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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the experiences and knowledge of six classroom teachers who engaged in teaching practices that sought to transform the educational experiences of students in urban public schools. The study examined the educators' life histories and experiences in traditional teacher preparation programs. The goal of this research was to investigate the way teachers' life histories, including early educational experiences in K-12 schooling and teacher preparation within traditional and historically white institutions, inform their approaches to teaching and enacting activist literacies. For the purpose of this study, I define activist literacies as thinking, understanding, and acting with deliberate intention. Framed by existing theories on black feminist thought, intersectionality, and critical race theory, as well as by research on teacher preparation programs and social justice education, this study employs qualitative data collection methods that include written narratives and interviews. An additional layer of data was obtained through an autoethnographic approach. Data drawn from in-depth interviews and reviews of participants' submitted narratives were analyzed to present illustrations of the various ways in which teachers are activists. In examining both individual narratives and interview transcripts, this study found themes related to marginalization and isolation. This study helps the field think critically about how to cultivate and support teachers to engage in social justice work that seeks to disrupt patterns of privilege and oppression while simultaneously advancing a new teacher preparation model grounded and informed by the historical legacy of Black women educators and their current work in classrooms, schools and communities.

TEACHING IS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT: THE LEGITIMATE KNOWLEDGES OF  
BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS ENACTING ACTIVIST LITERACIES

By

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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Teaching and Curriculum

Syracuse University  
May 2017

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the Black women teachers who assisted me along this journey. It is their tireless dedication to the children for whom they serve that continues to inspire me.

To the many young people, families, and communities who continue to motivate me to lift up my voice in the struggle for justice.

To my family, for without them, who would I be? You all have nurtured me and watched me grow. You have grounded me even as I swayed in the wind. Thank you for imagining the possibilities in me.

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**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

*We are the ones we have been waiting for.* -June Jordan (1978)

The opening quote above are words delivered to the General Assembly of the United Nations to commemorate the 44,000 women and children of South Africa who used their bodies in an act of protest against the “doppass.” The doppass was a document black South Africans were required to carry outside of their homelands and designated areas. Failure to produce this pass often resulted in arrests. The words are the italicized final line of Jordan’s “Poem for South African Women.” The italicization suggests that the activist-poet may have quoted someone who came before her and intended the stand-alone stanza as an epigraph. Senator John Edwards (2006) and Sojourners’ CEO Jim Wallis (2006) attribute the words to the late activist Lisa Sullivan in “Ending Poverty: The Great Moral Issue of Our Time” and in “God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It,” respectively.

Civil Rights and social justice advocate musical collective Sweet Honey in The Rock later turned these words into a song. Black feminist author Alice Walker entitled her 2007 work, *We are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*, which discussed the issues that continue to plague society while simultaneously encouraging readers to become aware and work for change. In the introduction, Walker attributes the words to Jordan and wrote,

[I]t was the poet June Jordan who wrote, ‘We are the ones we have been waiting for.’

Sweet Honey in the Rock turned those words into a song. Hearing that song, I have witnessed thousands of people rise to their feet in joyful recognition and affirmation.

The way in which this phrase has been utilized in various genres to articulate the same sentiment of empowered agency sends a poignant message to both the readers and listeners. The

words are used herein as an affirmation of those truly and consciously dedicated to transforming the educational opportunities and experiences of students of color throughout this nation. The use of these words by Sullivan, whom was described by her student Makani Themba (2001) as someone adept at “identifying young people and holding their talents up to the light so that they are evident even to them,” or by Jordan in recognizing the resistance of women, or by Sweet Honey in the Rock in their song calling for civil rights, or by Alice Walker in her written words is telling. The words have meaning that has been taken up by various Black women at different times. The words and their galvanizing utility are used herein to contest that educators must wait for Superman (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010) to make the transformation necessary in our schools. The gifted and vocal Black women who have wielded these words to catalyze understanding and action come from a tradition of activism, awareness, and self-efficacy. In the same proud tradition, this work applies a granular ethnographic lens to the lived experiences of six Black women educators to affirm that the answers to the pervasive challenges in education are indeed found within.

In 2016, the national climate on education is fraught with tensions between policy-makers, teachers, and families. These tensions exhibit delineating effects in urban schools and communities, such as disparate suspension rates for students of color (Skiba, 2000) as well as the disturbing “school-to-prison pipeline” (Noguera, 2003). Black children in urban communities are being removed from classrooms and placed into the juvenile and criminal justice systems at a disgraceful rate. The number of young people funneled into the juvenile justice system have reached levels that some have described as epidemic in our nation (Heitzeg, 2009; Powell, 2014). Researchers who study racial disparities in school all concur that Black students experience suspensions at rates disproportionate to their percentage of the population (Fenning & Rose,



2007; Mendez, 2003; Skiba, 2002; Wald & Losen, 2006). Significant research has also empirically examined and quantified the ways students are funneled out of schools and into prisons (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009).

The “school-to-prison pipeline” concept is an epidemic, one that alludes to structural dynamics that push the most vulnerable students—who are disproportionately Black and Latino—out of school, away from their educational futures, and into the criminal justice system (Hing, 2012). The school-to-prison pipeline is a major component of institutional racism in the United States, insofar as it helps to maintain racial inequality without the majority of Americans being aware of this function (Cousineau, 2010). The pipeline is perpetuated by over-reliance on exclusionary discipline (Gonzalez, 2012), high-stakes testing that was required by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) legislation and continues through Race to the Top (), as well as the referral of students to law enforcement for adolescent misbehavior (Cousineau, 2010). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has called the school-to-prison pipeline “one of the most important civil rights challenges facing our nation today” (ACLU, 2008).

As these discriminatory practices continue to occur throughout the nation to varying degrees, there has been an insurgence of activist-initiated movements by individuals and collectives. One can witness the resurgence of activism into mainstream consciousness through movements such as Black Lives Matter, Black Youth Project, The Dream Defenders, and a host of other efforts geared towards the radical uplifting of historically oppressed and marginalized groups. Student activism has also witnessed a resurgence, as college students have publicly demonstrated on issues from college debt to institutionalized racism. Beyond these movements, there have also been large-scale teacher and student-led strikes in numerous cities, including

Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Seattle, and New York. Across the country, collectives are coming together to protest social, political, and economic injustices. The resurgence of activism across many groups has created a prime environment in which to examine teacher activism. This study examines the ways Black women teachers engage in activism in classrooms, schools, and communities. By examining the life histories and teacher preparation programs experiences of the participating educators, this work explores how Black women teachers' activist literacies serve as a catalyst for transformation, while contextualizing schools as microcosms of the broader society.

When examining school outcome data in the United States, the history of racism and classism and the resultant exclusion is visible. Systems of privilege and preference often create enclaves of exclusivity in schools, in which certain demographic groups are served well while others languish in failure or mediocrity. As diversity grows in rapidly transitioning school districts, demographic gaps become increasingly apparent (Howard, 2007). These gaps have made it difficult for students of color to have sustained success in schools. Black women teachers have historically struggled—and continue to struggle—in their efforts to ensure students of color receive the quality education they deserve. These efforts have also stretched beyond the confines of schools and have poured out into communities. Black women teachers are often fighting against societal injustice within schools as they recognize the connections between the two spaces. Gordon (1986) contended that because teachers are part of two worlds—larger society and the educational mechanism and its power structure—they hold the key to transforming those worlds. In this chapter, I discuss the following topics: 1) the purpose of the study, 2) the nature of the research questions, 3) the significance of the study, 4) the statement of the problem, 5) the definition of terms used in the study, and 5) an overview of the dissertation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In the professional and academic spheres of education, I have deliberately supported my K-12 students and student teachers in their attempts to investigate, learn, and advance. Notably, my classroom teacher experiences have been with predominantly students of color from more urban communities. As a result, a particular focus of my pedagogy and teacher education interests continues to be the development of more practical and effective approaches to providing quality education for students in urban settings. Having been a K-12 student of color from an urban community myself, the awareness of the disparities in outcomes between urban school districts and other districts has been a central personal and professional preoccupation.

This work asserts that I, and other Black women teachers, have been afforded a unique filter over the course of our education and teacher education experiences, which are predictably in stark contrast to the experiences of the predominantly white female population of teacher education programs across the country. The purpose of this study is to firstly investigate these asserted differences, and secondly to identify what, if any, practical insights and best practices might be put forward to further the goal of effectively teaching an increasingly diverse student population. Through the unique perspectives of Black women teachers, this work broadly examines the ways schools of education with social justice and inclusion-oriented programs prepare future educators to engage in educative practices that aim to transform the experiences of students in public schools.

The auto-ethnographic synthesis of my own experiences in these investigated realms, as parts of this study, critically centers the question of researcher-teacher-activist objectivity, and attempts to facilitate the sensitization increasingly called for to view education and education disparity issues in more balanced ways.

As a teacher and volunteer in K-12 classrooms, I have been witness to the real and tangible effects on students when their teachers are not effectively prepared to engage in practices that improve educational experiences. As a teaching assistant in university classrooms with teacher candidates, I have also had opportunity to observe whether, and in what ways, awareness of and appreciation for the goal of improved educational experiences for students is imparted to future teachers. These professional experiences, along with the sensitizations and cultural competencies afforded by the intersection of my Black, female, first generation, émigré, and activist identities, provide a widened lens for the investigation and analysis provided herein.

Understanding the development of my own self-awareness and critical consciousness along with my life experiences has been integral in my role as a teacher, activist, and researcher. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the perspectives of Black women teacher activists and examine the ways in which their teacher preparation programs and life experiences have informed how they define and carry out their role as educators. The study seeks specifically to investigate Black women teachers enacting activist literacies and pedagogies towards the end of advancing new methods in teacher preparation programs with the central goal of improved educational experiences and social justice for students, and by extension, their communities.

### **Research Questions**

The principle research question that guides this study is the following: In what ways have Black women teachers enacting activist literacies come to understand, define, and carry out their roles as educators given the current societal climate and the current educational disparities facing students of color and those attending public schools located in urban school settings?

- What are the experiences of Black women teachers who enact activist literacies in teacher preparation programs, in their classroom practice, and in their communities?

- What are the life histories of Black women teachers as learners who enact activist literacies?
- How do these experiences inform their development of activist literacies and identities?

### **Significance of the Study**

I identify as a Black woman educator. I also identify as a Black woman activist. I take the stance that one does not have to be marching on the front lines of protests (though I have) or holding picket signs at rallies (I've done that as well) to be considered an activist. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks suggested that teaching can be a performative act of resistance, encourages changes, and inspires students to become more actively involved in the teaching and learning enterprise. I align my research work with educators, researchers, and movements centered on social justice and activism at their core. However, I am also part of the academy, and therefore teacher preparation is critical to me. Within these intersecting frames, I sought to understand the life histories and experiences of Black women who take up and knowingly or unknowingly engage in practices that work to transform and change schooling experiences and society within today's schooling systems. Through the examination of the lived experiences of Black women teachers, it is my aspiration that we can better understand how Black women teachers understand and negotiate their identities and pedagogical practices in a complicated system of schooling embedded in unyielding and often unjust societal dynamics.

Delpit (1995) discussed how Black women teachers purposefully shift narratives about children by providing counter-narratives about "other people's children." Collins (2000) highlights how Black women teachers have resisted seeing children through a lens controlled by racism, classism, hetero-normativity, etc. The "controlling images" or the generalized

representations about a group have compelled Black women to resist rendering social injustices into “natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2000, p. 69). Examining the role of Black women teachers enacting activist literacies is crucial, particularly those committed to advancing a more just society.

Secondly, in seeking to understand the way Black women teachers engage in activism, understand and come to know their role as teachers at various stages of their development, and engage in social justice issues necessitates a purposeful examination that has been absent from the literature. For some Black women teachers, this has meant working to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, and reframing the achievement gap to be more reflective of an educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ladson-Billings reframed the constructed racial achievement gap as educational debt, which shifted the blame away from students and developed a more inclusive discourse that holds educators and stakeholders accountable. Ladson-Billings (2006) offered a challenge to those in the field of education to think about the ways educators, teacher, and stakeholders accumulate a debt owed to children. Considering the knowledge of Black women educators, such as Ladson-Billings and many others, this study further seeks to use the understanding of the Black women teachers in this study as legitimate knowledges in teacher preparation and social justice education. This study therefore is a qualitative study that draws on narrative and interview data and positions the knowledge produced by this data collection as legitimate knowledge.

The combination of teacher narratives along with the interviews revealed that the subjects have developed a pedagogy informed by their life histories and experiences in their teacher preparation programs. These two distinct data sources, self-written teacher narratives recalling an event in their teacher lives and traditional interviews, provided rich data for the study. These will

be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3. This study was constructed and conducted as a response to experiencing profound disappointment and frustration in regards to professional teachers' reactions to yet another tragic incident in the United States documented in the next section of this introduction. This study furthers the understanding of how Black women teachers' activist practices inform their pedagogy, which is Black feminist in nature, and how Black women teachers consequently act as change agents in and outside of the classroom (Joseph, 1995).

### **The Need for Centering Black Women Teachers**

As sure as I write these sentences, I am certain of the inevitable critical query, “But why Black women teachers? Why Black women teachers as opposed to any other teacher that takes an activist stance and does transformative work?” To answer, the investigative enquiry into the specific contributions of Black women teacher-activists is explicitly related to the societal currents in our time that seek to decenter the urgent need for continued vigilance in addressing the systemic disparities impacting the Black community. For generations, education has been recognized as the single most impacting intervention for addressing disparities and promoting positive transformation in individual lives—particularly for historically marginalized communities. Counter-intuitively then, this perceived attempt at decentering is no better exhibited than the rapid and ignorance-driven attempt to shift the impassioned international social outcry that “Black Lives Matter” to the purposefully demobilizing and status-quo maintaining “All Lives Matter.” The All Lives Matter agenda is identified as a damaging movement seeking to pacify those who aggressively exercise their right to live blinded lives of privilege, in ignorance of how privilege is often supported on the backs of, and at the cost of the lives of, systematically disenfranchised groups.

The significance of this study, in all of its deliberate specificity, is multifaceted. One significant pursuit is to highlight the historical and ongoing limiting and exclusion of the voices of Black women teachers from the canon of research in teacher preparation and academic scholarship. My research on Black women teachers builds on existing research that captured the historic and systematic silencing, invisibilizing, and marginalization of Black women in the academy. Patricia Hill Collins' trailblazing 1986 essay, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," described the unique experiences and challenges of Black women faculty in the academy. Black women faculty faced a myriad of challenges due to their social location. One way to understand this is through examination of simple statistics related to the presence of Black women faculty. According to the American Council on Education (2010), African-American female professors make up only 2.9 percent of all faculty teaching in colleges and universities, while white female faculty represent 32.1 percent of the professoriate (Wilder, Bertrand, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). Black women cannot be traditional knowledge producers if they are not present in the spaces of such scholarship production. This will be discussed further in Chapter 2's review of literature. Despite this, Black women produced knowledge specifically within their communities. The silencing of Black women in the academy is a microcosm of the intersectional silencing that occurs in political, economic, cultural, and broader social arenas. Scholarship that focused on the experiences of Black women demonstrated that Black women deal with issues as invisibility, exclusion, and tokenism. Centering the voices of Black women teachers within this study is an acknowledgement to those who have consistently pushed against imposed limitations of their bodies and their minds. On this assertion, Beauboeuf-Lafontant wrote:



Although women's bodies are targets for bringing them in accordance with gender mandates through society's regulations and violence, as well as its surveillance and management women also enlist their bodies and minds to subvert society's claims on them. The degree to which a woman knows her subjectivity to be in excess of discursive norms creates a critical space for the generation of new meanings and possibilities of her embodiment. (2009, p. 46)

Black women have pushed against reductive ideas of whom they can be in myriad ways, both historically and contemporarily (Wallace, 1978). Without the deliberate scholarly treatment of the established and contemporary contributions of Black women teachers, the academy is rendered complicit to the historical and cultural practice of inflicting invisibility upon people of color. As a humble attempt to fill an existing scholarly gap, this study contributes to our understanding of how the life histories and experiences of Black women teachers in teacher preparation programs inform their activism and pedagogy. The study also seeks to examine the high utility of foregrounding Black women teachers and teaching in relation to larger societal issues. Lastly, this study extends privilege to the often excluded and marginalized voices of Black women teachers by recognizing the scholarly and practical value of their contribution to the academy, to students, and to the communities they serve.

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### **What's Wrong with Bad Ass Teachers (BATS)**

Excerpts collected from the Facebook page of the teacher group, Bad Ass Teachers (BATs), regarding the shooting murder of unarmed teenager, Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, served as a catalyst for proposing this research. The cover photo on BATs' Facebook page includes three images with progression arrows between each image. The first image is that

of a monkey covering his mouth. The second, a red apple core carved into the shape of a bat, and finally an image of a monkey's mouth opened seemingly screaming, with the words, Find Your Teacher (black font) Voice (red font). The stated mission reads as follows:

Badass Teachers Association was created to give voice to every teacher who refuses to be blamed for the failure of our society to erase poverty and inequality through education. BAT members refuse to accept assessments, tests and evaluations created and imposed by corporate driven entities that have contempt for authentic teaching and learning. The stated goal reads, BATs aim to reduce or eliminate the use of high stakes testing, increase teacher autonomy in the classroom and work to include teacher and family voices in legislative decision-making processes that affect students.

Both the mission and the goal of the group appear to be progressive and committed to social justice by highlighting the purposeful avoidance of such mitigating factors. However, clear tensions developed as many teachers within this group articulated sentiments that contradicted both the mission and the goal.

I argue that the statements by teachers within this group as well as other commentary surrounding the tragedy are indicative of a counter-productive mentality held by some teachers that absolves them from having to address or teach about social injustices, and by teachers who do not see the classroom as a space for consciousness raising. Reading such comments, which will be covered in greater detail later, indicated a profound and urgent need to develop a strategic plan to ensure that all teachers have the ability to critically examine the problems of inequity plaguing our society.

Though these comments and others are problematic, equally troubling district officials' reactionary responses to students' questions and teachers' attempts to navigate these times. I was

troubled by the ease with which deliberately marginalizing comments and ineffectual lip-service were made by district officials to the very real concerns of teachers, students, and community-stakeholders—parrying back and forth in a space where teachers attempted to voice support for social justice and equity for all students. One school district’s superintendent decided to ban teachers from addressing any questions related to the tragedy: Superintendent Ed Hightower of Edwardsville Community Unit Schools, District 7 in Edwardsville, IL stated, “Normally, there would be an open discussion of events. However, this situation in Ferguson has become a situation whereby there are so many facts that are unknown.” Consequently, the directive was given that if students bring it up, teachers should change the subject. Through this exercise of authority on the district-wide policy level, Superintendent Hightower attempted to silence students, parents, and teacher-allies, and to restrict their exercise of agency in having their concerns addressed effectively. For some teachers, the institutional barrier erected by the directive was embraced as absolution from any responsibility to the children in their classes and schools.

In response to the same situation, my colleagues—whom I had taught with in the Bronx, NY for the past 10 years—asserted in response to my public expression of anger and frustration that “not all teachers feel that way” or “teachers are allowed to feel what they feel and believe what they believe, as long as it doesn’t interfere with instruction.” These statements might not seem particularly troublesome in relation to overall schooling goals. However, because schooling does not and has never existed in a vacuum, this is a particularly callous stance to take, rife with threats to the advocacy for justice our students deserve. I take time now to discuss why the initial comments as well as some of my colleagues’ responses to my indignation are so dangerous. Problematizing these comments will help advance from the very beginning the necessity for this

research. The first comment on the post made to Bad Ass Teachers' Facebook group page to be analyzed was expressed as follows:

I would tell my students the same thing I tell them when they ask me about religion: "I would ask your parents about that." As a teacher, I don't feel it's my place to talk about something like that. If it happened in a school and the students were afraid it would happen at their school, then yes, I would reassure them that we have procedures for that and we would do everything to keep them safe, but this topic should be discussed with their parents.

The statement demonstrates, in my opinion, a limited and restrictive view on the role of teaching. The speaker does not recognize, and consequently cannot embrace, that there is a position for her as a teacher in tackling issues that have profound consequences for students attending many of our schools. The comment also establishes that care should only occur if tragedies and incidents transpire between school walls and behind closed doors. The comment simultaneously isolates schools from larger communities and shortchanges the potential of family and school partnerships to work collaboratively to address issues affecting students. This type of thinking, and view of schooling, represents a pervasive and inadequate conceptualization of teaching and its reliably transformative role (for better or for worse) in students' lives. The second comment from the BATs group page to be analyzed is equally as elucidating, and was expressed as follows:

I just do not understand why this page is "dealing" w/this Michael Brown issue. I thought this group was about educational issues. It seems to me like this is a whole other issue entirely. A large one that should be addressed in another forum. What we're fighting is a big enough battle. I know I, as a teacher need to focus on that. W/everything my job

demands, that's all I can do w/my family's needs too. The comments/posts about Michael Brown seem like they should be on personal FB pages. It's going to create opposition to this group & our mission.

Though equally as troubling, the statement above is also telling in that the speaker points to the current climate in schools where teachers are inundated with seemingly endless demands on professional and personal time, myopia-inducing amounts of paperwork and testing, and the disparaging of their professionalism—all of which act as parts of the increasingly aggressive attacks on public education by policymakers. This comment also views issues of social justice as isolated from educational issues, stating that they should be addressed somewhere else and by someone else. But where and by whom? The conclusion of her post, “[I]t's going to create opposition to this group & our mission,” causes me to wonder what exactly is the mission of education in our nation presently? How are teachers making sense of the role of teaching and schooling? How are teacher preparation programs potentially influencing an ethos that suggests social justice inequities are other people's problems?

The responses by my colleagues and others of the same vein also require attention. They, too, provide insight to the significance and necessity of this study. The first reaction by one of my colleagues at my expressed outrage that “not all teachers feel that way” is a common defensive response to what I can only assume were initial feelings of being attacked. I thought about this response in connection to responses associated to oppressions such as racism. Many people often respond to experiences of racism shared by people of color with, “Not all white people are racist.” When people respond in this way, it serves a function that reifies the racist incident. There is often also a predictable preemption of any further conversation about the

incident from occurring. These types of responses—knowingly and unknowingly—serve as silencing tactics.

This silencing prevents discourse about the uninformed ideas and actions of some teachers and allows for them to become accepted and normative. Vigilance and productive discourse helps to avoid perpetuating marginalizing and oppressive practices. The last response, “teachers are allowed to feel what they feel and believe what they believe, as long as it doesn’t interfere with instruction,” is truly worrisome. A header in the Learning Network of the *New York Times* reads, “One young man is killed and the whole world takes notice.” If the whole world takes notice, how then can anyone ascertain that a tragedy such as this would not have tremendous impact on students and teachers? Without the proactive and vigilant responsiveness of teachers, the act of noticing, along with the varied internalizations and externalizations of a senseless loss of life by students, would in effect naturally interfere with instruction.

Examining the activist literacies of Black women teachers provided a perspective in viewing the BATs incident informed by an understanding of schools and communities as interconnected. Of course, the tenor on the Facebook page was troubling, but what was more troubling is that no one denied an injustice. Facebook members only debated the appropriateness of school as a site for these discussions. As will be discussed and highlighted in the data, teachers walk a fine line as public servants in any decision to speak about perceptions of injustice. Some are aware of walking this fine line and make deliberate choices about when to cross it; others buried the sense of threat and insecurity associated with being a part of the system so that they are only aware of an aversion to activism, not conscious of the underlying threat. However, as will also be evidenced in my research, the activist literacies that inform transformational and liberatory pedagogy are precisely what modern public school students

require from their teachers as they navigate the same daily dynamics that led to the death of Michael Brown.

### **Definition of Terms**

There are several terms that will be utilized throughout this study. I present these terms in the following section to facilitate a shared understanding of the language that will be used throughout the dissertation.

*Activist literacies:* The actual work or the daily engaged practices of activism that encompasses the historical contributions of Black women in social movements, contemporary contributions of Black women’s activism in education, Black feminist pedagogy, and social justice teacher education.

*Activism:* The action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.

*Black women teachers:* Black, female K-12 public school teachers who have graduated from traditional teacher preparation programs that espouse inclusion and social justice teacher education as foci of their programs. I have chosen to capitalize the word “Black” because I believe that “Black” constitutes a group with shared values and experiences. The teachers in this study describe themselves as “Black” women. The notion of Black is reflected in bodies of literature, music, and other cultural markers.

*Literacy:* Competence or knowledge in a specific area that are linked with particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups (NCTE, 2013)

These terms speak to the overall concepts within my study. However, I think it prudent that I offer a bit of commentary behind the title of the dissertation. Words and terms often

convey meanings that are both intentional and unintentional. I want to be explicit and clear by providing a window into my thinking behind the title.

I debated utilizing the term legitimate in the title of this dissertation because it implies that there may be such a thing as *illegitimate knowledge*. Characterizing a particular type of knowledge or way of knowing is a common theme within tradition of Black intellectualism. For example, knowledge that circulates by word-of-mouth in the Black oral tradition historically functioned as a method to communicate even as traditional avenues were denied to Black women. I experimented with using the term *expert* as opposed to legitimate, but thought that was not sufficient enough. This dissertation serves to actively disrupt and counter existing narratives that frame the knowledge provided by Black women as tertiary and alternative. The title and the work within this dissertation function to confront a *culture of justification*. Cooper (2015) wrote that a culture of justification is present when one “is always asked to prove that the study of Black women’s lives, histories, literature, cultural production and theory is sufficiently academic and sufficiently ‘rigorous’ to merit academic resources” (p. 4). Utilizing the term legitimate in the title directly negates arguments of illegitimacy by employing the specific language imparted under the dominant model that traditionally existed. The explicit naming of this dissertation is a type of epistemological approach that shapes Black Feminist Thought and is “rooted in Black women’s experiences and their particular ways of knowing” (Patton, Njoku, & Rogers, 2015, p. 63). Black feminist thought makes it possible to reject dominant notions of truth, acknowledging personal experience as a form of knowing, validating the importance of dialogues grounded in a caring ethos, holding individuals accountable for their knowledge claims, recognizing Black women as agentic knowledge producers, and viewing Black women’s standpoint as a valid truth.



### Summary

The purpose of this study was to further the research on Black women teachers and their activist practices to include an exploration of the ways in which their life experiences and experiences in their teacher preparation programs informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators given the current sociopolitical climate. This study explored the experiences and life histories of six Black women teachers who engaged in pedagogical practices that are informed by activism. The study revealed the lived experiences of the participants and how these experiences informed their activist literacies.

Through interview data and teacher narrative data, these six teachers' experiences within their classrooms, schools (P-12 and teacher preparation programs), I recorded and analyzed these six teachers' experiences. The data collected provides a glimpse into how Black women's pedagogical practices are informed by their varied experiences, particularly as Black girls in the world and as learners in P-12 and college environments. In its entirety, the study highlights the ways Black women teachers take up the work of teaching that is activist related. In particular, the study focuses on and identifies the taken for granted practices of Black women teachers that seek to interrupt existing patterns of power and privilege in schools even as they resist the terminology of activism or activist literacies as contextualized in this study.

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 outlined the context for research on teachers engage in activist related practices within the current culture of public education. Chapter 2 reviews appropriate scholarship that informs the study, which includes research on Black women in social movements, Black women teachers, Black Feminist pedagogy, history of Black Women's activism, and social justice teacher education. Chapter 3 focuses on how I selected to pursue and study the phenomenon, including the purpose behind

procedures and methods of data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the life histories of the participants in the study as a way to make them more visible in the research. Drawing on teacher memories, this chapter illustrates the ways that often taken for granted practices are also specific types of activist literacies. Chapter 5 is the first data chapter and focuses on experiences within teacher preparation programs. Chapter 6 focuses on the engaged practices of the participants in the study. This chapter highlights the specific ways that participants resisted and performed in their classrooms, schools, and communities. The final chapter summarizes these findings in relation to the research questions, discusses limitations, and presents implications for policy as well as preservice teachers.

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

*When you're a Black woman you seldom get to do what you just want to do;  
you always do what you have to do. -Dorothy Height (1979)*

In this study, I sought to understand how the life histories and schooling experiences of Black women teachers informed their pedagogical practices, and how these teachers' knowledge(s) could serve as a foundation for an alternate vision of teacher preparation programs dedicated to social justice and liberation for all people. Since teachers are an integral and critical piece of a larger puzzle that impacts the ways status quo is maintained, it was important to examine the history of Black women as leaders in social movements and as teachers dedicated to change and disrupting established structures, policies, and procedures. There is something to be gained from understanding the urgency with which many Black women and Black women teachers travel through spaces and beyond borders to transform these locales into more equitable and just arenas for all people—specifically those marginalized and oppressed. In this section, I provide some historical context on Black women and their significant role in the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality, as well as the impact of Black women teachers on aspects of schooling and education. Provided that a significant amount of teachers' pedagogy and practice is done in the context of larger societal structures steeped in inequity and oppression, within the first section of the literature review I look closely and intently at the history of Black women in social movements. The specific inclusion of research on Black women teachers and Black feminist pedagogy demonstrates the ways Black women teachers have worked and engaged in the function of schooling, as well as how they have developed “a mindset of intellectual inclusion and expansion that stands in contradiction to the Western intellectual tradition of exclusivity and chauvinism” (Omolade, 1987, p. 32). The second major section of the chapter explores literature related to teacher preparation, specifically social justice teacher education, and

the ways social justice teacher education is taken up in the academy. An additional layer is presented that examines the experiences of Black women as preservice teachers within predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

The final part of this chapter looks at the literature on the theoretical frameworks that ground this study. Since this study focused solely on Black women teachers, it is important for the reader to understand the intersecting theories of Black feminist thought, critical race theory (CRT), and intersectionality theory, each of which inform my conceptualization, data collection, and analysis. These intersecting theories provide the theoretical base and framework that ground this study. The purposeful mining of complementary theories in examining the lived experiences and the daily realities of Black women teachers helps to illuminate their knowledge and actions. Insights gleaned and best practices can then be used to reimagine teacher preparation programs and expand teachers' agency as activists and advocates embracing the awareness that teaching is political.

