in school, and the effects of increased expenditures on educational goals (O'Shea & O'Shea, 1997). In 1983, *A Nation at Risk, the Imperative for Educational Reform,* a report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was published. This report imprinted the term "nation-at-risk" into the public's consciousness by charging that America's schools were mediocre and could not produce a work force that could compete worldwide. Although the report has been discredited, with Berliner and Biddle (1995) calling it a "manufactured crisis," the report altered the way Americans viewed education. The National Commission on Education called for more rigorous standards and accountability, along with a return to basics, harder work, more homework, more hours of school, and more days of school (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). On its 20th anniversary, Goodlad (2003) noted

that the report, although fanned to hysteria by the media, did "stimulate a surge of support from philanthropy for innovative improvement initiatives" (p. 14). Unfortunately, the "media overkill turned attention away from its [the report's] substance" (p.7) but the charge to design an educational system that deals with 21st realities should have been assembled 20 years ago (Goodlad, 2003).

Cohen and Hill (2001) noted that the publication of A Nation at Risk "galvanized hundreds of other study groups, commissions, and reports" (p. 14). Within three years, 35 states had enacted comprehensive reforms, which emphasized increased courses and test taking (Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). During this time, the back to basics educational reform took predominance and textbooks, lecture-recitation, and an emphasis on rote learning dominated the field (Darling-Hammond, 1997). A 1989 national education conference of state and local officials, educators, parents, and community business leaders, led to the adoption of The National Education Goals, which encouraged schools to work on improving student achievement (Goals 2000, 1998).

Reforms continued into the 1990s with instruction a primary focus for preparing students to compete in a global economy (Goals 2000, 1998). Technology and the information age became a force for change. School improvement was the leading political issue in most states (Cohen & Hill, 2001). McNeil (2000) noted that the locus of control over curriculum, teaching, and assessments that began in the 1980s placed the authority for educational decisions at the state level. Every state began the process of writing common standards for all students. President Clinton's major reform initiative, *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, passes in 1994, was based on fundamental principles of

effective school change. This Act included an assumption that by the year 2000 all children in America would start school ready to learn, that the high school graduation rate would increase to at least 90%, and that America's teaching force would have access to programs that would improve its professional skills (Goals 2000, 1998). However, in 2000, under a different administration, Goals 2000 was retired and the standards based reform movement, which produced the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*, took center stage.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 amended the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965. As the latest educational reform movement, it increased the federal government's participation in the lives of American students by requiring increased student academic achievement through testing and by setting up a system of rewards and consequences for students and schools that fail to achieve sufficient progress. The Act contained four basic educational reform principles: (a) stronger accountability for results, (b) increased flexibility and local control, (c) expanded opportunities for parents, and (d) an emphasis on using teaching methods with a record of success. NCLB also mandated annual testing for all students in reading and math by 2005-2006, and in science by 2007-2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

NCLB addressed children who are limited in English proficiency including immigrant children and pledged to ensure that these children develop high levels of academic attainment in English (NCLB, 2001, Part A). NCLB also addressed preventive and intervention programs for children and youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk, and proposed to improve educational programs that prevented these children from dropping out of school (NCLB, 2001, Part D). Of

key importance were changes to Title I, which required that schools meet annual yearly progress goals. Schools that failed to make their target for two consecutive years would be identified as in need of improvement, opening the door to public school choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Deschanes et al. (2001) stated that the current standards based reforms focus on (a) requiring low-performing students to do more during the school year and the summer, (b) assessing blame for the failure to achieve academically on the students, and (c) withholding promotion or graduation as a consequence for failing tests. These authors noted the striking comparison between current reforms, in which all students ideally receive the same curriculum, the 19th century, when students were judge on their character or ability, and the Progressive era, when reformers found a different niche or track for every student. According to Deschenes et al., the narrow focus of schools today does not allow for the variety of students and for the variety of areas in which they might excel. As a result, "students who do not excel in the age-graded, narrowly academic world may once again be subject to the same kinds of labeling and failure that their predecessors were" (p. 539).

School reform movements in the past challenged and often changed the way schools conduct the business of educating students. Based on the political and social winds in the country at the time of their inception, these movements had the capacity to change the lives of public school students. In many instances, these reforms specifically targeted groups of students, or individual students who required additional assistance to function in the education milieu. In many cases, the federal government, state governors and legislatures, and school boards took

over to "set things right" for educators who they saw as being derelict in their duty (Ericson & Ellett, 2002, p. 3).

However, in some cases, these reforms created more difficult situations for students who were already in a tenuous position. As Amerein and Berliner (2002) pointed out, because the newest legislation and associated reforms is heavily test based, there could be a profound impact on students considered "at-risk." The State of America's Children 2004 (Children's Defense Fund, 2004) noted that there are educational policies associated with high rates of school failure, dropout, and delinquency, and that for "school reform to work for all children, the needs of youths at-risk who confront such policies also must be addressed"(p. 95). This is particularly true for poor African American students in urban areas.

Traits of Urban Educators

Urban education has its own unique set of problems to contend with in educating children who are economically, linguistically, and ethically diverse. Children who live in poverty and attend large urban districts deserve the same educational opportunities afforded children in affluent school districts.

Researchers such as Martin Haberman (1995), Geneva Gay (2002), Jacqueline Irvine (2003) and A. Wade Boykin (2001) have shown that children from poverty and urban schools can be successful. Haberman (1995) showed how teachers of children of poverty can become "star" teachers. These are teachers who are successful in teaching children of poverty and urban areas. Haberman (1995) describes characteristics or beliefs leading to behaviors found to be common in "star" teachers of students in poverty. They are: (a) being persistent, (b) promoting learning (c) using theory and practice, (d) working well

with students at-risk, (e) having a professional orientation to students, (f) avoiding burnout and (g) admitting to being fallible. Educators in urban areas are often faced with issues that relate to security; equality as it relates to race, gender, and resources; and parental involvement. Haberman (1995) believes that these teachers possess specific traits that facilitate their success. These teachers do not succumb to teacher burnout, because they understand the causes and prevent themselves from falling victim. They admit that they are not perfect. The teachers that Haberman identified (1995) go further to state that "star" teachers have a keen awareness of discipline and classroom management will take care of themselves, if a structured instructional environment is established. Haberman believes that "star" teachers of poverty are persistent, and they possess a high sense of teacher efficacy, and take responsibility for education their students.

Teacher efficacy impacts the personal effectiveness of the teacher and plays a role in their ability to impart knowledge. Teachers with high efficacy believe they can control events and produce desired outcomes (Hudson, 1998, Dweck, 2002). Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy tend to do better at planning, organizing, preparing, and spend more time teaching and are more open to ideas and willing to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students (Hoy, 2003-2004). Teachers who have low efficacy often display minimal motivation to help students to succeed. The teacher's belief in his or her ability to influence student achievement is an important component in being an effective teacher (Haberman, 1995). Teachers who lack this confidence only add to the growing gap in achievement for African American student in large urban areas.

African American Students and the Achievement Gap

In the 1990s, the controversial *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1996) claimed that gaps in student achievement were the natural result of variation in students' genetic makeup and natural ability. The book drew extreme criticism from various research fields. Experts contested the findings and asserted that achievement gaps were the result of more subtle environmental factors, such as social-emotional components that influence achievement performance and social inequities created by demographic realities (Bainbridge, 2002). More recently, scholars have analyzed the effect that certain in-school factors have on student achievement such as academic and school attachment, and teacher support (Becker & Luthar, 2002). While it is difficult to isolate the variables that directly impact student achievement, research has shown that good teaching matters (The Teaching Commission, 2004; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998).

The Education Trust, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization, found that many minority students attend inner-city schools, which are often under funded. As a result, those students tend to receive poorer-quality instruction, have fewer highly qualified teachers, and have access to fewer resources (The Education Trust, 2002). Current trends in the literature seem to indicate that student achievement is adversely affected by socio-economic status and ethnic grouping. In a meta-analysis conducted by Rodriquez (1997), data from a variety of sources, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the National Assessment of Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) reports revealed that Asian-American and Anglo-European students consistently outperformed underserved students, while most US Latino and First

Nations students were consistently in the middle of the achievement scale. Puerto Rican and African American students continued to be at the bottom of the scale. While National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results have shown that, over time, African American and Hispanic students have made great strides in narrowing the breach that separates them from their white peers, progress seems to have come to a halt since the mid-1980s. For example in 2007, while 39 percent of white students scored at the proficient level or higher on the 4th grade reading exam portion NAEP, only 12 percent of African American students and 14 percent of Hispanics students scored proficient.

Researchers have tried to pinpoint why race and class are such strong predictors of students' educational attainment. While families of different class, ethnic and racial backgrounds including African American and Hispanic families, may place a high value on education, researchers have noted the realities of constraints on financial resources (Rubin. 1976). Financial capital has a direct effect on educational outcomes because it can be used to purchase educationally relevant materials such as books or computers that can facilitate educational opportunities outside of school (Downey, 1995; Jones, 1984; Milne et al., 1986; Orr, 2003). Furthermore, the research indicates that financial capital can also be converted into other types of capital, specifically cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1990, Greenfield, Raeff & Quiroz, 1996). Orr (2003) finds that wealth creates a black/white achievement gap primarily through exposure to cultural capital. One controversial explanation for the Black-White achievement gap is that peer culture among African American students is more oppositional to achievement (Ferguson, 2001).

Acting White and a Culture of Opposition

The work of Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) provide significant findings. Their "Capital High," a pseudonym for a predominantly black high school in a low-income area of Washington, D.C., had a predominance of "oppositional culture" in which African American students dismissed academically oriented behavior as "white." The research indicates that students suffer academically when there is a lack of cultural synchronization between students and their school. Crafting effective public polices to address the achievement gap requires understanding its causes. Various possibilities have been advanced, including differences in family structure and poverty, differences in school quality, racial bias in testing or teachers' perceptions, genetics, and differences in peer culture, socialization, or behavior, and some minority's opposition to achievement.

Oppositional culture theory takes into account the observed facts between African Americans and Whites which have contributed to a culture of opposition: (1) white culture provide blacks with inferior schooling and treat them differently in school; (2) by imposing a job ceiling, white culture fail to reward blacks adequately for their academic achievement in adult life; and (3) black Americans develop coping devices which, in turn, further limit their striving for academic success. As a result, African Americans began to define academic success as the prerogative of white people, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating white people in striving for academic success. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that this oppositional culture arose partly because white Americans historically have refused to acknowledge that black

Americans were capable of intellectual achievement and partly because black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability.

In the late 1990s, Harvard University economist Ron Ferguson revealed a similar finding. In an upper-class suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, called Shaker Heights, Ferguson found large racial disparities in achievement. Ferguson detected an anti-intellectual culture among African American student in the local high school; Shaker Heights became synonymous with the problem of acting white. Tyson (2002) found in her study of 56 middle class black students that negative attitudes toward school were more likely linked to low performance. These results challenged Ogbu's 1986 study suggesting that African American students were culturally opposed to achievement, because they were perceived as "acting white" by peers (Tyson 2002). Her study cannot be generalized since the sample size was too small. According to Jencks and Phillips (1998), fear of "acting white" did not explain why African Americans were scoring low, but may explain why they were not motivated to "catch up" (Jencks and Phillips, 1998, p. 34). Another aspect that researchers have found contributes to low achievement in minority students is a "cultural incongruence or cultural disconnect" (Byrnes, 2003).

In an empirical analysis of the phenomena "Acting White" authors Fryer and Torelli (2005), find that African American and Hispanic students who earn high grades face social costs in terms of their popularity. Fryer and Torelli (2005), describe "acting white" as any "statistically significant racial differences in the relationship between student popularity and grades."

The Effective Teacher of African American Students & Teacher Expectations

Cultural synchronization refers to the quality of fit between the teacher and students' culture (Hillard, 1994). Studies have examined the breakdown of relationships between teachers and students (Delpit, 1995; Valdez,1996; Valenzuela,1999).The studies examined the mismatch of the teacher-student relationships in terms of cultural appropriateness, cultural congruence, and cultural relevance. Cardenas and Cardenas (1977) referred to this mismatch as incompatibility. Through their model, the theory of incompatibilities, they expressed the belief that minority children's failure in schools is due to the lack of compatibility between their characteristics and the characteristics of a typical instructional program. Cultural appropriateness is evident when educators use the students' own culture to improve academic skills by making meaningful connections to their culture (Au & Jordan, 1981).

Scholars generally agreed that teacher education which adopts a cross-cultural perspective is key (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 1995). Irvine (2003) argues that the closer the cultural synchronization between a teacher and a student's, the greater the likelihood for academic success. Hilliard (1994) contends that African American students could benefit and learn from teaching that was not culturally sensitive, if teachers' expectations of students' performance were high enough. He concluded that black children were failing not because they could not learn from white teachers or even different pedagogical styles, but because of "systematic inequalities in the delivery" tied to negative teacher expectations.

It is important to note that teacher expectation is not the same as teacher belief. The work of social psychologist Carol Dweck (2002), asserts that one's

belief will drive practice. Educators who hold an "entity belief" about intelligence, believe that intelligence is fixed. It is something that is predetermined and not accessible to change or growth. This view will undoubtedly alter their expectations of students. In contrast, educators that have an "incremental belief" about intelligence believe that all children can learn, and that intelligence is something that can increase through effort and persistence. These teachers will almost certainly hold higher expectations of students (Dweck & Bempechat, 1983, Dweck 2002). There is an extensive body of research that describe how teachers' expectations can influence student performance and plays a significant role in student success (Brown, 2002; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Teacher expectations may produce self-fulfilling prophecies by evoking students' performance levels that are consistent with those expectations (Claycomb, 2000; Delpit, 1995; Brophy & Good, 1974; Jussim, 1989, 1996). The research suggests that teachers may interact differently depending on their expectations of specific students. In addition, to teacher expectations, Ferguson (2003) adds teacher belief along with expectations that may contribute to the achievement gap of minority students.

Irvine (1990) contends that the inevitable occurs: miscommunication and confrontation among the students, the teachers, and the home; hostility, alienation, diminished self-esteem and eventual academic failure. Irvine claims that achievement is maximized when students and teachers share the same cultural background. In such cases, students and teachers are on the same page with respect to acceptable ways to participate and daily interactions.

In as much as the vast majority of teachers and administrators tend to be White and middle class (even in schools with high concentrations of minority students of low-income), minority children typically experience a cultural clash. White children, in contrast, find it relatively easy to assimilate to typical classroom cultures and norms because they often encounter middle-class teachers who have backgrounds similar to their own. To support their claims, advocates of cultural incongruity point to studies that indicate that achievement can be elevated in minority children when teachers modify their classroom environments in terms of communication patterns, participation structures, and content of curriculum (Irvine,2003; Pewewardy 1994; Murrell, 2001). Delpit (1988), Irvine (1990) and Ladson-Billings (2001) contend that if African American students are to compete in this society, they must have teachers who understand the culture of power and be willing to teach them that culture without having to give up their home culture. They must recognized the cultural experiences of their students and incorporate them in their teaching. To develop a classroom environment that is equitable for all students, teacher-student interactions should include teaching in a manner that acknowledges student's cultural background and making cultural referents an integral part of the curriculum.

Irvine (1995) identified and reviewed eleven studies that used teachers' ratings of their perceptions of African American students in comparison to their ratings of white students. She concluded that teachers, particularly white teachers, had more negative attitudes and beliefs about African American students than about white students with regard to such variables as potential for success in college, initial impressions, deviant behavior, ability, and certain

personality characteristics. However, Irvine also noted that although the information provided by these studies is useful, it is not clear how these attitudes and beliefs influence teacher-student interaction in the classroom. The research proposed here is meant to build on the scholarship of Irvine and others by providing teachers with an opportunity to not only articulate these attitudes and beliefs, but to consider what ways they may effect teacher-student interaction.

High expectations of teachers coupled with cultural congruence can be pivotal in successfully educating African American students. Teachers contribute to the achievement of African American students through their attitudes and beliefs as well as their content choices. These beliefs and practices are affected by teachers' own life and educational experiences, their beliefs about ideal ways of knowing and doing, their beliefs about students' parents and communities, as well as by the demands placed upon them by state and district curriculum mandates.

Prior research clearly demonstrates that low teacher expectations for students can negatively affect student performance. Meanwhile, the evidence that high expectations for students can also have an impact has been clearly documented. A study by Edmonds and Frederiksen (1978) found that teachers in instructionally effective inner-city schools had "high-expectations" for all of their students. Other studies have yielded similar results (Brophy & Evertson, 1976; McDonald & Elias, 1976; Rutter, et al., 1979; Andrews, Soder, & Jacoby, 1986; Bamburg & Andrews, 1989). Different studies have reached different conclusions, but they all indicate that students will rise to teacher expectations-high or low.

Irvine (1995) indicates several characteristics of teachers who are effective in teaching minority students. Effective teachers are competent in their subject matter, hold high levels of expectation for their student's academic performances, and provide their students with high levels of knowledge. Teachers who instruct African American students need to go beyond being effective (Malloy & Malloy, 1998).

Cooper (2002) interprets effective teaching from an epic or insiders perspective that captures the values and norms of the community with regard to a particular condition or situation. In other words, having an understanding of the students and the community provides teachers with an avenue for learning. In Siddle Walker's work (1992), she stated that an effective teacher of African American students is one who knows the subject matter, views themselves as the authority in the classroom, and holds high expectations for all students. According to Walker (1992) in practice this is called "being hard on them" and involves a selective use of power in the classroom that exemplifies and promotes the centrality of African American learning. This power is not to be confused with oppression or authoritarianism. Rather, it is to be seen as a positive means to increase student achievement, self-respect, and group membership, which can be seen as a defense against an oppressive educational system (Cooper, 2002).

Foster (1994) revealed that effective teachers of African American students act in ways that demonstrate being cognizant of their obligation to the next generation. She examined the perspectives, values, and pedagogical insights of a group of exemplary African American teachers from communities across the nation. She summarized the beliefs of the teachers studied as

including being committed to African American children and their communities, believing in their unlimited potential and, not allowing racism to get in the way of their teaching demanding curriculum. Such teachers also promoted a family model of teaching which included caring, empathy, and respect for the black community as well as holding high expectations for African American students.

Accomplished teachers of African American students understand the distinction between education and schooling (Murrell, 2001). Education is a broader process than schooling and it is education that African American students really need. Education is understood as the total process of promoting the intellectual, spiritual, ethical and social development of young people that molds them into capable, caring, and character-rich adults. Schooling, by contrast, is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the status quo.

The status quo of public education has an embedded system of racism and inequality with a long history of unfair practices. Schooling has been described as a practice that supports and maintains the status quo (Delpit, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Ogbu, 1997; Shujaa, 1994; & Woodson 1969). Shujaa, (1994) argues that it is probable that African-American students receive more schooling than education. This claim is a direct link to his assertion of the failure of public schools to take into account differing cultural orientations and unequal power relations among groups that share membership in a society. Education, in contrast to schooling, is the process of transmitting from one generation to the next knowledge of the values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness.

Lee, Lomotey, and Shujaa (1990) contend that a successful practice for educating African American students requires a strategically guided process transmitted through an African-American cultural orientation and an understanding of how societal power relations are maintained. Further, in considering what characteristic makes an effective teacher of African American students; many researchers have inquired into whether the race of the teacher matters. In other words, can white teachers effectively teach and serve African American students'?

Some scholars have suggested that a deficit view of African American students' abilities rooted within white teachers' hegemonic Western epistemological framework, can often be unconscious and is almost always unstated (Banks & Banks, 1997). Basically this framework interferes with white teachers or any other from being able to take an African American child's point of view and thus insidiously reduces the possibility of effective teaching. These scholars suggested that teachers' negative beliefs towards African American students may account, at least in part, for the fact that, historically, African American students have fared less well than whites on such measures as standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college admissions rates.