### **Black Women in Social Justice Movements**

Black women steeped in a connection forged from common experiences and struggles have continued to strive towards realizing improved educational outcomes for students of color. In discussing Black women's role in the Civil Rights Movement, Barnett (1993) shared, "Black women were often the ones who initiated protest, formulated strategies and tactics, and mobilized other resources (especially money, personnel, and communication networks) necessary for successful collective action" (p. 163). King (1988) reminds readers that "Black women often held central and powerful leadership roles within the black community and within its liberation politics" (p. 54). These were not unique happenings occurring in isolated

movements but rather commonplace as Black women shouldered the burden of keeping families together in dire circumstances.

Black women and men “utilized their collective *cultural capital*—that is their collective financial, physical, and human resources as well as a sense of group consciousness and collective identity”—to advance the education of the entire group (Franklin, 2002, p. 179). They did this by “funding colleges and universities, including all-black schools designed to educate black youth and combat the racist educational *Black Laws*” that excluded them from public schools (Franklin, 2002, p. 179). Additionally, the cultural capital was used not only for the preparation of black teachers “who accepted the responsibility for the academic success of their students but also a community-based effort to combat white supremacy in education” (Franklin, 2002, p. 179).

Despite the major influence of Black women in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, few studies document the roles and contributions of these women in the struggle for equality and social justice in America (Franklin, 2002, p. 13). This strategic omission has long been the practice of those in power to silence the voices of Black women. Smith and Hull (2014) wrote, “Black women, whose experience is unique, are seldom recognized as a particular social-cultural entity and are seldom thought to be important enough for serious scholarly consideration” (p. 100). Septima Clark (1990) expressed her experiences as a woman working for change in the civil rights movement, speaking specifically about the attitudes of Black male Civil Rights leaders:

I was on the executive staff of SCLC, but them men on it didn't listen to me too well.

They liked to send me into many places, because I could always make a path in to get people to listen to what I have to say. But those men didn't have any faith in women,

none whatsoever. They just thought that women were sex symbols and had no contributions to make. (p. 77)

Clark refers to her consistent ability to make a path and garner attention to what she had to say. The capacity of Black women such as Clark to create space and opportunity is deeply embedded in the historic tradition of Black women and the principles of uplift that encompasses so many of the significant social movements in this country.

More currently, Black women have seen themselves as major players in present day social movements. The contentious debate between Black women and white women and the purpose and goals of the feminism movement have existed since its inception. Black feminists have always been critical about the ways “white feminism” has taken up the work of maintaining patriarchy through seeking equality with men rather than the dismantling of the system that privileges men. There has been a tendency to “privilege a partial, white, bourgeois, liberal perspective” while largely marginalizing or ignoring the struggles of Black women (Motta et al., 2011). Jenika McCrayer (2015) wrote, “Though mainstream feminism has become more inclusive and intersectional with each new wave, there is still some resistance to embrace the varying values and needs of the numerous groups and identities feminism is supposed to advocate for” (p. 2). She described these goals as “oppressive and exclusive” priorities that leave the rest of us behind, and discussed wage equality and equal opportunity employment:

Let’s keep it real: Mainstream feminism is absolutely not advocating for women of color in the fight for wage equality and equal employment opportunities. For example, I still have to write JM on resumes and not “Jenika” just to increase the chances of me getting a call back. Then, let’s imagine that I do get a call back, and even better (or rarer), I get the job. As a Black woman, I make 64 cents to every dollar a white man makes, Native

American women make 60 cents, and my Latina/Chicana sisters make 53 cents. Trans women face major discrimination and a decrease in wages once they transition. So why on Earth are feminist still insisting that women make 77 cents to a man's dollar. Do we not exist or is it only the plight of white women that count in mainstream feminism?

(McCrauer, 2015, p. 3)

The example provided by "JM" is a prime illustration of the exclusive nature inherent in white feminism, but more importantly a profound example of the inclusivity of Black feminism.

McCrauer not only names her plight as a Black woman, she includes the realities of other marginalized and oppressed groups of women who at times are even more invisible than Black woman. This is what Black women in social movements have historically done and continue to do.

The presence of Black women in these movements—the civil rights and women's liberation—was deep and impactful; however, their rendered invisibility has been pointed out as another tactic aimed to silence Black women and their agency. Charron (2009) wrote,

Too often, the civil rights and women's movements we collectively remember are mirages, shimmering across the decades reflecting partial historical truths and contemporary nostalgic desires. Too often, the civil rights story begins in 1954 and ends in 1968, and white women seem to have taken the central initiative in launching the women's liberation movements. Representations of these intertwined movements are equally mediated, gendered, classed, and raced in ways that eclipse our view of black women in them. (p. xxix)

Black women in historical movements have laid the foundation for their continued presence in contemporary social movements today. That is to say, Black women are always acting as change agents and critical forces in transformative agendas.

A contemporary example of Black women “leading” social movements is evidenced in the Black Lives Matter movement, which began on the social media site, Facebook. However, it is important to note that the Black queer women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, behind the Black Lives Matter Movement had a history of organizing and activism prior to the explosion of the hashtag that eventually grew into a national organizing project. The use of social media and technology points to the evolving face of social justice movements. The social media roots of movements such as Black Lives Matter allowed Cullors (2013) message, “#blacklivesmatter is a movement attempting to visiblize what it means to be black in this country. Provide hope and inspiration for collective power to achieve collective transformation rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams,” to reach large numbers of individuals. The swiftness and long reaching advantages helped people around the nation to converge and coalesce around this idea. Black women in social movements have always been honest and frank about present conditions while also demonstrating ability to hope and dream of an alternate way of living beyond mere existence. Sudbury (1998) maintained that “fundamental to black women’s organizing is the belief that transformation is a possibility” (p. 237). The criticality of being a visionary can also be evidenced through the Black Lives Matter movement. The Black Lives Matter movement was started in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of 17-year old Trayvon Martin. The movement was, as one of the founders insisted, a way for everybody to get free. She wrote,



#BlackLivesMatter doesn't mean your life isn't important- it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within White Supremacy, are important to your liberation. Given the disproportionate impact state violence has on black lives, we understand that when Black people in this country get free, the benefits will be wide reaching and transformative for society as a whole. When we are able to end hyper-criminalization and sexualization of Black people and end the poverty, control, and surveillance of Black people, every single person in this world has a better shot at getting and staying free. When Black people get free, everybody gets free. (Garza, 2014, p.2)

Garza's words, "everybody gets free," again points to the inclusiveness of movements for social justice led by Black women. Black women teachers have also been intentional and have done this in practical ways that have allowed for racial uplift and advancement of Black people. While this has been the case historically, unyielding and persistent oppressive systems along with diminished agency caused many teachers to become complicit and perform the work of maintaining the existing systems of privilege, oppression and white supremacy. Picower (2009) described this as relying on a set of "tools of Whiteness" designed to protect and maintain dominant and stereotypical understandings of race (p. 197). The sheer number of white teachers in the field makes it critical to look at Whiteness and its relationship to teaching, and this study implores us to look at the ways Black women teachers experience academia and learn to become teachers under the veil of whiteness. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when student demographics sharply shifted and technology rapidly advanced, many teachers of all races and ethnicities failed to meet the necessary requirements to be the type of teacher needed in the current landscape. Black women teachers play a critical role in social movements. This intentionality informs everything that follows.

### **Black Women Teachers**

Black women teachers have long established identities as sharers of knowledge and visionaries. Historically, it was Black women throughout the era of slavery—not men—who furtively acquired basic literacy skills and sought to share their newly acquired skills in secret (Shipp, 2000). Education, particularly “the desire for literacy and formal education became a *core value* in the African American cultural value system” also “for formerly enslaved African Americans and their descendants, literacy and formal schooling were closely associated with *freedom*, and they were willing to make great sacrifices to obtain them” (p. 176). This newfound knowledge served several purposes: shed light on the conditions in which they lived; gave them access to the political processes and climates that were the social, economic, and political ethos of the time; and provided spaces and frameworks for resistance (p. 25).

The number of Black women educators who made significant contributions to the field of education is numerous. To identify only some of these educators comes with the danger of excluding others. However, there is also danger in not emphasizing any of the contributions made by members of this particular group. Therefore, I offer brief discussion of two Black women educators with the caveat that there are so many more deserving of the same illumination. I have chosen to highlight two Black women teachers, Septima Clark and Anna Julia Cooper because they were integral forces in social movements, were dedicated educators and were also profound examples of Black women’s intellectual legacy.

*Freedom’s teacher: Septima Clark.* “This country was built up from women keeping their mouths shut” (Clark, 1976, p. 26). Septima Poinsette Clark’s love of teaching as well as her commitment to activism positions her as an ideal educator to discuss within the context of this study. Deciding where to begin to discuss Clark was a challenge as there were many facets of her

life and career that are worthy and valid for discussion. For this study, I will discuss her design of, establishment of, and work within the Citizenship Schools. When Clark was fired from her teaching job in Charleston, South Carolina, she took a job at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. The Citizenship Schools of the South were designed under this founding concept: “The basic purpose of the citizenship schools is discovering local community leaders. It is my belief that creative leadership is present in any community and only awaits discovery and development” (S. Clark, Oral History Interview, July 25, 1976). Charron (2000) wrote of Citizenship School teachers:

They have learned to signal their commitment to the civil rights movement by teaching their neighbors to read and write, by taking them to register to vote, and by establishing or working with any organization that will improve their communities. Their training has taught them that grassroots civil rights activism remains inseparable from grassroots education. In this process, Clark has guaranteed that each Citizenship School Teacher carries forward an organizing tradition forged by countless southern black women activist educators before her. (p. xvi)

The pedagogy of the Citizenship School was informed by both her activist work and dedication to adult literacy. Charron (2000) shared,

Four decades of teaching and civic organizing shaped how she perceived the fundamental problems confronting the southern black community, including the need for better schools, better health care, better job opportunities and wages, and increased voter participation –particularly among black women–in local, state, and federal affairs. The challenge this former public school teacher accepted was to find means to solve them.

Citizenship Schools became a foundation for the non-violent movement between 1961- 1970. During this time, Clark (1976) and her coworkers prepared a network of Citizenship School teachers: “people with PhD minds who never had a chance to get an education” (p. 2). These teachers collectively taught more than 25,000 people. The possibility and the realized reality of Clark’s commitment at the time is, in my opinion, remarkable. The transformative nature of what was accomplished through her passion for teaching and desire for justice helped to change and improve the lives of many African Americans. The expansiveness of Clark’s contributions cannot be contained in a mere section of a literature review. However, there are well documented accounts of her legacy. The legacy of Septima Poinsette Clark is rich and informative and has been documented in two autobiographies, *Echo in My Soul* (1962) and *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (1987). Researcher such as Katherine Mellen Carron have added to this with her work, *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark*, in 2009.

*A voice from the South: Anna Julia Cooper.*

I speak for the colored women of the South, because it is there that the millions of blacks in this country have watered the soil with blood and tears, and it is there too that the colored woman of America has made her characteristic history and there her destiny is evolving. (Cooper, 1893)

Anna Julia Cooper described her own vocation as “the education of neglected people.” Cooper’s political action began at age nine, when she protested the preferential treatment given to boys for candidacy in ministry. She continued this trend while attending Oberlin College, where she declined to enroll in the inferior ladies’ courses in favor of the gentleman’s courses (AJC Center, retrieved March, 5, 2016). Cooper believed that education was the means for Black women’s

advancement. Accounts of Cooper's teacher activism demonstrate her overall belief in education as opportunities to develop more fully. "With her firm resolve in education as tantamount to the progress of people of color, Cooper rejected her white supervisor's mandate to teach her students trades, and instead trained and prepared them for college" (AJC Center, retrieved March 5, 2016).

Of the women discussed in this section of the literature review, Cooper experienced the most blatant attempt at erasure of her contributions to the advancement of the intellectual thought of Black people. Bailey (2004) described Cooper's achievements in this way:

The achievements of Anna Julia Cooper are extraordinary given her life circumstances. Driven by a desire Cooper called "a thumping within," she became a prominent educator, earned her PhD and influenced the thought of W. E. B. Dubois and others. Cooper fought for her educational philosophy, but despite her contributions, her apparent elitism has shaped contemporary assessments of her work. (p. 56)

The words utilized by Bailey to open her paper illustrate the complexity with which Cooper can be viewed. The apparent elitism that Bailey writes of was reframed by professor Vivian May. In May's (2007) book, *Anna Julia Cooper: Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction*, Cooper's strategies of code-switching and irony were reflective of a radical methodology of dissent. May's work captures Cooper's theorizing from experience as well as her ideas and strategies of liberation along with her vision for an egalitarian society. Despite the visionary capacity of Black women educators such as Cooper, there have been persistent efforts to erase the contributions of Black women, not only from social movements as discussed previously, but also from contributions towards the intellectual shaping of Black people's consciousness. Bailey (2004) wrote,

Anna Julia Cooper could not have known how often her words, “When and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me,” would be quoted. W. E. B. DuBois borrowed them and others from her, acknowledging their author with merely, “as one of our women writes.” (p. 56)

Cooper and Dubois were colleagues, but for some reason Dubois attributed her quote to “one of our women” rather than recognizing her as the author. Browne (2008), in “*Anna Julia Cooper and Black Women’s Intellectual Tradition: Race, Gender, and Nation in the Making of a Modern Race Women*,” asserted that the relationship between the Black male and Black female intellectuals was complicated. The lack of naming underscores how Black women were left out of the optics framing Black political life by both whites and Black men. Cooper, in keeping with the tradition born out of Black women’s self-determination, the power to decide one’s own destiny (Collins, 1998) and self-definition, conceptualized as the power to name one’s reality (Collins, 1990), argued for her inclusion as an intellectual. Cooper’s experiences illustrated the issues that Black women intellectuals and activists have faced in efforts to insist on Black women’s voices and resist erasure and silencing. Her experiences also point to the interconnectedness of education with social and political action. May (2007) highlighted Cooper’s commitment to activism when arguing against critics and misinterpretations of Cooper’s work that her lived experiences were anti-elitist. May wrote, “Perhaps, then the challenge lies in developing flexible interpretative strategies able to attend to Cooper’s different vocal registers or resonances without silencing them, and more expansive notions of political action or of counterpublics able to recognize a broader range of activities as, in fact activist” (p.

50). The lives of Clark and Cooper illustrate the complex systems that Black women educators have had to navigate throughout the past and contemporarily.

The literature in the pursuant section highlight specific ways that Black women have resisted the purposefully designed silencing. According to Haddix (2005), Black women teachers are generators and producers of knowledge, but this knowledge has historically been silenced by a dominant, white patriarchal discourse. This has compelled Black women teachers to not only navigate spaces that have traditionally marginalized them but to do so in ways that develop resistance, resiliency, and perseverance. Black women teachers represent a marginalized group whose voices, until recent years, remained absent from canonical educational discourse.

Particular studies focusing on Black women teachers have highlighted the use of voice as a metaphor for Black women's empowerment (Beauboeuf, 1997; Dixson & Dingus, 2008). In her book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks (1989) discusses the issue of women of color coming to voice. Although she acknowledges the need for their voices to be heard, she suggests that women of color develop a new way of speaking, employing a liberatory voice that is not determined by one's status as being oppressed. She proclaims that opposition and resistance characterize speaking with a liberatory voice: "It demands that paradigms shift—that we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way" (hooks, 1989, p. 15). Collins (1998) acknowledges that the call for Black women to gain a collective voice is not new. Feminist and author Sikivu Hutchinson (2014) writes the following description of Black women teachers:

Black women teachers often largely unsung, yet devoted to a radical vision of teaching and critical literacy that extends beyond the narrow confines of the classroom. They espouse a justice ethos that pushes students to resist the oppressive paradigms of self and

low expectations imposed on them by the dominant culture; often working under conditions that denigrate their professionalism as women of color.

This description illustrates the very nature of Black women teachers. There is no assertion that all Black women teachers share a common pedagogy or educational philosophy. However, their intersectional race and gender experiences facilitates a shared history of oppression and promotes a predictable impetus to challenge and encourage those around them to disrupt systems of domination. Dixson (2003) teases this out a bit further and argues:

It might be helpful to address the ways that African American women teachers understand and use the intersection of race, class, and gender, not because these three aspects of identity represent the totality of their experience or identity, but rather in response to the even more limited ways in which most social science research, particularly education research has cast them. (p. 221)

Though there is no assertion made that Black teachers share a common pedagogy, researchers have examined the pedagogical contributions of Black teachers from different vantage points. Irvine (1989) identified three areas of Black teachers' cultural style. These were "perception of their role as authority figures, teaching delivery style and performance, and use of cultural familiar speech and events" (p. 58). Additional research identified the Ware demander pedagogy as the teachers' ability to demand excellence through culturally responsive teaching and engagement (Ware, 2006). These studies point to the power of pedagogy and politics through advocacy for students and their families. The pedagogical practices of Black women teachers will be discussed further in this chapter.

Black women teachers have provided scholarship that documents their activism and through this have created new ways of knowing. One of the most critical texts along this vein is



Patricia Hill Collins' book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000a). In this second edition of the book, Collins reflected and said, "I suspected that African-American women had created a collective knowledge that served a similar purpose in fostering Black women's empowerment." (p. x). In *Womanist Lessons for Reinventing Teaching*, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005) discussed the feminization of the teaching profession, and articulated that at its inception "teaching was never meant to be transgressive or subversive activity for female educators..."

Historically, Black women have been largely ignored by much of the academic theorizing and research in education, as they were never the center around which the conservative projects of dominant femininity and teaching were developed. (p. 436)

However, these new ways of knowing have yet to be fully valued in the academy, as measured by the dearth of Black women literatures included in the teacher education canon.

### **Black Women Teachers in Social Movements**

As referenced earlier, teachers including Clark, Cooper, Bethune, and a host of others have championed the advancement of Black men, women, and children through education initiatives. Teacher activists such as Ida B. Wells, Jo Ann Robinson, and Angela Davis serve as both historic and contemporary examples of Black women who have been forced from their teaching jobs because of their political commitments (Hill, 2010, p. 273).

African-American female teachers, through their teaching missions and involvement in social movements, were forerunners in the development of African American feminist thought. Among African American female teachers who founded educational institutions, for example, curricula were often underscored by an awareness of African American's precarious social, economic, and political positions. Thus, while their course offerings

balanced industrial and classical models, African American female teachers often had the specific needs of working-class and poor African American women in mind. (Lomotey, 2010, p. 89)

Black women teachers countered the discriminatory practices of educational institutions and professional organizations by forming their own. For example, Spelman College, the nation's first historically black college for women was founded in 1881 in Atlanta, Georgia by two Black Baptist female seminaries, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles. Freedom Schools were started and maintained mostly by Black women volunteers. The Freedom Schools of the 1960s were part of a line of efforts to liberate people from oppression using the tool of popular education, including secret schools in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries for enslaved Africans; labor schools during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; the Citizenship Schools formed by Septima Clark and others in the 1950s (Teaching for Change, 2016). Black women teachers also engaged in political activism by participating in organized assaults on Jim Crow segregation, despite steep consequences. Black teachers were often required to sign loyalty oaths prohibiting membership in the NAACP, and those whose names were found on rosters were fired. This trend was best articulated in the following paragraph from the Encyclopedia of African American Educators:

Southern school authorities were not above scanning NAACP rosters for names of African American teachers' offices and memberships. Aline Black (Norfolk, Virginia, 1939), Viola Louise Duvall (Charleston, South Carolina, 1944), and countless other African American female and male teachers were fired, physically threatened, and, in some instances, socially alienated for their willingness to be plaintiffs in landmark cases. Teacher Harriette Moore was killed in a bomb blast, alongside her husband, also a teacher and a leader in the NAACP. In the decades following her dismissal from the

Charleston Public Schools, Septima P. Clark sued and won back pay and compensation. Clark lost her position as a result of her leadership position in the Charleston NAACP. (Lomotey, 2010, p. 90)

These instances of violence towards teachers indicate that teachers have always been viewed as a threat to the maintenance of unjust systems and structures. Their ability to reach, impart ideas, influence young minds and raise social consciousness among youth in the eyes of the oppressor is seen as dangerous and therefore the nature of the profession must be depoliticized. However, Black women teachers have resisted this depoliticization through concerted efforts of resistance—through teaching and teaching beyond the classroom. For example, Septima Clark taught adult literacy for civic participation at the Highlander Folk School (Lomotey, 2010, p. 90). Looking at historic contributions of teachers such as Clark allows us to see the ways education can be both formal and informal, and can be furnished in institutions of higher education as well as in the field or community (Hill, 2010, p. 78). The contemporary practice of Black women teachers promoting civic engagement and participation is clearly part of the same tradition that informed Clark’s teaching of civic participation, racial uplift and social justice. Dingus (2010) wrote:

Themes of racial uplift, community connections, activism, social justice, and leadership development around African-American educational issues continue in the work of contemporary African American female teachers. As African American women and mothers, many contemporary African American female teachers are painfully aware of the continued legacy of racial injustice, economic oppression, and educational inequities imposed on African American students. Recent research on African American women

teachers highlights the ways in which they connect school, community, and culture in their classroom instruction. (p. 91)

Through the lens of intersectionality, Black queer contemporary scholar, professor, and personal inspiration, Bettina Love is another example of this legacy. Dr. Love is currently creating a Hip Hop Civics Education curriculum from the ground up entitled “Get Free.” The catalyst for Love’s work is to nurture the ways students intellectually connect with the art form and also to create a space within humanities where diverse solutions to today’s problems can be addressed (Howard, 2015). In Love’s own words that highlight the benefits of Hip-Hop Civics Education:

Centering Hip Hop in the classroom exposes students to the ingenuity, genius, and creativity of urban youth past and present. When Hip Hop scholars place Hip Hop in the context of higher education, the robustness of Hip Hop culture allows us to have complex class discussions about the contemporary everyday realities of urban youth who endure the social, economic, physiological, and psychological trauma of coping with the racial injustices of ‘post-racial’ America. (2015, p.3)

While Love’s work can be situated within the tradition of scholars such as Carol Lee, Joyce King, and Arnetha Ball, she is highlighted here because of her approach in utilizing young people’s stories and voices in the development of the curriculum. The parallels that exist between Love and those that came before her are connections that cannot be ignored. The intersections that are identifiable by tracing the roots of teacher activism with more contemporary teacher activism is not coincidental. From this historical foundation, Black women teachers continue to seek improved and transformative educational opportunities for young people through their everyday teaching practices and pedagogy.

### **Black Feminist Pedagogy**

The work of Black women teachers has been referred to as Black feminist pedagogy. Black feminist pedagogy evolved out of the activist tradition of Black women teachers. It sets forth learning strategies informed by Black women's historical experiences with race, gender, class bias, and the consequences of marginality and isolation (Omolade, 1987, p. 32). This pedagogy is undergirded by womanist themes comprising female activism, caring as a key force for activism, and life-long human development (Richardson, 2013, p. 331). Black feminist pedagogy can be viewed as informing multicultural education, culturally relevant teaching, and teaching for social justice because of its promotion of a non-western worldview and its inclusion of gender and patriarchy as central to an understanding of all historical phenomena (Joseph, 1995).

Citing the work of Collins (1990) and Ladson-Billings (1996) defined Black feminist thought as the kinds of knowledge and experiences that Black women teachers bring to their pedagogical practice. To further explain Black feminist pedagogy, we can look to Shipp (2000) who expressed that,

Because of gender and race, Black female teachers have more experience as the “cultural other” than white teachers. Teachers of color can use this familiarity with the sense of being “the cultural other” to inform their work, with an understanding of students experiencing that sense, be it because of race, ethnicity, class or exceptionality. (p. 207)

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1997, 1999), Dixson (2003), and Ladson-Billings (1995) all examined the pedagogical practices and beliefs of Black women teachers in attempts to analyze how Black women teachers respond to issues of race, gender, racism, and social justice. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1997) proposed the renaming of culturally relevant teaching to “politically relevant

teaching” to illuminate that a teacher’s political understanding of education “make their actions sensitive to and supportive of the anti-racism and anti-oppression of students of color” (p. 704), as well as emphasize the political, historical, social, as well as cultural understandings that such teachers bring to their profession (p. 705). Dixson (2003) sought to describe and examine the extent to which issues of race, class, and gender identity informed the pedagogy of African-American women teachers. In doing so, Dixson (2003) desired to understand how these women recognize and use their identity in a positive and liberating manner for themselves, their students, and their communities (p. 222). Dixson (2003) holds that the political character of African-American women’s pedagogy is implicit and explicit (p. 224). In her study, Dixon (2003) interviewed teachers and identified five themes: a) teaching as a lifestyle and a public service; b) discipline as expectations for excellence; c) teaching as othermothering; d) relationship building; and e) race, class, and gender awareness. Here, I will focus only on teaching as a lifestyle and a public service.

The ability of teachers to recognize and embrace that teaching is more than just a job is what guides my beliefs about teaching, as well as my identification of the critical role of teacher preparation programs. Along with spending quality time preparing lessons each day and creating lessons and materials that engage and challenge their students, the teachers in Dixson’s study believed that teaching is an honor and advocate for their students. Where does this belief originate?

Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s (1997) study titled, *Politicized Mothering Among African American Women Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry*, explored the self concepts of culturally relevant teachers and articulated that Black women teachers’ pedagogy also derives from their “political clarity,” or their recognition that there are relationships between schools and society

that differentially structure the successes and failures of groups of children (p. 7). Further, Beaubouef-Lafontant asserted that teachers need to recognize that in their roles, they have the power to legitimize certain knowledges and identities and not others. This recognition allows Black women teachers to define themselves in less restrictive ways as simple transmitters of knowledge to more expansive influential educators. As a result of her study on six Black women teachers Beaubouef-Lafontant (1997) wrote,

It is defining themselves as political beings, as people who bring their knowledge of injustices squarely into the classroom, that the teachers most claim minority voice in education. Combined with their maternal concern, their political clarity allows them to see disturbing similarities between academic tracking and social segregation; between teachers' low-expectations of some students and the perpetuation of an underclass; between teacher control and the maintenance of a social order in which too few people question those in power. They essentially develop a "double consciousness" (DuBois, 1965) or a questioning attitude about the "truths" proclaimed and uncritically accepted by the mainstream. (p. 8)

Black women teachers' commitment to social justice can be viewed as political or moral concerns that they bring to their teaching. Beaubouef-Lafontant (1999) believed,

That these teachers see their work as continuing the efforts of other Black women to survive the adverse conditions created by racism. In their interviews, it is revealed that they view their efforts as part of a larger tradition embodied by family and community members, as well as by historical figures. They also see their teaching as helping them become whole people- individuals who come to their teaching not disconnected from

their knowledge of relationships, power, or the human capacity for change and good. (p. 13)

In the interviews conducted by Beaubouef-Lafontant, the term *womanist caring* was conceptualized by focusing on the pedagogy of exemplary African American teachers. Through this idea of womanist caring, she posited the notion of politically relevant teaching to describe the pedagogy of culturally relevant teachers who “use their knowledge of society’s inequities and their influence to empower marginalized students” (1999, The nuggets of knowledge garnered from these interviews highlighted the investment in the human capacity for change and good, which is what motivates Black women teachers towards social justice and activism. The idea of womanist caring encouraged educators to see their action “as a humble, yet essential, contribution to an extensive, collaborative, and enduring project change (Sheared, 1994, p. 291). Womanist teachers see racism and other systemic injustices as “simultaneously social and educational problems” (Beaubouef-Lafontant, 2002, p. 286). Another important characteristic of Beaubouef-Lafontant’s work is that of political clarity. Black women teachers’ political clarity is the awareness that society, and by extension, its schools, is structured to ensure the success of some groups of children and the failure of others (Beaubouef-Lafontant, 1999). According to Beaubouef-Lafontant (1999), political clarity causes Black women teachers to be:

...mindful not of the cultural norms, values, and practices of their students, but more importantly of the political realities and aspirations of people of color. As a result, their pedagogy is “relevant” to the political experiences of inequity and disenfranchisement of their students. (p. 705)

The pedagogy of Black women teachers is steeped in principles of not only caring but of informed political clarity. These notions inform the pedagogical practices of Black women



teachers, as well as the ways in which they commit themselves to the children in schools and communities. In the next section of the literature review, I discuss Black women's activism to further ground the overall study.

### **Defining Black Women's Activism**

Black women's activism focused upon a range of issues, and has been described by researchers and writers as feminist, especially when it occurred in all-female groupings (Danto, 2014). Activism as it relates to Black women's lived realities is grounded in historical tradition. Defining activism, particularly as it manifests distinctly from explicit involvement in social movements, continues to be challenging. Partly due to the stigma of being labeled an activist, the lack of consensus is generally due to variation in what activism looks like to individual women of color. Contributing to this dynamic as well is what some have viewed as a concerted and sustained effort to conceal the many contributions of Black women to crucial projects of social activism. Barnett (1993) wrote, "The invisibility of modern Black women leaders and activists is in part a result of gender, race, and class biases in both the social movement literature and feminist scholarship. Scholarship and cultural attention has focused almost exclusively on great men and elites as leaders" (p. 163).

Black women's activism is rooted in a historicist tradition and reflects the various systems of oppression that Black women face along the intersections already discussed. Collins (2000) emphasizes that understanding the complexity of Black women's activism requires not only the need to address more than one form of oppression, but also the significance of how singular and multiple forms of oppression are organized (p. 203). According to Collins, Black women's activism is informed by two dimensions: a) struggles for group survival and b) struggles for institutional transformation. These two dimensions work together to stimulate social

change as Black women create spheres of influence that provide the tools to resist and undermine or work around established rules of dominance (Collins, 2000).

Purposefully examining the role that Black women activists play illuminates the fact that they possess a distinct political agenda that incorporates resistance to oppressive structures of power that exist within their schools (Dixson, 2003). For example, the Vassar College Takeover of 1969 exemplifies Black women resisting and advancing their political agenda. Accounts of this takeover describe a scene in which Black women students devised and carried out a plan to occupy Vassar College's main administration building. Propelled by what they referred to as the "Nine Demands," which challenged Vassar to implement changes that would ensure the continuation of the Black studies program and improve the quality of Black student life on campus, 34 Black women marched through the double doors of the administration building and calmly stated to the switchboard operator, "this is a takeover" (Thomas, 2006). For three days from behind self-imposed barricades, these women negotiated with school leaders and emerged victorious. Thomas (2006) shared, "my participation in the occupation of Vassar's Main Building taught me that crucial decisions do not come without risk. Some choices will be unpopular, but they must be based upon personal values and an unwillingness to compromise those values" (2006, p.4).

Another account of Black women teachers' activism was documented in *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*. Linda O. McCurry uses the diary entries, letters, and public writings of Ida B. Wells to depict Wells' early involvement in activism as she taught and lectured in various places on the lynching of Black men and women in the South. Wells used her voice and focused her eloquence on the horrors of lynching, exposing it as a widespread form of racial terrorism. Wells lectured in the States and abroad, arranged legal representation for Black

prisoners, hired investigators, and founded anti-lynching leagues. These accounts are clear evidence of late 19th century Black women teacher activism in the promotion of social justice. While Wells' activism evolved from a sense of urgency and loss, other forms of activism have been presented in efforts to make the world a more just place for all.

Using the definition of Black women's activism provided by Costello (1991), as the doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals, it is evident that Black women have been engaged in activism in various ways throughout history towards many goals. Goals such as equity and access to quality education for marginalized and underserved youth, dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, or drawing attention and working to reform the criminal justice system have functioned as catalysts for Black women's activism. *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2010) ignited a national conversation around justice and sparked a political movement. The author said, "There are enormous victories that are being achieved precisely because the people whom we have written off and viewed as disposable are reclaiming their voice, standing up, speaking out, organizing even as they struggle to survive" (M. Alexander, December 23, 2013). In the quote above, Alexander uses the term "people" to emphasize marginalized and oppressed individuals and collectives joining together to push for change. This persistent struggle for survival has been a common thread that weaves throughout social justice movements across time and space.

Black women face further challenges in their activism. Black women are commonly referred to as angry when expressing their thoughts and grievances against injustice, hence the aversion of some women to being labeled an activist. Anger appears to be a prevalent emotion shared by many activists. "Like the spark that ignites the fuel in an engine, anger is the stimulus that initiates action" (Adams, 2007, p. 10). Individuals who experience moral anger often

perceive their anger as righteous and justified, linked to something greater than individual self-interest (Potter-Efron, 2005).

Professor Brittany Cooper, in response to critics' attempts to equate her anger and activism as divisive, shared,

Anger is a legitimate political emotion. And if your life is marked by injustices big and small each and every day, then rage, too, is a legitimate political emotion. I made the choice, though, to let my rage be generative, productive rage, the kind of rage that emboldens me to build the world I want to see rather than take a sledgehammer to all the things I hate. I stay mad. But there is a method to my madness. (Cooper, 2014, p. 3)

The energy of anger described by Cooper pushes individuals out of their comfort zone toward activity. According to Hayes and Juarez (2010),

Anger establishes an assertive presence and force that refutes the dominant White mainstream's denial and evasion of race-based inequalities while simultaneously insisting on the legitimacy and humanity, thus visibility, of those targeted by White racial domination, including their experiences and knowledge. (p. 2)

The literature presented thus far highlight different models of activism. As awareness and raising awareness are key parts of furthering transformative educational experiences for our students, this study is given additional significance by promoting both. I will now briefly discuss two of models of activism that are significant to this study. James (2002), reflecting on the impact of visionary pragmatism along with intellectual activism, shared the following, "The legacy of visionary pragmatism, oppositional agency and collective activism will continue to inspire black women and to inform black feminist, social, political and intellectual activism in the twenty-first century" (p. 5-6). For the reasons stated above, both visionary pragmatism and intellectual

activism models are useful in a study on Black women teachers enacting activist literacies; both exist to combat the ideology of white supremacy that exists in institutions at both intellectual and practical levels.

### **Visionary Pragmatism**

The first model of activism, “visionary pragmatism,” has been utilized as a point of entry into discussing models for Black feminist activism. Collins chose visionary pragmatism as a model because it “approximates a creative tension symbolized by an ongoing journey ... at the same time by stressing the pragmatic, it reveals how current actions are part of some larger more meaningful struggle” (Collins, 2013, p. 189-190). When Collins discussed visionary pragmatism, she opened with a reflection on her childhood:

As a child growing up in an African-American, working class Philadelphia neighborhood, I wondered how my mother and all the other women on our block kept going. Early each workday they rode long distances on public transportation to jobs that left them unfulfilled, overworked, and underpaid. Periodically they complained, but more often the counseled practicality and patience. Stressing the importance of a good education as the route to a better life, they recognized that even if Black girls married, big houses, maids, and blended family bliss as idealized on the popular television show *The Brady Bunch* were not guaranteed for us. Their solution: we, their daughters were to become self-reliant and independent. (Collins, 1998, p. 189-190)

The idea of visionary pragmatism that Collins posited identified not just the struggles of the Black women in the community but their hopes and dreams for their daughters. The daughters represented a future that is not predetermined, but envisioned because of an ongoing struggle. Collins stated:

Thus, although Black women's visionary pragmatism points to a vision, it doesn't prescribe a fixed endpoint of a universal truth. One never arrives but constantly strives. At the same time, by stressing the pragmatic, it reveals how current actions are part of some larger, more meaningful struggle. Domination succeeds by cutting people off from one another. Actions bring people in touch with the humanity of other struggles by demonstrating that truthful and ethical visions for community cannot be separated from pragmatic struggles on their behalf. (Collins, 1998, p. 190)

Collins' theory presented an opportunity to think about the ways in which, in relation to this study, Black women teachers think about a life for their students that they themselves have never experienced. Current actions of teachers within classrooms, schools, and communities can be viewed as and can act as resistance towards societal injustice on a larger scale. Advocating for and with students within classrooms, as well as with community members outside of schools, can lead to societal transformation that actualizes long desired equity and access for opportunities to learn.

### **Intellectual Activism**

The second model, "intellectual activism," speaks to the creative work contributing to social movements against racism, sexism, homophobia, and class exploitation (Collins, 2013). Intellectual activism is the myriad ways that people place the power of their ideas in service to social justice. Collins discusses two ideas that shape intellectual activism: the tensions between speaking truth to power and speaking the truth to the people. Speaking truth to power "harnesses the power of ideas toward the specific goal of confronting existing power relations" (Collins, 2013, p. xii). A second strategy of intellectual activism aims to speak the truth directly to the people. This truth telling requires talking, reason, honesty, love, courage, and care to the masses.

Intellectual activism has also been at the center of a contentious debate within the academy regarding who can and should be considered an activist or one who engages in activism. Scholars, along with community members, disagree on whether the work at the academy can be and should be considered as activism. Educator Jenn Jackson (2014) shared her frustration:

Despite my daily work towards the empowerment of my community, I often find myself confronted with outright rejection from non-academic community based-activists. I have been called a “sell out” and a “snowflake” because of my ambition in academia. It has been implied by some that my work in the real world is devalued and undermined by my educational endeavors. This is an effort to erase the validity of my activism, thereby denying my right to be seen as a complex Black woman with varied beliefs, priorities and passions. (p. 3)

Jackson (2014) asserted further,

Many believe that academia values theories and pedagogy over actual lived experiences, but the two are not mutually exclusive. Black women do not cease to be Black women simply because we walk into a classroom. We don't leave our blackness at home on our way to campus. We continue to be Black women even in predominantly white male spaces of universities and colleges. Our experiences and identities travel with us. Similarly, it is our lived experience which adds dimension and depth to the fields we pursue. (p. 5)

The author's counterarguments are legitimate, particularly when supported through historical contributions to activist movements by Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, and bell hooks just to name a few. Black women teachers have traditionally been at the

forefront of social justice battles. According to Dixson (2003), the political activism of teachers of color is most often revealed in these teachers' stances on issues such as tracking, special education, and student discipline. Dixson examined the ways contemporary African American women teachers continue their involvement in political activities and their dispositions. These dispositions are most times passed on to their students through their words and actions. Black women teachers similarly take on struggles at local, national, and international levels. Dixson (2003) further argued that the latter type of activism is often overlooked and understated as a political mission.

Though at times overlooked and understated, numerous scholars, researchers, and activists have offered thoughts, views, and documented research findings on what activism is. Recently, Ladson-Billings (2014) posted the following to her blog, *Black and Smart*:

Yes I'm old enough to have participated in some serious activism and one clear aspect of activism is sacrifice! Activists give up time, talent, and money. Activists sometimes place their lives on the line. Activism is not merely complaining or griping. It is principled action concerning some deeply held belief or values. (para. 4)

Examining the deeply held belief or values of Black women teachers in relation to fights for social justice can be used to critique and transform the current situation of schooling for students who continue to be marginalized and left behind—those who are running a race that was rigged from the very beginning.

Casey (1993) documented the political will exercised by teachers in their daily lives. In this study of women teachers informed by the principle of active social and political agency, Casey (1993) utilized life-history interviews to document the experiences and perspectives of subsets of teachers while detailing the historical backdrop in which teaching has consistently



been done by those with marginal voices. The study focused on Jewish, Catholic and African-American teachers, and illuminated the differences in caring among groups of women within a patriarchal society. The Black women teachers in this study were referred to as “organic intellectuals;” they are the organic intellectuals of their people in classrooms in neighborhoods, at home, in unions, in Urban Leagues, and in local politics (Casey, 1993, p. 153). Casey’s study documented their struggles against racism and class and gender oppression. The Black women teachers in Casey’s study discussed their identity as African Americans and the ways they viewed the maternal as a promise and commitment to the survival of Black children and Black people. Michele Foster (1996) further sought to establish definitions of a good teacher. Utilizing a method of community nomination, Foster encouraged community members to share the names of teachers they considered good teachers. Her study specifically examines teacher activism and focuses on the oral histories of racially and ethnically diverse activist teachers within the context of integration. In the long-term study with 20 teachers of African descent, these teachers reflected on their experiences and how they understood the teaching profession. In the 20 life history interviews conducted over the span of eight years between 1988 and 1996, Foster found that some of the teachers observed and experienced various types of treatment that students of African descent encountered during school desegregation. For many of the teachers within the study, they found that integration failed. One reason was that Black children lost the dedicated instruction of Black teachers due to firing or displacement of Black teachers and staff.

Identifying Black women teachers who enact activist literacies as pioneers in the struggle towards a more revolutionary society is paramount in validating contributions that are often ignored and diminished. The experience and actions of Black women teacher-activists, broadly, should be legitimated and used to inform teacher education policies and curricula. Though a

broad utility of this approach can be argued, the necessity for creating schools and spaces that serve in disrupting the status-quo of marginalization and disenfranchisement in urban settings is nonetheless evident. In ignorance to the enduring institutional impediments faced, the descendants of historically marginalized people are required increasingly to take ownership for claiming and exploiting the scant opportunities won in movements past. They are further mandated, implicitly or explicitly, to utilize these opportunities for continued individual and group advancement. As such, there must be systemic attention in preparing them to be agents of change. Kaufman and McDonald (1995) wrote:

As teacher educators, we struggle with the fact that there is tremendous gap between the reality of schooling and our visions of educational reform. As we prepare teachers, we have visions of them becoming change agents in their classrooms and in their schools, and visions that their efforts will contribute to a movement for educational change... (p. 47)

This vision of teacher education has made social justice a popular approach in teacher preparation programs and is therefore discussed in the upcoming section of this chapter.

### **Social Justice Teacher Education**

“We are political militants because we are teachers. Our job is not exhausted in the teaching of math, geography, syntax, history. Our job implies that we teach these subjects with sobriety and competence, but it also requires our involvement in and dedication to overcoming social injustice.” -Paolo Freire, *Letters to those who Dare Teach* (1998)

This section of the literature review focuses on social justice teacher education—its understanding, implementation, and challenges—and argues its necessity to teacher preparation programs. Additionally, this section provides a brief discussion of criticisms against social justice teacher education, as well as the overall connection to the proposed study. The nature of activism is inherently connected to social justice. As this study is particularly interested in the

ways Black women teachers engaging in activist literacies experience their teacher preparation programs, a review on social justice teacher education is warranted.

Existing literature on social justice teacher education is consistent in one significant way: there is a lack of coherent understanding of what social justice education actually is. Hytten and Bettez (2011) wrote, “It is often unclear in any practical terms what we mean when we invoke a vision of social justice or how this influences such issues as program development, curricula, practicum opportunities, educational philosophy, social vision, and activist work” (p. 4). However, this lack of clarity has not stymied the use of social justice education in teacher preparation programs.

The lack of clarity directly contributes to professors’ deficit capacity to stimulate the necessary shift in thinking for teacher candidates to understand that structural and historical aspects of schooling are problematic. Teacher candidates are regularly prompted to focus on social justice as just good teaching. Researchers often write about teaching that is informed by principles of social justice in terms of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000, Villegas & Lucas, 2002); culturally relevant teaching, (Ladson-Billings, 1994); teaching to change the world (Oakes & Lipton, 1999); and multicultural education (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Consequently, potential for radical change is limited. Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) suggested, “Teaching for social justice is not just good teaching, if the word ‘just’ is intended to mean ‘simply’ or ‘merely’” (p. 2). Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) continued,

But the meaning of “just” as “simply” implies not only that teaching for social justice is commonplace and routine but also that teaching, learning and schooling are neutral and value-free activities that are not and should not be connected to larger political or ideological commitments. To the contrary, teaching for social justice is defined in part by

the moral and ethical values to which it is attached and by its strong commitments to improving the life chances of all students, ensuring that all students have rich learning opportunities, and challenging aspects of the system that reinforce inequities. (p. 374)

Numerous teacher preparation programs have added a social justice component to their preparation programs. In fact, Zeichner (2006) stated, “It has come to the point that the term social justice in teacher education is so commonly used now by colleges and university teacher educators that it is difficult to find a teacher education program in the United States that does not claim to have a program that prepares teachers for social justice” (p. 328). In research conducted by Cochran-Smith, Gleeson, and Mitchell (2010) on social justice in relation to pupil learning, the researchers provided that:

Social justice has become a “catch-phrase” a perspective based on recognition of significant disparities in the distribution of educational opportunities, resources, achievement and positive outcomes between minority or low-income pupils and their white, middle-class counterparts. This is coupled with the position that teachers should be both educators and advocates, committed to the democratic ideal and to diminishing inequities in school and society by helping to redistribute educational and other opportunities (p. 3)

Brown (2004) further contended,

We have entered the moment in which teacher education and social justice are sharing a discursive space in mainstream teacher education. The increasing number of statements about the importance of social justice in the focus and scope of major teacher education journals and books, publication of articles that explicitly refer to social justice and number of teacher education programs and professional development programs that

endeavor to prepare teachers for social justice are indicative of the increasing focus on social justice in teacher education. (p. 198)

This focused attention on social justice teacher education “appears to be due to the increasing public awareness of and rallying against longstanding inequities in areas like academic achievement, school funding, faculty and staff hiring procedures, and the allocation of types of resources” (Grant & Agosto, 2008, p. 195). As critical awareness of people with vested interests in education is raised, attention is placed on teacher preparation programs and their approaches to implementing social justice teacher education. This implementation can only be effective with specified and identified purposes. While teacher preparation programs vary, there does seem to be clearly articulated goals provided as a framework for social justice teacher education.

Cochran-Smith (2004) states that preparation with a social justice focus must do many things, including the following:

- Prepare teachers to be agents of social change
- Prepare teachers to hold high expectations for all students
- Prepare teachers to build on what students bring to school
- Prepare teachers to teach skills and bridge gaps
- Prepare teachers to work with (not against individuals, families, and communities)

In addition to these fundamental concerns designed to create rich learning opportunities for all children, a commitment is made to engage students in critical thinking as well as recognize and challenge inequities and injustices that prevail in education and society. However, as Gay (2000) stressed, “Social justice teachers need to be able to do more than just ‘talk’ about social justice. Most importantly, a commitment to social justice education requires that teachers understand and interrogate their own positions and their role in sustaining the status quo, and an examination of

their roles and beliefs” (Kaur, 2012, p. 13). Milner (2008) argued that successful teachers in urban schools envision life beyond their present situations; come to know themselves culturally, linguistically, gendered, racially, economically, and socially in relation to others; speak of possibility and not destruction both inside and outside of the classroom regarding their students; care and demonstrate that care; and change their negative, deficit, counterproductive thinking in order to change their actions in the classroom with students (p. 1592).

### **Implementing Social Justice Education in Teacher Preparation**

Though many teacher preparation programs have adopted social justice as a component of their program, it is important to discuss how social justice education gets implemented. Teacher preparation programs are historically driven by improving quality teaching through ensuring that future teachers are highly qualified with specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be able to promote authentic learning for students (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Much of the focus of social justice teacher education in teacher preparation continues to be targeted towards the predominant number of White female pre-service teachers as something to add to their teacher toolbox, not necessarily a practice or pedagogy to believe in. Sleeter (2001) found that there was an “overwhelming presence of Whiteness” in the education research base. Whiteness is the “unmarked category against which difference is constructed” (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 1).

Sleeter (2001) perceived that as a whole, white pre-service teachers do not come to teaching with cross-cultural experiences or knowledge from which to draw, and they tend to apply a color-blind approach to enable them to ignore difference. Color-blindness in teacher education has been researched and discussed by numerous researchers (Bell, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2003, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Solorzano, 1997; Thompson, 2003). Bell’s study focused on

white teachers and their understanding of unwritten rules that discourage children from having meaningful relationships with those that are different from themselves. While studying these teachers, Bell asked about implicit assumptions held and found that unspoken agreements assign “narrow latitude for acceptable behavior” for people of color, as well as who defined terms of interaction and who had to fit in. (p. 240-241). Bonilla-Silva put forth a framework for understanding color blind racism through the identification of four major constructs, abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural stereotypes and minimization. He calls these constructs “set paths” for interpreting information about social issues (p. 26). These frames provide whites with a method to reinforce white supremacy. Cochran-Smith’s study with student teachers in urban elementary schools showed that student teachers needed to reconsider their assumptions about those with cultures different from their own. She argued that teacher educators need to go beyond color blindness and basket making as responses to cultural diversity. Solorzano (1997) asked questions grounded in critical race theory, such as “what forms does racism take in teacher education and how are these forms used to maintain the subordination of students of color” (p. 8)? The studies offered above provide a framework for challenging cultural deficit theories as well as the intentional maintaining of white supremacy and the privileging of Whiteness in teacher preparation programs. The traditional privileging of Whiteness in teacher education and more specifically in social justice teacher education, occasionally “peppered with some discussion of race or culture” (Cross, 2005, p. 266), in teacher preparation is insufficient. Hayes and Juarez (2010) provided narratives of their personal experiences as teacher educators to “consider why and how the racial power of Whiteness continues to derail teaching and learning for social justice in US teacher preparation programs, despite the democratic intentions, hard work and good will of many teacher educators” (p. 233). The authors argued that for social

justice to be actualized in education, the racial power of Whiteness must be interrupted (Hayes & Juarez, 2010). In the article, *Whiteness as Property*, Cheryl Harris (1993) presented that the core and value of Whiteness is its exclusivity. Ladson-Billings (2004) added that “most members of the dominant society rarely acknowledge themselves as cultural beings” (p. 107). Hayes and Juarez (2012) further provided,

In teacher education and elsewhere in U.S. society and its institutions past and present, the supremacy of Whiteness—that is to say, the systemic and historical privileging of Whites’ collective interests, accomplishments, values, beliefs, and interests—doesn’t just unfortunately or accidentally happen, and it is no mere or innocent coincidence that it continues to reappear as if out of nowhere as it appears to be natural and normal. (p. 2)

Thus, according to Hayes and Juarez (2012),

There is accordingly, no reason other than the reason of White supremacy that teachers continue to exit their teacher preparation programs not prepared to effectively teach all children. And this reason is unacceptable and must be interrupted and redirected within the daily business of teacher education in the United States. (p. 3)

The authors continue on to say, “In rare instances, teacher preparation programs include a study of Whiteness and emphasize systemic racism instead of cultural exoticism” (Hayes & Juarez, 2012, p. 4), but in far too many others, rampant hypocrisy abounds. The language of programs includes social justice and multiculturalism and diversity—while the ideology, values, and practices are assuredly reinscribing White privilege, power, and racism” (Cross, 2005, p. 266). Programs that continue to invest in liberal ideologies which regard schooling and social mobility in their curriculum as the best approaches are problematic, while the persistent educational disparity between dominant and minority groups work further alienate people of color in



schooling and learning. Social justice education then runs the risk of being appropriated and weakened at the detriment of candidates in both traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs, as well as students in P-12 schools in the nation.

### **Limitations of Teacher Preparation Programs**

Many teacher educators teaching at universities throughout the United States received their professional credentials prior to the social justice education push and have limited or no experience with social justice pedagogy; therefore, they lack commitment to doing what is necessary to reconceptualize and rethink programs, curriculum, and practices. In order to become a teacher for social justice, teachers need to understand who they are and their views on the sources of inequities and privileges (Darling-Hammond, 2005). As previously mentioned, Cochran-Smith, Villegas, Adams, and Bell have all conducted extensive research examining the implementation and understanding of social justice education in teacher preparation. One of the issues in implementing social justice teacher education lies with the faculty. Bell, Washington, Weinstein, and Love (1997) depict the dynamic thusly: “One problem is that most college faculty who are attempting to teach for and about social justice, however have not had professional development that specifically prepares them to do so” (p. 299). The authors go on to explain, “For most faculty, our professional training has not prepared us to address emotionally and socially charged issues in the classroom. Social justice education is not simply new content but often a radical change in process as well” (Bell et al, 1997, p. 299). However, there is a more critical argument that should be presented. With the majority of teacher educators and teacher candidates existing as part of the dominant culture, what impetus is there for teacher educators to recognize, or examine their own privilege? Additionally, what occurs in classrooms where

students resist the teachings of teacher educators committed to teaching about social inequality and injustice?

Affecting change in classrooms is significantly important—however, what happens beyond the classroom doors? Constraining social justice education in a way that thinks only of change in classrooms is restrictive and works against developing what Maxine Greene refers to as “wide-awakeness.” Greene describes wide-awakeness as, “a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in as an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements.” Cochran-Smith (2006), too, acknowledges this limitation and seeks something greater: “a notion of teaching practice that extends beyond what teachers do within the boundaries of their classroom walls to include how they understand and theorize what they do as well as how they take on roles as members of communities, constructors of curricula, and school leaders” (p. 27). Cochran-Smith (2003) furthers this contention while arguing for a major overhauling of university-based teacher education programs. She presents a strong case for a new teacher education, one that works both to challenge historical ideological underpinnings of traditional programs and to situate knowledge about culture and racism at the forefront of the teacher education curriculum. Included in this re-imagining of teacher education is teaching for social justice as an imperative and an outcome of learning to teach, as well as understanding the importance of valuing the cultural knowledge of local communities. A new teacher education program might produce progressive educators, as Applebaum (2003) describes, as profoundly aware of mechanisms by which power has functioned historically to silence and marginalize certain social groups through the schooling process commit themselves to seek to disrupt and problematize such social relations in the classrooms and their schools. One approach to this new teacher preparation program is presented by Zeichner. Zeichner (2010) examined work going on in multiple sites

across the country in hybrid spaces or a third space to link campus courses and field experiences in university-based teacher education. He asserted that there must be a change in academic knowledge viewed as the authoritative source of knowledge to one that is non-hierarchical between academic, practitioner, and community engagement. He argued that this new framing for teacher education will result in expanded learning opportunities for teacher candidates that will better prepare them to enact complex teaching practices. Citing Guitierrez (2008) who argued that a third space is a “transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened (p. 152). Zeichner (2010) maintained that “the solution to the disconnect between campus and schools in teacher education and continuing professional development for P-12 educators” is in these hybrid spaces (p. 92). The hybrid spaces “encourage a more egalitarian status for their participants than conventional school-university partnerships” (Zeichner, 2010, p. 92). Zeichner described boundary crossings that work to bring academic and practitioner knowledge together. One of these boundary crossings is to incorporate knowledge from communities into preservice teacher education. Traditionally, teacher preparation programs focused on service learning in which teacher candidates provide a service to a community, but this framing uses community expertise to inform teacher candidates on how to be successful. This contrasts with the deficit framing of communities that is often present in teacher preparation programs.

According to Ayers (1998), “Teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles” (p. 34). Ayers thus suggests that teachers can change the context they reside in. Since the early 1990s, Giroux (1992) argued for a pedagogy that would help teachers gain the capacity to teach for social justice:

Learning to teach that is premised on a stance for social justice recognizes the importance of social justice pedagogy. This social justice pedagogy refers to a deliberate attempt to construct authentic conditions through which educators and students can think critically about what stands as knowledge, how knowledge is produced, and how knowledge is transformed by a particular relationship between the self, others, and the larger world. (p. 99)

Hunt (1998) added that, “Teaching for Social Justice is at the core of democratic education. It serves as a reminder, not only of the inequities and of biases that continue to wear away at the foundation of democratic principles.” Nieto (2000) contributed further, “Social justice education is a perspective that involves looking critically at why and how schools are unjust for some students through analyzing school practices and policies, the curriculum, instructional materials and strategies, as well its tracking practices” (p. 184).

Educators such as Kohl (2001) argued that to create schools that are socially just, one must advocate for moral responsibility. Educational experts and researchers whose work, good and just teaching (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), teaching to change the world (Oakes & Lipton, 1999), and teaching for diversity (Zeichner, 1993) are largely informed by social justice principles and have also contributed to the conversation on social justice education. However, a concise and clear definition of social justice education remains unclear and by extension, its role in teacher preparation programs also lacks definition.

This study embraces social justice, defined generally, as promoting a just society by challenging injustice and valuing diversity. Social justice is not—as it is often and wrongfully equated with—the notion of equality or equal opportunity in society. However, social justice

education is focused and more concerned with realities of equity. As such, this study seeks to promote teaching for social justice as a philosophy in education that attempts to mitigate the boundaries of general curriculum such as race, class, ability, language, appearance, sexuality, etc. In 1997, Bell defined equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society that is equitable, in which all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.

The thrust of this study and the findings to be presented support the characterization of teaching and teacher education for social justice as a moral and political undertaking. Theoharis (2004) provides a practical definition of social justice in relation to school leaders as,

...grounded in realities of public school work where these administrators and teachers advocate, lead and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing conditions in the United States. (p. 333)

Teacher education, according to Cochran-Smith (2004), is both a learning problem and a political problem aimed at social justice. In other words, policies regarding teacher preparation cannot be disconnected from existing systems of power and privilege. In attempting to clarify what learning to teach for social justice looks like, Cochran-Smith (2004) utilized the term “principles of pedagogy” to emphasize that teaching practice is linked with knowledge and interpretive frameworks and a matter of “praxis” (the shaping of theory and practice).

### **Arguments Against Social Justice Teacher Education**

Arguments against social justice education in teacher preparation are often contextualized in false dichotomies between social justice and knowledge or learning (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). In this section of the review, I will present three of the main arguments employed in

efforts to discredit social justice as a viable approach to preparing prospective teachers. I will then summarize why social justice education is pertinent to this research study.

Three arguments are consistently made against teacher preparation foregrounded with social justice:

- Critics of the phrase view the term as negative and that it connotes a dangerous if unspecified social and political ideological agenda of indoctrination (Wise, 2006).
- Critics reject the idea because it focuses on what they view as progressive and political goals at the expense of traditional academic learning goals (Crowe, 2008; Will, 2006).
- Few programs that center social justice education in their missions provide viable ways to measure students' learning (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Weideman, 2002).