Effectively teaching African American students, white teachers can be effective. Cooper (2002) reported on small portions of white teachers, called "independent" teachers, who have succeeded in teaching African American students and in some cases their influences on the public's perception of teaching African American students. One prominent example is Jonathan Kozol (Cooper, 2002).

Culturally Relevant Teaching

A persistent theme in the literature in regard to cultural relevance teaching provided a framework worth reviewing. The main focus of culturally relevant is on the quality of the relationships that culturally relevant teachers established with their students. Culturally relevant teachers are described as teachers who feel personally invested in the education of children of color. Culturally relevant educators view education for children of color as a positive contribution to the learning for all students (Cummins, 1989; Valenzuela, 1999). As a result, culturally relevant teachers see their students' cultures and lifestyles as assets rather than a determinates or an obstacles to their learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally relevant teaching involves providing the best possible education for students that preserves their own cultural heritage, prepares them for meaningful relationships with other people and for living productive lives in the present society without sacrificing their own cultural perspective (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Culturally relevant teachers understand equity issues and are prepared to identify and eliminate institutional practices that deter equity (Delpit, 1995). Therefore, as suggested by Delpit (1995), culturally relevant teachers must have a political understanding of the education system and their actions need to be sensitive and supportive of the antiracism and anti-oppression struggles of African American students. In 1994, Ladson-Billings conducted an ethnographic study of successful teachers of African American students. The eight teachers in the study were engaged in what she has termed "culturally relevant pedagogy." Culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes the combination of academic

achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. It also deals with the specific oppression of racism as a central unit of analysis. Regardless of their culture of origin, culturally relevant teachers share an understanding of systematic inequity, of the political, economic, and racial structures that disproportionately limit the opportunities of African American students.

Teachers engaged in culturally relevant pedagogy work to help their student better understand what racism is, how it works, and what they can do to work against it. Culturally relevant teaching begins to emancipate students from constraints in which education has failed to prepare them to think and act in a democratic and multicultural society. Further underscored are the importance of the belief in the educational ability of all students, the development of a community of learners responsible for their own and their peers' learning, the dynamic nature of knowledge, the conviction that all students bring knowledge to the classroom that can serve as a foundation for new learning, the development of necessary skills valued by society at large, and the cultivation of relationships with students beyond classroom boundaries. This suggests the importance of understanding the extent to which teachers incorporate issues of living in a society where racism is present.

Beauboeuf (1997) in her study of six African American female teachers and how they engaged in culturally relevant teaching found that successful African American teachers saw teaching as a form of mothering. Beauboeuf asserted from her findings that good teaching is less about cultural similarities between students and teachers and more about the "political clarity" of the teachers. As defined by Beauboeuf, teachers with political clarity recognize the

existence of oppression in their students' lives and seek to use their personal and social power as adults and as teachers to encourage children to understand and undermine their subordination. She suggested renaming *culturally relevant* teaching *politically relevant* teaching. By examining politically relevant teaching among six African American women, she found that they brought maternal, political, and moral concerns to their pedagogy. She referred to their teaching as politicized mothering. These teachers challenged their students and themselves to learn, to grow, and not to become complacent or resigned to the status quo.

African American students as do all students, learn in an environment in which they believe that the teacher cares about them and has a sincere interest in their welfare. Affective interaction between teachers and student is fundamental to the teaching and learning of African American students (Kaplan, 1986; Malloy & Malloy, 1998). Thus, it is imperative that teachers demonstrate a connectedness with each of the students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is particularly important for African American students during reading instruction.

Culturally Relevant Literacy

Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko and Hurwitz (1999) define reading as a complex process that is situational bounded. They explain that fluent reading is not the same as accurate decoding. Fluent reading occurs as the reader interactively relates to the text in order to gain meaning, increase knowledge, and achieve reading proficiency. The experiences readers bring to the text impact their level of proficiency. The work of Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube (2001) revealed that effective literacy instruction involves strategic reading that is teaching and learning centered. This is based on a sociocultural model;-which stresses, among

other things, that learning is dependent upon the students' interactions with the teachers and other members of the classroom. A research synthesis of the literature suggests that providing literacy instruction that is culturally relevant promotes high achievement among culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000; Hale 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Culturally responsive literacy instruction is instruction that bridges the gap between school and the world of the student. It is consistent with the values of the students' own culture aimed at assuring academic learning, and encourages teachers to adapt their instruction to meet the learning needs of all students. Culturally relevant instructional practices allow students to discover language arts and construct meaning. Instructional practices that address issues of culture and language hold the greatest promise of helping culturally diverse learners to become successful readers (Beaulieu, 2002).

In her book *What Keeps Teachers Going?* Sonia Neito makes the point that "rather than a focus on dehumanized 'best practices,' we need to focus on students and those who best teach them." Neito points to the disconnect between theory and practice in urban education. The understanding of theory and practice as it relates to reading instruction will provided a necessary framework of reflection on educational practices for African-American urban students as it relates to the research presented in this dissertation. This framework lends to an understanding of how culturally responsive instruction in teaching practice helps to facilitate growth and student achievement for African-American students.

Summary

The U.S. Department of Education predicts that by the year 2010, minority populations will become the majority population in our schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Presently, this diversity has had a significant impact on urban education, but in the future it will have an even greater impact. Prior to entering school at least one third of the nation's children are at risk for school failure (Strickland, 2003).

A significant contributor of the difficulty minority student's encounter in school is due to a mismatch between their culture and the school's culture (Vogt, 1987). The result is that schools frequently become discontinuous or out of sync with the populations that they are suppose to serve (Gay, 1988; Howard, 2001). Cultural incompatibilities are often mistaken for intellectual inability or lack of motivation (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Studies have shown that rather than trying to educate everyone in a homogenous way, we do far better to diversify our techniques and attempt to connect with our students as they are-rather than as we are.

A number of complex factors influence the effectiveness of teachers who service African American students in large urban districts. For example, educational reform initiatives that teachers have little or no control over, and the unique dynamics of working in large urban districts contribute to the challenges that urban educators face. However, there is a growing body of knowledge that strongly suggest the need to delve further into the practices that teachers consistently embrace when teaching African American students in large urban districts. The literature review provides the insight into the nature of the problem

and what has been done by researchers to understand the issues surrounding this phenomenon.

Chapter 3   Methodology

Research Design

Research design is defined as a set of guidelines and instructions to be followed in order to reach a certain goal (Mouton, 1996, p. 107). This section presents the design of the research, the methodology, and the method of data analysis. This is a qualitative research study, designed to identify teacher attributes, beliefs, and practices which contribute to the successful teaching of African American students in the greater Detroit area, along with the social context that influences and or shapes these factors (e.g. teacher education programs, district and school environment, professional development, and professional experiences, teachers' communities of origin, etc.). In addition, this research examined teachers' perceptions of the environmental and administrative structures in their schools and districts that support instruction for African-American students. Research in this area will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding beliefs, backgrounds and experiences, with particular focus on urban areas in and around Detroit. As explained in Chapter 1, the greater Detroit area has a cultural and social history that is unique to the nation. Today, although most urban schools are challenged by current educational conditions, the impact on Detroit area schools has been particularly harsh.

Qualitative research portrays the everyday experiences of individuals with the intent of better understanding or interpreting these experiences. One method for portraying experiences is through interviews, such as focus groups and individual interviews (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). Further, Guba and Lincoln (1985) defined qualitative research as adaptability in dealing with multiple

realities. In comparison to quantitative research, qualitative research allows direct transactions between the researcher and respondents to facilitate an assessment of influences and value patterns present in the phenomenon. Qualitative research lends itself to the possibility of learning opportunities for participants as demonstrated by different phenomena of interest, particularly the social phenomenon that lends itself for group discovery and opportunities for deep reflection that are present within the context of focus group interviews. In this way, this type of research gives back to its participants something tangible and value. Crotty (2003) asserted, "Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with a world they are interpreting" (p. 43). In a qualitative research study such as this, data analysis involves "making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said.

Through focus group and individual interviews, the research presented sought out to identify consistent, effective classroom practices of middle school language arts teachers of African American students in several urban areas in and around Detroit. This research was also concerned with identifying and understanding those factors which contribute to the development of these classroom practices. A qualitative methodology was useful because it allows the researcher to understand a variety of complex matters (Creswell, 2002). Results of this research have the potential to be of value to urban educators or African American students in large districts throughout the country. Qualitative research plays a unique role in providing both understanding of phenomenon, as well as reasons why. Focus groups with teachers are the primary methodology used in this study. This approach is considered the hallmark of explicit use of group

interaction to generate data and provide insights that might not emerge without

the synergy found in a group. Krueger and Casey (2000) identified the following

characteristics of a focus group:

> [It is] a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. It is conducted with approximately seven to ten people by a skilled interviewer [facilitator]. The discussion is relaxed, comfortable, and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion. (p. 18)

Analysis of focus groups provided a broader understanding of experiences

from perspectives of the selected participants. Researchers using focus groups

find that interactions among participants motivate them to state feelings,

perceptions, and beliefs that they might not express if interviewed individually.

According to Barbour and Kitzinger (1998), a number of key characteristics led to

the increased use of focus groups in the last 20 years. Generally, as is the case

for most qualitative methods, the focus group's ability to access the knowledge,

ideas, story-telling, self-presentation, and linguistic exchanges within a given

cultural context makes it a refreshing challenge to traditional quantitative

approaches.

> Quantitative work, such as the collection of survey data, through a process of measurement, experimentation, and variables, transfers the original voices of its research subjects into statistical data, mathematical relations, or other abstract parameters, leaving little understanding of the context in which particular practices occur (Shratz, 1993, p. 231).

In contrast, qualitative methods such as focus groups, participant

observation, case studies, and individual interviews pay more attention to

the original voices of people in their everyday lives, allowing researchers

to observe and present a broader view of reality within their research

practices. Focus groups help capture those experiences that cannot be meaningfully expressed in numbers (Berg, 1995).

Ladson-Billing's research provides a rational model for focus groups. In her article "That's Just Good Teaching (1995)," she noted that although she had observed teachers in their classrooms. Common themes for participants' understanding of their teaching began to emerge from her data only when she held focus groups. This technique inherently allowed observation of group dynamics, discussion, and firsthand insights into respondents' behavior, attitudes, and language. Conversation is the heart of the focus group. However, qualitative techniques also highlight what is not said – silence-as clues to perspectives and worldviews (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). "Focus groups combine elements of both interviewing and participant observation. The focus group session is, indeed, an interview" (Patton, 1990, p.169). At the same time, focus groups capitalize on group dynamics.

Participants

Participants were selected through a nominated purposive sampling from urban school districts in the tri-county metro Detroit area. In qualitative research, participants and settings are selected carefully (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Principals, language arts curriculum directors, language arts instructional specialists and curriculum supervisors were first recruited and asked to identify and nominate middle school teachers who they believe are effective teachers of African American students. Cruickshank and Haefele (2001) describe good teachers as ideal, analytical, dutiful, competent, expert, reflective, satisfying, diversity-responsive, and respected. To support the selection of effective

teachers, this study utilized James H. Strong's Teacher Skills Assessment Checklists identified in *Qualities of Effective Teachers* as criteria. Strong's checklist assesses several categories: the teacher as a person; classroom management and organization; planning and organizing instruction; implementing instruction and monitoring student progress and potential. The checklist is very detailed and includes sensitive information. Therefore, participants had the opportunity to first review the instrument and then decide whether or not they agreed to authorize the nominating administrator to complete the research instrument and or the *Qualities of Effective Teachers Checklist.* Nominees that received a minimum of two endorsements from administrators and or support staff were invited to participate.

Ten responded to the invitation. At the initial informational session only seven participants attended. Six participated in the study and one teacher started a consulting firm, and left the group. To maintain anonymity, teachers were given numerical codes and pseudonyms. Follow-up interviews confirmed missions of the participants and names were given to the teachers that defined their work as an urban educator. The participants represented four large urban districts in the tri-county area, with 113 combined years of experience. The group consisted of four females, one of which was Caucasian and two male teachers. Teachers were nominated by administrators and instructional specialist. Gender and race were random. Group size played a critical role in the collection of data. Morgan (1992) reviewed the basis for determining group size, concluding that smaller groups were more appropriate with emotionally charged topics that

generated high levels of participant involvement. Teachers who met the following criteria were invited to participate:

- Certified to teach

- Highly Qualified as defined by NCLB

- Have at least three years of teaching experience

- Teach language arts in a middle school

- Teach predominantly African American students

- Recommended by administrators based on the Teacher Skills Assessment and nomination form (see APPENDIX)

The participants were invited to attend an initial meeting that described the context of the research and the purpose. If a teacher was willing to participate in the study, they signed a participant consent form. Participants were compensated for their time as a way to show that their contribution is of value and appreciated. Each volunteer received an Ativa 8GB flash drive and a set of motivational posters for their classrooms. To facilitate focus group interaction and promote a relaxed atmosphere, the researcher provided cookies and coffee (Carey, 1994).

Role of Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is both collector and culler of relevant data. Further, it is incumbent upon the researcher to take steps to ensure that his or her participation does not contaminate the data. As a former teacher and now as an administrator, it was important to identify to the participants my role as an "insider." As an "insider" I may be able to relate to the participants and their experiences. One of the characteristics of qualitative

research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for the data collection. This type of research recognizes the researcher as an instrument of the research. As such, taking into account the experiences and perspectives of the researcher is valuable and meaningful to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My insight into urban education fostered greater collaboration and therefore aided in building trust. As an administrator, I was aware that participants may not be entirely open, and perhaps invent data. To account for this, I shared my experiences to connect with participants and assure participants that I have struggled as a classroom teacher and I share in their challenge. The intent of this research was to highlight what is good about their teaching. Further, I came as a researcher not as an administrator, but as a doctoral candidate. The research is expected to affect a positive change in their work with African American urban students.

In addition, to connecting with participants, I created a trusting environment, participants were guaranteed complete anonymity. Participants were assigned a numerical code to facilitate confidentiality and build trust. Gaining trust is essential to the success of the focus group, and even once it is gained trust can be very fragile (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Participants were reminded at the beginning of each session that data from the focus group would not be shared with various districts and all comments were coded with pseudonyms. To minimize biases, a reflective research journal was maintained that chronicled my own experience as a teacher and administrator and as the researcher. Lincoln and Guba describe this process as reflexivity (1985). This process allowed the researcher to "reflect critically on self as the researcher." Further it supported the need for the researcher to take reflexive stance without

contaminating the data. Contamination can occur when the researcher interprets the data from a view that is not true of the focus group members. The journal sustained the conduct of the study and assumed a regular, ongoing, self-conscious documentation of successive versions of coding schemes, and therefore strengthens the analysis (Carney, 1990).

Data Collection

A series of 4 focus groups sessions each one hour in length with the teachers were held at the Southfield Library in conference room A. This site was selected because it provided a neutral setting for all of the participants. Each session had a focus or theme. The first session began broadly, letting the participants "tell their stories." The subsequent sessions were used to obtain more targeted information:

> Session I: To what extent are successful teachers' of African American students' personal and professional beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences congruent with components of culturally relevant pedagogy?
>
> Session II: What classroom practices are used by successful teachers to provide effective instruction for African American students? How did these teachers come to accept these practices? What was the evolution of these practices?
>
> Session III: What professional factors/social contexts (e.g., training/teacher education programs, environment, administrative support, etc.) contribute to teacher effectiveness when working with African American students in the greater Detroit area?
>
> Session IV: What professional obstacles have these teachers confronted? How did they respond to or engage these obstacles (curriculum choices, programs, services, policies and procedures? (Questions outlined in session four maybe addressed in subsequent session, therefore, it will only occur if needed).

Sessions were at least two weeks apart to allow any one-on-one follow-up, as well as any modifications needed for remaining sessions based on emerging

themes revealed in transcribed sessions. The researcher took notes and each session was audio taped and transcribed. Audio tapes and transcriptions were stored in a locked file cabinet. Audio provided a complete verbal record that was studied much more thoroughly than data in the form of interviewer notes. Prior to the focus group sessions, the researcher carefully explain the purpose of the audio recording and gain the confidence of the group members so as to minimize undesirable effects, such as respondents being less likely to express their feelings freely if they knew that their responses were being recorded.

The use of focus groups served as a research technique that collected data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher (Morgan, 1996). This definition has three essential components. First, it clearly states that focus groups are a research method devoted to data collection. Second, it located the interaction in a structured discussion as the source of the data that had a goal in mind. Third, it acknowledges the researcher's active role in creating the group discussion for data collection purposes. Participants were provided with a topical summary from each focus group session prior to the next session for the purpose of member checking. Therefore, allowing participants the opportunity to correct errors and provide a check on whether the researcher gave an accurate account of their information. Member checking was completed and the researcher brought the analysis to the participants asking for verification and their interpretation of the researcher's analysis (Creswell, 2002).
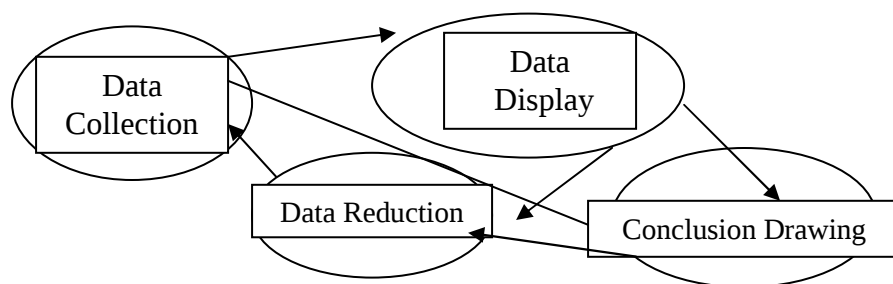
Data Analysis

Analysis of the focus group sessions was to seek patterns of consistency and emerging themes from teachers deemed effective with African American

students. Tapes were transcribed verbatim immediately following each session. Transcription was read and re-read with an initial line-by-line coding. The initial coding was done to organize the data within the framework of the research questions (Spradley, 1980). Each participant was provided a copy of the transcription for review. Participants were given the opportunity to modify, delete or add data they thought was necessary.

Data analysis was recursive and on-going throughout the research project; coding the data throughout the study to allow potential themes to emerge. Miles and Huberman contend that data analysis is comprised of three linked sub processes: 1.) data reduction 2.) data display and 3.) drawing conclusion. The research states that these processes occur before data collection, during study design and planning: during data collection as interim and early analyses are carried out; and after data collection as final products are approached and completed. The figure below provides a graphic of this interactive model of the components of data analysis used:

Figure 1.
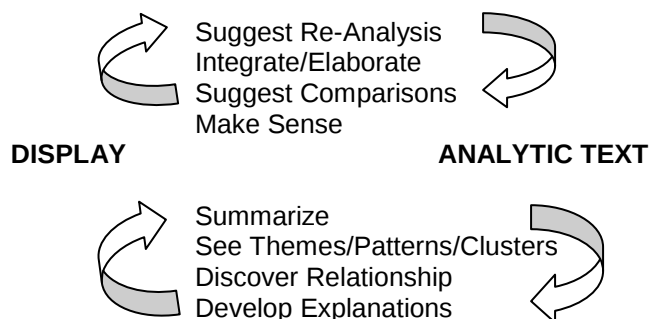
The objective was to collect data from a series of focus group sessions. Sessions were audio taped, and transcribed. The data was coded according to emerging themes, categories and sub-categories that emerge. Qualitative

research has a focus of inquiry which helps to navigate the research into finding out about social events. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), qualitative research studies are designed to discover what can be learned about events of interest, particularly social phenomena in which people are the participants. Data reduction was identified as a method for the researcher to create a conceptual framework. The framework was used to aid in the clustering of information and the formation of patterns. Organization of the data augmented the initial analysis. The data display assisted in constructing meaning from the patterns that began to emerge from the collection and therefore conclusions and interpretation aided in the transformation of data as it is condensed, clustered, sorted, and linked over time (Gherardi & Turner, 1987).