Prior to its phrase removal in 2006 by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), "social justice" as a disposition had been present in educational discourse. Unfortunately, these two words fell victim to "obscure bureaucratic action" (Heybach, 2009) and became a threat to policymakers. NCATE attempts to establish high teacher quality through accrediting schools of education that prepare teachers for state licensure. Institutions' failure to become NCATE accredited may lead to adverse consequences for teachers who exit its program. Consequently, teacher preparation programs are largely influenced by NCATE. This influence represents a certain type of power that is not easily or desirably relinquished. From her research, Heybach (2009) asserted that NCATE "would face strong opposition to this policy issue, and potentially could lose its authority to act as the national accreditation agency of teacher education programs if this dangerous phrase-*social justice*-was not abandoned" (p. 25). However, Heybach (2009) argued,

Without social justice oriented forms of discourse consider what is omitted, consider what potential educative conversations will fail to materialize for future teachers. If the most democratic movements in U.S. history embodied values of social justice, such as the abolitionist movement, suffragette movement, and the civil rights movement, then it follows that American democracy is indebted to “radical social agendas” for keeping the fragile project alive. To deny this element of the national tradition as somehow outside the knowledge base that teacher candidates should learn is to alienate them from what is most democratic in United States history. (p. 241)

Heybach’s research continues on to highlight the abrupt manner in which the term social justice, due to its critics, was removed with little pushback from anyone in educator circles. Heybach (2009) utilized a response by Dan Putin to highlight this feeling of isolation:

There was literally no one sitting behind Arthur Wise willing and able to defend the other side to the committee, namely there was no one who would speak to the ancient origins of, societal consensus around, and empirical evidence for social justice as a cause for all individuals (and especially for future teachers) in a democratic and pluralistic society. (p. 238)

Erasure of the words *social justice* replaced by more politically comfortable or less charged terms, such as *diversity* or even *tolerance*, is recognition by some teacher educators “that students cannot be reduced to essentialist or binary categories, might challenge how social justice is being defined and by whom, as social justice and diversity are not the same. In this case, using diversity in lieu of social justice can potentially downplay the emphasis on pre-service teacher dispositions that have the potential to remedy educational disparities among specific populations of students. This lack of naming particular student identities, such as those whose race, gender

identity or expression, national origin, or weight (size or height) are nonconforming, makes preservice teachers, who by their nature are new to the profession, vulnerable to marginalizing the potential cultural and social capital of the students they are teaching. The final section of this literature review examines the literature related to the experiences of Black women preservice teacher candidates in teacher preparation programs at PWIs.

### **Black Women Pre-Service Teachers**

This literature review would be incomplete without inclusion of the literature on Black women preservice teachers. Existing research in the area of Black preservice teachers focused on their experiences within their teacher preparation programs. While there have been studies specifically on Black women preservice teachers, much of the research encompasses Black women preservice teachers within the umbrella of teachers of color. Teachers of color, according to Jackson (2015), are teacher candidates who self-identify as African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, Native American/American Indian, Asian American, and bi/multiracial.

Much of the work related to examining the experiences of Black women in higher education focused primarily on the challenges and obstacles faced by many of these women, particularly those at PWIs (Butner, Burley, & Marbley, 2000; Zamani, 2003). The findings point to difficulties in resistance from White students and faculty when addressing issues related to race, culture, and gender (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). Findings also revealed that although more Black women are enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs than those decades ago, their presence lags behind their white counterparts (Wilson, 2002). Montecinos (2004) noted that students of color are often positioned as objects but ignored as participants in multicultural teacher education research. “(E)xcluding, silencing and ignoring the presence of preservice teachers of Color, multicultural teacher education is, paradoxically, securing the norm



of Whiteness in teacher preparation and undermining the principles of multicultural education” (Montecinos, p. 168). Literature along this vein has been dominated by research on developing the awareness, insights, and skills for effective teaching. However, for preservice students of color in “predominantly White programs, the overwhelming presence of whiteness can be silencing” (Sleeter, 2001, p. 101). The overwhelming presence of whiteness have caused teacher educators to rethink the ways in which preservice teachers of color are taught. Sleeter (2001) shared,

Because of this overwhelming presence, many teacher educators have chosen to develop alternative teacher education programs for prospective teachers of color or for those who bring experiences and attributes that good urban teachers share. These alternative programs may develop a range of insights that do not emerge when focusing mainly on how to prepare traditional White students. For example, alternative programs value what students of color (who are often recruited from the ranks of paraprofessionals) bring, making their assets part of the selection process, and build on what they already know, often in highly field based settings. (p. 102)

Despite the fact that the enrollment of students of color in institutions of higher education has increased by 48% over the last ten years (Harvey, 2002), the racial/ ethnic composition of teacher preparation programs has changed relatively little. Although teacher preparation programs have had a larger pool of students of color from which to recruit, they have not been successful in attracting more students of color into the profession through traditional preservice pathways (Irrizary, 2001). This is probably because “what is currently understood about the preparation of teachers for diversity is based on the needs and concerns of White preservice teachers, this perspective reinscribes the notion that a particular type of teacher identity leads the

agenda for multicultural teacher education (2015, p. 8). The scholarship on preservice teachers of color is brimming with calls specifically focused on recruiting and retaining teacher of color. This is largely due to research that advances the view that the diverse K-12 student population needs to see and interact with teachers that come from similar backgrounds (Brown, 2014; King, 1993).

The lack of teachers of color is a direct reflection to the lack of teachers of color in teacher preparation programs. Public schools have increasing numbers of teachers who are white and female, while the numbers of African American teachers decrease (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Delpit (1995) argued that African American teachers, as a result of their cultural and educational experiences, who decide to go into teaching face classroom environments that devalue them. Delpit highlighted teacher education programs and environments as significant reasons for African Americans and other minority students to depart from the profession.

Though research focused a great deal on the experiences of and the recruitment and retaining of teachers of color, some literature pointed to the benefits of diversifying teacher preparation programs. For example, literature on preservice teachers of color points to the experiential knowledge that these particular preservice teachers bring to their respective programs. Brown (2014) noted,

Their desire to teach is not simply a personal choice, but one that is informed by larger sociocultural factors associated with societal conditions and shared community/familial knowledge about the value of teaching. This commitment, along with the notable disparity between the number of White teacher and those of color in K-12 schools, the ongoing opportunity gap that exists between White students and students of color in K-12 schools and the assumption that teachers of color can serve as effective role models for

K-12 students of color, supports the argument that more teachers of color are needed.

This translates into the popular rhetoric found in many teacher education programs around the need to recruit more teacher candidates of color. (p. 339)

However, these calls to recruit teacher candidates of color is not enough if teacher preparation programs do not address the normative culture that continues to exist in teacher preparation.

Recruiting teachers of color, yet failing to prepare them to promote educational equity, does little to alter a system of education characterized by significant disparities in opportunity and achievement. Solely focusing on the representation of teachers of color in university or K-12 classrooms is tokenistic and not transformative. Representation, while important, is not enough (Irrizary, 2001, p. 93). As Villegas and Irvine (2010) contended, “we need to learn more about how best to prepare teacher candidates of color to use their cultural expertise to support student learning” (p. 188).

Other studies, such as Agee (1998, 2004), Burant (1999), and Tellez (1999) examined how preservice teachers of color experience learning in overwhelmingly white programs. Agee (2004) highlighted that teachers of color often felt that their teacher preparation programs failed to prepare them do this work (i.e., enacting critical multicultural teaching) effectively with white students and diverse students. Burant’s (1999) study examined the ways in which one Latina woman experienced losing her voice after her white classmates expressed lack of interest in the thoughts she shared in the classroom. Berry (2005) and Haddix (2015) provided additional understanding of the experiences of Black women in teacher education. Berry (2005) provided a glimpse into the teaching and learning experiences of one African American female teacher educator and the pedagogy used to enhance the learning experiences of her African American pre-service teachers. Utilizing field notes, journaling and student memoirs, Berry’s critical

autoethnography theoretically framed by critical race feminism advanced notions for improvement for teacher preparation. Haddix (2015) used interviews to highlight tensions between participants' "racial and linguistic understandings of what it meant to become, represent, and interact as teachers as a result of our participation in a mainstream teacher education context" (p. 2). Shealey, Watson, and Qian (2011) examined the research on Black women in teacher education and the implications of this research to transform higher education and P-12 settings. Through identifying and examining 25 previous studies exploring Black women in teacher education, four themes emerged that capture the nature of the work in this area. The themes were teaching for transformation, pedagogical contributions of Black teachers, intersections of race, culture, and gender and navigating the academy. Navigating the academy is particularly significant as it is these experiences within teacher preparation programs that determine and impact Black women pre-service teachers' ability to complete their programs and consequently join the teaching force. Policy makers have aimed criticisms at teacher preparation programs with this particular issue at its core.

Criticism from both inside and outside of teacher preparation programs suggested that traditional pre-service teacher education has not done a sufficient job preparing teachers to teach diverse populations (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). Research also examined the experiences of Black women preservice teachers in traditional programs that rely on culturally responsive pedagogy. A significant portion of the findings point to students experiencing marginalization, tokenism, and isolation. The experiences of Black women preservice teachers in teacher preparation programs is vital in not only the diversifying of teacher preparation programs, but in diversifying the predominantly white female teaching force and addressing the disappearance crisis of Black educators. Other researchers who take Whiteness as

property into account noted that teachers of color get enclosed in a frame that defines them as necessary role models for K-12 students of color, but not as potentially effective pedagogues for all students (Brown, 2014). Kelly (2007) described this tokenism as racial tokenism that “entrap[s] these teachers to one specific role and helps to mask the actual ways that they might make a pedagogic difference for both K-12 students of color, as well for their White counterparts” (p. 233).

Summarily, some of the key themes that shape the scholarship on teachers of color and teacher preparation in the US include the call to recruit and retain more preservice teachers of color in teacher preparation programs, the perspectives and voices of preservice teachers of color about teaching and the experiences teacher candidates of color encounter in teacher preparation programs (Brown, 2014, p. 327).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Drawing on black feminist thought, intersectionality, and critical race theory (CRT), this study aims to underscore the importance of magnifying the voices of practicing Black women teachers and to acknowledge their perspectives and experiences as legitimate knowledges and as agents of knowledge (Collins, 1990). Black feminist thought, CRT, and intersectionality—when brought together—require researchers to consider specific challenges Black women face in America and the importance of their stories being told in their own words (Sealy-Ruiz, 2013).

#### **Black Feminist Thought**

The first theoretical orientation that shapes this study is that of Black feminism or Black feminist thought. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins (2000) wrote,

I knew that when an individual Black woman's consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life undergoes change, she can become empowered. Such consciousness may stimulate her to embark on a path of personal freedom, even if it exists primarily in her own mind. If she is lucky enough to meet others who are undergoing similar journeys, she and they can change the world around them. (p. x)

Stimulating Black women's consciousness can lead to self-reflection, self-actualization, and personal freedom as it also produces a collective consciousness that empowers and acts as a form of resistance. Collins (1990) wrote,

Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigm shift that rejects additive approaches to oppression. Instead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class and religion, Black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of an overarching structure of domination. (p. 222)

This insight is important as it requires understanding of the ways in which Black women teachers make sense of their surroundings and the ways they experience learning to become teachers while in predominantly white spaces. Black feminist thought advances the importance of viewing the experiences of Black women as a way of understanding how they come to know and perform their role as teacher activists. In viewing paradigms of race, class, gender and other identifiers as interlocking systems of oppression, it is possible to be more expansive on how these systems interconnect and have an impact on the teachers in this study.

It is imperative to provide some historical perspective on the importance of Black feminism and its emergence as an ideology to further articulate the necessity in developing such a framework. Black feminism arose directly in response to the Black liberation movement (itself

an out-growth of the civil rights movement), and the women's movement taking place in the United States and the West. Cherise Charleswell (2014) summarized the tensions Black feminists faced in the shadows of the two movements:

In short, Black women were being marginalized and openly discriminated against in both movements, and they were finding it difficult or impossible to build solidarity with those who were also acting as their oppressors. All too often, "black" was equated with black men and "woman" was equated with white women; and the end result of this was that black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were (and many would rightfully argue continues) to be ignored. (para. 1)

Prior to Charleswell's summary, both historical and contemporary women had articulated their recognition of the distinctive context for black womanhood (King, 1988) and double jeopardy (Beale, 1970, p. 112). Anna Julia Cooper (1892) often spoke and wrote about the double enslavement of Black women being "confronted by both a woman question and a race problem" (p. #). Mary Church Terrell (1904) wrote, "Not only are colored women ... handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women" (as cited in Gottheimer, 2004, p.432 ).

Consequently, Black feminism developed out of a need to fill a void that was missing in mainstream or second wave feminism, which primarily focused on gender oppression with little regard for race and class (Beal, 1995; hooks, 1984). Identifying one important limitation of the feminist movement, bell hooks (2000), argued that feminism's goal of seeking credibility and acceptance on already existing ground—rather than demanding the lasting and more fundamental transformation of society—had shortchanged the movement. This assertion highlighted the

narrow scope and view of feminism that also served as a catalyst for the conceptualization of Black feminist thought.

In response to marginalization in mainstream feminism, Black women positioned themselves by engaging and producing work and scholarship that spoke directly to Black women's experiences of systemic, interlocking oppressions (Robinson, 2013). Collins (2000) describes Black feminist epistemology as a) lived experience as a criterion of meaning, b) the use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims, c) the ethics of caring, and d) the ethics of personal accountability. Collins (2000) further describes Black feminist theory as a "process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (p. 31). Black Feminist Thought framed many studies related to Black women educators and their activism. *Hope and Despair: Southern Black Women Educators Across Pre- and Post- Civil Rights Cohorts Theorize About Their Activism* by Loder-Jackson (2012) described divergent and convergent social and historical contexts of ten Black women educators in Birmingham, Alabama. The participants in the study theorized that teaching and leading are activist practices in their own right.

According to Gordon (1995), "the nineteenth century has revealed itself as an interesting transformative movement in the history of African Americans, during which many African American women challenged dominant social structures and narratives and created institutions to serve the African American community" (p. 63). Black feminist scholars continue to work towards illuminating the myriad ways that oppression acts on Black women and the ways they continuously resist that oppression. Some of these scholars have demonstrated the effectiveness of utilizing Black feminism as a tool to analyze Black women as well as Black women teachers'



pedagogy. King (1998) points to the persistence of the struggle on one hand but also the tireless determination that Black women reveal:

The dual and systematic discriminations of racism and sexism remain pervasive, and, for many, class inequality compounds those oppressions. Yet, for as long as Black women have known our numerous discriminations, we have also resisted those oppressions. Our day-to-day survival as well as our political actions have demonstrated the tenacity of our struggle against subordination. (p. 43)

The dual systems of oppression highlighted in the quote above can be better understood through intersectionality.

### **Intersectionality**

In order to truly understand the ways in which identity markers interact with one another, we should examine the important concept of intersectionality in significant depth. Though the concept of intersectionality in Black feminism has been around for decades, it was not until 1989 when American professor, lawyer, and scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw ascribed it a name. Crenshaw initially used the framework of intersectionality in legal scholarship aimed at providing the language necessary to negotiate the tensions between multiple identity markers and for understanding the multiple forces shaping social inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989). Later, Crenshaw (1991) used intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences and that the intersection of racism and sexism factor into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.

Intersectionality evolved beyond simply the intersection of race and gender as intersectional analysis expanded and allowed us to map the ways that race intersects with ability,

nationality, language, and other key categories of social existence and inequality (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality helps us to unpack how these categories shape both individual experience and the social world at large. Intersectionality is critical for thinking about how current policies, practices, and discourses can be changed and improved. While intersectionality was praised as “the most important theoretical contribution of women’s and gender studies to date” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771), Crenshaw cautioned that intersectionality was not some “new, totalizing theory of identity” but rather that the intersections of race and gender highlight the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed and what Matsuda (1991) terms “asking the other question”

Asking the other question is difficult at the times when everyone else is looking in one direction; however, coming from multiple places of oppression compels us to do just that. Matsuda wrote, “When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’” (p. 64-65). Multiple identities provide multiple opportunities as well as challenges to engage effectively in social justice issues.

Currently, intersectionality is in danger of being depoliticized. Bilge (2013) describes this systemic depoliticizing as acting to neutralize the critical potential of intersectionality for social justice change (p. 405). Utilizing anecdotes to illustrate the absence of intersectional political awareness in movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the slut walk movement, Bilge (2013) pointed to the methods in which the absence of intersectionality in these movements have silenced, excluded, or misrepresented subordinated groups (p. 406). Bilge (2011) coined the term “ornamental intersectionality” to further explain the opportunistic uses of intersectionality (p. 3).

She argues that ornamental intersectionality is a “superficial deployment of intersectionality that undermines intersectionality’s credibility and potentials for addressing interlocking power structures and developing an ethics of non-oppressive coalition-building and claims-building” (Bilge, 2013, p. 408). In addition to the depoliticizing of intersectionality through these limited uses, intersectionality has also been criticized for lacking empirical grounding. Crenshaw (2011), aware of critics that questioned the significance of intersectionality and its actual usefulness, responded thusly:

Indeed, the responses they anticipate -some definitive articulation of intersectionality’s grand objectives, mechanisms, and trajectories- are quite foreign to my own sensibilities about intersectionality. My own take on how to know intersectionality has been to do intersectionality; to assess what intersectionality can produce is to canvas what scholars, activists and policymakers have done under its rubric. Thus, the invitation to measure and evaluate intersectionality as theory in the abstract has not drawn my engagement over the years...I’ve consistently learned more from what scholars have done with intersectionality than from what others have speculated about its appeal. (p. 222)

Purposefully situating intersectionality as a core component of a study aimed at radical transformation for our nation’s teacher preparation programs and consequently classroom spaces would ensure that the initial goals of providing the language and tools necessary to generate counter-hegemonic and transformative knowledge production and as a tool for social justice continues. Intentionally highlighting intersectionality in this study would, therefore, ensure that my work in fact does something. The theorizing that I have engaged in throughout this study but particularly in presenting A Black feminist-oriented teacher preparation program tries to advance a critically conscious teaching force grounded in and by the work of Black feminist scholars and

Black women teachers. Causing us all to recall that “intersectionality’s intersectional origins” (Luft & Ward, 2009, p. 19) were born from tensions between feminism and women of color is imperative moving forward in scholarship and research. Collins (2000) argued that US Black women’s experiences, as well as those of women of African descent transnationally, have been “routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge” (p. 252). It is imperative to demonstrate support of Black women’s knowledge and to counteract practices of distortion and exclusion by affirming that the experiences of women of color—Black women teachers in our case—can be used to generate knowledge and theory.

Recentring race in scholarship and research is vital directly because of feminism’s attempted cooption of intersectionality. Bilge calls attention to and demonstrates concern regarding this when she asserts, “Reframing intersectionality as a creation of ‘feminism,’ an outcome of feminism’s internal *debates*, effectively erases a landmark oppositionality from which intersectionality emerged: feminists of color confronting racism within feminism” (p. 420). Recentring race in this particular scholarship is actualized by engaging in labeling and discussing the various identity markers that interact with one another and shape the women in this study. Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women’s emerging power as agents of knowledge. According to Collins (2009), one distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge, specifically new knowledge gained from historically marginalized voices—such as Black women teachers—is important for both dimensions of change.

The perspectives of Black women teachers and their understanding of their roles as teachers, change agents, and activists have historically been absent from the literature pertaining

to education reform, equity, inclusion, and social justice. Though their perspectives are noticeably absent from educational research, there does exist a historical tradition of Black women activists, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisolm, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Audre Lorde, who engaged in transformative work that was intentionally and purposefully committed to issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion. It is this core understanding that becomes the essential crux of this proposed research study.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Utilizing CRT along with Black feminist thought and intersectionality in this current research study provides the theoretical and methodological frame for answering questions related to Black women teachers' teacher preparation for social justice. CRT and its methods emphasize the necessity of challenging dominant discourses as being essential to social justice. This research study aims to not only answer questions and analyze questions, but to also provide a space for Black women teachers to share their experiences and demonstrate their understanding of what it means to be transformative educators towards social change.

CRT, similar to intersectionality, is derived from law and legal studies as a movement initiated by scholars across the country. Informed by two previous movements, critical legal studies and radical feminism, CRT has a firm grounding in analyzing power structures and the construction of social roles. Adriene Wing (2003) wrote of CRT's foundational beginning, "CRT emerged as a self-conscious entity in 1989, although the intellectual underpinnings of CRT can be found in the work of then Harvard University law professor, Derrick Bell" (p. 4). CRT writings in the legal field cover various topics including affirmative action, hate speech, voting rights, racial profiling, immigration law and challenge the ability of conventional legal strategies to deliver social and economic justice (Wing, 2003).

Scholars including Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Charles Lawrence, Lani Guinier, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams, and Kimberle Crenshaw began to challenge the fact that the hard-won gains of the civil rights movement were being stalled and rapidly eroded due to a pervasive liberal ideology that was slow and protracted in the law (Kumasi, 2011). CRT then was initially focused on critiquing the sluggish pace of racial reform resulting from the 1960s Civil Rights legislation.

Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman wrote some of the earliest works on CRT. They were both critical of the traditional and liberal approach to civil rights, which maintained a color-blind approach to justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT (a) recognizes that racism is prevalent in American society; (b) CRT challenges dominant ideology by critiquing liberal principles of race-neutrality and colorblindness; (c) CRT is committed not only to discussing race in relationship to society but also social justice and the eradication of all forms of oppression; (d) CRT accepts experiential knowledge through the use of storytelling, narratives, and counter-narratives (Bell, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lopez, 2003; Lynn & Parker, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001); and (e) CRT positions the experiences of people of color as central and emphasizes the experiential knowledge of people of color as factual, authentic, and integral in analyzing and understanding inequality based on race.

CRT's overall commitment to social justice and to ensuring voices of the marginalized is particularly important to work in the qualitative field of research. Due to CRT's ability to unmask and represent long-silenced voices, an apparent and obvious connection can be made between the two. CRT evolved through the legitimating of narrative and storytelling (Delgado, 1989), and centering of experiences. Matsuda (1987) argued that stories were useful because

experiences were real. Only through listening can the conviction of seeing the world one way be challenged and acquire the ability to see the world through others' eyes (Delgado, 1989).

**Critical race theory in education.** Though CRT emerged as a critique in the legal field, CRT has since evolved into an effective and beneficial device for analyzing and addressing inequities in various fields, including education. Kumasi (2011) wrote,

CRT has helped build a community among scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds who are dedicated to exposing and transforming racial injustice anywhere it is manifested. CRT has thus provided a new language and a new paradigm in which to address the issues and challenges facing “outsider” groups who experience racism in their daily lives. (p. 201)

Scholars used five central themes to inform their perspectives, insights, and methodologies. The five themes that inform critical race theorists' work in education, including their research methods, perspectives, and pedagogy are provided below. For additional reading on CRT and the five elements that comprise the framework advanced by researchers (see Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000, 2001; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). In much of the literature providing the framework, the themes identified by Solorzano (1997) are presented in this order.

- **The Intercentricity of Race and Racism:** The premise that race and racism are pervasive and permanent (Bell, 1987) grounds CRT and centralizes race and racism, while focusing on the connections of racism with other forms of oppression.
- **The Challenge to Dominant Ideology:** CRT in education challenges the dominant ideology of claims such as meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity that is common and present in educational spaces and instead asserts that

racism is a permanent component of American life. Critical race theorists argue that these antiquated claims act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in US society (Solórzano, 1997).

- **The Commitment to Social Justice:** CRT in education challenges us to envision social justice as the struggle to eliminate racism and other forms of subordination while empowering groups that have been subordinated (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). CRT seeks to advance such a social justice agenda.
- **The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge:** CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education (Carrasco, 1996; Delgado Bernal, 2002) CRT in education views this knowledge as a strength and draws explicitly on the lived experiences of students of color (Bell, 1987; Carrasco, 1996; Delgado, 1989).
- **The Interdisciplinary Perspective:** CRT in education challenges traditional, mainstream analyses by analyzing racism and other forms of subordination in education in historical and interdisciplinary terms (Delgado, 1984, 1992; Garcia, 1995; Olivas, 1990).

As previously mentioned, CRT in education cannot be traced back to one single scholar in particular but should be viewed as a movement. This movement, according to Matsuda (1996), was historical and a “derivative of the history and intellectual traditions of people of color” (p. 55). Historically and often not cited as contributors to this movement are people such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and W. E. B. DuBois, who drew attention to and theorized about the difficulty of life for African Americans relative to educational issues and the stagnating effects on social mobility. W. E. B. DuBois was one of the first to research and write about race



and racism. His writings on race are relevant with regard to contemporary race and racism criticism, as they contributed significantly to the discursive arena of CRT. Due to DuBois' view that African American education should be founded on a knowledge of the history of their people in Africa and in the United states, as well as maintaining that the entire cultural history of Africans in the world, should be taken into consideration when seeking to grasp and grapple with the present conditions it is not difficult to recognize the impact of his work on CRT.

Additionally, in 1933 Carter G. Woodson originally published *The Mis-education of the Negro*, which has been republished many times and is considered as one of the most important writings on education—in which he evaluated and critiqued the American public school system and highlighted the system's failure to provide the type of education necessary to empower African American socially, politically, or economically. More contemporary scholars, Ladson-Billings & Tate, wrote one of the earlier pieces about CRT in relation to education in 1995. This work laid the foundation for CRT in education as it sought to use the theory as an analytical tool for understanding inequities in schools and schooling experiences. Due to its importance and contribution to the field of education, a concise yet illuminating origin and summary of the paper is offered here.

Toward a *Critical Race Theory of Education* originated like many other works do as conversations about research goals and agendas. It was soon apparent to both scholars that they had more in common than growing up in Northern cities and being educated in urban public schools (Ladson-Billings, 2011). There was a desire by both scholars to challenge the existing research in education that framed Black and Latino students as culturally deficient and culturally disadvantaged. They wanted to foreground race and racism as the central and stable variable in the many disparities in educational achievement, experiences, and outcomes. The paper was then

presented as an “advanced paper session” which required readers to read it beforehand, but according to Ladson-Billings (2011), no one asked for a copy of the paper. Nonetheless, in a standing room only crowd, Ladson-Billings and Tate presented the above titled paper, which has now become one of the most cited pieces referencing CRT and education. CRT in education has extended and grown as new generation of scholars who were taught by Ladson-Billings and Tate began to write their own works utilizing CRT. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) interrogated the usefulness of multicultural education as a means of obtaining justice for students of color; they argued that “the multicultural paradigm is mired in liberal ideology that offers no radical change in the current order” (p. 62). However, the critique pointed at multiculturalism should not be viewed as dismissive, but rather as a call to action.

Additional scholars have utilized CRT in various ways to address racial microaggressions and campus racial climate (Solórzano, 1998), as well as explore connections between research and theories of African Americans (Lynn, 2002). Multiple efforts have been made to do so, including Solórzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) utilization of CRT to examine student resistance through storytelling, as well as Solorzano, Villalpando and Oseguera’s (2005) utilization of CRT as a framework to analyze educational inequalities and the racialized barriers for Latino(a) college students. Researcher and educator Teranishi (2002) employed CRT to study the racial climate for Asian Pacific Americans and its impact on high school students’ postsecondary educational aspirations. The use of CRT in the study provided opportunity to deconstruct the conventional idea of Asian Americans by revealing the divergent social and educational circumstances of Chinese and Filipino students’ experiences. These scholars and others advanced the uses of CRT in education during the period from 1993-2007 as they used CRT to illustrate the role of race and racism in education, particularly higher education.

As CRT became more pivotal, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that race and racism were still not viewed as a determinant factor in both social and school inequities. They argued that the “savage inequalities which social activist and education critic Kozol (1991) reported about were a “logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized” (p. 47). Arguing that race continued to be untheorized, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1005) believed that the “intellectual salience of this theorizing” had not been “systematically employed in the analysis of educational inequity” (p. 50). Consequently, CRT became more of a way to systemically reveal the ways race and racism continue to play a pivotal role in educational outcomes. Dixson and Rousseau (2006) wrote that CRT assisted scholars in providing a deeper analysis of the historical and contemporary conditions that have created socioeconomic disparities. CRT, as an intellectual practice, legitimated a critical study of race and education (Leonardo, 2012) and became a discourse of liberation (Parker & Lynn, 2002). The critical race scholar can use a variety of literary within the counter-story to build credibility, while also encouraging the reader to imagine the world differently and consider alternatives to the master narrative (Espino, 2012). A scholar’s decision to use CRT as a framework denotes their understanding that racism is a part of American society and therefore intertwined with social mobility. Social mobility and the role of education has been one area where CRT has been particularly useful in identifying the growing divide in educational opportunities and outcomes for students. CRT disrupts the notion that it is possible to start out poor and with hard work grow prosperous. Using CRT as a lens allows us to examine the circumstances that people were born into as contributing factors to their limited mobility. CRT argues that race is centered and never not in play (Leonardo, 2012). Therefore, all social

problems emanate from a center. From its center, CRT informed many other disciplines and areas of research.

CRT's first element, commitment to social justice, is integral for communities of color and perhaps aligns itself most with the overall goal of CRT. To be sure, CRT is intentionally committed to social justice. As an educator particularly committed to social justice, I was enlightened to see the many and varying ways social justice was defined, sometimes completely in contrast to my own understanding. This contradiction is summarily stated: There are groups promoting educational reform in order to perpetuate status quo norms of power and privilege acting in the name of social justice. Yet, and at the same time, there are other groups who wish to dismantle such privilege under the auspices of social justice (Boyes et al., 2009). Due to the integral way that social justice is entwined with CRT, it is important to articulate its meaning. Social justice in connection with CRT seeks to "eradicate injustice based on underserved, systemic inequalities" (Chapman, 2007).

One of CRT's strengths is in the users of the analytical framework. There is a deep commitment to sharing the stories of the oppressed and marginalized, exposing the mechanics of racial dominance while not minimizing how people resist in their everyday lives (Cook, 2013). Perhaps it is this commitment that has made it possible for newer scholars to utilize CRT and at the same time expand its uses. Through a variety of frameworks, scholars used CRT as a sound foundation on which to advance their work and ideas.

One framework that derived from CRT is critical race quantitative intersectionality (CRQI). This framework brings CRT to quantitative research while remaining focused to the tenets of critical race theory. Covarrubias and Velez (2013) argued that critical race quantitative intersectionality has the potential to provide greater impact in the areas of research, policy, and

practice, as it transforms the manner in which the numbers are derived and framed while aligning the methodological expectations that policymakers are looking for.

Critically compassionate intellectualism (CCI) is a second model that is grounded in critical race theory. Upon its implementation by teacher and scholar Augustine Romero, CCI sought to ensure an equitable and excellent educational experience for Latina/o students. Just as CRT seeks to alter the current landscape, so too does CCI. Teachers, as a means of challenging the hegemonic order, ask students unapologetically to insert issues of race and racism into their critiques and analysis (Romero, 2013). CCI advocates for students to be critical of their reality, and in their pursuit of understanding they must search for root causes of social toxins rather than simply addressing symptoms of these toxins.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a view of the varying and interconnected intersections between Black women, Black women teachers, and Black women and activism, along with social justice teacher education, which has largely been influenced by Black women teachers. Additionally, because of the focus on teacher preparation in this dissertation, a review of Black women candidates in teacher preparation programs was presented. In general, the literature provides both a historical and contemporary lens of Black women teachers' contributions to social movements while also depicting the ways this type of work may be taken up in social justice teacher education.

Since this study examines Black women teachers—both those who identify and claim the activist name and others who, without self-identifying, perform in ways that are activist informed—I explored and discussed the legacy that informs such an identity. I also discussed the key theoretical frameworks that inform and ground this work. It was important for me to do this

even while living as a Black woman to fully be able to make connections between the theories and the practices. It was also crucial for me to do this so as not to aid in the depoliticizing of these significant contributions and their purpose in the field of education.

The interconnectedness of Black feminist thought, intersectionality, and CRT can be evidenced through their origins, each emerging as a way to see and understand more fully the experiences of people of color. These critical theories value the stories and experiential knowledge of people of color and the ways in which people—but particularly in this case, Black women teachers—experience, make sense of, and navigate the socially constructed world. The foundational research literature has been concerned with how Black women teachers have understood their role as educators while adding alternative voices and perspectives to teacher education curriculum. This dissertation is designed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the subjects' life experiences contribute to and inform their daily teaching practices and pedagogical beliefs. This work further explores how the subjects exhibit centering students and the well-being of students, as well as how these practices, engaged daily, can be viewed as activist literacies. Implications for this labeling and what the designation means for teacher preparation programs are investigated through the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of Black women teachers who enact activist literacies in teacher preparation programs, in their classroom practice, and in their communities?
- What are the life histories of Black women teachers as learners who enact activist literacies?
- How do these experiences inform Black women teachers' development of activist literacies and identities?

Summarily, this chapter provided the reader with context for the study. This chapter is not written in the traditional way of literature reviews that tend to focus on one particular research area, but rather I provided a more expansive view into the particular areas that are encompassed within this study. Gathered from the reviews on literature conducted by past researchers, I found that qualitative methodology with small participant size was common. These characteristics helped inform my design of the study. Historically, most research on Black women engages Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought offers a synthesis of a body of knowledge that places into perspective the situations and conditions of Black women and their position in society. The conceptual framework provided by Black feminist thought recognizes and acknowledges the everyday experiences of Black women negotiating their multiple identities and roles in community. Black feminist thought honors the creation of theory from the practice of reflecting on daily life as ways of knowing. (Collins, 1990). For this research study, it was crucial to bridge the lived with the research (hooks, 1984) as a way to extend the knowledge base of Black women teachers. Instead of a solid truth, this study pursues situated knowledge that emerges from the narratives as well as accounts gathered from interviews of Black women teachers that will illuminate their legitimate knowledge(s) and the “multifaceted nature of their reality” (Collins, 1990, p. 325). A number of scholars assert that people and communities of color hold a cultural wealth that scholars and researchers often overlook (Gay, 2009; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009). For this reason, I have situated this study as a means to present the legitimate knowledges of Black women teachers enacting activist literacies.

The next chapter of this dissertation study will explore the specific research procedures that I employed to record, document, understand, and learn from the lived experiences of Black women teachers who were part of this study.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The following chapter presents the methodological procedure used to examine and explore the life histories and experiences of Black women teachers. Conducted over the course of a six-month period, six Black women teachers participated in this intersectionality-informed qualitative research study. Three research questions guided this study:

- What are the experiences of Black women teachers who enact activist literacies in teacher preparation programs, in their classroom practice, and in their communities?
- What are the life histories of Black women teachers as learners and who enact activist literacies?
- How do these experiences inform their development of activist literacies and identities?

The chapter begins with a brief summary describing the reasons I identified my research as intersectionality-informed. I follow by presenting the overall research design. The inquiry process is then detailed with attention to the design, analysis, and researcher stance utilized in the research process. Situating and framing this study with Black feminist thought and critical race theory (CRT) assisted me during all steps of the process, which included conceptualizing the study, decision-making throughout the study, and identifying a combination of themes, categories, concepts, and theories that were inductively derived (Merriam, 1998) towards the culmination of the study. The intersections at which these two theoretical frameworks converge provide benefits for research on Black women and offer promise for understanding the intersecting identities of African American women (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). I have discussed



intersectionality at length in Chapter 2; however, due to the intersectionality's inherent nature in this study, I offer the following.

This study on Black women teachers, and their lives and experiences as young girls and pre-service teachers within teacher preparation programs, is an intersectionality-informed one. The conception of the study, the research questions posed, the methods used to gather and examine data, the Black women teachers sought as participants, and the ways in which the data gathered were made sense of were all done purposefully. I made these decisions as a Black woman existing at many intersections throughout my life. It is my very existence at these intersections that obliged me conduct this research. Intersectionality can transform how a research problem is conceptualized, how it is investigated, and how findings are used to advance social justice (Hankivsky et al., 2012). The commonalities between intersectionality and qualitative research highlight the importance of foregrounding voices as well as the necessity of addressing power inequities between researchers and those researched. Foregrounding the voices of Black women teachers who are highly effective yet mostly absent from much of the scholarly work and literature in teacher preparation or when these voices are used are done so as electives and not as core curriculum choices is essential.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research does not belong to one discipline, nor does qualitative research have a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The goal of qualitative research is to uncover the ways in which people “make sense out of what is happening to them” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 248). Qualitative research aims to understand how people discern and experience. At its root, qualitative research involves a “naturalistic approach” and the collection and use of a “variety of empirical materials” (Denzin & Lincoln,

1994, p. 2) to describe their lives and experiences. This study sought to understand how the Black women teachers in this study experienced teaching and how teaching was shaped by life histories and teacher preparation programs within the current landscape of education. The study further highlighted the ways in which Black women teachers thought and acted in striving for education that liberates.

Qualitative researchers can begin to sort out how peoples' discourse and actions "reflect how they resolve the constant tension between (a) the rules prescribed by their cultural community (b) the positions they assume in particular circumstances and situations that compel them to negotiate, comply, or innovate" (Holland et al., as cited in Arzubiaga et al., p. 321). The activist literacies that my participants embody, as well as the many negotiations made by them in response to current educational environment, can only be understood through a nuanced and deeply intersectional view of their personal and professional experiences as Black women educators, along with their formative experiences within their teacher preparation programs. Understanding intersectionality then becomes an integral piece in my study, as this intersectional lens directed at theory allowed me to see and understand the ways in which my participants have constructed their teacher activist identities and their embodiment of activist literacies that are not easily and readily identified as such. As Boggs (2012) said, "the linkages and connections we must make if we are attempting to move toward revolutionary struggle are of the sort evoked by women of color's feminism" (Angela Davis Interview, 2012). By engaging with my participants in this way, I was better equipped to understand the ways in which participants' experiences—as well as my own—as Black girls and eventually Black women helped them to come to be who they were meant to be.

One key characteristic of qualitative research is the researcher herself acts as the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data. In this specific instance, the researcher is not only a data collector and analyst but a data source, as well. I understood early on in this process that I could not tell these stories without also telling my own. The connection I have with this subset of Black women is one of recognition, understanding, and solidarity. These three principles unite the participants and researcher in this study.

The qualitative nature of this study provided me with the opportunity to collect data from three distinct data sources—teacher narratives, interviews, and autoethnographies—as I sought to report on a relatively new topic for the academy: *teachers' activist literacies*. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) equate the qualitative researcher to a “quilt maker” piecing together “strategies, methods, and empirical material” (p. 4). The qualitative research model enabled me to use an inductive research strategy to uncover emergent themes and concepts, while simultaneously eliciting the most illuminating data (Patton, 2002) within the experiences of Black women teachers as they enact activist literacies in their classrooms, schools, and communities and to use this understanding to bridge the gaps between theory and action, schooling and teaching, and teacher preparation programs.

Qualitative research tools beyond the researcher can be utilized “to bring to the surface stories of those whose voices have not been heard, those who have been oppressed, or disenfranchised in schools” (Pugach, 2001, p. 443). Additionally, qualitative research can foreground these voices and not relegate them to the background. This is particularly important within the context of this study due to the systematic silencing of Black women and their contributions to activist and educative work, both historically and presently. One can see instances such as these in historic contexts with the formation of the Black Panther Party and the

Student Nonviolent Coordinating committee, which were “mostly comprised of or developed by women of color, but history remembers the men who situated themselves as figureheads” (Ware & Bennett, 2015). Currently, we see this occurring with the contemporary and present erasure of the Black women activists Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi, who via social media organized and originated the Black Lives Matter Movement. It is only because of decisive pushback by these activists that their names have not been omitted. Cullors, in an interview said, “Black women hold it down all the time and we have been architects of the movement—not just this current one, but previous ones –since the beginning. So, we decided early on that we weren’t going to allow our stories and the stories of black women to be erased” (Cosmopolitan Interview, October 17, 2015).

Finally, using qualitative research that is informed and grounded in the theories and methodology to be described in the upcoming section illuminates how their experiences shaped their identities and activism and how these are reconciled in their teaching pedagogy and beliefs about children.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry was utilized for this study because of its usefulness as a research tool in exploring how Black women teachers come to understand their roles as activists, change agents, or status quo dismantlers. I utilized both narratives and interviews for the participants as a means to gather data and position Black women teachers as expert knowers, but beyond that, as teacher activists dedicated to doing. Doing what, one might ask. “Doing” will be contextualized later in the study (see Chapters 5 and 6). Narrative inquiry allows for the Black women teachers within this study to be part of the “research process as people with a perspective and wisdom that are worthy of hearing” (Dutton, 2003, p. 8). There has always been something about the phrase

worthy that has unsettled me. However, in this instance I stand firm in the belief that these voices are not only worthy but must be presented as such. Ladson-Billings (2000) argued, “There are well-developed systems of knowledge, or epistemologies that stand in contrast to the dominant Euro-American epistemology” (p. 258). Ladson-Billings’ assertion here distinctly disrupts the idea that only some knowledge is valuable and worthy. In this particular case, the narratives produced by the participants contribute to the existing, yet limited research on Black women teachers. Even as the world around us changes, there continues to be a “traditional state of mind” that these narratives as counterstories aim to unsettle. The narratives as well as the interviews serve as stories needing to be shared. According to Denzin (2006),

Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and speaking, we perform the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contexts, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other. (p. 422)

The ability to tell one’s own story in efforts to either challenge, provide context, or challenge the current and dominant frame then becomes essential. Narrative inquiry is storytelling in its most simplistic form. The particular storytelling used herein comes from a rich legacy and tradition in African American communities. hooks said,

It is a tradition based on the continuity of wisdom, and it functions to assert the voice of the oppressed. Storytelling is not merely a means of entertainment. It is also an educational tool, and for many, it is a way of life. For others, it is the only way to comprehend, analyze, and deal with life. (hooks as cited in Amoah, 2013, p. 94)

The knowledge that we derive from this narrative inquiry begins, as hooks (1984) surmised, with validating individual's experience as an authoritative standpoint.

If value is to be given to the practice of storytelling, then the argument must be made that storytelling serves a functional purpose, or fills a void, unlike anything else can.

Storytelling and the history of the oral tradition enable one to reconnect with one's past and one's ancestors in the process of asserting one's voice in the present. (Amoah, 2013, p. 91)

Inherent in the narrative forms is voice that is the ability of a group to articulate its experience in ways that are unique to its members (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

### **Autoethnography**

The last method I employed in my study was autoethnography. Autoethnography describes and analyzes personal experiences while engaging in cultural commentary (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The approach is, as Adams (2012) describes, a space for self-reflexivity for researchers to dissect their own unique lived experiences. Likely, someone somewhere along my dissertation journey would ask me if I was an autoethnographer, and I thought it prudent to be prepared to answer it honestly. I wrote earlier about telling these stories and not being able to tell these stories without also telling my own. However, this tension goes beyond an inability that needs to be overcome—I have embraced it as a conscious choice to include my voice in my study. As a method, autoethnography generally entails the study of the researcher's own experiences to make sense of reality (Southerton, 2011, p. 77). Determining how to answer the question above, as I decided to situate myself as not only part of this study but as a producer of knowledge, gave me some hesitation. Theoharis (2008) in his study and use of autoethnography as an approach writes,

Combining in one study an examination of my practices and experiences with those of other principals provided for deeper and broader understanding of the issues and strategies discussed. For me, studying social justice principals and hiding my experience by not including myself in the study would have felt disingenuous and would not have provided the authenticity I sought. (p. 225)

Using this reflection of autoethnography solidified for me the essence of why I found it necessary to use this approach in the study of Black women teachers whom I share both commonalities and differences with.

Aware of the criticisms that some have posited against autoethnography, including that this particular method is biased and a form of “subjective navel-gazing” with little or no scientific value, I thought about my view of teaching. I thought about what it would mean to not merely be an objective observer gathering facts but as additional research instrument “whose personal background and values will shape the knowledge created” (Southerton, 2011, p. 78). Then I began to ask myself several significant questions prior to moving forward. Do I regard teaching as a “science”? I also thought about what narrative truth I wanted to tell. Was my experience enough to produce findings and knowledge that were “credible”? Who decides what and who are credible? These questions spun around in my head until I wrote them down on paper and attempted to answer them. I took some time to jot down some of my initial thoughts, some of which will be used in this section of the paper to be more reflexive in the research. Reflexivity in research is crucial, as it compels the researcher to raise his or her consciousness about a particular point of view and what may have influenced it.

Southerton (2011) wrote of autoethnographers,

With the stories that they tell, autoethnographers aim to have an impact on the reader, to make the reader feel connected to the issue at hand, and to understand someone else's experiences. These narratives are meant to be springboards for new understanding and action toward a more compassionate and equal society. (p. 78)

This understanding and articulation of the autoethnographic researcher can be viewed alongside of Griffin's (2012) account of black feminist autoethnography (BFA), which says,

Black feminist autoethnography as means to voice is obligated to: raise social consciousness regarding the everyday struggles common to Black womanhood; embrace self-definition as a means for Black women to be labeled, acknowledged, and remembered as they wish; humanize Black women at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. (p. 139)

Through autoethnography, researchers are able to speak to their own experiences in relation to their work (Boylorn, 2008; Holman-Jones, 2005). Boylorn (2008) also wrote,

"Autoethnographers look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal with the cultural" (p. 413). I believe that BFA allows for the space for me to think about and reflect on my own experiences in coming to be the teacher who I was meant to be. Concluding that I did view myself as an autoethnographer, I continued on. I wrote my personal narrative prior to receiving any of the remaining participants' narratives. I did this as a way to not be unintentionally influenced by the memories shared by my participants. I began writing and journaling as my participants were submitting their own narratives. To manage the interviews, I enlisted a colleague who was not a part of the study to follow the interview protocol. The use of autoethnography in this specific research study allowed for my own experience to be utilized as



data but also provided an opportunity to speak and write about a collective social belonging and collective knowing beyond my individual experience.

Using autoethnography as a method allowed me to connect with myself, my thoughts, my memories, and my readers through deep and authentic critical reflection. My autoethnographic responses serve to add to the collective experiences of the teachers within this study but also as an additional unique perspective. To acquire these data sources, I completed my own teacher narratives as well as participated in the interview collection process.

### **Participant Selection and Criteria**

The participant selection involved in this qualitative research stayed true to Merriam (1998), who wrote sampling in qualitative research tends to be “small, non-random, purposeful, and theoretical” (p. 9). I employed purposeful sampling, in which participants are intentionally chosen because of the specificity inherent to the research questions underlying the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I chose to spotlight six Black women teachers. The participants were selected from personal connections to the researcher. Where some might find this selection method to be too intimate, I hold that my connection to both the participants and to the subject matter led to a more robust, honest, reflective, and comprehensive collection and analysis of the data. I discuss this choice more in depth in the upcoming section.

The criteria for selection included the following:

1. Self-identify as a Black woman
2. Graduated from a four-year undergraduate university that espoused a commitment to urban education
3. Received teacher preparation training from a traditional teacher preparatory program

4. The teacher preparatory program includes coursework in either inclusive education or social justice education
5. Hold a current teaching licensure
6. Currently teaching or had taught in a public school at elementary through high school level

Utilizing my own network of teacher colleagues from my ten years of elementary school teaching experience as well as my sorority connections, I recruited the participants for the study. Before forging ahead, it is valuable to discuss the choice to include women I knew prior to the study. The relationships that existed between the participants and the researcher allowed for a level of connectedness. This connectedness has been part of the fabric that we know as sisterhood. My usage of the word *we* and *our* is a conscious decision that embeds me into the group that I am studying, rather than distancing me from it. Deliberate choices, such as the one identified, as well as the way in which I positioned myself in the research were study design elements that speak to the nature of doing work with Black women collectively. Through our similar journeys and experiences, we become part of a collective sisterhood of educators. Achieving true Black sisterhood is to acknowledge the diversity of experiences among Black and Black-identified women, while at the same time recognizing and embracing Black women's connectedness as women, as people of color, as human beings, and also as educators. The connectedness is what cemented our commitment to the research process. Hopson (2015) offered, "Black feminist sisterhood whether actual or of the imagination can foster change: it can allow for the interchange of ideas and shared knowledge that can transform lives" (p. 268). Collins (1990) writes, "In terms of Black women's relationships with one another, African-American women may find it easier than others to recognize connectedness as a primary way of

knowing, simply because we are encouraged to do so by a Black women's tradition of sisterhood" (p. 125 ). Sisterhood is not easy. Lorde (1983) for example, writes of sisterhood, "What has come to exist between Black women is pretenses of connection, parodies of self-love, evasion on the deepest level, and a false sense of respect" (p. 174). Yet, she goes on to conclude that the attainment of a sisterhood in which there is compassion and vital connection between Black women is a process that is "lengthy and difficult" (Lorde, year, p. 174). She continues, "It is the pursuit of such a sister-relationship that can and does lead to Black women's "empowerment—our strengthening in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service of our work and future" (Lorde, p. 174). Although Lorde says the attainment of such a sisterhood is lengthy and difficult, she maintained that it is critical for our commitment to self, others, and our work. This is service to self, children, schools, and communities.

Lorde included the word future, not as an afterthought, but as a powerful and impactful word choice that signifies the vitality that exists between and because of sisterhood relationships. When Black women educators with common agendas form alliances, then transformation in and of schools can be realized. Lorde's critique of sisterhood points to the essentiality of sisterhood, but it further solidifies why research grounded with sisterhood continues to be necessary. This sisterhood and connectedness is present between study participants and myself. This is evidenced when Janel shared, "I can't help but feel a certain value in being part of this research. I feel like I'm not alone." Further when Tazarea acknowledged, "Even though I'm alone here in this space, I know I'm not alone." The dialogue that exists between us then is an necessary component of the knowledge validation process. Collins (1986, 2000) also underscored the importance of Black women's relationships with other Black women. This strength comes in affirming each other's humanity, uniqueness, and right to exist, which aids in our active resistance against

dominant ideologies that attempt to limit our capacity to engage in self-definition. The connection helps erode isolation while also creating an environment of trust and reliability.

One key concern in all research, but particularly in research where participants and researcher are connected prior to the study, is an issue of trustworthiness. Some might view the shared connectedness and shared identity amongst the researcher and participants as a liability, but I view it as not only a strength but as an opportunity to hold one another accountable. Gandara (2008) contended that relationships between a shared identity group can help to foster trustworthiness. She refers to this as “cocooning” because the strategy provides protection in a healthy and supportive environment and the skills necessary to confront marginalizing experiences (Gandara, 2008, p. 44). The idea that cocooning allows for sharing and analysis in a safe environment helps to set the stage for true and revealing exchanges between members who share a common identity and relationship.

While the benefits of sisterhood, connectedness, and knowingness among myself and research participants are clear, there are some concerns about this issue. One of these issues is the effect this may have on subjectivity and bias. During my reflections on sessions with the Black women teachers in this study, I posed a question: do my relationships with these women pose a threat to the validity and reliability of the research? I responded in negation to this question, but I reflected these concerns in my research practices. For instance, throughout the research process, I attended to the limitations that researchers often present as inherent to pre-existing relationships by engaging in required systematic self-scrutiny of assumptions, careful rephrasing of questions, repeated disclaimers that participation was voluntary, and cultivation of an environment of openness that fosters freedom of expression. During the interviews, when I

noticed myself making assumptions about what my participants shared, I asked probing questions to deepen my understanding and to ensure that I documented the responses truthfully.

Therefore, while there are limitations to knowing participants, it is even more crucial to continue to highlight the benefits of varying types of relationships between participants and researchers. Relationships afford opportunities for deeper revelations that may not have been uncovered had it not been for prior connections. The Black women teachers and I went beyond interviewing; we engaged in an exchange of experiences, a sharing of stories, and a critical and necessary remembering (i.e., a recalling of moments that shifted our consciousness, grounded our understanding, and grew our commitment to issues beyond ourselves).

Initially, I received responses from seven participants who graduated from various institutions across the United States. Two of the recruited participants were omitted from the study because of geographical logistics and because of ties to Teach for America. After the remaining participants were confirmed, they were asked to fill out a participant information sheet (see Appendix A). These questionnaires were utilized to gather initial data on participants' education, demographic data, educational experiences, and teaching experiences.

**Participants.** My dissertation centers on the life histories and experiences of teachers who identify as Black women teachers. These identifiers have impact on the ways the participants in my study negotiate in and navigate their classrooms, schools, and communities. The subsequent chapter presents the biographical sketches of the participants along with basic demographic information including age, education, current position within the school context, and professional affiliations. Listed below is brief demographic data for the participants in this study (Table 1). However, in-depth biographical sketches can be found in Chapter 4.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Name	Age	# of Years Teaching	Grade Levels Taught
Janel Jones	42	19	6, 7, 8
Lisa Lowe	38	9	6, 7
Tazarea Thomas	25	2	3
Jennifer Jamison	38	15	3, 4, 5
Dominique Davis	38	16	5, 6, 7
Raine Roberts	35	11	3, 4, 5

From these respondents, I solicited and collected a teacher narrative, which required participants to recall and write about an important event in their teacher lives. No further information or context was provided to the participants other than a due date. In addition, there were no parameters provided to the participants pertaining to page length, word count, or specificity related to the overall prompt. The decision of what to share related to the broader context was left up to the individual participant. Upon receiving the narratives, I began to read and reread them while highlighting words or phrases that were consistent between the narratives.

As I sought to document and understand the ways that my participants enacted their activist literacies in their classrooms, schools, and communities, I utilized teacher narratives and reoccurring in-depth and semi-structured interviews. These modalities afforded me access to the participants' thoughts, beliefs, and understandings about students, teacher activism, and activist literacies. During the interviews, I stayed present and committed to "listen well, question closely,

and observe details” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 248) in order to obtain the most information available.

Interviewing and reading the submitted narratives of the participants of this study served as a deeply personal undertaking as I sought to document the experiences of the teachers. Because of my relationship with the participants, some of the anxiety and pressure usually present between the researcher and researched seemed to be alleviated, as we had rich conversations filled with laughter, thoughtful introspection, and shared hopes and goals.

### **Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**

As a non-practicing elementary school teacher, I have had direct experience with the ways educational opportunities have positively and negatively shaped the lives of students. I have been part of this trajectory through my teaching practice, my beliefs about children, and my understanding of the purpose of schooling. I have also been the student in K-12 classrooms and classrooms at higher education institutions. These experiences continue to shape my identity as a researcher. Most importantly, I have lived my entire life, first as a little Black girl and then as a Black woman. These two identity markers (Black and woman) have had a profound impact on my identity as a researcher. We are reminded that all researchers “bring perspectives, assumptions, and expectations to their labor that are cultural in nature and shape the work done” (Arzubiaga et al., 2008, p. 321).

It is challenging for me to describe my positionality, specifically in relation to my study. However, I will attempt to do just that in earnest. Provided that many roles encompass our lives, it is important to be aware of how our life experiences shape the type of research we choose to do, who we choose to center in our research, and how we analyze and present that process in the

end. To this end, it is essential to answer, why? I would like to say that though this is a specific section of my paper, my position is embedded throughout the totality of this work.

Expressing this idea became easier when I came across work done by a group of liberatory educators who presented the idea of positionality as knowledge. In their work, positionality is valued. When coupled with awareness, critical thinking, and reflective practices, the activity of positioning can be more self-directed, strategically applied, and transformative (Acevedo et al., 2015, p. 37). In these researchers' work, it was important for them to understand the role of experience in the learning process. For my study, it was important for me to understand the role of experience in the research and the ways shared experiences between myself and the participants provided a space for new knowledge.

Positionality acknowledges complex differentials of power and privilege while simultaneously identifying the multiple ways of knowing and being that arise from our multiple identities. The goal of revealing individual and relative positionality is to de-center dominant ways of thinking and expose multiple ways of thinking as diverse assets for self-knowing and collective-knowing. (Acevedo et al., 2015, p. 43)

My senses became more acute in listening to and identifying and sharing the participants' varying perspectives. Many of the research based classes warn of the need to remove oneself from the research. This seemed strange at all stages of the research process. For example, during the coding process I asked myself, what surprised me? This helped me to track my assumptions. Simultaneously I thought about what intrigued me. This line of questioning allowed me to track my positionality. While thinking about the ways my set of social, economic, and personal viewpoints impact the interpretation of the data, I felt it was necessary to dedicate sufficient time to discuss these characteristics and positions.



First, I categorically reject the notion of performing as an objective researcher. This rejection of course is not void of criticisms, but I stand firmly in the belief that gender and race must inform transformative research, conceptions of knowledge, and practices of investigation and validation. As my study is rooted in Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990), my situated knowledge as a Black woman researcher reflects a nuanced knowing and understanding ascribable to both my gender and race, which demonstrates how gendered and racialized identities inform the perspective of the knower.

Throughout my study, I was keenly aware of my preconceived ideas and beliefs about Black women teachers and their dedication to activism. I was also particularly critical of the current state of many teacher preparation programs, as I viewed these preparatory sites as core pieces of a larger institutionalized problem. However, these tensions were not viewed as an obstacle in getting to the heart of the matter, but rather an opportunity to listen more closely and recognize personal assumptions that have often been held as universal truths. But, there was something else beyond that, something that I was having difficulty articulating in a manner that was sensible to people living outside of my brain. It was the idea that my positionality held a certain benefit to the research process.

I became mindful of the moments in my research where I had what I termed “critical flashbacks.” This aligns closely to bracketing, which requires the researcher to bracket personal experiences and memories in relation to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Beyond bracketing, I utilize Dillard’s work on remembering to situate my idea of critical remembering or critical flashbacks. Cynthia Dillard’s (2012) recent work on (re)membering is helpful for theorizing the nature and the significance of the past. (Re)membering, according to Dillard, is the act of not only recalling the past but also putting it back together. Engaging memory requires not only

(re)membering who she is, but also (re)membering the collective past that she has been taught, warned, and seduced to forget. Dillard (2012) discussed experiences such as slavery and Jim Crow, and shared that these were not her experiences, yet they help to define who she is. For Dillard (2012), re-searching and (re)membering changes our ways of being and knowing. The Black women teachers in my study reflected on their early childhood memories related to schools as a way to understand the ways in which their teaching pedagogy were informed by these practices. While acting as the researcher conducting interviews of the participants in this study, I found myself making connections and linkages with participants' recollections, memories, and thoughts. Their remembrances triggered my own retrospection of moments in time that came to me as vivid flashbacks. I found myself having to remain present and engaged in my participants' revealings. I wondered about this as I continued my research. What did this mean in the pursuit of creating knowledge? Could this be a method where knowledge was co-constructed? What should I do? Was it acceptable that my memories, my thoughts, and my recollections become entangled with those of my participants? I began to call these instances critical remembering or critical flashbacks.

In literature, flashbacks are defined as, "interruptions that writers do to insert past events in order to provide background or context to the current events of a narrative" (Literary Devices.org). By using flashbacks, writers allow their readers to gain insight into a character's motivation and provide a background to a current conflict. They are usually presented as dream sequences and memories. In the field of psychology, a flashback is a phenomenon in which an individual has a sudden, usually vivid recollection of a past experience (PsychologyDictionary.org/flashback). The term is used particularly when the memory is recalled involuntarily or when it is so intense that the person relives the experience, unable to

fully recognize it as memory and not something that is happening in “real time.” In this work, I use the term critical remembering to describe a sudden recollection of the past triggered by participants’ revelations. In my usage within this particular context of teacher research, I recognize what is happening as a memory. I am not confused about that. However, I also do not wish to shy away from the flashbacks or pretend that they are not happening. The idea of critical remembering and flashbacks can also be positioned with what most autobiographers write about “epiphanies.” Epiphanies (Bochner & Ellis 1992; Denzin, 1989) are remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life. It is important to understand that only the individual has to consider the experience transformative, but more importantly, epiphanies reveal ways a person could negotiate “intense situations” and effects that linger—recollections, memories, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished” (Bochner, 1984, p. 595). Critical remembering can also be traced back to strategies borrowed from ethnographic and psychoanalytic methods that mine memories through the process of critical remembering, a process that combines emotions and self-reflexive lenses to access deeply buried or omitted experiences (Haug, 1987; Robins, 1995).