The goal of this research was to identify patterns and themes that connect these successful teachers of African American students, as well as to attend to the dissimilarities. Miles and Huberman provided an important guidance in my analysis. They recommend a display of the data because such a visual organization lends itself to the analysis. Indeed the display resulted in a powerful analysis of the data. Have a graphic framework allowed me to have a blueprint of the patterns:

Figure 2.

DISPLAY
Suggest Re-Analysis
Integrate/Elaborate
Suggest Comparisons
Make Sense

ANALYTIC TEXT
Summarize
See Themes/Patterns/Clusters
Discover Relationship
Develop Explanations

This study was phenomenological in nature because it explored the phenomenon of teachers' experiences and their interpretations or way of making sense of their surroundings (Patton, 1990). Emerging findings were triangulated (Creswell, 2002) across focus groups sessions, individual member checks, individual interviews, and the reflective journal. Written notes captured salient physical interactions of what was not said (e.g., nodding, leaning forward, folding arms, and pauses). Notes were kept in a journal throughout the data collection process. These notes along with the transcriptions from the focus group interviews served as overlapping data noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The intent of this research is to contribute to the knowledge in the field, assist people in understanding the nature of a problem, and generate possible solutions to this human and societal problem (Patton, 1990).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim that the basic concern in trustworthiness is the persuasion of an audience to believe that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of. I shared the transcripts with participants to clarify accuracy. During follow-up interviews participants were asked to expand on salient comments during the focus groups sessions for further accuracy and understanding. In keeping with the research the trustworthiness of this study addressed the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

The issue of credibility denotes that the researcher took appropriate actions to certify that the data and findings are "objective" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

and gathered in an ethical manner that does not taint or change the information or results of the study. To ensure credibility, the researcher used the following techniques: member checks, triangulation, and peer debriefing.

During the focus group sessions, the researcher asked for the participant's clarification and/or summary of responses. Also, each participant received a transcription of the focus group sessions to verify the accuracy of the text and add other important remarks if necessary.   Triangulation was accomplished by consulting multiple sources including interview transcripts, reflexive journal, and follow-up interviews.

The reflexive journal allowed the researcher to use influential notions during the data collection to substantiate consistency in the focus group techniques as well as provide an emerging guide for data analysis.

Domain Analysis

A domain analysis was conducted on the transcripts of the focus groups and the follow-up interviews. The domain analysis revealed areas of interest that I observed more closely for emerging patterns. Patterns were categorized using the research questions. For this, Spradley (1980) states to review data for domains or categories specific to the culture under observation and the semantic relationship that links them to any other related terms. Of initial interest were the patterns of the role of participant's family and their decision to teach in an urban area. Other domains, described in detail in chapters 4 and 5, however, emerged from the collected data throughout the investigation.

Taxonomic Analysis

I extended each domain by conducting a taxonomic analysis of the transcripts gathered from the focus groups and the follow-up interviews using Spradley's (1980) techniques. According to Spradley, a taxonomic analysis "differs from a domain in only one respect: it shows the relationships among all the included terms in a domain" (1980, p. 113). During this step, I looked for emerging patterns and relationships among all of the included terms that came from the domain analysis. For instance, during the focus group sessions, I kept track in my journal the various types of classroom practices used by the teachers during English Languages Arts. During the domain analysis I reviewed the impact their families had on their decision to teach in and urban area and how it affected their practice. Here, though, during the taxonomic analysis, I looked at all terms I had listed that linked to classroom practices.

Componential Analysis

At this phase I searched for characteristics of categories that were specific to the research questions. It was during this phase of analysis that I sorted my data for commonalities. The data was then grouped by paradigms that aligned with the research questions. I identified statements into categories and grouped them according to the prevailing idea that they expressed or reflected. These commonalities and paradigms were further verified by ongoing analysis.

Discovering Themes

Once all data had been collected and analyzed, it was further reviewed looking for principle statements that recurred across domains, and that seemed to link a common thread of exposition among the focus group participants. All of

my transcripts, coding, domains, and analyses were carefully reviewed and a

Thinking Map (Hyely, 2003) was created to make all of the data accessible to

facilitate including them in the writing of the results. Salient quotes were color

coded and flagged to include in my writing as exemplars of themes or

conclusions that I have drawn (see figure 3).

Categories of Analysis

Professional Beliefs	Professional Experiences	Personal Beliefs	Personal Background Experiences	Classroom Practices
THEMES	THEMES	THEMES	THEMES	THEMES
Connect Learning Build Community Student Voice	University Preparation Professional Development Research Curriculum	Family Values Commitment Confidence	Family Culture Values Commitment	Connections Student Voice Options & Choice Individualized Environment Relationships

Reflective
Students
Curriculum
Practice
Belief

Relationships
Personal
Professional
Students
Administrators

Figure 3

Connections
Students
Parents
Colleagues
Research

    As with most studies of this nature, the data of this story are primarily

descriptive and, therefore, are presented largely through descriptive means

(Wolcott, 2001). Quotes from teachers during focus group and follow-up

interviews serve to identify and describe the evidence of consistent practices of

effective urban teachers of African American students during English Language

Arts.

Chapter 4

The Rainbow

"Life will undoubtedly bring a few clouds, but it's my rainbows that I hold onto and cherish the most." (Maya Angelou, 2011)

The words of Dr. Angelou capture the essence of effective urban middle school language arts teachers. Even in the cloud of school closures, consolidations, concessions, mounting district deficits and teacher layoffs, urban educators can be a rainbow. In this chapter, themes emerging from a detailed analysis of the focus group transcripts, individual interviews and reflective journal notes that captured non-verbal data will be presented. Social phenomenon of the group dynamics which occurred during the focus group sessions were analyzed for the ways in which these contributed to teachers' thinking. First brief stories that introduce and describe each participant will be provided. Finally, an analysis of each emergent theme will be presented with specific attention given to the following research questions:

1. What professional factors/social contexts (e.g., professional development, teacher education programs, school environment, administrative support, etc.) contribute to teachers' success when working with African American students in the greater Detroit area?

2. To what extent are the personal and professional beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences of successful teachers' of African American students' congruent with culturally relevant pedagogy?

3. What classroom practices do successful teachers use to provide effective instruction for African American students? How did these teachers come to acquire and implement these practices? What was the evolution of the development of these practices?

4. What professional obstacles have these teachers confronted? How did they respond to or engage these obstacles (curriculum choices, programs, services, policies and procedures?

The chapter will conclude with the limitations of the research.

The Believers

"We do not really see through our eyes or hear through ears, but through our beliefs" Lisa Delpit

Interpretive qualitative methods were used (Merriam, 2002) to identify factors which contribute to the success of middle school language arts teachers of African American students in the greater Detroit area, as well as to identify the social context that influences and or shapes these factors. A series of cohort focus groups were held with teachers. It was the intent of the researcher to identify the common attributes and characteristics of teachers who are effective with African American students. Participants were selected through a nominated purposive sampling from urban school districts in the tri-county metro Detroit area. Teachers were nominated by building administrators and language arts instructional specialist.

Each participant shared their unique story. Personal stories provided a glimpse into the world of these extraordinary teachers. Personal experiences, specifically teachers own experiences as students, are viewed as important determinants of how teachers think and what they do (????).

Their Stories

"Our stories may be singular, but our destination is shared." (President Barack Obama, 2009)

Mr. Brian: The Visionary

Mr. Brian is a visionary. He is a forty-one year old African American male with six years of teaching experience. He describes his keen ability to help students to see the bigger picture, and an unwavering commitment to his belief in his ability to make a difference. Therefore Mr. Brian is depicted as the visionary

for the sake of this research. His work was recognized by the Skillman Foundation as an exceptional teacher and was video taped for an English language arts instructional professional development series. Mr. Brian currently teaches eighth grade English Language Arts.

Teaching was not his first career choice. He began his career as a building substitute. His mother is a retired educator (teacher/principal), and he credits her influence, encouragement and support for successfully completing his masters in teaching. He is viewed as a successful teacher with diverse groups of learners, although he has only been teaching for seven years. He credits his ability to meet the needs of diverse learners by getting to know the students. Learning as much as you can about diverse learners enables teachers to bridge the cultural gaps (Davis, 2006).

In the second focus group, which addressed classroom practices, Mr. Brian explained that he works at creating an environment that is safe and warm. He described some of the ways he does this is by engaging students in conversation about their interest and activities "I demonstrate to students that I am genuinely interested in getting to know them." Mr. Brian went on to say, "I connect with students and I consider this a necessary step in preparing to teach them." Student voice plays a pivotal role in his success with students.

> I show them and model how I want them to do the assignment or activity so if they have questions of how to do it I'm right there for them so that they can see exactly the best way to do it. And sometimes, as often has occurred, they may come up with a better way. If they do not understand the way that I'm teaching it to them, they will say 'what if we did it like this?' I would listen to the idea and tell them 'okay that might work. We can try it.

Mr. Brian also credits his success to student input. Students that have a choice, or some control over their learning, motivation is increased (Jensen, 1995). Mr. Brian provides personalized attention and individualized instruction to increase academic achievement. "After a lesson or sometimes during a lesson, I can do one-on-one with students who are having difficulty. I willing give up my preparation periods to tutor student who struggle." He describes using several textbooks to meet the needs of the students that are in his class, specifically for the students with low reading skills. Having a wide range of learners has resulted in Mr. Brian using a variety of text that is at different reading levels to address the same content.

Mr. Brian stated "curriculum does not always match my students, but as their teacher, and someone who knows them well, I tailor my instruction to each student." His students are encouraged to work within the curriculum framework using a variety of materials. This method allows him to reach students on a multitude of levels and provide meaningful engagement with the curriculum. Effective teachers use all available resources (Strong 2007). Mr. Brian revealed in our individual session that he was a comic book collector. "As a student I did not view myself as a 'reader,' it was my love for comic books that allowed me to fall in love with "a good story." Mr. Brian describes his one-on-one sessions that are designed around student interest. Mr. Brian describes his collection of textbooks as a plethora of resources. It includes comic books, sporting books, hip-hop magazines and books on tape. The collection allows him to use material to convey content in a meaningful way designed around student interest. Designing instruction around student interest has minimized non-compliant

behavior in the classroom. Mr. Brian's use of one-on-one service is also used as a management strategy.

> Classroom management takes care of itself when students are engaged at a level that is meaningful for them, students learn best when they know you are sincere and want the best for them. When students come into my classroom they're more apt to say 'okay, Mr. Brian is really trying to teach us things that he really cares about' and so it allows me to get the class under control, where some of the teachers around me may have difficulties, because they're not trying to reach their students at a personable level.

Mr. Brian Parental involvement allows him to further connect with students. To encourage parental involvement, he assigns parents homework regularly. Effective teachers engage parents in a meaningful way (Marzano, 2007). Mr. Brian gives parents a simple essay summary that involves a piece of literature that the student has read. Therefore, the student must first discuss the main points from the literature to the parents and provide support for the parent during the writing process. The more a parent is involved in the student's academic learning, including homework, the more the student is motivated to achieve (Gonzalez, 2002). Mr. Brian does not take credit for coming up with the ideal of parent homework. He found the ideal on the internet. This strategy provides a comprehensive review of the literature and a review of the writing process. In addition, the students are engaged in a dialogue with parents that involves teaching and learning. This strategy takes the age-old question of 'how was school today" to a higher level. He shared this strategy as a motivational tool for students and a great way to aid comprehension. However it also has had a profound impact on parental participation for Mr. Brian:

> At parent teacher conference (held in the gymnasium for staff safety), my colleagues thought the parents were upset with me regarding an assignment, because I had a long line of parents waiting to meet with me.

Repeatedly, they wanted to meet the teacher who had given them homework.

He views culturally relevant instruction as a "life-line" to further connect students to the learning. Mr. Brian describes his belief about culturally relevant teaching as a vehicle. "Building on background knowledge of students supports their comprehension and knowing the students gives you insight into their understanding as a teacher, I use it as a vehicle to get them to go where I need them." Ladson-Billings describes teachers that utilize students' culture as a bridge to school learning. This concept embraces the cultural differences of students as a tool for learning (1995).

Mr. Brian revealed his love and commitment for children during the follow-up interview. Mr. Brian received a lay-off notice after the second focus group session. He did not seem worried or unwavering in his commitment to service his students. He wanted to provide options for his students. He wanted to convey to them that they could achieve whatever they desired. In an effort to improve or perfect strategies to promote student achievement, reflecting on lessons and his interactions with students was a common practice,

Mrs. Laura: The Scholar

Mrs. Laura the *Scholar* has taught for fifteen years, she specializes in language arts and teaches students in an alternative environment with severe behavior concerns. Mrs. Laura is a seventy years young African American female with twenty years of experience. Mrs. Laura mentioned that she was a senior when she began teaching. She was highly recommended by several building principals. Her work as an effective teacher was recognized by Public Broadcasting Station (PBS). Mrs. Laura often reflects on the students that she

serves. She started her career as the first black legal secretary of a major urban law firm. She trained a number of staff members that all eventually were promoted and became her boss.

> It was a very, very racist environment, and I could see the tide turning, and what forced me out was being overlooked. I was hurt. I had trained over 500 clerical, I told my husband that I didn't know what I should do, and I kept telling him I have done all this in-house training on various models, equipment and modules , and helping the firm save thousands of dollars. I was going on-an-on complaining about all the training and teaching sessions. As soon as I said the word teaching, the light clicked and my husband said, 'yeah,' I was wondering how long it would take for you to get it."

Her husband (a teacher) helped her to realize how much "teaching" experience she had accumulated on the job. His insight and encouragement led her to finish her teaching degree from Cambridge. Being a novice to the profession led to her accepting assignments in some of the most challenging schools. Effective teachers are informal leaders on the cutting edge of reform and are not afraid to take risks to improve education for all students (Strong, 2007). Mrs. Laura uses a variety of techniques to meet the needs of students, including before and after school support for students who continued to struggle. Tomlinson (2001) explained that differentiation of instruction is a way of thinking about teaching and learning, not merely a teaching strategy. It is the teacher's response to the needs of individual learners in the classroom in order to maximize student growth (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Her strategies to engage students included the classics. Colleagues described her students as "thugs," she referred to them as *Shakespearian Scholars*.

> When I introduced Shakespeare to them, I told them this is a story about two young people in love-Romeo and Juliet. I brought in the music, and helped them to connect with the two young characters. After reading the story, I formed groups in the room and they had to recreate the scenes of

the play, and oh boy, did they make up the scenes. They used their own vernacular, and it was just great.

Differentiated curriculum results in increased student understanding and in student learning. By allowing students to use their own vernacular and prior knowledge Mrs. Laura was able to connect the classic to the students reality, this type of differentiation provides students the opportunity to think critically and increase comprehension (VanTassel-Baska, 2005).

Mrs. Laura completed her student teaching at Cranbrook, and she brought with her the same high expectations that were the norm at this highly regarded private school, into the inner city. High expectations represent a pathway toward improvement and growth in the classroom (Good & Brophy, 1997). Mrs. Laura held weekly literature singles. She engaged them in rich dialogue that centered on great literature.

> "Students had to read a book per week and present the major findings from their book to the class, and by the time you went around the room you heard a synopsis of 30 books, so you may want to read that book or at least you knew something about it. One week a boy came and whispered that he read three books, and I reminded him that he only was required to do one; I turned my back and said to myself 'yes!"

Her expectations of her students gave her hope and the students. She believed in them, and they began to believe. "Growing up in Detroit can be a challenge; I try to help students see themselves as learners." Mrs. Laura shares that her efforts center on helping students understand the culture of school.

> "I take nothing for granted, and I assume nothing, I take them as they come. Students know when you are genuine or when you're false, They've got to feel it, and my experience from an urban situation was very, very, very hard core – you know, students on parole, every week parole officers were coming into the class to check to see if so and so was here, it was really volatile. I spent a great deal of time trying to get them to learn the culture of school. Everyday I would say 'good morning, good morning.' And they would walk pass me, and say nothing and finally after about

three to four weeks the students began to respond. I got more and more...they would sit down and get to work. I always had classical music playing to help them to relax, they called it elevator music, but I encouraged them to try it during homework, because I knew that they were not coming from relaxing environments."

Mrs. Ann: The Practitioner

Mrs. Ann is a forty-four year old African American female and she is described as *The Practitioner*, because she willingly rolls-up her sleeves to support students, teachers, and parents. Effective teachers are viewed as persons who reflect on teaching, communicate consistently and act "globally" around the school for the benefit of the whole school community (Wentzel, 1997). Her work often went beyond the walls of her classroom, and extended into the community. Mrs. Ann along with other staff members, volunteer to support dismissal. She walks with the students into the neighborhood to keep a close eye on students as they transition home. Mrs. Laura stated that: "I only walk a block or so, but it makes a difference to hear the conversations that students have with each other after school." I also think my presence keeps them from fighting at least while in my presence." Mrs. Ann stated that the work of a teacher requires a "hands-on approach." After clarifying this statement and allowing Mrs. Ann to elaborate she revealed a proactive approach that addresses potential challenges that student will encounter during a lesson. Effective teachers are proactive about developing interventions before students fail (Jackson, 2009).

Mrs. Ann never imagined she would teach. The middle school English Language Arts Resource Room teacher was encouraged by her mother.

> What actually led me into teaching when I think back to it, I think my mom almost made me a teacher before I knew I was a teacher. I have a brother who is 13 months younger than I am, and I was always the one helping him with his homework and she said she could never…to this day she

could never teach him, but I could. So as a kid that didn't mean a lot to me. And I remember when I was 15 my mom had taken a typing class somewhere, and she didn't do that well…she did okay. But then I had just taken a typing class a year before, so I taught her how to type, and she was so impressed that she was learning from her teenage daughter. And I remember the day she told me- she told me "you should be a teacher," and when she said it I said in my mind –no. I believed teachers were up here and I thought as a teacher anytime you ask me a question in the world I had the answer at the top of my head. I thought I was supposed to know everything at all times, and I thought I will never be that smart. So I realized that being smart is not necessarily having the answers right there at that moment; you just need some resources to get the answers.

Having lived in the greater Detroit area, she "connected" with the students, parents and the community. Mrs. Ann was taught to value education early, and began her career as a paraprofessional in an emotionally disturbed all boys classroom. Her principal was so impressed with her work, when the teacher retired, the principal kept the controversial class open due to the positive impact of her working with the students. It was then she returned to complete her degree in education.

I decided to change my major from business to education. So I went home, I told my mom. I said "Mom, I need your help." She told me "what do you need?" I said, "Well, I need to take a two year leave of absence from the board of education so I can focus on my degree. In time, I have a two year plan…" and basically she said "you take one step, I'll take the rest." So I took my leave of absence, went and got my certification.

Mrs. Ann describes how nurturing students gave them emotional support that resulted in an increase in academics. Nurturing was demonstrated in the relationships she built with her students. Building significant relationships have had a significant impact on student achievement. Urban educators work to build an environment that fosters trust through the building of relationships (Comer, 1999). Mrs. Ann shared her decision to teach in an urban environment:

To me it's natural because that's where I came from and it was automatically my first choice. I think a lot of people's expectations are

lower for students in the urban area, but I know that they can achieve just like anyone else – all they need is nurturing, the guidance, the love, the structure. And I think that's why we're here – to give them that.

Taking the time to just listen and be open. Her concerns for the students demanded her to be willing to confront any issue that presented itself as a barrier to student success. Research states that in this act of listening, teachers actually demonstrate their dedication to bettering student lives, and they demonstrate their understanding through tenderness, patience, and gentleness. Effective teachers practice focused and sympathetic listening to show students they care about not only what happens in the classroom but about the student in general (Strong, 2004). The act of listening exudes trust, tact, honesty, humility and care. Moreover, research indicates that children want to be nurtured and that they value teachers who are kind, gentle, and encouraging.