During my interviews, I experienced multiple flashbacks as a rush of feelings, emotions, and sensations in listening to participants’ responses to questions posed. There were times when I was very present in my interviews with participants, but I was also acutely aware that I was not always fully present. There were times that I had to say to myself, “Reba, come back to this moment.” I had to be very vigilant as participants shared thoughts and feelings to remain focused on taking notes and paying attention to what was being said.

I use the term critical remembering in this particular study because it necessitates attention to the following questions: a) Why did this particular thought surface and arise to

cognition? b) What does it mean? c) How can it be used to further understand and interrogate the original participant's response? and d) How can what we learn as a result of this deeper probing lead to institutional transformation?

Critical remembering is

- Triggered by participants' retelling of memories and experiences
- Allows for further substantiating and validation of experiential thoughts and experiences while firmly understanding that marginalized groups' thoughts and words do not require validation to make them real
- Allows for linkage and magnification of thoughts and experiences
- Brings about co-construction of knowledge that occurs when spontaneous
- Complicates rather than simplifies
- Allows for pinpointing areas that overlap and need attention across contexts, people, and time
- Amplifies voices through the sharing of collective experiences
- Aids in the formulation of deeper questioning that target shared experiences and analysis of what might account for these commonalities

What are some concerns with this?

- Momentarily removes the researcher from the present context
- Requires a critical awareness of what it means to be present and in the moment
- Brings about emotions in the researcher
- There is an added dimension that requires additional attention to thinking and writing through one's research
- Creates tension in researcher retelling and re(presenting)

**Triggered by participants' retelling of memories and experiences.** Recently, there has been an influx of trigger warnings that aim to provide warning in advance if material contains anything that might trigger difficult emotional responses. Stemming from the blogosphere, it began as a caution about graphic descriptions of rape and has now migrated to university campuses (AAUP.org). Being triggered during an interview in this vein would be a positive result. It would provide an opportunity to expand the topic being discussed.

**Allows for further substantiating and validation of experiential thoughts and experiences.** Though firmly understood that marginalized groups thoughts and words do not require validation to make them real, traditionally it has been shown that experiential knowledge (knowledge gained through experience) has not been as valued as theoretical knowledge, particularly when this knowledge emerges from historically marginalized and oppressed groups. Due to my commitment to advance and present the ideas, beliefs, and thoughts of Black women teachers, experiential thoughts and knowledge are viewed as invaluable and crucial.

**Allows for linkage to and magnification of suppressed voices.** Such voices are routinely left out of the conversation, both intentionally and unintentionally. There is tangible support as one raises another's voice so that both can be heard.

**Brings about co-construction of knowledge that occurs when spontaneous.** In the co-construction of knowledge, connection to shared thoughts, ideas, and experiences can occur. This provides an added dimension during the interview process as it allows the researcher and the participant to journey together to remember specific incidents that evoked similar feelings amongst the two individuals.

**Complicates rather than simplifies.** This helps to move away from a reductionist sharing of interview data. There are no simple answers to the issues we see in urban education

and teacher preparation; therefore, our solutions must be grounded in complicated thought and nuanced analysis of issues and potential solutions.

**Allows for pinpointing areas that overlap and need attention across contexts and people.** By allowing for pinpointing areas that overlap and need attention across contexts and people, we can more effectively identify and fill in gaps that are present.

**Amplifies voices.** Amplifying voices that have been historically and systematically silenced adds depth and uniqueness while challenging what appears to be and is understood as the norm. Providing space to underrepresented voices has great significance for social justice change and institutional transformation.

**Aids in the formulation of deeper questioning.** Deeper questioning targets deeper probing and better understanding. This also allows for more in-depth questioning that results from the researcher being compelled to ask additional questions based on their own reaction to what has been shared.

I must admit that my own assumptions and expectations of what Black women teacher activism and activist literacies were firmly in my head at the onset of this study. Towards the middle of the study, I became a bit worried. I was anxious because some of my participants did not label these ways of being a teacher in their classrooms, schools, and communities as activism. Did the teachers in my study have to call their teaching practices activist orientated or refer to them as activist literacies? Beyond the title of this study, why was this label so important to me? What did it mean for the students in their classrooms? What did it mean for the parents? What did it mean for the communities in which these teachers taught?

Another salient point pertaining to my positionality was my inclusion of my own voice within the study. The decision to shield my identity by including my own experiences as another

participant in the study, and not as a researcher, was purposeful. I positioned myself in this study as a knower who viewed and engaged in this work in a deeply personal way. Despite the importance of including my experiences, beliefs, and knowledge based on my belonging to this particular group of Black women, I did not want my name within the study to overshadow other participants. Therefore, I included my autoethnographic data just as I did the data pertaining to the remaining participants of the study. This decision highlighted the very way that this dissertation functions. It is more than just a written document. It is an example of Black women engaging in activists work in different ways. Positioning my data along with the remaining participants ensured that I remained in the tradition of Black feminist thought (i.e., to be in community with other Black women as though we are sitting and talking around our mothers' kitchen table collecting thoughts and preserving memories). The dissertation was a collective kitchen table of collected thoughts and preserved memories. The dissertation was a collective process between the participants and myself.

The work lies in the vein of what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) surmised as Black women's ideas written in a voice that is "both individual and collective," "personal and political" (p. 205). Collins highlighted the interdependence of experience and consciousness. She suggested that "African-American women as a group experience a world different from that of those who are not Black and female" (and these experiences can encourage a "distinctive Black feminist consciousness") (Collins, 1990, p. 221). My position as an academic is not what makes my work intellectual rigorous or able to absorb and withstand a critical "culture of justification" (Cooper, 2015). It is the collaboration between the researcher and the Black women teachers in this study that strengthen this work. My agency as both a teacher and a trained scholar is distinct from the Black women teachers in the study, and only helps to refine both roles rather than diminishing

the power of what that may symbolize. Patton et al. (2015) shared, “Black women must use their intellectual resources, their voices, and engage in activist struggles in solidarity with others for socially just causes” (p. 65).

Through this type of reflexivity, I have gained a deeper understanding of personal and research participants’ experiences and understanding of Black women teachers’ activism within the current educational and societal landscape. By exploring and reflecting on my own experiences as a Black woman teacher, I was able to connect more deeply and sustain trust through my openness while documenting our experiences.

### **Data Sources**

Three data gathering methods served as the sources for this study. The purposes of my study made the data sources of teacher narratives, interviews, and researcher narrative and interviews most appropriate for use in a study of histories and experiences of Black women teachers. Below, I describe the ways in which these particular methods were utilized in this study and the reasons for the specific choices.

### **Teacher Narratives**

“You must be unintimidated by your own thoughts because if you write with someone looking over your shoulder you’ll never write.”(Giovanni, 1992, p.186) Nikki Giovanni, an activist, writer, and professor, shared these words encouraging us to write. The parameters of this study urged the participants to do the same in the form of teacher narratives. Going forward throughout this dissertation, the term narratives is used to represent teacher narratives. Narratives are a particular type of discourse that Black feminist scholars view as a powerful means to uncover the “multilayered texture of Black women’s lives” (Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1999). Narratives allow people to recollect stories—however, according to Etter-Lewis (1991), “Black



women's narratives are not a mere compilation of idiosyncratic recollections only interesting to a specialized audience; rather, Black women's life stories enrich our understanding of issues of race and gender" (p. 43). Further, narratives are used to understand lived experiences from the perspectives of those involved, as well as to contextualize issues in their particular social, cultural, and political environment, oftentimes to change conditions (Glesne, 2010). Within this particular study, Black women teachers' recollection of an important event in their teaching lives presents us with an opportunity to identify and explore the instances in which participants recall and name important events. These important events reveal more about the participants than what appears on the surface—they serve as a mirror through which we can examine the motivations, practices, and beliefs about children that Black women teachers hold, and use such examinations to meaningfully inform the teaching and learning occurring in teacher preparation programs.

This work does not include the entirety of any one teacher's narrative, but what is presented serves as a window into the teacher lives of the participants. It is a visual representation of moments in their teacher lives that serve as indicators of a commitment to social justice issues that lie at the threshold of their classrooms. Each narrative is used to convey meaning, beliefs, and values that reflect everyday occurrences or a social reality navigated by the teachers within this study. More importantly, the narratives are constitutive, meaning that they are not only shaped by individuals, but they also shape individuals. This character of the narratives is important, as through this study I assert that the strategies and daily practices engaged in by the Black women teachers in this study offer an excellent opportunity, beyond mere potentiality to be transformative, for informing teacher preparation models.

The use of teacher narratives has widened beyond simple anecdotal accounts. De Lauretis refers to these narratives as "original critical instruments" (as cited in Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, p.

21), viewing them as “opportunities for self-reflection and social critique. Self-reflection allows for teachers to connect professional learning and their practice as teachers with their ongoing development as people” (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, p. 21). Social critique allows for illuminating the ideologies and material conditions that shape education and the reclaiming of teacher knowledge and agency. These two distinct purposes are central to learning and furthering the research and literature on teacher preparation. Narrative, as a method and form, can be used to nurture and foster critical consciousness, support meaning making, share cultural knowledge, create new knowledge, reclaim voices and identities, and detail lived experiences (Willis, Montavon, Hall, Hunter, Burke, & Herrera, 2008).

The narrative component of this study allowed for the honest and thoughtful communication, thinking, and reflection of the participants individually, while simultaneously situating these stories as learning opportunities collectively. At this point, it is also important for me to ground my thinking further as a Black woman doing this type of work in the academy that is often reluctant to recognize and acknowledge the work done by people who look like me. For this reason, it becomes imperative for me to discuss my thinking about narratives as relative to the history of Black women.

Beyond the use of narratives as critical instruments, narratives and voice in Black women’s history has been pivotal in advancing strategies towards change and action. This can be witnessed in the collection of work, *With Pen and Voice*, an anthology presenting responses of Black women who “spoke and wrote as preambles to action” (Logan, 1995, p. xi). Highlighting the many ways in which Black women fought against tactics that worked to silence them and strip them of their humanity, one writer Shockley (2008) wrote, “To counteract this assault on black freedom, black women writers fought with pen and voice” (p. 110). It is from this history

that I engage narratives to be both instructional and transformative. Engaging memory through narrative writing, in efforts to uncover the experiences that Black women teachers value—particularly in regards to their thoughts on students, communities, and roles—served as a rich data source for this dissertation study.

To fulfill the narrative requirement of this study, participants were asked to recall an important moment in their teaching lives. Many questions developed when reading the participants' narratives. Some of these questions included the following:

- Was there enough said?
- What were the questions and the themes that evolved from the reading of these narratives collectively?
- What were the questions and the themes that evolved from the reading of these narratives individually?
- What lessons can be learned from the narratives individually?
- What lessons can be learned from the narratives collectively?
- What activist literacies were present in the narratives?

As I read through the narratives, I found myself wishing that I could talk to the participants and that the Black women teachers could also write and reflect on one another's writing and experiences. This desire emerged along with thoughts about the Black women writers' movement and the literary history that saw a period in which Black women writers, poets, and artists spoke to the collective experience of people of color, but also to the uniquely intimate experiences of individual women. Collectively, the teacher narratives were provocative in that they generated new thoughts and questions. I found myself writing questions in the margins and noting how each individual participant's voice came through.

Delgado (1989) shared the following:

Stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics ... They can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live. They enrich imagination and teach that by combining elements from the story and current reality, we may construct a new world richer than either alone. (p. 61)

Delgado's paper is evocative for its use of multiple narratives and voices to provide understanding. He asserted that narratives help question a dominant mindset.

The findings gathered from the narrative stories of the participants revealed themes that were threaded throughout each of the stories. Five common themes were consistently threaded throughout the teacher narratives: 1) the necessity of change along two lines—policy and self, 2) a compelling need to do more, 3) loving the students, 4) recognition of students as complete and whole, and 5) self-reflection with visionary planning. These themes will be expounded upon in the chapter titled, *This is Just What we are Supposed to do*.

The second data source was interview data. The following section provides a summary that includes a description of interviews as a data collection method. Second, the section describes the inquiry process as it connects to interviews as well as in depth look at the frames that I used while analyzing and making sense of the interview data.

### **Interviews**

“It was my mother who taught me how to ask the right questions—and all of us who try to do this thing called scholarship on a regular basis are fully aware that asking the right questions is the most important part of the process” (Brown, 1986, p. 14). Interviewing is the most common data collection method employed in qualitative research (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

Researchers use different types of interview strategies for different reasons. Commonly, interviewing formats range from highly structured to unstructured, with semi-structured resting in the middle. The difference in each format has to do with the particular order, time, and questions used. In highly structured interviews, the researcher establishes the order and time of the interview as well as constructs the questions prior to the interview. Unstructured interviews, however, do not require a predetermined set of questions in a specified order. For the purposes of this research study, I conducted semi-structured interviews. There were many reasons that I employed interviews, including gathering responses that are more authentic and personal in nature as well as the ability to modify questions and probe further. Additionally, the tone and body language utilized by the participants provided additional information.

One of the first understandings I had about my research was my desire for authenticity. I sought to have conversations with the participants that were void of stress and feelings of anxiety that often accompany researcher-participant interviews. It was important for me to converse with the participants, as well as to be interactive with them. Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillman-Healy (1997) offer the following:

Interactive interviewing reflects the way relationships develop in real life: as conversations where one person's disclosures and self-probing invite another's disclosures and self-probing invite another's disclosure and self-probing: where an increasingly intimate and trusting context makes it possible to reveal more of ourselves and to probe deeper into another's feelings and thoughts; where listening to and asking questions about another's plight lead to greater understanding of one's own; and where the examination and comparison of experiences offer new insight into both lives. (p. 122)

Conversations allow the researcher and participant to engage in dialogue. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) writes, “To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries” (p. 130). I went into this work hoping to cross boundaries, in that the knowledge garnered from this study would transcend our interviews and have enduring results in the academy and for the teaching profession.

The interview data gathered can be described as counter-narratives. One criteria of counter-narratives is the emphasis placed on the knowledge of those who are marginalized in society. As this study seeks to foreground and center the experiential knowledge of this group of Black women teachers, counter-narratives becomes critically important. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) describe the counter-story as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). Storytelling and counter-storytelling can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival, as well as resistance (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Within the context of this research, interviews as counter-stories helps to further the activist nature of this study.

Broadly, the interviews sought to address the following questions:

- How do the Black women teachers understand and explain their approaches to teacher activism?
- How have their experiences within traditional teacher preparation programs informed and or shaped their teacher activism?
- How have their life histories informed their approaches to teacher activism?
- How can this knowledge be transmitted to future teachers?

For each participant, I conducted three sets of interviews. The first interview allowed me to gather background knowledge. “Tell me a little bit about yourself” was a constant phrase throughout the first interviews. The initial interviews with each participant also served as a way for me to clarify any of my misunderstandings stemming from what I read in the narratives. Additionally, during the first interview, the participants were provided the opportunity to share the *why* behind their teacher narrative selection. Why this particular story? Why this specific memory? These were some of the initial questions posed during that first interview. During these interviews, participants were also asked to reflect on their own learning experiences within school. After the initial round of interviews, I reexamined the interview protocol. It is important however to understand that my semi-structured interviews were, as introduced earlier in the chapter, conversational, developing as I sat with the participants.

The second interview focused on the participants’ experiences within their traditional teacher preparation programs. The desire to utilize the data gathered throughout this study to construct a blueprint for reimagined and re-envisioned teacher preparation programs made this particular information critical. In the course of these interviews, the Black women teachers were required to do some recollecting in regards to their overall experience within teacher preparation programs. At the core of this questioning were opportunities to discuss requirements such as classwork, field placement, and pedagogical development. Since part of the study was to advance a blueprint for teacher preparation programs, I asked the participants to tell me the positives about their teacher preparation programs—however, we spent a significant amount of time thinking about and envisioning those details that would make an even more effective teacher preparation program, especially for those who would serve marginalized and oppressed groups of children. The teachers talked about their coursework and how the requirements were not

rigorous and provided no authentic opportunities for critical reflection. Importantly, and across all interviews in this domain, were participants' revelations pertaining to the whiteness they were surrounded by during this time and how these experiences also informed their teacher identity and subsequent activism (though they did not readily name their work as such).

The final interviews were specifically designed to engage participants in dialogue around their teacher activist literacies. These interviews focused on the ways in which Black women teachers performed the actual work of teaching. The interviews required some initial contextualizing of activist literacies, as this term was new to the participants. Additional new terms emerged, but only to identify and define the innate practices the participant teachers engaged in every day, informed by their thinking and framing around students. Our deepest learning and growing occurred during these final interviews.

After conducting each interview, I listened to the recordings of the interviews again to develop subsequent questions as well as lead-ins to the next domain. This assisted me in deepening and widening the interviews. I began noticing themes early on and tracked those by writing them in my researcher journal. For example, within the life history domain, I noticed that many of my participants reflected on negative early experiences in school in which they felt marginalized. Memories of migration and losing pride in their culture were evident in some of the participants' responses. In these cases, I made sure to ask more specific questions where necessary.

Follow-up emails and phone conversations were made in some cases to clarify information when necessary. Prior to the beginning of the first interview, participants were asked to read and sign the required consent form. During each subsequent interview, participants were reminded of the option to discontinue the interview process or omit any question that they were



uncomfortable with. Additionally, each interview ended with giving the participants the opportunity to present further commentary they felt had not been covered in my questioning. This, I feel, provided the participants with additional ownership and voice throughout the process.

After completing all three interviews, I conducted one follow-up phone call with each participant in which I thanked them again for their time and contribution. I informed them that they could review the sections of the dissertation that were specific to them to ensure I had represented their words in authentic and trustworthy ways. I assured the participants that all interviews would be kept strictly confidential and I would use pseudonyms rather than the participants' actual names. Each interview typically lasted between one hour and 90 minutes. Four of the participants were interviewed in person, while two participants had interviews conducted over Skype. The participants were interviewed between May 2015 and November 2015.

There will be three data chapters. The first chapter is a nontraditional data chapter. It includes the life histories of the participants. The second chapter focuses on teacher education experiences, and the third on teachers' activism and resistance practices within classrooms, schools, and communities.

### **Researcher Narrative and Interviews**

The inclusion of information from my personal narrative along with my participation in the interview process were additional sources of data. They will be presented along with the data from the participants. I wrote my narrative early on in the narrative collection process. I did this as a means of not being influenced by any other participants' narrative. For the purposes of this study, I completed my narrative and set it aside until I had received all the narratives from the

participants. I did not revisit the narrative and revise it in any way once it was completed. This was my honest attempt at staying as true to the narrative collection protocol as possible.

For the interview data, I asked a peer to conduct the interviews following the same interview protocol that I used for the participants in the study. These interviews were recorded and transcribed in the same manner of the remaining participants. With this sort of process, researcher positionality becomes crucial. In efforts to be as open, honest, and transparent as possible, I write now about some of the tensions that became present during this study. Earlier I described my researcher positionality and reflexivity, but here I want to discuss some of the ways I attended to tensions present when the researcher is also the researched.

### **Data Analysis and Coding**

#### **Data Analysis, Coding, and Interpretation**

Data analysis is the search and uncovering of conceptual ideas, topics, and themes. Themes can be predetermined but can also emerge as analysis takes place. Memoing was an important part of my process as I recorded my thoughts and ideas about potential codes. I also kept a research outline—a copy of my research concerns, theoretical framework, central research question, and goals of the research on one page—with me as I coded, as recommended by Auberach and Silverstein (2003). Memoing served as a critical link during my coding process that allowed me to track my progress and ongoing thoughts about the data as well as early interpretation of the data. The most precise way to think about memoing is, as Glasser (1978) stated, as the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst during coding. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) note that analytic memos allow room for speculation and integration. They allow us to reflect so we may check our beginning assumptions, analysis, and conceptual frame, and they allow us to extrapolate so that we may

create direction for our work” (Ely, 1991). These memos assisted me in managing the data as well as what I was thinking about the data. At its most basic, understanding analysis is answering questions—that is, what does the data say—and interpretation is saying what it means. These questions assisted me in remaining focused as I examined the data.

Throughout data collection, I conducted initial analysis. While it was my goal to code and analyze the transcripts immediately, life happened and I found myself transcribing long into the interview process. Ultimately, I transcribed the data as I went along. I listened to the recordings and time-stamped specific instances that seemed to be consistent between the transcribed data of the different participants. This practice helped me later as I began to code.

The coding process is an interpretive technique that allows for sorting, organization, and interpretation of data. Formally defined by Glesne (1999) “as a progressive process of sorting and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data (i.e.) observation notes, interview transcripts, memos, documents, and notes from relevant literature) that are applicable to your research purpose. By outlining like-minded pieces together into data clumps, you create an organizational framework. It is progressive in that you first develop, out of the data, major code clumps by which to sort data. Then you code the contents of each major code clump, thereby breaking down the major code into numerous sub-codes” (p. 135).

During coding, codes can be characterized as simple to more complicated abstract categories. A code is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldana, 2013). I used a systematic approach to coding. The first step involved developing a coding system. After developing the coding system, I assigned each code a phrase to be used throughout the analysis. I included another category in expectation of responses not anticipated.

According to Saldana (2013), coding is cyclical and is not simply labeling but rather linking from the data to the idea to and back to other data. The coding process began with purposeful reading and analysis of the teacher narratives followed by the interview transcripts. I began with one text and began the coding process. The remaining texts were then read, marked, and reread for a closer examination of the data. Vasquez (2011) stated, “Narrative analysis sheds light not just on the lived experiences of individuals but also on how individuals use language to make sense and shape their experiences” (p. 543). The analysis conducted during this process was undertaken with the understanding that “by laying claim to personal Narrative (i.e. the telling of one’s own story), oppressed peoples are able to create their own sphere of theorized existence, and thus remove themselves from the marginalized position to which the dominant society has relegated them” (Amoah, 1997, p. 85). In this instance Black women teachers, who are marginalized in the teacher profession by sheer numbers of existence in the profession, fill in the gaps which traditional framing of teaching has sorely neglected. Etter-Lewis (1991) wrote, “that all women must tell their own stories in their own words (p. 44). Narrative analysis has previously been connected to feminist education research (Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

In the upcoming section, I will describe my step-by-step my process as I analyzed the teacher narratives followed by the process used with the interview transcripts. Though not remarkably different, there were some differences in the ways I approached the two distinct data sets that I feel need to be discussed separately. Coding during both the teacher narratives phase and interview transcript phase was systematic. During the process, I asked myself certain questions as I sought to classify and understand the data. The questions were as follows:

- What is being said?
- What do I see happening here?

- What is being conveyed?

I present my coding process in the following procedural way because this was one of the challenges I faced while completing my dissertation.

### **Systematic Approach to Coding the Teacher Narratives**

1) Each teacher narrative was logged in on a narrative cheat sheet (See Appendix B). This cheat sheet displayed the following information:

- Participant pseudonym and assigned participant number (This became known as N1 for Participant 1)
- Narrative submission date
- Initial analysis completion date
- Final analysis completion date
- Word count
- Potential themes or categories that emerged were documented
- Location of themes in narrative

There was also a place to indicate if there were questions about the narratives that needed further clarification. Initially, the teacher narratives were examined within the broad categories of the study: teacher preparation, teacher activism, and social justice education. Then, I looked for keywords. Originally, I started to use the find tab in the Microsoft toolbar to locate specific words within the submitted narratives. Then I decided against this method and instead read the narratives in their entirety, pulling out keywords, themes, and phrases as I went. Next, I began to critically analyze all the categories and collapsed them further. The conclusion of my data analysis rendered themes related to self-reflection and change, compelling need to do more, and

lastly, recognition of students as whole people. Drafts were sent to each participant for member-checking (Merriam, 2000). Continual review of findings ensured trustworthiness.

### **Systematic Approach to Coding the Interviews**

I must admit that coding the data from the interviews, and even thinking about coding the data stressed me out initially. This was partly because I had not sat and fleshed out what coding process would be most effective for this type of multimodal study. Attempting to settle on a coding process was a harrowing experience. I was quite relieved to come across Atkinson's (1996) admonition,

There are no formulae or recipes for the "best" way to analyze the stories we elicit and collect...Such approaches also enable us to think beyond our data to the ways in which accounts and stories are socially and culturally managed and constructed. That is, the analysis of narratives can provide a critical way of examining not only key actors and events but also cultural conventions and social norms. (p. 80)

Additionally, I struggled with how I wanted to present data related to myself as the researcher. I was unsure if I wanted to italicize my voice throughout the study and what that would mean for my participants. I decided that I would not italicize my own words, as Theoharis (2007) shared this might "unnecessarily shift the focus on my experiences over the experiences of the group of principals" (p. 225), in my case the Black women teachers. Avoiding this was important to me because early on I viewed the knowledge of the participants as valuable and necessary.

Distinguishing my voice from the participants' voices in any way would work adversely in retelling the stories harmoniously. The three interviews for each participant were transcribed as close to the interview date as possible. I established pre-set codes that I thought would show up in the data by thinking about keywords specific to the domains of life history, teacher-

preparation, and teacher activism. After transcription of all interviews were complete, I read one transcript first and used brief phrases for my coding of the interview data and highlighted each fragment of relevant information and labeled each with a category phrase. For example, some of my phrases were classroom culture, staff and faculty demographics, etc. There was a level of open coding as well, which consisted of an analysis of the transcripts to search for commonalities and differences. I read the remaining interviews in the same domain and repeated the process. I revisited my initial coding and renamed some of these first attempts. For example, I changed compelling need to do more to being compelled to do more. Then, I conducted a level of axial coding, which allowed me to make connections across the data and form more expansive explanations. Making these connections can help to make visible the often hidden or overlooked factors and processes that shape experiences. This is an integral phase for researchers working with intersectionality because researchers “bear the responsibility for interpreting their data within the socio-historical and structural inequality” (Bowleg, 2008, p. 321). Organizing the codes into categories was the next step for presentation. This was simple as I decided to report themes by interview domains. These categories then became concepts and core themes, which were then sorted and presented.

The interpretive task of the researcher in an intersectionality-informed study is to “make explicit the often-implicit experiences of intersectionality, even when participants do not express the connections” (Bowleg, 2008, p. 322). That is to say, in this study, to be intersectionality-informed is to link issues pertaining to blackness and womanness occurring within socio-structural intersections of racialization, whiteness, historical silencing, and gender discrimination. Making the intersections explicit and not allowing only for individual

explanations of these complex issues to stand alone, but rather to demonstrate the ways intersections of inequity shaped the issues was a priority in interpreting the data.

### **Theoretical Framing**

In the upcoming section, I will provide a brief description of the theoretical frameworks, their usefulness to this study, and the overall impact that these frames had on my work. How the study was informed by intersectionality is explained in detail, following the discussion of the theoretical frameworks. Framing this study required a particular type of seeing and witnessing. It also required a foregrounding of frameworks that support the understandings and of the experiences of Black women and their intersecting identities. These theories are Black feminist thought and CRT. There are limits and scopes of each theory, and I chose to look at these theories as complementary to each other and not in opposition with one another. Approaches that view race, gender, and other identifiers as interconnected have practical implications in that they allow for a more expansive viewing of the world. The importance of these theories to my work can be understood because of the origins of the theories themselves. Black feminist and critical race theorists had to develop their own respective theoretical streams, which function to fill in the gaps that mainstream (i.e., white patriarchal) theory has sorely neglected (Amoah, 2013). Pertaining to this study, the perspectives, experiences, and histories of Black women teachers have been missing from teacher preparation programs. I was clear from the very onset of my study that the Black women teachers in my study be viewed as agents of knowledge. Their stories and experiences would help to fill in the gaps that are prevalent in teacher preparation programs whose students, professors, and faculty are often white and middle class.

The study was informed by intersectionality, which I explain following the discussion on the two theories. In the upcoming section, I will provide a brief description of the two theoretical



frameworks, their usefulness to this study, and the overall impact that these frames had on my work. An intersectionality-informed framing of the study allows for an examination the multi-dimensional nature of individuals' lives and how they interpret and navigate their day-to day experiences of power and privilege (McCall, 2005). Relating to this study on Black women teachers' life histories, experiences within teacher preparation programs, and their activist literacies, intersectionality then allows for expanding the frames that address these three areas of Black women's lives.

Examining the ways in which Black women teachers enact activist literacies in their classrooms, schools, and communities allows for an intersectionality-informed study because as Rogers and Kelly (2011) stress, such research forwards social justice by moving beyond an intention of "achieving statistically significant results to one that seeks to address and ameliorate inequity" (p. 405). Additionally, research informed or aligned with intersectionality advance social justice in that they

- ensure meaningful participation of the community or populations of study across multiple social locations;
- address issues of power in research and knowledge production;
- attend to the complexities of health and social issues; and
- ensure real-world application of research and advancing social justice (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2009; Rogers & Kelly, 2011).

### **Black Feminist Theory**

Black feminist thought emphasizes the value and worth of ideas created by Black women and suggests a standpoint of and for Black women. The standpoint develops in three key ways:

1) a framework shaped and produced by Black women's experience; 2) an uncovering of the

unique stories that are intersections between and among Black women; and 3) exploring the class, religion, age, and sexual orientation diversity among Black women. During the later times of my dissertation journey, when I was feeling particularly harrowed, one participant said, “Reba, you are doing important work and for those of us who wish we could be doing it, you serve as a real motivation. You are my sister and I thank you truly for amplifying our voices!”