Mr. Richard: The Warrior

Pearson Publishing recognized Mr. Richard as an outstanding language arts teacher. He trains colleagues on the curriculum resources available in language arts. Mr. Richard describes himself as a tool. He wants his students to view him as a tool for learning, and as a guide to assist them with new information. He credits his success to "zooming in on the needs of students," and battling with them to believe in their ability.   He has used his skills of collaboration and working with other veteran teachers to hone his skills. Teaching was described as a joy for him.

He credits the strong relationships that he establishes with students allow for his success. He shared that his work is constant, and often extends beyond the work day. Mr. Richard along with four other focus group participants

frequently makes home visits to strengthen relationships with parents and students. Mr. Richard stated that by having a stronger understanding of the students' home environment allows him to build relationships with, further connect and strengthen his bond with students. Mr. Richard was raised by a single mother and he grew up in a high poverty area. Therefore, he relates to some of the environments that his students experience:

> I think understanding the environment that they are living in can contribute to their success. I will teach them. If you understand their environment that they are coming from, I mean there are so many ways you can impact their thinking about…that is what they are in, that little circle, or whatever their little circle that they think they're in, is not the limit of what can do. That's not the end of the world. If you can get them to think outside that circle and so that they can go further outside that little environment that they're living in, and impact their thing and say, "Well, this is not where I'm limited to be. I can go further, I can go past this and I can reach further than this." And if you empower them to think outside that environment, then you've done your job. You've done your job."

Research supports that teachers who have an awareness of student home environment are able to deliver relevant instruction and create opportunities that provide students with viable options (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

Giving students additional support and allowing them to have an insight into your own story further connections of teacher-to-student relationships. Mr. Richard expresses wanting more for his students and their future." His passion for his work came through in his tone.

> "I have to also keep saying that I'm committed to teaching all students. But I have a special desire to help the African-American child. Knowing the environmental aspects of what our people have suffered and still are suffering, I take it upon myself personally, as I know all of us do (referring to the other participants), that we have to help these children because they are our future. I want to retire one day, and I want them to be able to get into that cycle of working and contributing so that I can sit back. And I know that if I don't do this, that maybe the continuing demise of our culture, and our kids not being educated. So I kind of take it kind of personally, as I think back on me being raised poor and seeing them, and I

know what education has done for me and will do, and I want them to have the same thing. So that's what I, I don't want to say I drill in their minds, but I let them know, "Look, I'm your guide and I'm here to help you and this is my job." So all of that bears and place a part into everything that I do, and helping them to feel confident that I'm here to guide you, so that you can make it, there is such a great need there. And I think, it just bears on my heart."

The critical and complex learning needs of those students most at risk of academic failure require the teacher to possess a high level of understanding about the students they teach. Planning for instruction involves developing meaningful lessons that communicate high expectations to students (Bernard, 2003). Effective teachers of at-risk students engage students in the learning process, by making connections between the curriculum and real life.

Mrs. Christine: The Legacy

Mrs. Christine came from a long line of educators. Grandmother and great aunt were teachers along with her parents. Mrs. Christine's grandmother and great aunt were both educated in the south. They were both denied contracts with Detroit Public Schools until they completed additional course work. The Legacy recently discovered correspondence that described what her grandmother and great aunt endured with the board of education. When the two southern certified teachers completed the course work, they were given more courses. Mrs. Christine described the blatant racism that they experienced:

> My grandmother was a teacher, and her sister was a teacher, when they came up from the south, they couldn't get employed here. The Detroit Board…I actually found some records, some transcripts between some discourse between my aunt and the Board, and the letters going back and forth. She would take a class, they would say she needed this class and she would take it, and they would say "Well, you're still not prepared. You will need to do that." And so they really couldn't get work here."

The travesty of being told they were ill prepared resulted in substitute positions. They were never given a contract to teach. The struggle witnessed by her parents drove them both into education. Mrs. Christine learned to value education early-on. She entered college as a pre-medical student. It was her summer employment, teaching at a child development center where she describes being "bitten by the bug of teaching."

> I had a summer job working at a child development center. And I was having a ball, and these kids amazed me – little four year olds learning at the speed of light. And I was curious you know how were they learning? It's the how and the why you know. And I don't care how much I taught them; they would just pick it up like this. So it made me curious about how the children really learned. A young lady from the Detroit Board observed me and she said "I don't know what you're going into but it should be education." And, I was like "You think? "I don't know." I wasn't going to go up against my dad. After a couple of summers working hear at the child center I began to really like it. I was enjoying it each time I went and each time I wanted to stay longer. I didn't want to go back and just do pre-med; I wanted to work with children. And so I was bitten by the bug of teaching, I lived it and I enjoyed the kids.

Mrs. Christine feels she was destined to teach-it has become her legacy to both her grandmother and her great aunt. She is passionate about the work she does. She feels seeing the "light go on" is worth more than gold.

> I had moments that the kids realize that they have it, they don't need me to share, to show, to teach, but they're beginning to make connections. And watching them realize that "We have this, we can do this," and then their curiosity about "Well, then what else?" Watching kids go at it.. I mean when they figure out "So this means what I thought, so then what does this mean?" And having them begin to become interested in learning – those are the things that draw me in, that make me think I'm never going to leave this. They're going to have to carry me away from the classroom somewhere. I like it that much!"

Teachers that connect with the learning process find ways to continue to build on the natural curiosities of learners. This allows teachers to create environments that foster academic growth. Building a learning community is

about getting to know your students and bonding with them (Routman, 2003). Mrs. Christine describes coming from a long-line of educators gives her motivation to keep pushing. "Achievement is not an option, in my class, you will perform, and when support you every step of the way." Learning was described as a love passed down. Teaching and learning is her way of keeping a family tradition alive.

Mrs. Carol: The Motivator

Mrs. Carol is a Caucasian female who has been teaching for twenty years old. She knew from the start, that she wanted to teach. Growing up in small suburban area, college was expected. Her mother was a nurse, and her father was an executive. Teaching was viewed as a noble profession. Teachers have historically been viewed as pillars of the community and essential to society's success (Comer, 1999). She contributes her ability to be "genuinely concerned" about her students and their success as a critical component in her ability to be successful. Mrs. Carol goal is to awaken a love of learning in every student she encounters.

> I help students to discover their own love of learning by exposing them to everything. In the beginning of the year, I take a survey to allow me to get to know my students. I then have them create a survey for me, thus allowing them to get to know me. I use the information to begin to build and assess the needs of my students. It's actually a writing assignment, they develop questions and sometimes I am asked serious questions about how and why I became a teacher. This lesson appears to be simple, but it carries more weight than a graded assignment, it's my opportunity to peek into their perceptions from their questions of me and their responses, but it also allows them to peek into me as their teacher.

Sharing and connecting student interest to learning outcomes can allow African American students to achieve academic success. The effective teacher

knows how to connect students, and how to modify instruction, and what to modify (Cawelti, 2004). Reaching out to parents further connects Mrs. Carol with students.

> "These are my kid," that is my message to parents' right from the start. I treat them just like I would treat my own. I am a mother of three and they know that I care, and my goal is to ensure the success of their child. "Motivating students is how I get them to buy in. I actually taught a few of my parents, and now I have their children, they know I'm vested in the community, and I know that helps me with my parents"

Building the connections between students and parents helps Ms. Carol to create an environment of inquiry by giving students permission to question her first as a person via the survey. Questioning has often been a viewed by researchers as the key to higher level thinking. This process supports student engagement in learning and a teacher's ability to monitor the learning process (Strong, 2007).

Motivating students to want more than just "a grade," and empowering students to move to action allows her to connect with students. Empowering students has been described as a way to motivate students and support creativity in the learner. Teachers routinely give assignments that will not require a finished paper; rather it provokes thought for use in class discussions or writing activities. Her strategies of motivation have evolved around critical literacy. "Empowering students to do something with the information is how they see the power of knowledge." Moving beyond the text is a method she often embraces to help students connect with the literature. Being a white teacher, teacher in a predominantly African American district, Mrs. Carol often shares her own struggles with teaching and learning as an opportunity for dialogue with her

students. "Sharing my own trials and triumphs, helps students to see me as a person, not someone who has all of the answers." She credits her success with "being real, up-front, and honest with students."

> I try to be honest with students and transparent about assignments and the goals of my classroom. I want them to understand up-front my expectations, but I also want them to begin to see the bigger picture and understand the ultimate goal of an education is for them to have the necessary skills to contribute and compete in a global market. It may sound a bit like a "cliché" but I feel it is important for them to have some type of insight into demands of teaching and learning.

Ms. Carol goes beyond the classroom instruction and embraces the affective aspect of teaching and learning. Strong, 2004 reports that the teacher as a person and the interpersonal skills are the basis for creating strong working relationships and a positive classroom environment for learning. Those relationships can be powerful motivators to learning. When recounting their best teachers, Individuals recount how the teacher made them feel before mentioning how much they learned (Wubbels, Leyv & Brekelmans, 1997).

Focus Groups

Focus group sessions for successful teachers became a path for teachers to reflect on pedagogy. The role of reflection has been described repeatedly in studies of teacher effectiveness. Effective teachers continually practice self-evaluation and self-critique as learning tools (Strong, 2007). Rich dialogue provided a valuable vehicle for teachers to shed light on proven strategies. Each focus group was designed around a theme that directly linked to the research questions. The first session addressed research question two: To what extent are the personal and professional beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences of successful teachers' of African American students' congruent with components of

culturally relevant pedagogy? The second session centered on question three: What classroom practices do successful teachers use to provide effective instruction for African American students? How did these teachers come to acquire and implement these practices? What was the evolution of the development of these practices? The third focus group addressed education, training and preparing to teach in an urban area. The final focus group allowed the participants an opportunity to address any obstacles that they were confronted with and how they were able to navigate through or respond to the challenges. As a result of the structured focus group sessions, several themes emerged.

Personal Beliefs and Background Experiences

Teachers identified dimensions of personal life as having a positive consequence on their professional practice as urban educators. Teachers reported that becoming a parent helped them gain insight into children and family life. Teachers acknowledged that they treated their students as they would like their own children to be treated. Mrs. Carol stated:

> I tell my parents that these kids are my kids – I treat them just like I would treat my own. I am a mother of three; having experiences the highs and the lows of parenting, I know what it is like to have tweens and teenagers. I want the best for my kids, and make it clear to parents that I treat your child just like I would treat my own. And if they need lunch money, or a stern talking them that's what I going to give to them, I would want you to do the same thing to mine.

Family and Values

Participants consistently identified personal relationships and family values that had a significant impact on their professional practice. Personal relationships that centered on a love of learning, willingness to share, spirituality and a firm

commitment to children were recognized as important. Three of the teachers

reported having close family members that were teachers. Mr. Brian shared the

invaluable support he received from his mother:

> Personally, I had a lot of help from my mother who was in education for over thirty years and retired from education. Going to her classrooms, going to her schools, seeing how she taught and the way she did things in her classroom, as well as how she managed her students and cared for her students, taught me how to interact with students. That's something that I could not learn in the classroom setting at the university level. I had to see that done for myself. And she was a great demonstrator of how to speak with children and how to communicate with students, so that they can learn and they will learn from you. That's something that's irreplaceable. You can't learn that in the university. It's impossible. It's priceless. It's priceless.

Mrs. Christine had several members of her family that were educators. Her

relationship with family plays a vital role in her professional life as a teacher.

Having a close relationship with family members gave her a drive to share the joy

of learning with her students as an extension of her actual family.

> My parents exposed me to a lot of educational settings. I went to some of the best schools in Detroit. I knew early in life the benefit to having a good education. Education was viewed as valuable in my family, and my parents instilled the importance of a good education, and now I am passing on the tradition, not only to our daughter, but to my students as well.

The data suggest that the personal lives of teachers outside of the

classroom has a notable impact on the classroom itself (Blasé, 1985) and

ultimately on student achievement. Further, teachers identified their own spiritual

beliefs as having a beneficial influence on their professional life. Teachers

discussed religion in a general manner of values or a belief in God. Mrs. Laura

shared what she attributes to her success as an effective teacher of African

American middle school students:

It's the driving force. I know that we're supposed to separate church and state and all that stuff. But I would have to say much of my success is because of how He (God) has aligned my own personal life and then He blesses me with the students that are before me. And when I get a group in front of me, the first thing I say is "Alright, Lord, you and me, let's figure this out. And then I go at it. He's give me a positive attitude with students. And I don't care how rude, and nasty they start out, by the end, well, we're all on one page. And it's allowed me not to leave no one behind, to truly embrace the experience, the moment and to work through whatever we're going through so that we can begin the learning process. And that I attribute to God; not to the schools, not to the administrator, because when no one else has my back, I can always feel like, okay, you're there, aren't you?

> As Mrs. Laura ends, the other focus group participants nod in agreement and chime in chorus with a hearty Amen.

The belief in God translates into feelings of concern, acceptance, confidence, and security. Their relationships with students were described throughout the research as caring, understanding, and accepting as a result of spiritual beliefs. What emerged from the personal lives of teachers is the ability to have a well developed individual identity and a sense of connection to others beyond the self (Belensky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). There is a growing body of literature that suggests that the work of teaching and a teacher's personal experience, ideology, values and beliefs impacts their educational practice greatly (Day, 2004; Elliott & Crosswell, 2001; Fired, 1995; Nias, 1996). The sense of connection is experienced by teachers in a variety of ways- through children, family life, interests, experiences, values, and religion.

Connection and Commitment

A connection to students was a constant theme throughout the data analysis. Participants expressed connections as a necessary ingredient for students to be successful, and how growing up in an urban environment allowed

them to connect with the students that they serviced. This connection was also described as a unique aspect of urban education and a key factor in their commitment to teach and remain in an urban environment. Mrs. Christine remarks:

> They need the connection with another human being, that's willing to look at them for where they're at and say, "Fine by me, come on in here. Let's get this." They seem to need that. These kids look at you in the face to see "Are you going to accept me or reject me?" As long as they know what you are going to do…my goal is to find the connection, and I know I can get them to respond, once they know that they matter, then you can teach them.
> Connections evolved into teacher commitment. The analysis focused on

conceptualizing connections into a theoretical framework. The connections were considered as a beginning bond and a further commitment for student success. Ms. Ann portrait of how she conceptualizes her connections with students and the natural process of being a part of the community:

> To me it's just like you said – it's natural because that's where I came from and it was automatically my first choice. I think a lot…at the same time I think peoples expectations are lower for students in the urban area, but I know, we all know that they can achieve, just like anyone else – all they need is the nurturing, the guidance, the love, the structure. And I think that's why we're here – to give them that.
> Teacher connections and commitment has been identified as one of the

most critical factors for the future success of education (Huberman, 1993). The research supports a strong connection between teacher commitment and having a passion for the work of teaching (Day, 2004; Elliott & Crosswell, 2001; Fried, 1995). Connections and commitment provided a lens to analyze culturally relevant pedagogies. Connecting to students and the community emerged from the date, and participants shared their belief that all students were indeed capable of academic success, and saw themselves as members of the

community. Ladson-Billings, (1995) identified the conception of self and others as being factors of culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant instruction was a common thread among each of the focus group participants. Strangely the teachers were unaware of the theoretical framework that was a persistent presence in their classroom and their instruction. Culturally relevant instruction was an unconscious practice, and viewed as a necessary practice for student success. Participants used the word "connect" to describe how they were able to help students to perform. Mr. Richard describes his eye opening experience:

> I wrote a paper on teaching African American students using their own vernacular. And it was an eye-opening paper for myself, because I came to realize that the speech patterns that we may enunciate toward each other in the classroom is not the same speech pattern that you would see in the suburbs with Caucasian children. And I realized at that point that the way that we teach our children, our African-American students, is not only through our speech patterns, but also our culture.

Teachers shared a variety of strategies that centered on culturally responsive teaching. Data on culturally relevant extend beyond themes and surfaced across the data analysis. Participant statements are congruent with the research: Ms. Ann: It's the building of relationships and teaching beyond academics, beyond reading, math, and arithmetic. Establishing relationships with students is viewed as a component of culturally responsive teaching (Dixson, 2003). Bennet and Sherman (1991) found that culturally responsive teachers make student interest the main priority. Mrs. Carol states:

> I allow students to explore in their own way, and I support them: I allow them to select reading material based on their interest. I guide their selection and help them to broaden their scope, but it all builds on their

interest. Helping students connect with the literature strengthens their comprehension skills.

When students are actively involved in planning what they will be doing, it supports learning (Ware, 2002). The planning involves real choices and not such simple preferences. Students may be asked to select a topic for study, to decide what resources they will need, or to plan how they will present their findings to others. Students learn to make informed choices by actually making informed choices (Haberman, 1991). Ms. Laura illustrates the benefits of giving students the ability to choose:

> I found what works for me is giving my students a choice. And the choice is always what I expect, my goal for them is to exceed my expectation, and often they do, so they feel that they have some ownership.

Connecting to students was viewed as an understanding that revealed the cultural competence of the participants. Cultural competence supported prior knowledge and successfully scaffolding instruction. Possessing cultural competence is a critical criterion that culturally relevant teachers exhibit (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Using culture as a basis for learning is a strong indicator of cultural competence that was consistent among the focus group participants. Again, culturally responsive pedagogies was a common thread in the data analysis and overlapped within the emergent themes, and therefore will be addressed again and further analyzed as it relates to other major themes.

Professional Beliefs and Professional Preparation

Preparation of teachers has a history of debate. Dewey (1904) reminded us that it is more important to make teachers thoughtful, alert students of education than it is to help them gain immediate job proficiency. However, in the

wake of high stakes testing and growing accountability the debate continues. Participants shared their belief on the adequacy of preparation. University preparation was viewed as fundamental and necessary for establishing a strong theoretical background for student learning, Mr. Richard recalls his undergraduate studies: "I learned a great deal about theories, and thematic units, but I did not learn some of the nuances of teaching such a diverse group." Participants all reported a common disconnect with the theory presented and the students that they serve.   Results were mixed. Mr. Richard expanded by stating:

> I do feel that the university prepared me with pedagogical theories. Yes it gave me a lot of that, but the hands-on, under-the-cover type stuff, I had to learn on my own, once I got into the classroom. So no, I don't think the universities prepare you enough for that. Especially, and I don't want to say particularly African American students, but for any students, they don't prepare you for the real hands-on, nitty-gritty type stuff. I don't want to say it's a shock when you get there, but many of us who are ready to do it, we know it's a part of the process. So it's a learning process.

Participants echoed this belief of having a strong foundation of theory, but gained application on the job and with professional development. Studies support the finding that fully prepared teachers understand how students learn and what and how they need to be taught. In addition, their background knowledge of pedagogy makes them better able to recognize individual student needs and customize instruction to increase overall student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). The discussion continued, and focused on urban teacher preparation. Mrs. Christine reported:

> I'll say this about the university. They may have opened my eyes as to curriculum practices, academics, and whatnot, but preparing me to be a teacher in an urban setting, they did not. They could no more connect with these kids than the man in the moon. And the reality of what they taught in how to deal with urban kids, who come from backgrounds…they come from, ill-prepared me to stand before our children. My experiences, some are working with 7th graders, I mean, tooth and nail up in your face with it.

My first experience in a new building was with a 8th grade student. And the first thing – one of the girls, I mean confronted me, and says, "oh, you want to fight?" And I was like, "who?" And I'm like, "Who are you talking to?" Nothing in the university prepares you for that. They make it sound like these little babies, you're going to stand up and everybody's going to sit there and talk. "Teach." That is the farthest thing from real education.