Because this study seeks to be transformative and activist oriented, Black feminist thought is critical as a framework. Black feminist thought cannot challenge race, gender, and class oppression without empowering African American women. From the position on the margin, one appears to have a wider scope of observation, and this makes Black women teachers particularly well positioned to take up the work associated with activist literacies. In her preface to the second edition of *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (1999) wrote, “I emphasize Black feminist thought’s purpose, namely, fostering *both* Black women’s empowerment *and* conditions of social justice” (p.x ). To continue and further connect Black feminist thought to the work of Black women teachers in this study, I use Hill Collins (2000ta) words:

By taking the core themes of a Black women’s standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black feminist thought can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women’s every day, taken-for-granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance. (p. 29)

This study aims to use the knowledge gained from the memories of Black women teachers along with their interview data to highlight the taken-for-granted knowledge held by the participants. Traditionally, Hill-Collins contextualized this knowledge in the following way:

The commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women growing from our everyday thoughts and actions constitutes a first and most fundamental level of knowledge. The ideas that Black women share with one another on an informal, daily basis about topics such as how to style our hair, characteristics of “good” Black men, strategies for dealing with White folks, and skills of how to “get over” provide the foundations for this taken-for-granted knowledge. (p. 34)

With this study, I seek to expand this taken-for-granted knowledge to include Black women’s teaching practices and activist literacies. I aim to include the taken-for-granted knowledge that the Black women teachers in this study hold and act on to improve the conditions of the young people in their classrooms, schools, and communities.

Essentially, Black feminist thought is inextricably linked to social justice, which is at the very core of this study. Recognizing the human dignity that is in all of us, and the push for social justice, is fundamental to any re-imagined, re-envisioned, and re-articulated approach to teacher preparation and consequently positive schooling experiences and outcomes for students. In an 1893 speech to women, Anna Julia Cooper expressed this worldview:

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition ... The colored woman feels that woman’s cause is one and universal; and that ... not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is

conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won—not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. (Loewenberg & Bogin, 1976, p. 330-331)

Cooper's words, in connection to this study as well as other feminist works, prioritizes an engaging in work that promotes social justice for all people. In this study, her words serve as a reminder that by improving conditions for young people, particularly those who have been forgotten and abandoned, improves conditions for all students. The inclusion of these words from another time and context demonstrates both the historic dedication, awareness, and pursuit of social justice that has been the legacy of Black women.

While this study was situated within a framework of Black feminist thought, another equally important framework, CRT, helped me to understand the experiences of Black women teachers in this research.

### **Critical Race Theory**

CRT helps to frame this study because of the essentiality of its principles to the overall purpose of this work. At the core of CRT is the recognition of race and racism in our society, a critique of the traditional western values of objectivity and neutrality, a reliance on the knowledge and experience of people of color in the definition of its tenants, an interdisciplinary focus, and a goal of the elimination of all forms of oppression (Lynn, 1999). CRT obliges us then to determine how racism is perpetuated for the purposes of undermining racial bias within systems and institutions, all the while actively working towards dismantling white privilege. The lens of CRT also allows for the interrogation of social, educational, and political issues by prioritizing participant voices (Chapman, 2007). Throughout this study, I seek to not only

prioritize participants' voices but also to use them to inform teacher preparation programs that prepare educators to actively work to disrupt systems of oppression that negatively impact students within our K-12 schools. In essence, CRT “goes beyond the experience of Whites as the normative standard and instead grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive historical context that places an emphasis on the experiences of people of color” (Lynn, Jennings, & Hughes, p. 607).

According to Hayman (1995), theorists who utilize CRT “articulate concerns that may have been ignored or marginalized by the dominant discourse, problematize concepts that seem otherwise immune from scrutiny, and suggest resolutions that are frequently at odds with the prevailing demands of convention and fashion.”

Within this dissertation, I utilized qualitative research methods to begin to document and understand how teachers' experiences and life histories inform and influence the embodiment of their activist literacies.

### **Ethics**

Member-checking, frequently discussed in qualitative research as a way to maintain the reliability and validity of data, is used to determine whether a researcher's interpretations of data are accurate (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Participants in this study were given numerous opportunities to check my interpretation of the data they provided at various points throughout the study (Doyle, 2007). The first occurred after the creation of the biographical sketches, and then again at the early data interpretation stage. The opportunity to read the life histories allowed the black women teachers to recall the conversations that we shared. This approach contributed to the richness and enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

Some of my participants made corrections and suggestions to the document. For example, Janel re-read her life history data, reflected, and requested to expand on one particular part of her life history. Tazarea read through data pertaining to her experience in her teacher preparation program and began to cry. She stated that reading this within the context of a research study did not diminish the hurt that was felt in the moment. “It brought me right back to being that ‘one’ in class” (Tazarea). This approach privileged the voices and interpretations of participants, and I felt this process enhanced the credibility of the study. The fact that this study is rooted in Black feminist thought and its privileging of Black women’s voices became more apparent.

Engaging in any type of research study presents risks. Some of these risks can be exponential while others are minimal. Though the risks with this study were minimal, it is important to discuss their existence. Threats to confidentiality were one risk area. I minimized this risk by providing a choice in interview location. This was also done to provide comfortability to the participants. For interviews conducted via Skype, when in person interviews were not possible, the participants were in their homes. Initially, I planned to conduct all of the interviews in person, however with one participant this was impossible.

Further, to protect the participants involved in the study, the right to refuse to participate without penalty was presented to them at the beginning of each interview. During the study, participants were informed during interviews that they could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion or hard feelings. I felt this was important because I did not want them to continue the study out of some type of loyalty to me, but only because they viewed it as a valuable research study and as something they wanted to be involved with. I reminded the participants that they did not have to answer any questions that they were not comfortable with. To further protect the privacy of individuals, pseudonyms were used for all participants, as well

as for locations. All audio recordings, transcripts, and documents remain on a password-protected, secure computer.

At the end of the final interviews, it was clear that the participants found value in the journey we had embarked on together throughout my research study. There were feelings of gratitude in that they were able to talk openly and honestly about a profession that signifies purpose to the individuals. There were multiple requests to connect in the future and begin a Sister Teacher Support group. I believe this demonstrated that the participants received some benefits from participating in the research.

The choices that were made in this study, as with any study, have significant impact on what is revealed and uncovered, what is shared and what is kept secret, what is spoken and what is left in the shadows of our heart and the crevices of our brains. I hope that I have done right by my participants. I hope that when they read this, they are proud of what we have done. I hope that the stories I have highlighted help to further the conversation surrounding teacher activism, liberatory education, and all of the ways in which we are working to create more authentic opportunities for children from marginalized groups, for children in our inner cities, for children who adults have written off. I hope this study gives us the opportunity to keep talking and keep digging so that we can all realize our truest potential.

In summation, essential to the methodology of this study is the acceptance and belief that the essential meanings of women's lives can be understood only by listening to women themselves (Collins, 1990). The narratives and interviews seek to gather data from the perspective of the teachers in this study as a method that enables Black women teachers to be participants in the research process, thereby recognizing, affirming and learning their legitimate knowledge(s). This study was designed to create new material about and validate Black women

teachers' experiences in their classrooms, schools, and communities. The next chapter of this dissertation introduces the participants to the readers by providing context to the participants' lives.



**CHAPTER 4: WRITING THE LIVES OF BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS**

*Here, I seek to enact and recognize both the intellectual and creative legacy of African ascendant women as powerful, provocative, and important “first step” in (re)membering ourselves and in understanding how our knowing and being rooted in and constantly informed by African wisdom. - Dillard (2000)*

In this chapter, I provide a context for understanding the life and work of each of the Black women teachers in this study. I include details of their self-proclaimed identities, educational, and professional experiences to provide a sense of knowing these participants. The information in this chapter relates to the very first research question, which centered on participants' life histories. Drawing from their narratives and interview data, I provide a contextual understanding of their experiences, challenges, decisions, and achievements as they developed their political consciousness and their decision to identify as a teacher activist. Additionally, I use the participants' own words, selected from either their narratives or interview transcripts, to introduce them to the reader. Writing the lives of Black women is a political undertaking. It is essential to collect stories that are deeply personal and politically powerful in order to ensure that the words of those who write exist long after they are gone. By no means is what follows a complete reflection of the teachers within this study; however, the upcoming section does provide a detailed glimpse into the lives of the participants.

In this chapter, I draw on both narrative and interview data to explore the first research question, “What are the life histories of Black women teachers as learners who enact activist literacies?” While integral to my research, these Black women teachers exist outside of their contributions to my academic research. I am physically centering and honoring the women who gave their time, shared their knowledge, and in some cases laughed and cried with me.

Though I requested teacher narratives at the very beginning of the data collection phase, my study was primarily interview-based. During the first interview, participants were asked to share as much as possible about their backgrounds and what/who has influenced their work as teachers. Additionally, I asked them to talk about specific instances in their written narratives that referenced their professional influences. It was through these first interviews, as well as one to two follow up chats, that I gathered the information utilized to construct the following sketches. I asked the participants to reflect on their experiences and how their life histories informed the agency they were developing or had already developed in areas of activism.

### **Becoming Who We Were Meant to Be**

It is important to highlight that the names of the participants in this study as well as the institutions and other locations for the study are assigned pseudonyms. The participants in this study are respected educators, and are viewed and identified by the researcher as key informants. Patton (2002) describes *key informants* as those who are knowledgeable about the topic being studied. These Black women teachers are able to uniquely speak to their experiences in ways that provide further insight to the insider experience of teacher activism. At the time I conducted this study, the participants were working at different grade levels in the United States public school system: elementary and middle school settings. The participants' service ranged from two to 17 years of classroom teaching experience, which provided a range of novice and veteran views about teaching and teachers enacting activist literacies. Out of the six participants, only one was teaching in a suburban setting. The remaining were teachers with experience in what the participants identified as urban schools. What does the term *urban* mean to the teachers in this study? For many of the teachers in this study, urban symbolizes the location in which they experienced their own childhoods.

The teachers in this study had all been *prepared* to teach by completing a traditional teacher preparation program at historically and predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Each participant recognized the impact that this schooling had on them as teachers within the schools where they eventually taught. They taught with an understanding of children that is steeped in a “pedagogy of excellence” (Dominique), and “one of empathy, optimism, and truth” (Tazarea). For these teachers, teaching is “a practice of joy and love” (Jennifer) despite the “intensely and unrelenting vices that seek to penetrate their (students) protective outer shells” (Janel) whom they view as “embodiments of possibility” (Raine). They are teachers committed to “showing up and being wholly present” (Lisa) for their students, students’ families, and communities. The teachers recognize the importance of experiential knowledge gained through their teaching and their very existence as Black women in a world where Lorde (1994) reminds us that as Black women we were never meant to survive.

The participants in this study are women I care about. They are women that I respect and have connected with beyond this study. I consider them to be part of my own network of Black women educators. The preexisting relationships and the varying levels of relationships between the participants and myself over the course of the study deepened our interaction. This increased trust and accessibility, but it also made setting clear parameters with respect to the study necessary.

This chapter introduces each of the participants by providing a view into their life history based on interview data. Researcher selected quotes from participants’ written narratives or interviews are prior to the description to highlight and illuminate the voices of the teachers and to draw attention to the language that the teachers utilized to share thoughts on becoming and being teachers. The quotes serve as a brief glimpse into who they are and what they consider important.

These quotes were selected because of their impact on me as a researcher. They illustrate the various, collective ways the participants thought about who they are in relation to other people, their students, or institutions.

Upon receiving and reading the narratives submitted by the teachers in the study, a common theme emerged. Though the narrative prompt was broad, the teachers in the study all wrote about their experiences with students. They focused their writing on interactions with students that I view as activist oriented practices. Participants did not write about receiving awards or accolades for exemplary teaching, but rather utilized this opportunity to share experiences related to their work and teaching with the young people in their care. Again, the names of people, educational institutions, and school districts have been changed to provide anonymity. Additionally, I have provided a key (Appendix F), for identifying the data sources as they appear throughout the dissertation. When first introducing the data source, I provide the full name of the participant, date and type of data source. I utilized shorthand throughout the remainder of the dissertation to identify the sources.

**The Conscious and Deliberate Service of a Black Woman Educator: Janel Jones, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Teacher in New York State**

*“When you find your purpose, you become an activist without even knowing it.”*

(Interview 1, Janel Jones, July 16, 2015)

Janel is a 39-year old Black lesbian woman from a small, rural town in upstate New York. She was raised by her aunt and uncle whom she came to refer to as mom and dad in a town divided by railroad tracks. Janel’s family was one of two families of color in the small onion and potato farming community. Her biological mother died from tuberculosis and her biological father was involved in a serious automobile accident when she was three years old. This accident

caused paralysis from the waist down making it impossible for her father to care for all three children. Her uncle worked at a gas station and her “mother” was a first-grade teacher. Janel was a very strong student and credits her “controlling” mother with pushing her to excel beyond what was expected of a little Black girl in the rural town (Janel I1).

Janel and her siblings, one sister and one brother, attended the only schools in their community. There were two schools: an elementary school and a combined middle/high school. Janel excelled in sports such as basketball, volleyball, and track. She quietly and inconspicuously excelled in her studies. Her mother forced her to apply to colleges outside of their small town. Janel’s mother wanted her daughter to connect with people that looked like her. This afforded Janel the opportunity to meet new and diverse people. She says this was the beginning of her “awakening” (J11). After completing her first year of college, majoring in business administration, and returning home to do summer work at a local business, Janel recalled the moment she realized there had to be more for her life. She needed a career that was meaningful and purposeful. Janel pondered what made her feel complete, and realized a life of public service would provide the desired meaning and fulfillment. She returned to school and switched her major to urban education.

During this time, Janel began her studies in the School of Education. Conflicting with her mother’s hope for sisterhood, Janel found herself isolated once again as she was one of a very few students of color. Despite this circumstance, Janel found her niche. Learning became enjoyable for the first time. Learning was not driven by external motivators, but rather an internal and authentic desire to serve and live her most complete life. It was also at this time that Janel admitted to herself that she was attracted to women, and could only envision life with another woman as a partner. She read a number of coming out stories, and realized that *coming*

*out* was not something she wanted or needed to do. Just as Janel quietly navigated and succeeded in school without recognition, she sought the same in her personal journey as a Black lesbian.

Janel returned to her small town after graduation, but could only suffer it for six months. She took a job coaching the girls' track team and substitute taught as an immediate means of income. After experiencing life outside of her small town, she felt restricted and uncomfortable upon returning home. The contrast between the two spaces that were so much a part of Janel's development as a Black woman proved to be too polarizing. Janel moved to the small urban center closest to her hometown to look for employment and pursue her master's degree in Literacy Instruction at the local university. Currently, Janel serves her community as a fifth-grade educator in a smaller metropolitan area. She has been a teacher for 20 years and received tenure after completing her third year of teaching. She has taught at the same school throughout her career, which is located about 30 miles from her childhood home.

Janel has taught approximately 500 students over the span of her teaching career, many of whom now come back to visit. Some of her students have children of their own that Janel has also taught, and others who seek recommendations and references for jobs and college applications. She has received various awards because of her dedication and effort in educating all students, and for the leadership she has demonstrated throughout her career. Most recently, Janel's focus has been to enlighten her colleagues on racial issues affecting her students and their community, while also maintaining a standard of high expectations and unconditional service to students, families, and the community. Janel used the word "unconditional" to describe her service:

Because I too often find that teachers *say* they are serving students and families until a student or parent does something or says something that they don't appreciate or agree

with, and then the service becomes conditional. My service and actual love for my students and their families is given without strings and always present, no matter what mistakes are made. I understand the need to be forgiving and patient. So even when we might disagree, I remind myself of the ultimate goal in serving children. (Janel, Interview 3, July 30, 2015)

Janel's commitment to serve children is evidenced even early on in her teaching career.

She wrote:

It was my second year teaching fourth grade in an urban elementary city school. I was a little bit of a rebel and questioning the status quo. I opened my ears to other viewpoints, but was determined to find my "own way" to being an excellent teacher and figuring out what really worked with my students. I didn't want to reflect a particular model of teaching, nor buy into some canned program. I had a desire to understand my students and their varied cultures and backgrounds. In my 20's, I was warmhearted and passionate about teaching and my students' success. My manner with students was quiet and calm and some of my colleagues suggested that my demeanor might not be what my students needed as far as discipline was concerned. I found myself in an environment that relied on rules, warnings, and punishment. This was not always comfortable for me as I believed in high expectations, reinforcing positive behavior and a positive approach or now what's termed as restorative approaches to discipline. But being a new teacher, I felt as though I had to "go along" with this organizational culture. (Janel, Narrative: June 2, 2015)

She discussed the tension of being a particular type of teacher within an environment that does not support the beliefs she holds about students. Her teacher narrative highlighted her

commitment to one specific student and how she eventually reached the student. In this excerpt from her narrative, she wrote:

I had 29 students this particular year and one stood out like a sore thumb. Jasmine Carter was used to being the “bad girl” in class. Her mother came in one of the first days to tell me just how bad. Jasmine would enter each day and refuse to do anything that I requested. She sat by herself and her classmates hesitated to engage with her. She seemed unhappy and angry each day. I wondered whether her mother had ever received any positive comments about her daughter. I tried stating my expectations in a firm manner with “teacher presence.” That didn’t work. I became frustrated because nothing was working with Jasmine. My mood changed in class and had a negative effect on all of my students. I was responding to my students in a short, curt manner and wasn’t myself. I felt as though we weren’t making progress as a class and became discouraged. I knew for a fact that Jasmine wasn’t learning anything. (Janel, Narrative)

This section of Janel’s narrative is important because it provides a further glimpse into her personality and commitment to activism. This excerpt also illuminates Janel’s self-awareness and observational skills in the classroom, particularly as it related to her student, Jasmine. Janel’s observational skills allowed her to recognize an unhappy student. Other teachers might classify Jasmine’s behavior as disengaged.

I listened to my team members and they all told me the same thing. Give her one warning. The second time send her to time out. The third time call home and let Jasmine’s mother know that she is not following your directions. If after three chances she isn’t complying, send her to the Dean of Students. I went to the Dean of Students and discussed this with him. He barked, “Three strikes and she is out.” “Don’t give her any



more chances.” “I expect to see her in my office!” We went through days and days of being frustrated with one another. Sending her out of the classroom seemed to make it worse. I reflected that although I had “won” the battle of authority, the matter had not been resolved. Jasmine would not come to school for days after I would send her out of class. I was miserable. Jasmine was too. She missed more and more days of school. I remember sitting in my classroom after a horrible day trying to figure out what to do next. I decided to reach out to someone with an outside perspective. I called my mother who had been a first grade teacher. I explained that I just couldn’t get through to one of my students and it was affecting me which in turn was impacting the rest of my students in a negative way. I explained my responses to Jasmine’s behavior. My mother asked questions. The first question was, “What do you know about Jasmine?” I replied that her mom came in and told me she was bad. That was about all I knew. Jasmine just seemed extremely unhappy. She also asked, “Why do you think Jasmine is acting the way that she is?” She suggested that I get to know Jasmine. I had to change my response to Jasmine’s behavior. I had to make her believe in herself. I had to build trust between us.

(Janel, Narrative)

Janel’s labeling of Jasmine’s affect as unhappy recognizes the reframing of certain behaviors that receive commonplace responses. Janel resisted the label of *disengaged* and related to the student’s humanity. Janel reached out to her own mother, who was also an educator, which emphasized the collective and dependent nature of teaching. The familial relationships that Black women often rely on in efforts to make decisions that are informed by generational knowledge and experience is evident in her narrative. This may seem insignificant, however, Janel’s

struggles to reach Jasmine were not acceptable to her. She, in fact, took concerns for Jasmine home with her. Janel continued to write about her experience with Jasmine. She wrote:

The very next day I greeted my students at the door. When Jasmine approached me I looked her in the eyes and said, “Hi Jasmine.” She looked away from me. I said, “Together we can make it a good day today. But I need you to give us a chance.” She didn’t reply to that, but I saw something. I made it a point that morning to stay close to Jasmine. I just remember keeping her at the forefront of my thoughts. I made eye-contact with her and when I caught her looking at me, I widened my eyes. One time a smile escaped. I had a plan to invite students to the classroom for lunch each day to try to get to know my students better. This day, I invited the girls back to the classroom for lunch to play games. They were all excited. Jasmine brought her lunch back to the classroom along with the other girls and sat at her desk. I got out the board games and the girls picked games to play. I brought the UNO cards back to Jasmine and said, “Would you like to play?” Shania and Mariel came over and said that they wanted to join us. Jasmine reluctantly played with us. While we played cards, we also played the question game. Each of us took turns asking a question of someone else in the group. We spent the lunch time getting to know each other. This became a daily event. I also added activities during the instructional day that would help to further sustain the community within the class. As the days went by, I could see that Jasmine’s outlook was changing. Changing her outlook on being in school became my primary goal that year. I didn’t care if she passed a single test. I just wanted her to like being in school. This meant I wasn’t calling her mother in for every “bad” thing she did “wrong”. It meant going against the expectation of the dean of students and handling things in my own way. In fact, I started calling

Jasmine's mother with only positive comments and praise. I spent lunches getting to know my students. I started an afterschool club where students could do homework and help get the classroom ready for the next day. Jasmine lived around the corner from the school. She began to stay every day and help out. Her favorite job was picking out the poem for the next day. One day, Jasmine asked me if would come to her church on Sunday to listen to her sing. She was in the church children's choir and she wanted me there. I went to church on Sunday and was extremely happy to see how proud Jasmine was that I was there. Jasmine was a different student by the end of the year. I learned so much that year about the power in building relationships, that respect must be afforded to all students, especially when responding to behaviors that are concerning, and that teachers must believe in their students to be successful. Jasmine Carter visits me occasionally 9 years later because I was her "favorite teacher" and I tell her that she was my favorite student and the one that taught me the most. (Janel)

These early teaching experiences shaped Janel into the type of teacher she would ultimately become, a teacher dedicated to opening the eyes of her colleagues about the students they were "entrusted to serve" (Janel, I3). When other teachers questioned her approach and demeanor with students, Janel became diligent in her teaching practices and actions. She wrote:

I was quite aware that some of what I would be doing would have me labeled as an agitator or someone who liked to rock the boat. I really wanted not to care, but I can't lie and say I didn't. Teaching for me was lonely at times because I found myself relegated to the sidelines. I felt misunderstood and isolated from my colleagues, and also targeted by administration but because my students made gains time and time again and because I had the support of my parents and family members of students in my class I was semi-

protected. They couldn't fire me but they made it challenging and downright hostile at times. And though I had a great class there was one student who I wasn't reaching.

(Janel, Narrative)

Janel's recognition and acknowledgement of the attitude associated with being an activist is what keeps her committed to the community in which she teaches and lives. Janel's activist literacies/practices are a result of the recognition and awareness of the myriad societal factors that attempt to adversely alter the life trajectory of students. Her performing and embodiment of activist literacies are directly connected to the purpose and meaning she has found in the work of serving, educating, and guiding young people. When asked about using the word "serve" in her discourse so predominantly, Janel replied:

Because I feel as though the majority of teachers feel as though the job is about them.

And I hear it. I see it and I feel it and so at every turn, I use the word serve so it reminds all of us that is why we have the job that we have to serve children and families. They're the priority. That's the mission and so I feel like if I don't use that word, people get away with, like they might not do that, but at least they hear it and it might impact them in some way, influence them in some way. (Janel, I3)

The notion of serving was present again when Janel responded to a question pertaining to unions.

Yes, I find that I happen to work in a school where the relationship between the teachers' union and the district, the administrators, it's not a positive collaborative relationship and so some of my colleagues work to the contract. They don't see the bigger picture, and so I think that's one of my jobs to really push that envelope and get people to see that we're in this for the students, that number one we serve students and families, and that being effective in that role means more than working to a contract. So, going on home visits,

bringing students in for conferences, like there are things that I'm doing that I don't have to do by contract, but they will provide my students with what they need to be successful in a classroom. I believe that they (unions) hold us back. Like so I said in our last, my last interview with you that there were some teachers in the building that didn't like it if I go above and beyond the contract to serve my students and their families. They tell me not to. It's not in the contract. I don't believe in that, and so I say I don't believe in that, and I will do whatever I want to do for my students and their families no matter what the contract says if I feel it's going to improve their achievement and their experience in my classroom. (Janel, 13)

Janel's pedagogy is firmly rooted in notions of serving and being in service to others, particularly students and families. Janel serves her community by being in partnership with the families within her local community spaces. She also works with her colleagues, providing critical support and advice, to improve skills needed to facilitate positive and engaging learning environments for students. Janel keeps issues of race and racism present in discussions with colleagues. Her deliberate and conscious dedication to being *in service* demonstrates her commitment to activism.

Though Janel is satisfied with her teaching career, she knows that she may be able to impact more students by obtaining her administrative degree and working as a building leader. In this position, Janel would be able to advocate with students, families, and community members to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students. Janel said, "one of my expectations for the faculty in my building will be that they unconditionally serve their students and families."

**Remembering the Joy in Teaching: Lisa Lowe, Middle School Math Teacher in New York State**

*“I always thought participating against injustice was being militant and I wanted no parts of that.”* (Interview 1, Lisa Lowe, July 21, 2015)

Lisa identifies as a Black woman. She is 38 years old, and was born and raised in the Bronx, New York. Both of her parents were from the south, her mother from Georgia and father from South Carolina. Lisa’s upbringing was a testament to the Southern values and traditions they brought with them to New York City. She grew up in a household where her mother and father were together for 43 years and married for four decades. Lisa’s father was the sole bread winner of the family. He worked as a fork-lift operator while her mother maintained the household. She has three sisters and also had one brother, but he has died. “We were always very close, my sisters, brother and I” (Lisa).

Lisa attended public schools in the Bronx, New York. As a young girl, Lisa was very outgoing and had many friends. “I had a very good life growing up. You know we were not rich by any means, but my dad always provided for us” (Lisa, I1). During high school, Lisa was enrolled in a special program in which she was exposed to law in hopes that students in this program would go on to study law in college. During this time, Lisa met a teacher Mrs. Harris.

Lisa shared:

Mrs. Harris was one of those cool teachers, but she was a stern teacher. She was one of those teachers that you knew not to mess with, but she taught you, and it wasn't just inside the classroom she taught you about life outside the classroom, also. She came around, you know, when people were having functions, and in particular when a friend had a barbecue she came, a graduation barbecue I think it was, and she came to the

barbecue, and, everybody was happy to see her. Everybody enjoyed her, and even after she retired she kept in touch with us. So Ms. Harris was a very inspirational teacher, one to emulate. (Lisa, I1)

After high school, Lisa attended a women's college in upstate New York before transferring to another school where she enrolled in the teacher education program. Describing this experience, Lisa said, "it was the best decision of my life. I was really too sensitive to be a lawyer. In fact, my closest friends who were in that program with me are all now working in the education field either teaching or counseling" (Lisa, Interview 2, July 30, 2015). Lisa credited this particular time in her life as one that allowed her to give students additional opportunities to find themselves.

After completing her undergraduate degree, Lisa returned home to the Bronx. She did not immediately begin teaching because an opportunity for a more lucrative living arose. Lisa said, "I had to make money because at that time I was the only one who could. I had a younger sister in high school and my parents were both out of work" (Lisa, I1). However, she quickly came to see that the classroom was indeed where she wanted and needed to be. Lisa said, "I felt at home in the classroom with children that looked like me. I ended up teaching right down the street from where I grew up" (Lisa, I1). Lisa earned a job as a middle school mathematics teacher in one of the better academic performing districts in the Bronx. She spent the next eight years honing her craft and becoming one of the most sought-after classroom teachers in her school building. Lisa later obtained a master's degree in math education. At the time of the study, she had taught for 8 years at the middle school level. She is the first teacher in her family. When asked to describe her teaching style and view on students, she said "I'm no nonsense! I expect great things from my students. I expect them to come into class prepared because I'm going to be

prepared for them”. Seeking to be inspired and reenergized, Lisa transferred out of the school building that gave her a start and began teaching in another school district. “It has been challenging, this new path that I’ve decided to walk on, but I am committed. Even if I have to take a break next year to refocus, I’m here now and I’m present” (Lisa, Interview 3, August 5, 2015). Lisa’s early teaching experiences were rewarding, and she experienced significant success with her students and their families. Teaching in relatively close proximity to the neighborhood in which she grew up in provided Lisa a sense of familiarity with her students, their families, and the community. “It’s interesting to see the shift with the different populations migrating in from various places and how this migration is influencing and changing the community and the schools” (Lisa, I3).