Universities continue to struggle with preparing teachers to successfully teach in an urban area. The research and literature related to effective teachers of students who are at-risk tend to focus on the teacher characteristics and emphasizes that poor and minority students are more likely to have a teacher who has not completed all teacher preparation requirements and therefore is not certified (Strong, 2007). It is important to point out that participants addressed the need to further their learning via professional development. Ms. Laura stated:

> I think all of the training and professional development that I received after I graduated played a huge part in my success. It helps to keep me up to date on new learning strategies, theories, things of that sort. And it also opens up the field when other teachers, when we congregate together in a professional development setting, you pick up other things from them. It all plays a part.

Encouraging teachers to become reflective practitioners and engage in continuous learning helps teachers to master the craft of urban teaching. Specifically when it comes to teaching African American students, Ms. Ann points out:

> I was taught to consider the whole child and – what is it, the Maslow triangle? It was good that they did, but that didn't even touch it, like you said. So you come ill-prepared. But I think the universities need to really begin to live up to their name. Especially my university that say they're preparing the "urban teacher." They're so off-point with that statement. They're off-point. So I think it needs to be dealt with more. I think there's more training in how to deal with bilingualism, or trying to bring them into the fold, than it is dealing with the African American child.

Many studies conclude that effective teachers must understand pedagogy (Bohn, Roehrig & Pressley, 2004). Data from this research suggest that teachers

understand the connection between textbook theories and how those theories play out in the classroom specific to African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Mrs. Christine expanded her statement:

> And I'll say this about the universities. They need to diversify education. They need to go beyond special needs and bilingual, and they need to truly look at the urban student and their needs. As urban teachers, especially when you go into the bowels of the city, you are not only a teacher; you're a social worker, you're a psychologist, many times you're judge and jury. I mean, you wear the parents' hats, you're a parent trainer. There are so many other elements that come into play, versus just being that classroom teacher. You're the supplier, and then you buy the supplies, you buy clothing, you feed them.

Professional training and preparation of urban educators requires a critical lens of analysis. As districts create performance evaluations for teachers that will directly link teachers to student performance, it is essential that we re-examine how urban teachers are prepared. The critical and complex learning needs of those students most at-risk of academic failure require the teacher to possess a high level of understanding about the students they teach. The discussion of preparation and training allowed participants to delve into professional beliefs that drive their practice. Research indicates that belief drives practice (Dweck, 2002). A driving belief that was a common thread of practice centered on building relationships.

Building Relationships

Effective teachers care for students first as people, and second as students. Teachers go beyond a mere respectful relationship to a caring relationship with students (Langer, 2000). Research participants emphasized the great need to establish significant relationships with students. "No significant learning will occur, with a significant relationship" James Comer (1995).

Relationships with students allowed teachers to connect with the learning. This connection fostered a relationship between the teacher and the student. Ms. Ann shared a story about a group of African American all male class that presented behavior problems and were well known throughout the building:

> I walked into the classroom, and the boys were flipping in the classroom: I had feet flying in my face, they didn't hit me but the feet went past my face, and I'm thinking to myself, how do you get this under control? So you know, like a good teacher I'm trying to take attendance. I call names, I have one boy says, when I call his name "What's poppin' sweetie?" and I had to reintroduce myself and tell him my name. And he's like "okay, honey." So this is the environment that I came into, so I'm looking at these boys and I'm thinking "Okay, I don't think we're going to get through this reading lesson on the board today." But at this time I had to establish some sort of relationship with these boys so I decided to be quiet and listen to them. And as I'm listening to them speak about gang activity: shootouts, drive-bys, drugs and sexual behavior. I finally said to them, "you know, I want to talk to you today, not as your teacher, as a woman who cares about the young men in front of me now. So don't look at me as your teacher, but this is more of a personal thing now." Because I said what I see and hear now is really starting to scare me." But the only way I think I was able to sort of develop a relationship with these boys is first I had to let them know that I too sat where they sat. I went to high school just down the street from where we were at. When I shared some personal stories with them all of sudden the boys started looking at me a little differently. And then it got to the point where it was a little bit easier to get these boys to sit down and stop doing the flips and kicking across my face or each other's face. I had to get to know them. It was more important for me to listen then to talk. When I listened to them, it was clear that they did not see a future for themselves. One particular student stood out, he was almost 16 years old, and still in middle school. I asked him if he wanted to grow up, have a job, a family, basically what was his plan, and he said "Sure, but I don't see it, and because I don't see it I can't believe it, and because I can't believe it, this is who I am now." And his words, I remember he said to me he's been 'banging and humping' for a while now and this is who he is.

Many students have to establish a relationship with their teachers before they can learn from them (Haycock, 2001). Students need to know that staff members care about them and their futures. They need to know that an interested adult is available to them and is one who understands their concerns,

and will continually help them to consider and explore educational and career goals. By taking the time to listen in an effort to try to connect with students and better understand the students allows effective teachers build meaningful relationships. Effective teachers practice focused and sympathetic listening to show students they care about not only what happens in the classroom but about students' lives in general (Strong, 2007). Ms. Ann initiation of two-way communication exudes trust, tact, honesty, humility and care. Nieto (2003) found that teachers who developed a close relationship with students witnessed their students striving for higher levels of achievement to please their teachers.

Taking time to get to know students likes and dislikes, having heart-to-heart conversations was a reported as a common practice among focus group participants, and sharing personal stories. Members reported that sharing of oneself, allowed students to see the teacher as a person. Mrs. Christine describes how students became accustom to her sharing and a significant consequence:

> They were accustom to me sharing, and I would share my personal life, and personal stuff about me. So one of the questions came up, I was talking and I said…they were asking why was Kim here (my 16 year old daughter). And all of the kids in the room got dead silent; Well they wanted to know why Kim was grounded, they know when she shows up to work with me something is up. And they said "what did she do?" They said "Grounded?" I said "Mm-hmm, because she misused her cell phone. So the kids need to know that you're real, that you're a real person and what applies to them applies to other people – it's not just for them within the context of the classroom, it's what you believe. And if they see that you're for real, and it's authentic, it's reality for you, what you're asking of them and these standards that you're setting are not for the purposes of that class but it's for real – then kids begin to buy in, and accept.

Mrs. Christine went beyond demonstrating care and concern. As an effective teacher she establishes a rapport and credibility with students by

emphasizing, modeling, and practicing fairness and respect. Effective teachers continually emphasize impartiality with equitable treatment of all students. Sharing her own personal stories along with giving students permission to ask questions further demonstrated respect and equity for all children. Both have been identified as a prerequisite of effective teaching in the eyes of students (Strong, 2007). Mr. Brian gives an account of his experience in allowing students to ask questions:

> One thing I experienced after a day of telling my students that I cared for them, the next thing I knew they started asking me questions about me. They started asking me questions like "Where did you go to school?" or "How did you do…?" "What kind of background did you have or what have you accomplished," things of that nature. And I told them, I told them "I went to school right here with you, I graduated from college right here with you." I even took a group of my students to my masters' college, so they got…and I exposed them to the college atmosphere. I exposed them to those ideas, I said "Hey, I did it – you guys can do it too." And they think that college is some far off kind of place that they have to go to. I say "Well here's a college right here, right here inside the city of Detroit that you can go to. It's not that far away, you guys can get to it." So they went there to see it, touch it, breathe it, live it. You know if they're exposed to it, it makes a difference in their perspective. They say "Yeah, this is something attainable. I can do it, I can. I just need the right tools so that I can reach it."

Effective teachers get to know students on an individual basis and are willing to help students achieve (Corbett & Wilson, 2002). Mr. Brian demonstrated his willingness and dedication to work with students and help them achieve goals by going beyond the school day (Baker, 1999 & Bernard, 2003). The treatment of students provided the necessary framework for teachers to build a community of learners and further connect the learning for students.

Building a Community of Learners

Building a community of learners hinges on the ability to foster an atmosphere that is culturally responsive, inclusive and differentiated. Participants discussed how building relationships is part of the bridge that creates a community of learners. Building a community of learners goes beyond the surface of the classroom environment, it involves building trust, and creating openness that facilitates growth. Mrs. Carol explains:

> My students know that I am here for them, but in turn, I want them to be there also for each other. I tell my kids, this is your education, and you must be active and participate in your own learning. I work at creating opportunities for them to work together and problem solve. But first we work as a whole group to try to tackle a question. We will brain-storm writing topics, or brain-storm about current issues. The discussion generates a number of items that students can further explore in smaller groups, but more importantly, it sets the stage for them to continue to engage in the learning by questioning. Students are not quick to question, because they have not been taught to question. Questioning takes risk, and I work to intentionally create a community where students are not afraid to question and take risk.

Ms. Carol made it clear that in creating a community of learners, educators must consider the parents:

> In building a community that values education…we encountered tired parents that had high expectations, but they were tired…we had to support them, in order for students to obtain the support they needed. Urban life is exhausting – poverty is exhausting-we see it in our parents' face.

Parents of children living in poverty will side with their child against the teacher in an effort t survive (Rudney, 2005) When parents and teachers are partners in educating students, a more unified home-school effort exists and they are less likely to lay blame on one another (Orange, 2005). This constructivist approach is viewed by participants as a way to help the learner to be actively involved in a meaningful way. Constructivist pedagogies reinforce the belief that

students who actively construct their own understanding by synthesizing new experiences into what they already know can improve their academic achievement and learn independently (Bransford et al. 2000). Effective teachers facilitate open discussions within the classroom. Creating a supportive community of learners requires teachers to approach teaching and learning with a positive relationship with students that encourages student achievement. Teachers must constantly communicate a climate of support and encouragement to ensue that students participate actively in the two-way teaching and learning process (Marzano, Marzano & Pickering, 2003). In building the community of learners' student voice plays a pivotal role in helping students to further connect to the community.

John Dewey called for teachers to listen to students and to be "alive" to their thinking, affect and leaning (1933). Participants reported actively seeking the voice of their students in building a community of learners. Providing students with options allowed the learners to further connect to the learning environment.

Student Voice

Building a community of learners requires students to articulate their ideas, challenge those of others, and negotiate deeper meaning along with other learners. This type of environment honors the voice of students and enables them to learn from one another. Teacher participants reported actively seeking the voice of their students as a means to engage students in dialogue, strengthen relationships and to create an open environment. Mr. Brian shared:

> Students are always making suggestions, and I am open. If I think it is something that we can do, and even if I don't think it will work, they know I am open to try or tell them what I think the outcome will be. Recently we were completing a "Do now" activity. It was a writing prompt on things that

you see in your neighborhood. Well the students wanted to change the prompt to things that you see in da hood. I agreed to the change and I was amazed at the results. They did not want to stop writing. The students were writing, and actively engaged. The classroom is their second home, and they're looking for somebody, anybody to give them acknowledgement. They need a voice and they also need guidance because they don't know how to necessarily appropriately voice their thoughts and opinions.

Teachers who are considered effective allow students to participate in decision making. The chances that new information will be remembered are increased when that information is connected to relevant issues (Sprenger, 2005). Participants nodded in agreement with Mr. Brian and the use of student voice. Mrs. Laura indicated how she uses student voice to diffuse inappropriate behavior:

> Getting their input on how to resolve it is sometimes, it works in a situation that we can use to diffuse it and get the rest of the class back on task, because some students come up with viable solutions…whether it be going to the library, taking a restroom break, 15 minutes in the class for themselves to get together – it just depends on the student.

Bringing student input into the content allows teachers to strengthen teacher student relationships, and provides the necessary autonomy for student accountability. Students that have a say in how they decipher the text, gain a deeper sense of understanding. In addition, it becomes an indirect but powerful way to communicate concern and cooperation Marzano (2007). The use of student voice is a strategic practice of effective urban teachers. It plays an essential element in the curriculum, delivery and management practices.

Classroom Practices

The classroom practices of the participants incorporated a combination of factors that emerged from the data. For the purpose of this research, classroom

practices were specific to the content of language arts. Factors intersected and layered instructional methodology into categories: student voice and student choice; instructional options and individualizing instruction; high expectations and the classroom environment. A teacher-student relationship was recurrent throughout the planning and delivery of instruction.

Teacher-Student Relationship

A teacher's repertoire of teaching strategies is a significant element of overall effectiveness. Effective teachers demonstrate interest in student lives beyond the classroom. Teachers who attend sporting events, concerts, and other special programs in which their students participate are valued by their students. (Strong, 2007). Focus group participants reported using teacher-student connections and established relationships with students to drive classroom practices. Ms. Ann stated:

> We do journal writing every morning, and I had a student who never wanted to write. In the beginning I couldn't even get him to complete a sentence, and it was always "oh Ms. Ann, I don't want to do this, I can't do this," whatever. I took the time to find out what it is that he was actually interested in. He was really interested in church, where he played the drums. I found out that he was singing and rapping with his father, so we took a combination of all these things that he was interested in to develop writing topics. Initially I was happy with a paragraph, but now he writes several full pages, and I would have to make him stop writing so that we could move on or even share. It was a success; he started begging me to give him more time to write. I noticed that not only did it help him, but the other students as well. Writing became a competition – let's see who can write the most.

Classroom practices were shaped by the relationships that the teachers had established with their students. The most important single factor in the learning process is the relationship between a teacher and a pupil and this critical relationship-not strategies or instructional tactics- provides the basis for effective

instruction (Bender, 2008). Relationships with students became the driving force in how instruction was delivered, how lessons were planned, and how the classroom environment was designed. Environmental aspects were used to provide harmonious learning, which connected students with instruction.

Classroom Environment

Effective teachers reported dilapidated buildings, and deplorable working conditions. However, transforming the environment was fundamental in their ability to successfully connect with students. Creating and emphasizing a positive learning environment was viewed as a priority among the focus group participants. Mrs. Laura stated:

> We have to embrace some of the newer techniques to change culture and environment. And we can do that for pennies. We don't have to wait for administrators. Picture in your rundown yucky building, plants, and beautiful student artwork displayed. I never use white paper. It's always on colored paper because the brain perceives things in color better than it does black and white, and so this is about learning. And stations, where students are writing, a art station where students are creating. The children are free to get up. You have a bean bag where they can kind of lie down or scrunch. "Sit up straight." How many times do you hear teachers say that? Well, these boys are sitting in this little seat and they're getting to be six feet tall. Can you imagine yourself…because it's uncomfortable for me to get in that desk. And do can you imagine what it is for a growing guy. And even some of the girls are really over-height and overweight and it's miserable. So if they're comfortable slumped, what do you care? As long as they're learning, I have always had that living-room effect. Chairs arranged in circles or clustered in small groups and flowers in between each station.

Participants were nodding in agreement to how Mrs. Laura described small changes that can be made to the classroom, that make a significant difference. Howard (2002) supports the notion that not only should the environment be positive, but it should be family-like. Crafting the learning environment to welcome, nurture, and honor African American students included

supplemental materials to the curriculum, equipment and overall environment. As educators we cannot control the students environment outside the classroom, we have the power to create positive or negative images about education, to develop an enriched environment, an to become the catalyst for active learning (Walker-Tileston, 2011). Mrs. Carol also insisted on a carpet area for her middle school students. She described her room as "cozy and warm." Her creation supported her overall goal of wanting students to feel welcomed. Meticulously cultivating warmth into the environment effective teachers addresses the small things. During a follow-up interview with Mrs. Carol she expanded on the need to create an environment for learning:

> I create an inner environment with music, paintings, lighting and plants. I have even brought in paintings off my wall from home, even posters and stuff. I went online and I printed out motivational sayings and pictures and they are all over my room. I want optimum learning. Working in this type of environment helps me just as much as it does the students. We have an atmosphere that is warm, and relaxed.

Cultivating a positive learning environment promotes student achievement. Several reported bringing in African artifacts, cloth, and books geared toward urban students. Teachers reported making window treatments, and softening the lighting with lamps to promote a nurturing atmosphere that inherently welcomed and valued students. Creating such an environment empowered students to become an active member of the classroom. The warmth created, permitted students to have a voice in the classroom that was valued, encouraged and welcomed. Mrs. Christine shared how she encourages student voice:

> I let my students know that I don't know everything, and its okay to make a mistake. I let them know that I want their input on how to tackle tough assignments. So when kids know that you can make a mistake, and they can make a mistake and its okay, they're more apt to try to answer questions, to grow and learn. I also let them know that if they don't know

something, it's not their fault, because I haven't taught it to them yet, it's my fault. And oh boy, did that take the pressure off them. It got them to relax and it made them try harder. It created an open dialogue.

Participants create a positive environment with intentional interaction with students that allow maximum learning to occur. An intentional interaction strengthens the relationships between students and teachers. Through interactions with students, effective teachers reported being able to individualize instruction and challenge each and every student to succeed. Teachers who are considered effective allow students to participate in decision making (Kohn, 1996). Participating in decisions gives not only a voice to students but it supports a choice in how their education is delivered.

Student Voice

In building a community of learners student voice was viewed as an essential ingredient. When students are permitted to do assignments that are related to the problems that they face or that are common in their community, they are eager to learn and participate (Thompson, 2010). Teachers reported honoring students and valuing their input as mention. Honoring student voice helped participants build a trusting relationship with students. Mr. Richard stated:

> Students that "by in" to what is going on want to voice their concerns. Today kids are different, and they want to have options, options with homework, group projects and even test. I don't mind as long as it connects to the objective in a meaningful way, and students are learning, I'm cool with it.

Mr. Richard has created an environment that welcomes student voice and voice lends itself to student choice. A democratic learning environment is one in which students are engaged and are active participants in the learning process. In such an environment, students are seen as peer educators who share

knowledge rather than as mere containers waiting to be filled with information (Howard, 2009). Giving students' choice had a layered meaning for some participants. Mr. Brian stated that providing students with options supported his goal of creating life long learners:

> I want student to know that they can do whatever they set their minds to. They can go to college, or start a business. I want them to understand the options they have in life beyond school, so I give them options, or choices. I call it practice. I want them to make the decision. Life will throw you a few curve balls and you will have no choice. Here you have a choice. They can select something that is relevant or interesting for them. This helps me to differentiate my instruction by giving students a choice.

Delpit (1988) affirms that the teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom. To deny students their own expert knowledge is to disempower them. Mr. Brian is helping his students to connect their learning to real life applications. When students have voice and choice, the student develops a sense of ownership in the learning (Gallavan, 2011). Effective teachers want their students to make reasonable and informed choices they are not in the context of the school, teachers must offer choices and coach students in making informed choices within the context of the classroom. Such choices may involve the options for demonstrating competence or understanding a set of facts or other choices among assignments on a particular topic (Sylwester 2000). By providing student choice, effective teachers are able to carefully differentiate and individualize instruction.

Individualized Instruction

Effective teachers tend to recognize individual and group differences among their students and accommodate those differences in their instruction (Tomlinson, 2003). Further, journal writing provides an outlet by which students

can express themselves and is part of a classroom environment that has a positive impact on brain chemistry (Sprenger, 1999). By responding to the range of student needs and abilities in the classroom, effective teachers adapt the assignment to meet the needs of students who may be either functioning above grade level or below grade level. Ms. Carol shared:

> After a lesson is taught, or sometimes during a lesson, I can do one-on-one with students that are having difficulty…also showing them and modeling how I want them to do that particular assignment or activity, so that if they have questions of or how to do it I'm right there for them.

One-on-one support increases student achievement significantly (Bloom, 1984). As an effective teacher Ms. Carol recognize that no single instructional strategy can be used in all situations. Participants described scaffolding and delivering relevant instruction gave way for student success. Teachers accommodated students, and successfully differentiated instructions for students regardless of abilities or disabilities as expressed by Ms. Ann "I get so upset when people don't challenge their children and push them." It's important to note that the teachers shared this vision although they were not formally trained as special educators; they individualized instruction to address the diverse needs of their learners. Quality instruction while simultaneously strengthening deficits via interventions was seen as an accountability factor. Instructional strategies are chosen for the concepts and processes stated in the learning expectations. As she stated her expectations for students are demonstrated through her interactions with students during instruction.

High Expectations

Effective teacher truly believe that all students can learn-it is not just a slogan. By giving students a choice in curriculum, creating a nurturing

environment and individualizing instruction-success was imminent. Students were held to a high standard, and supported with high expectations. This aligned with the research presented in the literature review and the impact of high expectations on student achievement (Edmonds and Frederiksen, 1978) Expectations should not be confused with standards. Standards are levels of achievement. Teachers who practice positive expectations will help their students reach high standards (Wong & Wong, 2009). Teachers held high expectations of students and supported students. Mrs. Christine shares high expectations and the impact of having them.

> Getting to the heart of learning… I am the meanest teacher in the building, and students tell me they wish they could go on a little longer. I have a student who is moving to Wisconsin next school year. She is incredibly rough around the edges and she was saying 'I really want to come back just one more year.' She said, 'you're going to be here next year?' I said 'you betcha!' If you set a standard it needs to be high-kids can tell when you water down instruction, and if you give up, they give up right along with you. They will oblige you every step of the way. They want to be challenged, they want to be acknowledged that they are somebody who wants to learn and they can feel that.

Having high expectations meant that the teachers insisted on students completing work and required students to redo assignments that were not done properly. Academic expectations were coupled with social expectations. Teachers realize that setting high expectations for behavior is just as important to learning as setting high expectations for academic performance (Covina & Iwanicki, 1996). High expectations provided a confidence in their ability to successfully meet the needs of students regardless of what level students currently performed. Assessment was used as feedback and openly shared with students to support the direction of their learning. Ms. Laura shared her personal story:

I grew up in Arkansas and the Little Rock Nine were from my neighborhood. You were going to learn. It was not an option-it was an expectation. I have the same expectation of my young people. When I feel they have not done their best work-they must redo the assignment until it meets the expectation set in the class. I give them feedback. My students constantly ask me "how am I doing?" Giving them on-going feedback is helpful for them and me as their teacher. It gives me an indication of how I need to readjust my instruction providing the feedback, it's like feedback and feed-forward. Having high expectations of them sets my bar high as well. As their teacher I feel it's my duty. If not me, then who?

One of the most generalizable strategies a teacher can use is to provide students with feedback relative to how well they are doing (Marzano, 2001). Ms. Laura's accountability to her students was powerful and empowering. If we want students to be more accountable, then we have to insist that they do what accountable people do. In this way, holding yourself to high expectations actually allows you to hold students more accountable (Jackson, 2009). Participants in this study felt that it was their obligation to meet the needs of students regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Obligation became a channel that was of particular importance when teaching English Language Arts and addressing students who continue to struggle at the middle school level.

Classroom Practices during English Language Arts

Instructional strategies of the participants can undoubtedly be used across content subjects. As mentioned this research focused on the classroom practices of effective English Language Arts middle schools teachers. Effective teachers prioritize reading because it affects success in other content areas and overall achievement gains (Allington, 2002). Therefore, questions and analysis were guided within the context of English Language Arts. Reading is a complex subject for students to master and it requires a keen sense of tenacious student

engagement. Ms. Ann described how she engages students during English

Language Arts:

> Engaging students has taken on a whole new meaning in my class. My students never know what to expect. I may dress as a character that I want them to connect with, and through questioning we dissect literature from a variety of view points. This keeps my students engaged and it helps them to connect to the literature. I often have students asking if we can go back and connect other points of view from different perspectives. Its difficult sometimes to stay with the instructional pace, but I want my students to think, and go beyond the state standards. It's not easy, especially with a diverse group and they all have a wide range of learning levels.

Other participants nodded in agreement with Ms. Ann's comments.

Questions and answers, from teachers to students and back again, represent

much of the academic interaction that takes place in schools. This process

supports student engagement in learning and a teacher's ability to monitor the

learning process (Strong, 2007). Mr. Brian was eager to share how he uses

questioning as an instructional technique:

> I start with a discussion question and we attack the question as a whole group. But we move into synthesizing questions to get at deep thinking. We have been reading the *Crucible* and as a whole group we have analyzed the characters of the story. I want my students to connect with the characters and to see how they have grown from one act to the other. The discussions have become so rich and the students are so engaged that it even blows my mind. I love giving the students conceptual questions that take them way beyond the text. Sometimes it takes some pulling, but when they get it, it's like the Fourth of July fireworks!

Mr. Brian's enthusiasm was apparent as he shared his questioning of

students as an essential strategy for student success. When students connect

the text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections and understand the

concept of connections, there seems to be no stopping them (Harvey & Goudvis,

2000). Building on these connections involves grappling with the hidden

messages in the text. As noted in the research: when students engage in reading and talking about a text, they enter a maze. The ideals in a text make up the maze, and the goal for working through it is to reach understanding (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton & Kucan, 1997). Allowing students the opportunity to think and discover their own way through the text provides the strategies necessary to create meaning. Dialogue and collaboration are key components that support the expansion of thinking. This is an interactive process that can only be depicted as a dance between the teacher and the student. Ms. Carol shared this statement in a follow-up interview:

> I want my students to know more than just the answers to the questions in the back of some book. I want them to be able to think through a piece of literature and decide for themselves what the author is trying to say. It takes me to pull that out. I question them on the little seemingly unimportant components of the text. I get them to massage the text and unravel it for a deeper meaning. We go back and forth and back and forth sometimes, but they do get it! Even if I have to drag it out of them.

This is a high level of questioning and engagement for teachers and students is the work of (Beck & McKeown, 2006). In their book *Questioning the Author* this level of engagement also requires that teachers spend time with the text and consider the critical ideas for students to construct. Reaching all learners was a common thread among the focus group participants and using the QtA strategy provides the framework to differentiate instruction. By having students engage in a *close read* (Beck & McKeown, 2006), every student has the opportunity to listen, read, think, learn and share meaningful ideas with classmates (Robb, 2008). Interacting with the text, the teacher and classmates, furthers the student-to-student relationship and the student-teacher relationship and supports the learning environment.

Effective teachers make greater use of interdisciplinary connections, connections across the curriculum, and integration of subject areas in their teaching (Molnar et al., 1999; Pressley et al., 1998). The participants within the group were able to use a multifaceted approach to English language Arts. It involved maximizing the classroom environment and embracing the environment as an instructional tool for students to learn. Building a supportive classroom environment fostered student voice and helped students to further connect to the classroom and the teaching and learning process. In the book *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities* at *Work* (2006) the authors indicate that effective teachers shift their positions as members of a teaching community and become fully engaged members of a learning community that involves students and emphasizes learning.

In sum, urban education has often been described as a complex and daunting task (Kozol, 1991). As complex as it may be Marzano (2004) insist that the teacher is the key element to student success. Results from this study substantiate the claim. Participating teachers attributed a number of pedagogical practices that significantly impacted how they delivered instruction during English Language Arts for African American middle school students. Attributes ranged from family and personal beliefs; professional preparation; specific classroom practices that engage all learners in a collaborative learning environment that fosters student achievement. The teachers of this research study can be viewed as exemplary models. In the words of the 44th president "Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The disproportionate underachievement of African American students suggests that teacher effectiveness with this student population has been limited (Howard, 2002). Effectively teaching African American students continues to be one of the most pressing issues facing educators. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors and social contexts that contribute to teachers' success when working with African American students in the greater Detroit area. In addition, to identifying personal and professional beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences of successful teachers' that is congruent to culturally relevant pedagogies. Furthermore, the research also sought out to discover consistent classroom practices, successful teachers provide African American students and how they come to acquire these skills. Finally, the intent of this research was to unveil obstacles that these teachers have confronted, and how they confronted the obstacle. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What professional factors and social contexts (e.g., in-service training, teacher education programs, school environment, administrative support, etc.) contribute to teachers' effectiveness when working with African American students in the greater Detroit area?

2. To what extent are the personal and professional beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences of successful teachers of African American students' congruent with components of culturally relevant pedagogy?

3. What classroom practices do successful teachers use to provide effective instruction for African American students? How did these teachers come to acquire and implement these practices? What was the evolution of the development of these practices?

4. What professional obstacles have these teachers confronted? How did they respond to or engage these obstacles (e.g., curriculum choices, programs, services, policies and procedures)?

A series of focus groups and one-on-one interviews were used to examine successful strategies that these purposeful teachers use. Sharing and reflecting on the practice revealed the richness of their dedication. The sustained dialogue among educators focused on specific factors and instructional practices that account for their success when teaching.   Through the dialogue themes emerged. Urban districts were chosen for this study because; urban districts across the country face a myriad of challenges that range from poverty, culture diversity and budget deficits (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

The results of this study suggest that effective language arts teachers of African American students enable students to achieve academic and social success by actively engaging their students in the teaching and learning process in a student-centered classroom.   Participants of this study developed an intentional rapport with their students. They shared a seamless system of service that focused on the individual needs of students (Hoy, 2003-2004). Focusing on the needs of students aided in their commitment to help students achieve a high level of success. In keeping with the research this study supports the premise that teachers can have a tremendous impact on the academic achievement of students (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Kozol, 1991; Marzano 2004).

Participants shared professional factors that contribute to their effectiveness

Discussion

Identifying and describing professional factors and social contexts that contributes to teachers' effectiveness when working with African American students in the greater Detroit area

Consistently in the literature, traditional teacher educations programs are viewed as insufficient in preparing urban educators to successful navigate an urban middle school (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Teachers that take a series of courses that focus on child development, instructional and assessment techniques often feel ill prepared to address the diverse needs of students. However, there was a positive relationship between student achievement and how recently a teacher took part in a professional development opportunity such as a conference, workshop, or graduate class (Hanushek, 1971). Focus group participants credited on-the-job training as the most significant contribution in their professional preparation. Regular attendance to local and state-wide conferences was viewed as a pivotal step in their ability to support student learning. In addition, professional development and mentoring were identified as strong factors in their ability to reach students. Professional development was described as an integral part for the participants (Marzano, 2004). And having an opportunity to "talk" was viewed as a missing opportunity to strengthen the overall practice of teaching (Ladson-Billings 1994). Coming together with colleagues that shared the same sense of urgency for teaching African American students in an urban area was described by several as "refreshing."

Academic achievement was a continual concern for the research participants. Teachers shared deep beliefs about teaching and learning that had family values ingrained. Frequently teachers reported relying on the family belief system that had a positive influence on them as students.

To what extent are the personal and professional beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences of successful teachers of African American students congruent with components of culturally relevant pedagogy?

Urban educators' emancipate students by embracing culturally relevant pedagogies in their instruction to urban African American middle school students. Training and preparing to teach in an urban area was the focus, and the teachers' interaction was positive and further supported the phenomenon of the focus group. Data collected for the purpose of this study substantiated the query that effective teachers of African American urban middle school students' described using methodologies that are congruent with culturally relevant pedagogies. As revealed in the data and the literature review, the main premise of culturally relevant instruction is the building of a quality relationship with students. Teachers shared a personal investment in the education of children of color (Cummins, 1989; Valenzuela, 1999). Effective teachers expressed the need to remain current with cutting-edge research. Participants viewed continuous learning as a vital part of their success. A strong connection with students, along with building significant relationships with students was the recognized as an essential factor and a common thread that contributed to their success (Comer 1999). Research indicates that culturally relevant teachers see their students' culture and lifestyles as assets (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Participants described interacting with students, and addressing the needs of student's a key element for teacher success. Culturally relevant pedagogy was identified as a way to accommodate the diverse needs of urban middle school students (Delpit, 1988). Addressing the needs of students became a central belief that emerged as a pattern. This belief centered on effective teachers and their commitment to empower students.

Teachers felt they were connected to the students and the community. Relevant instruction was viewed as a way to support student learning and as a tool to connect parents. Parental support was identified as an imperative element of their success with students in the classroom. Teachers used various methods for reaching students. Effective teachers' value parental support and they seek methods to honor the voice of parents in their room. Reaching out to parents opened the door for effective teachers to reach struggling students.

Focus group members used parental support to deepen their relationships with students. Effective teachers connect with parents to share success and to share their vision for their child. Members reported their success by calling, emailing and texting working parents to maintain a constant line of open communication. Home visits were shared as being a strategy to reach out and further connect with students and their families.

Four participants reported being from that area in which they teach, or having grown up near-by. Teachers reported unique experiences in urban education as being an integral part of why they enjoyed it so much. Diversity of the students and the need to be creative and life-long learners to keep up with the pace of urban students was a key part of why the teachers not only chose to teach in an urban area, but remain committed.

Culturally relevant was evident as Au and Jordan (1981) indicated when educators use the students' own culture to improve academic skills by connecting the culture to the content in meaningful ways. Empowering students and embracing student voice was utilized as a technique to again connect students with the literature. Giving students options in their ability to decipher the text

proved to be a common practice among the participants. Irvine, (2003) contend that teachers must recognize the cultural experiences of their students and incorporate them into their teaching. .

Classroom Practices

Participants shared a kindred spirit of collegiality (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The atmosphere was pleasant and each expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share and meet colleagues that held a mutual love for urban education and how to successfully address the needs of African American students. Bonds between teachers that share similar beliefs allowed participants to openly share. Mrs. Carol described the group; "Sharing their trials and triumphs" in the classroom added to the strength of the group dynamics.

What classroom practices do successful teachers use to provide effective instruction for African American students? How did these teachers come to acquire and implement these practices? What was the evolution of the development of these practices?

Several themes emerged as essential for effective teachers as they prepare to teach language arts. The ability to differentiate instruction and the use of technology was described as fundamental. On-going assessment was viewed as feedback. Teachers reported needing data to effectively plan and provide quality instruction. Effective teachers approach student learning much like a visit to the emergency room.   "Instruction is equivalent to triage," Mrs. Christine reported. She went on to state that understanding the needs of students and delivering prescriptive instruction was depicted as "part of the job."

Teachers delivered instruction that met the needs of students. Taking time to connect and modify the curriculum ensured student success. Teachers wanted to

validate the learner by working through their strengths. Participants stated that it would be helpful if decisions were made with the voice of the students that they served at the center of discussion. Valuing students was not taken into consideration with curriculum choices that did not honor the age or level of students who continue to struggle in language art. Teachers wanted to have more autonomy when it came to doing what was best for students. Mr. Richard blatantly said "I wish they would just get out of the way, and let me do what I need to do for my kids."

As noted in the research, it may be challenging to isolate all the variables that directly impact student achievement, data has shown that good teaching matters (The Teaching Commission, 2004). Attributions to their effectiveness when working with African American students went beyond the curriculum.

Teachers reported constantly reflecting on ways to improve their craft. Haberman (1985) describes characteristics of "star" teachers. They are: (a) being persistent, (b) promoting learning (c) using theory and practice, (d) working well with students at-risk, (e) having a professional orientation to students (f) avoiding burnout and (g) admitting to being fallible. Another resonating theme that was reported as having a profound affect on classroom practices was the need to build connections with students. Therefore, success required the participants to maintain a spirit of flexibility. Effective teachers simply give students what they need (Tomlinson, 2001). They employ strategies that promote student learning regardless of their level. Effective teachers have mastered differentiating and scaffolding instruction. One-on-one instruction was frequently used as a method for supporting struggling students. Teachers

seemed to have connected with their students and felt the need to connect in a way that conveyed a message of support. This message of support was coupled with high student expectations. Instruction was designed around human interactions and not curricula. Consistent with the research on high expectations as noted in the literature review, it is a key factor of student success (Good & Brophy, 1997).

Effective teachers create settings that promote academic and social growth. Students respond to teachers that have taken time to nurture their needs and provide rigorous, relevant, and engaging instruction (Tate, 2010). Motivating students through rich dialogue enable teachers to activate prior knowledge and assess students' readiness of material. Dialogue was open and free for students to probe and ask pertinent questions about the text. Participants depicted students as comfortable with teachers because of their relationship with the instructor. Connecting students with the text in a meaningful way allowed teachers to navigate through curriculum successfully. Engaging students during language arts is a complex task. Research has often depicted learning to read to be a complex task for students, but actually teaching language arts to middle school students can be described as a multifaceted task.

Curriculum choices that did not reflect African American urban students were reported as an obstacle. Effective teachers invested in material that would support and supplement curriculum choices that did not meet the needs of urban African American students. Connecting students to the literature was a common practice for the participants. Activating prior knowledge by connecting the content to the students' background was preferred by focus group members.

Building upon prior knowledge and delivering high quality relevant instruction was viewed as critical for student success. Teachers reported using various methods that allowed students to build on previous lesson. Activating prior knowledge or helping students establish a connection to the literature was viewed as "priming-the-pump." The method proved to help African American students academically and socially.

Focus group participants reported keeping students at the center of their thinking and planning. This fostered a bond with students that allowed teachers to create an environment that encouraged students to attain academic achievement. When teachers modify their classroom environments in terms of communication patterns, participation structures, and content, studies indicate that achievement can be elevated in minority children.

Overcoming Obstacles

Overcoming obstacles was the focus of the final group session. Teachers described a variety of obstacles throughout the research project. Participants faced a myriad of obstacles including lack of materials, administrative support, and increased demands (Milner 2002). Lack of materials was common. Participants were resourceful in gathering materials to support student learning. Writing grants, contacting publishers, seeking donations were a few of the methods the participants used to replenish materials and supplies.

Teachers learned to successfully navigate around the lack of material. Effective teachers tackled obstacles with a positive disposition. Administrative support varied among the participants. Participants reported a trusting relationship with administrators as a result of their continued success with

students. Academic accountability and proven results with struggling students were rewarded with administrative support.

The final research question addressed obstacles:

What professional obstacles have these teachers confronted? How did they respond to or engage these obstacles?

Obstacles were viewed as minor, and student success was the bigger picture, and remained at the forefront. For instance, reaching a student who has presented a challenge or who may have struggled with an assignment was viewed as an opportunity to learn a new strategy. Every day was deemed an opportunity to inspire a student. Effective teachers of urban African American middle school students respond to obstacles that minimizes the interruption of student achievement. Consistently, when asked to describe a success story, teachers described students that required them to reflect on traditional instructional methods of teaching. Thus the challenge was viewed as opportunity to learn or research new strategies. Effective teachers welcome the challenge to find new methodologies to further meet the diverse needs of African American middle schools students.

The research of Milner (2002) revealed that successful teachers in urban districts face a number of challenges, that include a wide range of issues that span from facilities to violence (Jipguep & Sanders-Phillips, 2003). It is important to note that participants did not argue about students who were unable to read, lack of materials or over-age students. Teachers had a strong belief in students and parents. Overwhelmingly, they agreed that parents want the best for their children, and students want to learn. Participants felt that it was their job to find the right strategy, or the right instructional tool to help students. They welcomed

all students and engaged all learners in the lessons. Effective teachers are resourceful and maintain a positive disposition as they approach teaching and learning.

Implications

This study aspired to suggest ways in which teacher focus groups could promote student achievement, specifically through the use of teacher reflection. Reflecting on the practice of urban education has the potential to yield significant results. The participants wanted to continue to meet. The rich dialogue and warm atmosphere created a pleasantness that fostered a positive synergy. Teachers were engaged in direct conversation about the teaching and learning process. Carol Dweck (2003) research indicates that belief drives practice. As teacher's engaged in this rich dialogue about the practice of education participants began to take notes on suggested strategies as they were presented in the focus groups. Belief was a driving force for the participants. A commitment to making a difference had a significant impact on their practice.

A relationship of support and encouragement was a conduit for the focus group. Interaction was warm and compassionate. Mrs. Laura described it "as an atmosphere of learning", and the members wanted to continue to meet. Coming together with colleagues that shared the same sense of urgency for teaching African American students in an urban area was described by several as "refreshing". Members wanted to continue to meet as a "think tank." Rich dialogue and the supportive environment with other teachers gave them validation. Communicating openly and honestly provided motivation and encouragement for the participants that were often missing at the building level.

Teachers need to have the opportunity to come together and share information. Reflecting on the practice of teaching has the potential to yield new directions and shape the practice of urban education. As a nation we are missing the opportunity to improve how we teach African American urban students. Allowing teachers to come together, to dissect and dialogue about the dynamics of successful practices and even failures, with the intent to learn and grow, may possibly be the key to closing the academic achievement gap for good.

Emergent Themes: A Continuum of Service

Emergent themes surfaced throughout each focus group session. The emergent themes can be described as a continuum of services (see Figure A). Eight major themes were a common thread in all of the focus groups. Prevailing themes include: *strong commitment to student success; building relationships; creating a nurturing learning environment; high expectations; confidence in their ability; individualize instruction; academic accountability; and valuing student voice in the classroom.* Steps of this continuum are seen as a necessary landscape for student success.

Steps of Effective Teachers

Implications were gleamed from the research included steps of effective teachers (Appendix E). Steps link directly to classroom practices. Effective teachers of African American urban middle school students embrace a system of steps to ensure student success. Steps can be viewed as a continuum of services that they provide students. Connecting with students was a common theme among the focus group participants. A great deal of effort is dedicated to connecting with students and building a strong relationship with students that

includes a personal connection. Personal connection can be based on interest or background information. Connecting to students supports a warm, welcoming, and nurturing learning environment. Connections formed allow the teacher and the student to create or build on an understanding. In addition, forming connections strengthens the relationship by allowing the teacher to share themselves with the student. Further, it helps African American students view teachers as a genuine resource and as a person. Student-teacher relationships lay the foundation for students to see themselves as learners.

Cycle of Effective Teacher Attributes

Ascertained from the focus group data was this cycle of events that teachers are actively involved in. It depicts a common practice shared among the participants. The Cycle of Effective Teacher Attributes (Appendix F), identify the cycle of decisions-making effective teachers grapple with. Effective teachers are responsive to the needs of students. Responding to student needs can be challenge without administrative support. Effective teachers are determined to provide this continuum of service and have become masterful in how they maneuver to get the job done.

Students are at the heart of every decision. Keeping students as the central focus provides motivation for effective teachers. Effective teachers are genuinely concerned about students, and will advocate for students to be successful, even when they are challenged by administrators, colleagues, and parents. Effective teachers are strategic in getting resources in the wake of budget shortfalls. Skillful, confident and reflection drives their belief and practice.

The Seven C's

Seven C's (see figure4), were a result of the connection formed from the focus group participants. A common thread connected the teachers' that was a profound presence in the session. Each participant spoke about how they connected to urban African American students, regardless of the teacher's race or gender. The shared connection extended to each other. Connection was a common bond they shared with students and within the focus groups. Connecting to each other was viewed as a critical step in how they were able to consistently achieve results with African American students. Culturally relevant instruction achieved a new level of understanding and was restated and expanded to included connecting culturally relevant instruction. It wasn't enough to have culturally relevant instruction without successfully connecting it with student's prior knowledge.

Connections created, allowed a commitment to form on the part of both the teacher and the student. Commitment helped teachers in building trusting relationships with students. Trust extended to colleagues and therefore formed collaborative partnerships. Essential for effective teachers, is the ability to collaborate with other colleagues. Collaboration aids in building a community of learners that is sustained with students at the center of every decision made.

Effective teachers are competent in their abilities to meet the diverse needs of African American students. Competent in content and instructional methodologies allows teachers to be effective. Effective teachers are responsive to the cultural needs of students. Culture is viewed as capital by effective

teachers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990). They build on what students bring to the classroom.

The Seven C's

- Culturally Relevant
- Competent
- Centered
- Community
- Collaborative
- Committed
- Connected
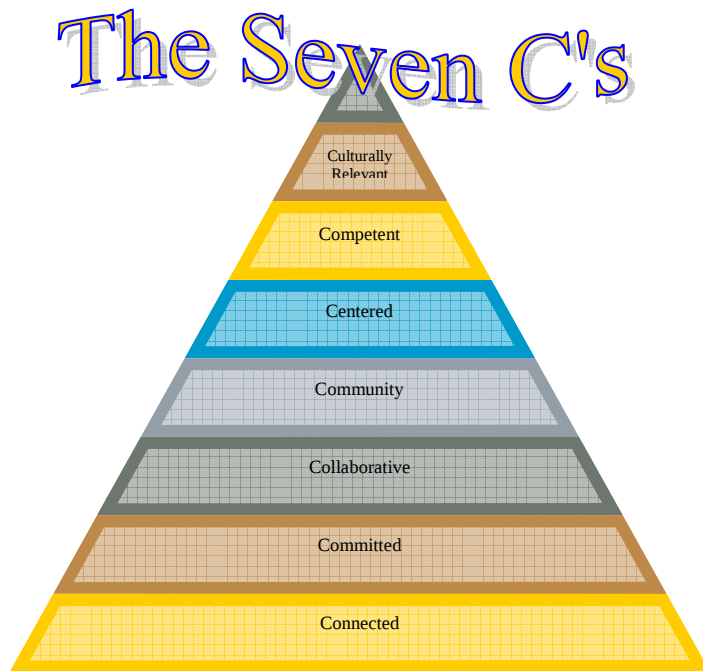
Figure 4

This study raises some additional questions worth further investigating. For instance, how do we better equip urban teachers with the ability to build significant relationships with students at a level that will impact student achievement? What type of courses will be necessary for teachers to engage students in meaningful relationships? How will these impact curricula discussions? What implications will this research have on the administrators?

Effective teachers empower students with 'voice.' Empowerment of voice allows students to have input into the how, what and the why. Students are encouraged to question, and free to research. Effective teachers have a keen

understanding of the importance of student voice and they know the long-term affects. Effective teachers are reflective and seek opportunities to further their skills and content knowledge.

Summary

Effective teachers demonstrated a social phenomenon that was achieved via a series of focus group sessions with teachers purposefully nominated. Teaching can be a daunting task, but the members of the focus group have mastered how to create a learning environment that is built on strong student-teacher relationships. Relationships gave teachers a necessary insight into the learner's background. Data collected from the formed relationship gave way to student voice with a collaborative community that centers on students being successful. Effective teachers do not view failure as an option (Blankstein, 2010).

Effective teachers possess the right attitude. Success is in there *DNA-Dynamically Navigating Achievement*. Effective teachers impact student growth, they provide feedback and use the data to thrust students forward. Effective teachers are thankless outside of students. In a time of extreme budget cuts, building closures, and consolidations, it's good to know that there are groups of select teachers that will greet African American urban middle school students with a continuum of services available to meet their growing individualized needs. Teachers will not waver in their commitment to help students succeed.

Implications of this research study have provided a framework for the research to continue. There is a large body of research that currently exists.

However, until we can successfully duplicate the efforts on a large scale, further research is needed. We are failing a large number of students at an alarming rate. Building closures have led to an increase in the drop-out rate, and urban schools have the highest budget deficits and tend to be the largest districts. Turnaround needed in large urban school districts is the topic of debate among educators, business leaders, and legislatures continue to grapple with closing the student achievement gap among African American student. The critical and complex learning needs of those students most at risk of academic failure require teachers to possess a high level of understanding about the students they teach on a daily basis. Teachers are the most important factor of any successful turnaround. I am honored to have met a group of dynamic urban educators that bring their very best on a daily basis. Regardless of the countless attacks against their pay, and their practice-students remain at the center of all decisions.

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT LETTER TO ADMINISTRATORS

Lanissa L. Freeman
P.O. Box 8039
Eastpointe, MI 48021

Dear Detroit Metropolitan Principals and Instructional Specialist:

I am conducting research to fulfill the dissertation requirement for the Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at Wayne State University. The purpose of my study is to explore classroom practices; professional factors; and social contexts used by teachers to effectively teach urban African American students in language arts middle schools. The educational statistics for urban African American students reveal disproportionate academic underachievement in comparison with their Anglo counterparts. Learning about the perspectives of successful teachers may be beneficial to both educators and teacher preparation programs. Specifically, I am interested in the positive aspects of urban teachers that instruct urban African American students.

Using the following general standards, I am asking for your assistance in identifying teachers who meet the following minimal criteria. These teachers must:

- Currently teach in grades 6-8
- Teach a majority of African American students
- Have at least 3 years' teaching experience
- Teach language arts
- Highly Qualified as defined by NCLB
- Be identified as highly successful in teaching African American students

Please complete the attached participant contact and mail in the prepaid envelops or you may nominate via email: lanissa.freeman@sprintpcs.net.

Teachers that agree to participate will have the opportunity to review the research instruments and the Skills Checklist. Provided that teachers authorize nominating administrators to complete the supportive documentation, I will forward the research instrument along with the *Qualities of Effective Teachers Checklist*. Included will be a pre-paid postage envelope for you to return the completed instruments.

Participants will engage in a series of 4-6 focus group sessions to dialogue about urban teaching and individual interviews. Participants will be coded by numbers to maintain anonymity.

Thank you in advance for your recommendation and participation in this study.

APPENDIX B

EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS RESEARCH INSTRUMENT
&
QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING CHECKLIST

EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS RESEARCH INSTRUMENT
This research instrument is to consider teachers as a participant in a research project. <u>Teacher must consent prior to completion</u>. Participation is voluntary.

Nominee's name: _____

Title: _____

Address: _____

Phone number: _____

Employment history relating to the nominee's qualifications for this award (include present duties):

Evidence of nominee's professional skill and competence, and recognition received (describe at least two recent exemplary products or activities; include evidence of their impact):

Impact nominee has made on the student achievement:

Impact nominee has made on the mission of the school or district:

Nominee's contributions to the effectiveness of the overall academic climate:

Nominator's name:	
Address:	
Phone:	
E-mail:	
Name and address of administrator/supervisor to notify if this nominee participates in the research:	

Qualities of Effective Teachers, 2nd Edition

| Checklist1-Teacher Skills Checklist |
| The Teacher as a Person |

Quality	Indicators	Not Observed	Ineffective	Apprentice	Professional	Master
Caring	Exhibits active listing					
	Shows concern for students' emotional and physical well-being.					
	Displays interest in and concern about the student lives outside of school					
	Create a supportive and warm classroom climate					
Shows Fairness and Respect	Responds to misbehavior on an individual level.					
	Prevents situations in which a student loses peer respect.					
	Treats students equally.					
	Creates situations for all students to succeed.					
	Shows respect to all students.					
Interactions with Students	Maintains professional role while being friendly.					
	Gives students' interest both in and out of school.					
	Values what students say.					
	Interacts in a fun, playful manner; jokes when appropriate.					
Enthusiasm	Shows joy for the content material.					
	Takes pleasure in teaching.					
	Demonstrates involvement in learning activities outside school.					
Motivation	Maintains high-quality work.					
	Returns student work in a timely manner.					
	Provides students with meaningful feedback.					
Dedication to Teaching	Possesses a positive attitude about life and teaching.					
	Spends time outside of school to prepare.					
	Participates in collegial activities.					
	Accepts responsibility for student outcomes					
	Seeks professional development.					
	Finds, implements, and shares new instructional stages.					

Qualities of Effective Teachers, 2nd Edition

Checklist1-Teacher Skills Checklist
The Teacher as a Person

Quality	Indicators	Not Observed	Ineffective	Apprentice	Professional	Master
Reflective Practice	Knows area of personal strengths and weaknesses.					
	Uses reflections to improve teaching.					
	Sets high expectations for personal classroom performance.					
	Demonstrates high efficacy.					
Classroom Management	Checklist 2-Classroom Management and Organization					
	Uses consistent and proactive discipline.					
	Establishes routines for all daily tasks and needs.					
	Orchestrates smooth transitions and continuity of classroom momentum.					
	Multitasks					
	Is aware of all activities in the classroom.					
	Anticipates potential problems.					
	Uses space, proximity, or movement around the classroom for nearness to trouble spots and to encourage attention.					
Organization	Handles routine tasks promptly, efficiently, and consistently.					
	Prepares materials in advance and has them ready to use.					
	Organize classrooms space efficiently.					
Discipline of Students	Interprets and responds to inappropriate behavior promptly.					
	Implements rules of behavior fairly and consistently.					
	Reinforces and reiterates expectations for positive behavior.					
	Uses appropriate disciplinary measures.					
	Checklist 3-Planning and Organizing for Instruction					
Importance of Instruction	Focuses classroom time on teaching and learning.					
	Links Instruction to students' real-life situations.					

Qualities of Effective Teachers, 2nd Edition

Checklist3-Teacher Skills Checklist
Planning and Organizing for Instruction

Quality	Indicators	Not Observed	Ineffective	Apprentice	Professional	Master
Time Allocations	Follows a consistent schedule and maintains procedures and routines					
	Handles administrative tasks quickly and efficiently.					
	Prepares materials in advance.					
	Maintains momentum within and across lessons.					
	Limits disruption and interruptions.					
Teachers Expectations	Sets clearly articulated high expectations for self and students.					
	Orients the classroom experience toward improvement and growth.					
	Stresses student responsibility and accountability.					
Instruction Plans	Carefully links learning objectives and activities.					
	Organizes content for effective presentation.					
	Explores student understanding by asking questions.					
	Considers student attention span and learning styles when designing lessons.					
	Develops objectives, questions, and activities that reflect higher-and lower cognitive skills as appropriate for the content and the students.					
	Checklist 4- Implementing Instruction					
Instructional Strategies	Employs different teaching and instructional strategies, such as hands-on learning.					
	Stresses meaningful conceptualization, emphasizing the students' own knowledge of the world.					
	Suits instruction to students' achievement levels and needs.					
	Uses a variety of grouping strategies.					
Contents and Expectations	Sets overall high expectations for improvement and growth in the classroom.					
	Gives clear examples and offers guided practice.					
	Stresses student responsibility and accountability in meeting expectations.					
	Teaches metacognitive strategies to support reflection on learning process.					

Qualities of Effective Teachers, 2nd Edition

Checklist1-Teacher Skills Checklist
Implementing Instruction

Quality	Indicators	Not Observed	Ineffective	Apprentice	Professional	Master
Complexity	Is concerned with having students learn and demonstrate understanding of meaning rather then memorization.					
	Holds reading as a priority.					
	Stresses meaningful conceptualization, emphasizing the students' knowledge of the world.					
	Emphasizes higher-order thinking skills in math.					
Questioning	Asks questions that reflect type of content and goals of the lesson.					
	Varies question type to maintain interest and momentum.					
	Prepares questions in advance.					
	Uses wait time during questioning.					
Student Engagement	Is attentive to lesson momentum, appropriate questioning, and clarity of explanation.					
	Varies instructional strategies, types of assignments, and activities.					
	Leads, directs, and paces student activities.					

	Checklist 5-Monitoring Student Progress and Potential	Not Observed	Ineffective	Apprentice	Professional	Master
Homework	Clearly explains homework.					
	Relates homework to the content under study and to student capacity.					
	Grades, comments on, and discusses homework in class.					
Monitoring Student Progress	Targets questions to lesson objectives.					
	Thinks through likely misconceptions that may occur during instruction and monitors students for these misconceptions.					
	Gives clear, specific, and timely feedback.					
	Reteaches students who did not achieve mastery and offers tutoring to students who seek additional help.					

Responding to Student Needs and Abilities	Monitors and assesses student progress.					
	Uses data to make instructional decisions.					
	Knows and understands students as individuals in terms of ability, achievement, learning styles, and needs.					

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT

Effective Language Arts Teachers of African American Student
in Large Urban Districts in the Greater Detroit Area

INFORMED CONSENT

Introduction/Purpose: You are being asked to participate in a study which is being conducted under the direction of Lanissa Freeman, a doctoral candidate at Wayne State University, College of Education. The purpose of the research is to better understand the consistent practices of teachers who teach African American students in large urban districts. The study will focus on 7-10 middle school language arts teachers. Middle school is viewed as a unique ground for researchers. The age between 10 and 14 is when students engage or disengage from school and learning. The transition to middle school has been associated with a decline in academic achievement, performance, motivation, and self-perception (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2002).

Procedures: A recruitment letter will be sent to district administrators asking them to nominate individual teachers. The researcher will contact the teacher nominated. Teachers will be given detailed information that depicts the research project. Teachers will have the opportunity to review the research instrument along with the focus group questions. Teachers may elect to participate in the research without having the nominating administrator complete the research instrument and or the Qualities of Effective Teaching Checklist. Teachers that consent to participate will be invited to a series of focus group sessions.   The researcher will conduct a series of 3-4 focus groups sessions, each one hour in length, and possibly an individual interview. The time commitment will be 60-90 minutes. The sessions will be scheduled on Saturday afternoons at the Southfield Public Library. If you participate in this study, you will have the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher, to review and comment on notes and interview transcripts, and to read and comment on the final report. Participants will be provided with a topical summary from each focus group session prior to the next session for the purpose of member checking. Therefore, allowing participants the opportunity to correct errors and provide a check on whether the researcher gave an accurate account of their information. Member checking is when the researcher brings the analysis to the participants asking for verification and their interpretation of the researcher's analysis (Creswell, 2002).

Benefits: There may be no direct benefits for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks*:* There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal: Participation in this research study is voluntary, and it will not be held against you if you decide to not participate or

choose to withdraw from the study at any time during the focus group sessions or individual interviews.

Consent to Participate in Research Study: I have read all of the above information about this research study. I hereby freely consent and voluntarily agree to participate in the study without element of force or coercion. I consent to be a participant in the research project entitled "Effective Teachers of African American Student in Large Urban Districts in the Greater Detroit Area." I understand that this research project, being conducted by Lanissa Freeman, will be used for a dissertation to fulfill degree requirements at Wayne State University. I understand that if I participate in the project I will be asked questions about my instructional practices with students, professional beliefs, training and experiences that contribute to student success.

I understand there are benefits for participating in this research project. First, my own awareness of effective instructional practices of African American students might be enlarged. Secondly, I will be providing researchers with valuable insights into consistent effective practices of teachers who teach African American students. Finally, I will receive a small token of appreciation for my participation (educational resource book).

I understand that this consent may be withdrawn at any time without prejudice or penalty. I have been given the right to ask and have answered any inquiry the study. Questions, if any, have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I may contact Lanissa Freeman at (313) 477-1733 or at lanissa.freeman@sprintpcs.net for answers to questions about this research or my rights as a participant.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Human Investigation Committee (HIC) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.) may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

 If photographs, videos, or audiotape recordings of you will be used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. You have the right to review and or/edit the tapes, only the principal investigator will have access to the audiotapes. The audiotapes will be locked in a file cabinet in the home office of the principal investigator. The audiotapes will be destroyed on December 31, 2013 along with the any documentation that relates to the data collected (master list, tapes, etc.) Participants will be coded to disguise the

identity. For example, participant will be coded using the following example codes: T1-Teacher 1; T2 etc.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in the study you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

The PI may stop your participation in this study without your consent. The PI will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision that is made is to protect your health and safety, or because you did not follow the instructions to take part in the study.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Lanissa Freeman at the following phone number 313-477-1733 or 313-577-0991. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Human Investigation Committee can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

_____ _____
Signature of witness**   Date

_____ _____
Printed of witness**   Time

_____ _____
Signature of person obtaining consent   Date

_____ _____
Printed name of person obtaining consent   Time

**Use when participant has had this consent form read to them (i.e., illiterate, legally blind, translated into foreign language).

_____   _____
Signature of translator   Date

_____   _____
Printed name of translator   Time

☐ I agree to participate in the individual interviews and the focus group sessions, and I consent to have the research instrument, in addition to the Qualities of Effective Teaching Checklist completed by the nominating administrator.

☐ I agree to participate in the individual interviews and the focus group sessions, however, I **decline** to have the research instrument, or the Qualities of Effective Teaching Checklist completed by the nominating administrator.

I agree to have the nominating administrator complete the research instrument: Yes ☐No☐
I agree to have the nominating administrator complete the Qualities of Effective Teaching Checklist: ☐ Yes☐ No

APPENDIX D

DESCRIPTION OF FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS
&
FOCUS GROUP AGENDAS

Interview Protocol

Prior to the first focus group session each participant will be provided with information about the impending focus group session. The first session will begin and serve as an orientation, address consent forms and establish guiding norms for focus group participation.

Session Procedures: All focus group sessions and individual interviews will be conducted on Saturdays from 2:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. at the Southfield Library. Light refreshments will be made available to all participants.

Focus Group I Questions: Beliefs, Backgrounds & Experiences

1. What is your perspective on urban public education?
   - What is your point of view on how students learn?
   - What belief do you hold about how African American students' best learn?
   - Describe the belief that you hold that drives your practice?
   - Explain how you reach African American students?
   - How do students respond to your teaching methods?

2. Explain how you activate or build the prior knowledge of African American students?

3. What strategies do you embrace to connect home and school for African American students?

4. What has your experience with the parents of African American students?

5. How do you define culturally responsive teaching?

6. What conversations are you having with yourself at the end of the day about the teaching and learning for African American students?

Focus Group II Questions: Classroom Practices

1. Tell me about a success story of a student from your class?

2. Do you feel that you have failed any students? Why or Why not?

3. Describe a student who has had an impact on how you teach?

4. Is there a particular student that stays in your mind? Why? Explain in detail.

5. Describe classroom practices do you feel are essential when teaching language arts to African American students?

6. What activities are you engaged in during language art instruction?

7. Describe what activities students are engaged in during language arts instruction?

8. What strategies do you utilize to account for the various learning levels and learning styles?

9. What practices do you utilize to connect the literature to the community?

10. Explain practices that you feel are essential when teaching African American middle school students who continue to struggle with reading?

11. Describe a good day in your classroom? Describe a bad day?

12. What constitutes success in your classroom?

Focus Group III Questions: Education, Training & Preparing to Teach in an Urban Area

1. What training or professional development played a role in your success?

2. Do you feel that you were prepared at the university level to be a successful teacher of African American students?

3. Explain in detail teacher education courses that prepared you to be a successful teacher of African American students? Why or Why not?

4. What factors do you attribute to your effectiveness when working with African American students?

5. What environmental aspects contribute to your success?

6. What does it mean to you to teach African American students?

7. What roles if any do you attribute your success to luck, ability, or effort?

8. What training prepared you to work in an urban area?

9. In your opinion what preparation/training is essential as we prepare future teachers in working with African American students?

Focus Group IV Questions: Overcoming Obstacles

1. What has been your most challenging obstacle as a teacher of African American students in a large urban area?

2. How do you respond to curriculum selections that you feel are not relevant to the students that you teach?

3. Discuss policies and or procedures that impede student achievement?

4. Have you encountered an obstacle that altered your belief system and had an impact on your practice?

5. How can new understandings be used to inform teachers about teaching African American middle school students? (How do we spread the word?)

Individual Interview Protocol

Session Procedures: All individual interviews will be scheduled in 30 minute intervals on Saturdays from 1:00 p.m. - 2:00 p.m. at Southfield Library. Individual interviews will be taped to ensure accuracy. Light refreshments will be made available to all participants. Individual interviews will be utilized base upon the emerging themes from the focus group sessions. Individual interviews will include questions outlined from the focus groups. Participants will be asked to expand, describe in detail, illustrate, and further explain classroom practices; they feel are important when teaching African American students.

FOCUS GROUP II
AGENDA

Welcome & Review

Research Question:

What classroom practices do successful teachers use to provide effective instruction for African American students? How did these teachers come to acquire and implement these practices? What was the evolution of the development of these practices?

Questions & Concerns

Focus Group II Questions: Classroom Practices in the Teaching of African American Students

1.Tell me about a success story of a student from your class?

2. Is there a particular student that stays in your mind? Why? Explain in detail.

Teaching Practices in Language Arts to African American Middle Students

3. What activities are you engaged in during language art instruction? Describe what activities students   are engaged in during language arts instruction?

5. What practices do you utilize to connect the literature to the community?

6. Explain practices that you feel are essential when teaching African American middle school   students
            who continue to struggle with reading?

7. Describe a good day in your classroom? Describe a bad day?

8. What constitutes success in your classroom?

FOCUS GROUP III
AGENDA

Welcome & Review

Research Question:

What professional factors/social context (e.g., training/teacher education programs, environment, administrative support, etc.) contribute to teacher effectiveness when working with African American students in the greater Detroit area?

Questions & Concerns

Focus Group III Questions: Education, Training & Preparing to Teach in an Urban Area

Is there anything in particular that contributed to your success?

2. Did your formal education and training at the university level prepare you to be a successful teacher of African American students? Why or why not?

3. Explain in detail teacher education courses, field experiences, or interactions with professors that prepared you to be a successful teacher of African American students?

4. What environmental aspects in the building that you teach, contribute or hinder your success?

5. What does it mean to you to teach African American students?

6. Is there any training-formal or informal that may not be directly related to education that prepared you to work in an urban area?

7. In your opinion what preparation/training is essential as we prepare future teachers in working with African American students?

8. What have you read and or what theorist resonates with you?

FOCUS GROUP IV AGENDA

Welcome & Review

Research Question:

What professional obstacles have these teachers confronted? How did they respond to or engage these obstacles (curriculum choices, programs, services, policies and procedures)?

Questions & Concerns

Focus Group IV Questions: Overcoming Obstacles & Previous Focus Group Follow-up

What has been your most challenging obstacle as a teacher of African American students in a large urban area?

How do you respond to curriculum selections that you feel are not relevant to the students that you teach?

What policies and or procedures, if any that impede student achievement (state, local and national level)?

Have you encountered an obstacle that altered your belief system and had an impact on your practice?

How can new understandings be used to inform teachers about teaching African American middle school students? (How do we spread the word?)
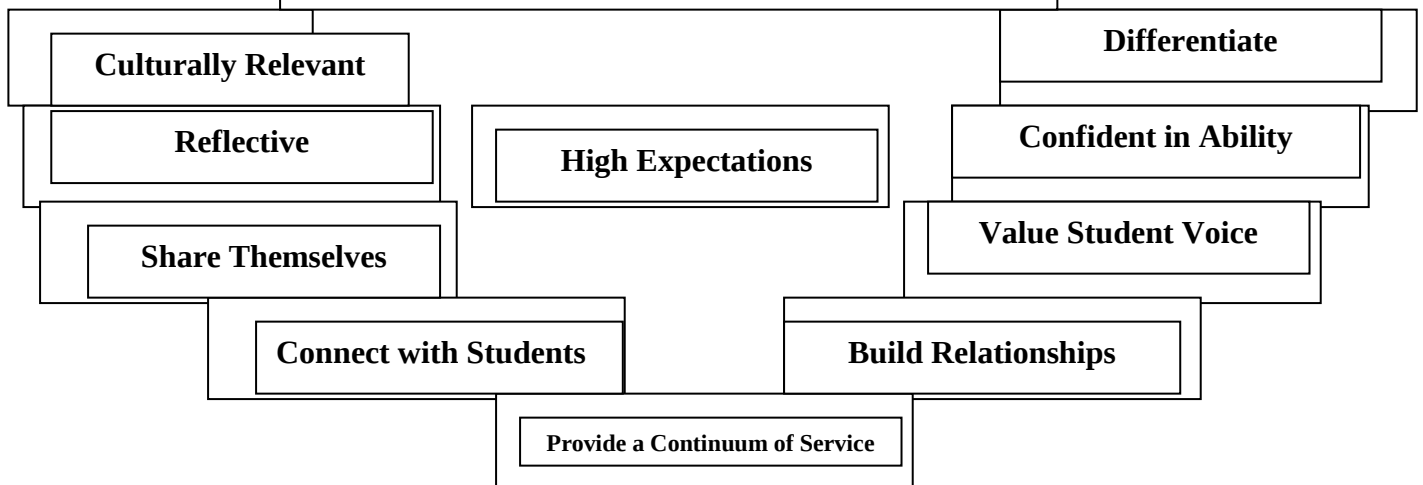
*The questions in this focus group maybe covered in previous sessions. Therefore, this session may not be necessary.

APPENDIX E
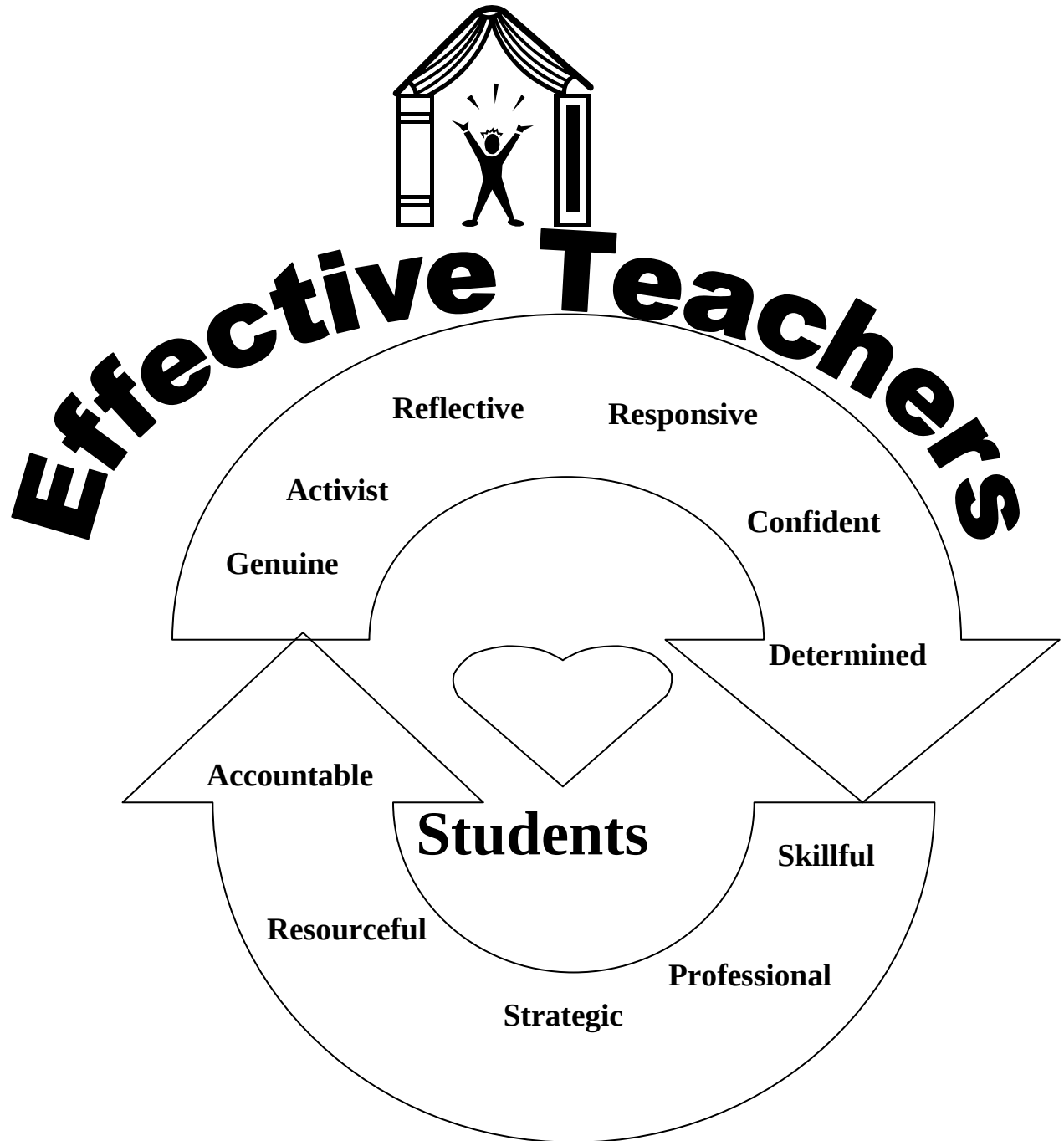
STEPS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS
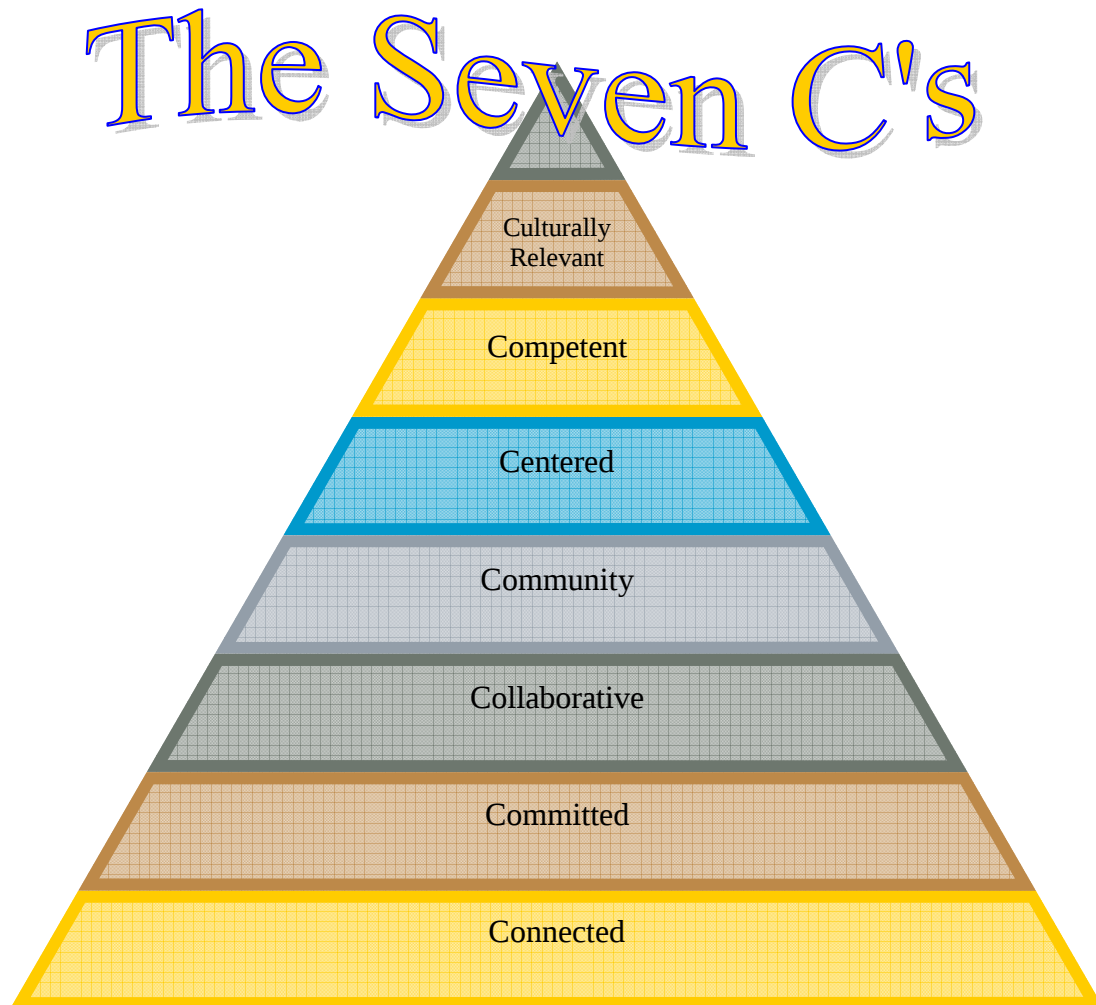
Effective Urban Teachers

Effective teachers provide a continuum of service to urban African American students. This continuum includes connecting with students in an effort to build meaningful relationships. The relationships formed stem from teachers sharing themselves, valuing student voice and reflecting on their practice. Effective teachers are confident in their ability to successfully navigate curriculum choices and skillfully differentiate instruction. Culturally relevant instructional practices provide a framework for how curriculum is delivered. Students are held to a high standard and effective teachers are accountable to the students that they service.

Culturally Relevant

Differentiate

Reflective

High Expectations

Confident in Ability

Share Themselves

Value Student Voice

Connect with Students

Build Relationships

Provide a Continuum of Service

APPENDIX F
CYCLE OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

Effective Teachers

Reflective   Responsive

Activist

Confident

Genuine

Determined

Accountable

Students   Skillful

Resourceful

Professional

Strategic

APPENDIX G
THE SEVEN C's

Effective teachers are connected to students in a way that fosters a strong bond. Commitment to the student is demonstrated by building trusting relationships that will require collaboration among staff and parents. The commitment to student success provides a vehicle for community partnerships to form. Teachers and administrators center actions on student achievement-academically and socially. Teachers are highly competent and embrace a variety of instructional techniques that ensure student success. Culturally relevant pedagogy is viewed as a critical component in curriculum choices and how teachers engage students.

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ABSTRACT

**EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS OF URBAN
AFRICAN AMERICAN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE GREATER
DETROIT AREA**

by

LANISSA L. FREEMAN

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Advisor   **Gina DeBlase, Ph.D.**

Major   **Curriculum & Instruction**

Degree   **Doctor of Philosophy**

Teaching in a large urban district has been historically described as a complex task and with the growing number of diverse students, the challenge continues to grow. The challenge is now coupled with major budget shortfalls. Across the nation public schools are struggling to keep the doors open, and provide basic supplies for students and teachers. Despite looming layoffs, closing schools, consolidations, and increased academic demands, there is a group of teachers in every urban district that consistently get results. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the beliefs, backgrounds, and classroom practices effective language arts teachers used consistently with African American middle school students. Participants were purposefully selected through a nominative process. A series of cohort focus groups and one-on-one interviews were held to reveal the pedagogies associated with these effective teachers of the greater Detroit metropolitan area.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

LANISSA L. FREEMAN

A highly creative educator who brings excitement and a high energy level to the field of education, that promotes an environment of openness, quality learning, and active participation.

- Bachelors of Science –Cognitively Impaired

- Masters of Arts- Educational Leadership

- Educational Specialist-General Supervision

- Qualified Special Education Director and/or Supervisor (eligible for federal reimbursement)

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- ❖ Founded the Sigma Urging Reading Excellence (S.U.R.E.)-a volunteer reading program for students reading below grade level. This after-school program has significantly impacted students reading level while involving more parents and community members in school programs.
- ❖ Created Stop the Drop-A yearlong awareness to attack the dropout rate.
- ❖ Developed and presented professional development for high school teachers on differentiated instruction; classroom management and thinking maps.
- ❖ Founded the WRAP Program Working, Reaching, Achieving Progress Program for high school learning disabled and resource room students to attend local community colleges.
- ❖ Chaired the Comprehensive School Reform Grant Writing Team that wrote grants for "Schools of the 21st Century ($300,000) and Comprehensive School Reform ($70,000).
- ❖ Taught 15 moderately cognitively impaired children to administer to many of their own needs without assistance and without being disparaging.
- ❖ Facilitated parent workshops on Individual Education Programs for students to ensure supportive education could continue in a home setting.
- ❖ Mediated issues between school policies, students, and their parents to provide the best opportunity for the student's long term learning success.
- ❖ Created a friendly learning environment utilizing child-oriented themes to retain student's attention and maximize the educational prospect.
- ❖ Encourage parents to actively participate in the Kindergarten Library Program to demonstrate to students thirst for knowledge and the parents support for reading.
- ❖ Mentored and significantly enhanced a student's skill set to succeed in a regular education class.
- ❖ Taught a totally unfamiliar curriculum to a sixth grade class successfully demonstrating ability to teach in any subject area.
- ❖ Wrote articles regarding Humanities Center activities throughout the United States based on extensive research for publication in campus newspaper.