Lisa’s narrative (June 3, 2015) is filled with inner struggle, self-reflection, and understandings of external mechanisms that factor into the classroom climate. Her narrative selection focused on two events that occurred during the same school year. These two isolated episodes had an impact on her development as a teacher. However, the fact that the events occurred during the same year truly served as a line of demarcation in her teaching career. This signified an important moment in which she unapologetically trusted herself and her ability. One of the events centered on an in-class situation and the other focused on an out-of-classroom experience in which she learned to trust herself. Her narrative begins:

One of the most important days in my life as an educator occurred in my third year of teaching. I think I chose this year because it shows perfectly the multiple ways I exist as a teacher. First as a classroom teacher and then as a classroom teacher in the world of stakeholder decision making. I don’t know, it just seemed interesting in retrospect that these things happened to me during the same school year and they both really had a huge



effect on me. I guess I'll start with the in-class situation. I remember the day as if it were yesterday, as if I had just sat at my desk again at the end of the day, after dismissing my students, buried my face in my hands and cried. I sobbed and sobbed for what seemed like the rest of the afternoon. I alternated between sitting up, staring blankly off in the distance which was really an unfinished bulletin board with tears silently escaping my eyes to all outright ugly crying. I couldn't stop crying. I remember it being a really rough day. There were students fighting in our class- my students never fought with each other. From very early on in the school year, I made it us against everyone else in the school, all the other classes, all the other teachers that didn't believe in them. So when this undercurrent of hostility towards each other began to surface it unnerved me. And it wasn't just two students, there were little arguments happening throughout the day. I was on edge because throughout the day I kept having to nip things in the bud. I was short when I shouldn't have been. Then one argument turned into a fist fight between one of my regular students and a visiting student to the school. He had been suspended out of his home school and was receiving instruction at my school. And because I usually got all the "bad" kids, he was put in my class. I need to say though, I never viewed students as bad! I looked at challenging students as my greatest opportunities. An opportunity to stretch myself and my teaching methods and strategies. Because students did not readily participate did not mean I gave up them or turned away from them. It was those instances in which I dug deeper. (Lisa, Narrative)

The words in her narrative paint a certain image of Lisa as teacher as well as Lisa as a human being. Teachers often reference being *only human* when they make mistakes in how they address situations or in response to accusations of ineffectiveness. Lisa's words also point to a purposeful

attention to community building, creating an inclusive and family-like environment in their shared classroom. Lisa's own vulnerability is exposed through her crying at her desk after a particularly harrowing day. The tears at the desk reveal Lisa's personal feelings of disappointment in what had occurred in the classroom that day and possibly even revealing frustration at her inability to intervene before things got physical. Her words also reveal certain external practices of school administrators who habitually view certain teachers as capable of handling difficult students. Lisa's response to the event demonstrated a commitment to reflective practices towards learning and growing as a teacher. Lisa reflected honestly:

Sitting there that afternoon, I thought to myself, "There has got to be a better way!" So after I cried for what seemed like hours, which probably was less than 15 minutes, I went to work. I assessed my own actions throughout the day in hopes of seeing where I contributed to the tenseness present in the room. I asked myself, "What could you have done differently?" I admonished myself for not stopping what I was doing when the third minor situation happened. Why didn't I say to hell with teaching Math and call my students together to figure out what was going on. Why didn't I give the students a chance to share what they were feeling and experiencing? I might have learned that our visitor had stirred up some old beef with some of the boys in our class. And despite my expecting them to treat him like a classmate they did not view him as a classmate and that I shouldn't force them to. I should have spoken up earlier in the week when the student was shuffled to my class, not only for my sake but for my students. (Lisa, Narrative)

The above section of Lisa's narrative illustrates not only a gathering of self, but a commitment to critical self-reflection. I use the phrase *gathering of self* to describe the moment in which Lisa concluded, "There has got to be a better way" before returning to work even

though she had already taught the entire school day and the children had already left for home. When Lisa went to work that afternoon, she did so with intentionality. She went to work on herself. She was not willing to allow what she had experienced and what her students observed to define her classroom or her as a teacher. She looked inwardly and focused on ways she contributed to the occurrence that had transpired earlier that day. By asking herself questions that required a deeper examination of her role in the school day, Lisa was able to identify critical points throughout the day in which she should have intervened. In this moment, Lisa held herself to a higher expectation even as she recognized the external factors beyond her control that make a challenging job more difficult. Towards the end of this section of Lisa's narrative she wrote, "I got really down on myself that day and I remember, though making some changes I carried that day with me for a while after it happened. I had to make a conscious decision to remember the joy I have for teaching and to trust my instincts" (Lisa, Narrative). This is an important lesson from Lisa's narrative—to remember the joy.

Lisa's remaining narrative continues to affirm the importance of joy and trust in teaching and in personal understandings of self.

Joy was important and so was remembering to trust myself. Remember I just said, I wanted to trust my instincts... Well let me just be clear, I had grown exhausted from this one particular colleague's questions about what I would do if the state department came into the school building and witnessed me doing something other than what was prescribed. I remember actually rolling my eyes this last time because I was so fed up. I turned to her and said, "I told you I was going to use my brain and mouth. (Lisa, Narrative)

Lisa was frustrated by what she felt were numerous attempts to minimize her ability to effectively articulate the reasons behind her decisions. Lisa's response served as a reminder that teachers using feedback and performance of students are the best positioned to speak about and support the decisions pertaining to what occurs in classrooms. As Lisa's narrative came to an end, she wrote:

Remembering to use my brain and mouth beyond just what was happening in my classroom was important. I had begun closing my door and working in isolation, but I recalled saying to myself, how does this help anyone besides me and the students in my class. I wanted to be an example for others of what could be when we remembered our voice and our knowledge, and how we could work collectively to make change. I see this as the turning point in my career because I started seeking leadership positions in the school while remaining in the classroom as a teacher. This year started me on a path beyond student impact, but one that impacted my colleagues as well. I thought this was really significant because it would impact more students' lives. (Lisa)

One of the most revolutionary acts that a Black woman can take part in is to trust herself. During a time of continued racial oppression and anti-blackness, it remains crucial to trust oneself and trust in one's abilities. Historically, Black women have been intentionally and unintentionally taught to doubt their intellect and ability. Part of what is understood about the way anti-blackness operates is that it strips Black people of their humanity while upholding white-supremacy. White-supremacy in public education settings creates toxic schooling environments for people of color, both adults and children. These toxic environments are maintained by instilling fear and doubt in the minds of those best prepared to speak out and speak up. This is evidenced through the erasure and rewriting of Black history in textbooks,

disproportionality in race in the school to prison pipeline, the hyper-policed environments in which students are expected to learn and teachers are expected to teach, the limited access to gifted classes in urban school districts, and the overrepresentation of students of color in special education due to misdiagnosis. These problems are exacerbated by many administrators viewing dysfunction as the norm in urban school districts with predominantly Black student populations. For Black women teachers, institutional hypocrisy is most evident when they are asked to *connect* and serve as model representatives for the students in their classrooms, but are then told to remain silent on best practices for engaging students in these classrooms. The majority of people in positions to make reform decisions in education have had little to no experience teaching in classrooms. Yet, those voices are recognized and valued as legitimate. The necessary transformation in education cannot be realized without the presence of other, rarely sought voices.

Lisa said, “I told you I’m going to use my brain and my mouth!” This became Lisa’s rally call for herself. It also served as a method to ignite her colleagues in a very personal way. I asked Lisa about this retort in our first interview. She replied, “I think we all need reminding sometimes, that we know...we know a lot of stuff, but sometimes the system is so heavy on us we forget and we just do what we’re being told. I decided in that moment I would remember my intelligence and my voice and use them to help other makes sense of what I was doing rather than change what I was doing to suit them” (Lisa, II).

Lisa’s views on activism are illustrated through her words, “I always thought participating against injustice was being militant and I wanted no parts of that”. This is complicated by her understanding of the word militant. When asked if she thought of herself as an activist, her reply was, “No and let me just say, when I say no, that means that I’m not on the

front line” (Lisa, I3). Lisa’s changing view on teacher activism and social justice education are discussed in depth in Chapter 6.

Currently, Lisa is navigating a new school environment: one that she describes as “unbelievably hard and challenging and nothing like I had grown accustomed to. There is so much dysfunction here, I’m not sure how I as a student would handle it, if I could handle it” (Lisa, I3). Her commitment to the children in her school remains unwavering. “I don’t want to give up, I can’t give up, but I am struggling and it is important for me to admit that to myself” (Lisa, I3). Lisa’s refusal to give up is evidenced through many of her actions. As Lisa wrote:

I had to change! I couldn't solely rely on what I was taught in my teacher education program. I had to use my gut and I had to use what my students were telling me through their behaviors, their level of engagement or boredom. I had to recognize that they (students) were always communicating something to me. Whether I listened or not was the point in which they understood my commitment to them. (Lisa, Narrative)

Lisa’s commitment to the students exemplified by her ability to listen empathetically. Her awareness of her students and consequent actions demonstrate a deliberate centering of the students in her care. Lisa wrote:

I could not in any way allow my students to fall farther behind. This meant for me that I gave up my prep period some days unless I had a meeting and spent time with my students, especially those students that were struggling. I wrote it into my plans who I would work with on certain days even if it were for an extra fifteen minutes. Did they always want me on top of them? No. But if I didn’t do it when were they going to get it? And if they didn’t get it what would that mean in the long run. (Lisa, Narrative)

Lisa scheduled additional teaching and re-teaching opportunities during her sacred preparatory

time. She prioritizes her students' learning over everything else. Lisa's revelation provides an opportunity to imagine what schools could be like if students were prioritized at all times. The idea that Lisa relinquishes her prep period was sometimes met with dissatisfaction by her colleagues, but it provides an opening to engage in discussion. Lisa's action that require other educators review whether school days are set up to positively impact or negatively impact students. Should teachers have to give up their prep periods to provide additional learning opportunities for students? No, they should not, but this is one controversial way in which this specific teacher did what she trusted to be in the best interest for the students in her class. When Lisa asks "and if they didn't get it, what would that mean in the long run," she is imploring consideration for the student beyond the classroom (Lisa, Narrative). Her concern is for the attention students need outside of the classroom as well. Lisa is asking whether the current structure of schooling intentionally creates and maintains the conditions inherent in modern public schools. Presently, schools operate as sites of oppression. This should not come as a surprise. Teachers and curricula largely rely on traditional ways of engaging in education. This contributes to unrelenting oppression of students. Many of the promising initiatives and programs that benefit students are conducted in alternate spaces because ways of knowing and learning are limited in schools. Lisa, similar to other participants in this study, recognized that schooling experiences are inextricably linked to life trajectories and outcomes. Therefore, more must be done to ensure that students experience success.

Lisa's pedagogy is reflective of her ties to the community in which she lives and teaches. She shared, "I can't look at the students in my classroom as being less than because I was them at one point. So I try not to forget that, and even though the community is largely changing, specifically with the amount of families from other countries moving here, there still exist a

strong family dynamic” (Lisa, I3). Lisa’s understanding of the community and the families within it prompted her to use community space as an alternative site for her work in building familial connections beyond the classroom.

**Standing Up and Speaking Out: Tazarea Thomas, Elementary School Teacher in New York State**

*“You can’t miss me in a room filled with my staff. I stand out like a coconut stacked with watermelon.”* (Tazarea Thomas, Narrative)

Tazarea was born in Baltimore, Maryland. However, her earliest memories take her to Belize City, Belize where her mother’s family lived. She is the youngest of five children. While in Belize, she attended pre-K and kindergarten. Her mother, who was a school teacher, then moved the family to California where Tazarea attended school for grades one to three. While attending school in California, Tazarea recalls being made fun of because of her accent.

I was told that I didn’t speak English right or something like that. And so I vividly remember going home and trying to get rid of my accent, and I asked my grandfather to make me a blackboard, and he did, and so I would go home and that’s how I would study. I would just write on the board. Then I would line up all my teddy bears, and I would have them like, I would pretend that they were current students in my class so I would just practice my speech over and over again. (Tazarea, Interview 1, June 13, 2015)

Tazarea learned lessons early on in life about assimilating into the United States culture, much like many immigrant families that came before her. Students asking and teasing her about her accent as a small girl illustrated just how much she would have to do or have to give up to be accepted. After California, Tazarea’s family ultimately settled in the Bronx, New York where she attended a West Indian private school for grades four through twelve. It was during this time



that Tazarea learned lessons about herself and her commitment to education. She would often serve as the spokesperson for her classmates when it came to communicating with teachers. She shared:

There were times in my schooling life particularly in middle school where I felt the teachers couldn't and wouldn't listen to us. My classmates would always come to me and say why don't you ask the teacher this and that. They seemed to think that the teachers were more attentive to me. So I did, you know I started speaking up in class and asking my teachers questions. (Tazarea, I1)

She was a confident and self-assured young lady learning in an environment that was very responsive to the students. During these years, Tazarea's family was stable. As she said, "we never starved, we never stole. My mother did a nice job hiding the issues. I grew up wearing hand me downs" (Tazarea, I1). Growing up as the youngest child of a single mother, Tazarea learned the importance of being strong and figuring things out with or without help. Upon graduation from her Bronx high school, she applied to and was accepted into a university in upstate New York. This was a culture shock for her as she had not had to communicate with white teachers on any consistent basis since first grade in California. Not only was this a type of culture shock for her, the time also served as an awakening.

I called my mom like my second week of school and I asked her to come back and get me, that coming to school was a mistake, because I was the only Black person on my floor in college, in my dorm, much less the only Black person in my classroom. (Tazarea, I1)

Tazarea's college experience went by quickly. "I was so intent on being that student, the one who did well that I really did not do much else. I graduated with a 3.8 but I didn't allow

myself to get distracted or to be involved in many other things” (Tazarea, I1). Tazarea pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, the largest African-American public service sorority in the world, while she was in college. Her membership in this community-service driven group was influential in her development as she found herself belonging to a collective group of predominantly Black women dedicated to social change and community improvement.

Tazarea’s emerging activism is in its infancy, as she would describe it. It became apparent in our subsequent interviews that, though in its infancy, Tazarea’s activism and development of activist literacies is present. At the time of the study, Tazarea was a recent graduate of a teacher preparation program in upstate New York, and was the youngest participant in the study. After graduation, she taught in NYC before returning to upstate New York to teach in a predominantly white, suburban school district. She currently teaches third grade and is applying to an education master’s program in literacy studies. She is in her early 20s and feels that she will not teach in the suburbs for the totality of her career or the “rest of my life, but I do think it’s important for now” (Tazarea, Interview 3, June 17, 2015).

Tazarea submitted her narrative piece three weeks away before completing her first full year of teaching. The narrative was an honest and intimate look examining the insecurities she felt as a first-year teacher and finding her voice. Beyond this insecurity, there was a narrative highlighting discipline, patience, and humility. Tazarea tentatively began, “At first I had to think long and hard about what I should include in this narrative writing. Do I make it about race? Do I focus on my experiences as a whole? Not knowing where this will end up, I’m going to just write about my past school year and then, later give this piece a title” (Tazarea, Narrative). The beginning of Tazarea’s narrative indicated that her racial identity was one topic she viewed as pertinent. Her inclusion of this negotiation between speaking of race and writing about

experiences as a whole demonstrates a common position that many Black women experience many times throughout their lives. It becomes evident through Tazarea's writing that she recognizes that her lived experiences are often racialized. Her assertion reveals the many internalized messages that Black women receive regarding what stories are seen as valid and valued, and affirms her desire to not have her personal story invalidated. Further, when Tazarea questions how to begin the narrative, she implies her intersectional awareness. This certainly speaks to a certain level of consciousness. Tazarea wrote in her narrative:

It is no secret that I am the only African American teacher in the building (we have 2 Black lunch aids). My school is predominately White American with maybe a total of 25 students who identify as Black. I do not know all these children by name but I have made a conscious effort to smile and speak specifically to these children. I do this to be a positive role model and for them to be aware that I am teacher working at Jefferson.

(Tazarea, Narrative)

The need for additional teachers of color has grown more pressing in recent years due to the changing demographics of our nation. Significant effort has focused attention on diversifying the teaching force so that there are more teachers of color in front of students of color. However, this effort misses an important opportunity to explore the benefits of having teachers of color teach white children. While discussing the decline in the numbers of teachers of color, Ladson-Billings (2015) shared,

I want to suggest that there is something even more important than black students having black teachers and that is white students having black teachers! It is important for white students to encounter black people who are knowledgeable and hold some level of authority over them. Black students ALREADY know that Black people have a wide

range of capabilities. They see them in their homes, their neighborhoods, and their churches. They are the Sunday School teachers, their Scout Leaders, their coaches, and family members. But what opportunities do White students have to see and experience Black competence? What opportunities do white students have to see and experience black competence. (para. 4)

Tazarea's presence in her mostly white elementary school within a district that has just one other Black female teacher (at the middle school level) is a reflection of what Ladson-Billings argues regarding the *Teachers of Color Disappearance Crisis*. The teachers of color disappearance crisis steers attention to the steady decline of teachers of color in our nation's schools, whether due to recruitment or retention, over the past decade. Teachers of color are rapidly decreasing in urban environments, which only signifies that the numbers are even less in suburban and rural areas. While the presence of Black women teachers in predominantly white spaces is important, we have to be attentive to the needs and concerns of the teachers educating in these spaces. A continued examination of Tazarea's narrative illustrates one of these concerns. She wrote:

While I was speaking about the benefits of close-reading, I heard something strange and foreign. It was my own voice. I didn't sound like myself at ALL. I was trying to speak as eloquently as possible. I used words that were unnatural to me just so I could "prove" my intellect and come off as if I was from a different culture than I actually was. The longer I spoke, the stranger I sounded to myself. At one point, I ran out of breath and felt like I couldn't breathe. (Tazarea, Narrative)

A young, novice Black woman teacher sitting amongst a group of white, mostly veteran teachers shared thoughts related to her understanding of a literacy strategy. Words stumbled onto

themselves, leaving her breathless and almost gasping for air. The words must have departed her lips in such a fashion that I imagined her words came out as

**Close Reading is an important literacy strategy that has many benefits for ELL as well as non-ELL students. The benefits of close reading include but are not limited to...** (Close reading is an important literacy strategy that has many benefits for ELL as well as non-ELL students. The benefits of close reading include but are not limited to...

Reading through the narrative, I imagined a gasp escaping her throat signifying the culmination of her statement. I envisioned Tazarea's shoulders and torso rising and falling as she slumped back into her seat, deeply inhaling as she saw the impact of her shared words settle over the group. I can imagine and know the immediate anxiety that washed over her as she questioned whether what she said made sense or whether she should have remained silent. When Tazarea indicated that she tried to speak as *eloquently* as possible in an attempt to *prove* her intellect, I am reminded of the sheer exhaustion that comes at the expense of Black women constantly working to prove themselves as intellectual beings. Though Black women are not all in agreement with one another, and are certainly not interchangeable, we often confront similar frustrations and experience a familiar alienation in spaces where we are on display. Black women are acutely aware of scrutiny under the white gaze. It is critical to understand that Black women are often viewed as representatives of an entire group, which often adds additional pressure to situations. There tends to be a presumed level of incompetence that must be disproved and refuted through constant displays of exceptionality in thought and practice. The sheer presence and existence of Black women in these types of potentially damaging and toxic spaces is an act of resistance that ultimately helps to shape their required activism. Determined teachers, such as Tazarea, actively work to disrupt the ways that ideas are formed about

Blackness. They often serve as the only person of color that white students will ever encounter in their schooling experience. Tazarea continued:

After reflecting I knew there were many factors that could have impacted this event. I thought about my age as a factor, my size (I'm only 5 ft. 2 inches) and of course, my brown skin and locks. You can't miss me in a room filled with my staff. I stand out like a coconut stacked with watermelon. Who else notices me? Is my act convincing? Who is the real Tazarea? Isn't it ok to have multiple "sides"? (Narrative)

Rereading the final section of Tazarea's narrative account, I opined that what Tazarea went through in the school cafeteria that day was an identity crisis of sorts: a crisis occurring at a very particular stage in her life when her identity was at the crux of everything else in her life. There are lessons to be learned and broad implications in each of Tazarea's questions. The multiple layers that are present in her narrative necessitate closer examination and additional attention. For example, "*Who else notices me?* (Tazarea, Narrative). Her posing of this question in her narrative writing is fascinating. It asks readers to examine what vis/invisibility means in relation to Black women. Who is looking at me and what are they seeing? What stereotypes have been assigned to our bodies in that moment? These are questions that are routinely, internally posed by Black women moving through their day to day lives. Black women are never just allowed to be present in our humanness. Black women are consistently reduced in ways that negate our very existence. Therefore, when Black women begin to see ourselves through other's eyes, a familiar pattern begins, one that causes women to question their presence in spaces, their right to be in those spaces, and the need to prove and establish themselves. Black women becoming visible ultimately results in questions about worth. Because Black women have experienced being both distinctly Black and a woman, there is an alertness regarding the ways others are silenced and

rendered invisible. Black women teachers cultivate spaces of recognition, affirmation, and empowerment in their classrooms.

The next question Tazarea posed, “is my act convincing,” caused me to think about the ways in which Black women come to recognize that they are frequently positioned on an externally constructed stage, often working to convince others that they belong. The question relays a shared experiential understanding. It is as though Tazarea knew that I would understand, because I have had to put on an act as well. It speaks more to an extreme effort to project a particular persona, one viewed as necessary to be present in certain spaces. Though Tazarea did not elaborate further in the narrative about the act of convincing, we did revisit the question in her first interview. This will be discussed further in Chapter 6 regarding teacher preparation. The end of Tazarea’s narrative focuses on her current state of mind.

Is this another level of “code switching” or is this me lying to myself and others? Is this an insecurity coming to light? Am I suffering from low self-esteem? Am I afraid to be me in front of white people? And furthermore, why am I STILL dealing with these thoughts day to day? Why do I still hide my voice? (Tazarea)

Code switching or what Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) refer to as *shifting* eludes to the constant struggle that Black women undergo as they alter their identities. This strategy is tiring, but often necessary for survival. Black women teachers articulate this strategy to their students as a tool to help them understand the importance of acquiring new knowledge even while utilizing texts that fail to highlight achievements of those that look like them. Code switching helps students make connections that are not readily or easily identifiable. When Tazarea questioned “is this me lying to myself and others,” she named the constant doubt that many Black women face throughout their education, journeys, and careers. The phenomenon in

which feelings, regardless of accomplishments, makes one feel as though they are a fraud is called imposter syndrome. A lack of understanding of one's own self-worth occurs in very discreet ways. Arguably, one might suggest that Tazarea is young and new to the profession. I would argue in response that being young and new should not automatically make teachers question themselves. How did a smart and qualified Black woman college graduate hired into one of the most segregated school districts (in which there is only one other Black woman teacher at another school) come to believe that her presence, her very existence might be a lie that she told to herself and others? This does not happen by accident. It occurs as a result of focused and extended internalization of messages of inadequacy relayed to her through the actions and words of people invested in ensuring she doubts herself. How can someone riddled with self-doubt speak up for justice and speak against injustice? How can they teach students to be confident and to speak up? These messages begin when women are young and are often amplified during teacher preparation programs. Fortunately, awareness and consciousness about these targeted attacks makes it possible to work against such oppressive practices.

**Demonstrating Care Through Teaching: Jennifer Jamison, Elementary School Teacher in  
New York State**

*“Failing as a teacher was not an option for me.”* (Interview 1, Jennifer Jamison, October 25, 2015)

Jennifer was born on the island of Jamaica, West Indies. She spent much of her early childhood on the family farm in the country. She is 38 years old, and remembers her childhood fondly with recollections of walks to school with her cousins and the “other country kids” into town to attend school (Jennifer, I1). Her early life in the Caribbean were “moments that filled me” (Jennifer, I1). Living with her grandmother, Jennifer developed a strong sense of her



identity from the matriarch of her family. Her mother, as many young women from the island did, left home at an early age and moved to the states to earn a living and help with the finances back at home. Though Jennifer's father remained on the island, she did not live with him.

Life in Jamaica was "a child's life. Adult affairs were not our worry. Growing up in the country we lived off the land-eating plantains and such" (Jennifer, I1). When Jennifer was 12 years old, she moved to Brooklyn, New York and reunited with her mother. Jennifer grew up in a working-class family, in which both her mom and step-dad worked. She never really knew about the finances of her mother and stepfather, because it was not her place. However, she shared a funny anecdote that highlighted this:

You know when I was young, I didn't know anything about middle or working class. I can now say that I grew up in a working-class family. But I never felt it as a child. You know when it was time to eat, there was food and we ate. I had no idea that my mother was literally living paycheck to paycheck. That was the truth until I was applying for financial aid for school and my mother had to fill out the application. I looked at it and turned to my mother and said, But where's the rest of the zeros? (Jennifer, I1)

This shared memory, that caused us both to chuckle out loud, perfectly illustrated some of the expectations that Jennifer holds about children. Jennifer shared, "I am the adult in the classroom so I am going to take care of them. That is my job. I am going to care for them. That is what I am supposed to do" (Jennifer Jamison, Interview 3, November 5, 2015).

The eventual move to New York City brought many different experiences. The schooling experiences in early life in Jamaica and adolescent school life in Brooklyn were vastly different. She experienced being teased and bullied for things that were "normal back home" (Jennifer, I1). Jennifer's conflicting adolescent experiences were instrumental in her development as a young

girl and as a student. Jennifer was a hard-working student and buried her head in her books. Often taking additional courses to fill up her time and attending night school. Jennifer did well in high school. By the time she was a senior in high school, she had completed the required courses to meet graduation requirements and was routinely finished with school by late morning. This freed up Jennifer's early afternoons, evenings, and nights to work at a local fast food restaurant in which she earned money to "buy some stuff and sneakers if my mother didn't want to buy them for me. My mother always told me to save my money" (Jennifer, I1). There was a common misconception about Jennifer, especially as she attended high school. Jennifer was thought to be very privileged and an only child. "My friends all thought I was an only child because I came to school well-dressed and I lived in a house. But my mother sacrificed a lot for us. I was not aware of all of her sacrifices because as a child, I was supposed to live life as a child. Hardship wasn't supposed to visit itself on me" (Jennifer, I1). These experiences growing up informed the ways Jennifer interacted with the children in her future classrooms. "One of the most challenging things for me as a teacher was seeing my students come to class in disarray and looking disheveled. It was so contrary to everything I had experienced as a little girl and young woman. I remember making my students fix their clothes and just look ready to learn" (Jennifer, I3). In Jennifer's mind, this demonstrated the care she learned by how she was raised. "I've become more aware of these things as I've gained more experience but I can't lie, it's still very important for me that students look the part of students" (Jennifer, I3).

Jennifer is a graduate of a teacher preparation program in upstate New York. She initially attended college with aspirations of becoming a nurse. This changed when she arrived at the university only to learn that the intended program had been phased out. During her time in upstate New York, Jennifer joined various student groups such as the Black Student Union

(BSU) as a survival tactic. “There were so few of us that we all gravitated to one another. We were with each other all the time. And even though we talked about important issues, the BSU allowed us to just be with one another socially, to not feel so alone” (Jennifer, Interview 2, October 30, 2015). The BSU provided Jennifer with early experiences in activism. “I remember being immensely proud of belonging to that group. It was the first club of color my campus. Understanding that helped me at the age of 18 recognize the struggle that must have occurred to even make it possible to exist” (Jennifer, I2). After graduating from her teacher preparation program, Jennifer began working as an elementary school teacher in the Bronx. She was a consummate professional. “I never wore jeans to work. I wanted my students to see me as a professional always. I thought it was my duty to represent myself well and in such a way that they would always feel and be proud of me” (Jennifer, I2). Jennifer’s attention to professionalism was shaped by her early schooling experiences in Jamaica and as a student in a very strict middle-school and high school. “It was clear to me that my principal wanted what was best for us. We were expected to be dressed professionally in school” (Jennifer, I1).

Jennifer is a mom of a daughter she describes as a fireball. “Being a mother has really helped me as a teacher. She has taught me unbelievable patience and has made me question everything we do in education” (Jennifer, I1). As a classroom teacher, Jennifer repeatedly received honors and accolades for raising student scores and achievements. Often being giving the “most difficult and challenging” students, Jennifer exhibited an ability to foster and cultivate relationships with students that many others had written off (Jennifer). Jennifer has repeatedly served as the grade leader for her grade, a position that acts as a liaison between teachers and administration, often voicing concerns of colleagues within the school building with administrators.

“Failing as a teacher was not an option for me” (Jennifer). Jennifer’s approach to education was certainly framed by this unwavering dedication to success. She worked diligently and purposefully to become the best teacher that she could be. “I always viewed my teaching as an exercise in excellence. I was always prepared for my students because I understood the consequences of not being prepared and what message that would send to the students in my classroom. That they weren’t worth it or they didn’t deserve a prepared and effective teacher” (Jennifer). The way she approaches teaching in her classroom is important as we come to understand the ways she works to educate children. Her activism is evidenced by the purposeful and intentional ways she engages as a teacher.

Jennifer began her narrative by drawing attention to her 15 years of teaching experience. Her writing took her on “a stroll down memory lane” to her first year of teaching (Jennifer). Her narrative focused on two primary ideas: trusting self and demonstration of care. I focused on *trusting self* when I looked at the narratives collectively as a researcher, but the lesson of *demonstrating care* is equally important. At the beginning of Jennifer’s recollection, before she discussed her experience with Peter, Jennifer shared:

Second month into the school year I was given a fifth-grade class straight from hell. I can recall being called to the principal’s office Friday prior to dismissal. Ms. Jones\*, effective Monday morning, you will take full control of class 5-512. The building will be opened on Saturday so feel free to come in and fix the room to your liking. At that moment I wanted to say no thank you however, I knew not to turn down an opportunity. Failing as a teacher was not an option for me. (Jennifer, Narrative)

Reading the beginning section of her narrative, I had many questions. Did she have contact with the class before? Was she assuming “hell” because the original classroom teacher quit and

abandoned the students two months into the school year? Why did the principal wait until Friday at dismissal to tell her this? Did she go into the school building on Saturday to “fix the room”? These were some of the questions that I inquired about in our first interview. Jennifer traveled back to the school that weekend, boyfriend and cousin in tow.

We spent hours there, just cleaning and organizing. I threw away a lot of junk that was in the classroom and made it my own. I hung bright bulletin board paper and borders on all the bulletin boards. I portioned out the classroom with easy to read labels. I had Brian help me move the large teacher desk to the back of the room. I pulled off the post-it notes with students' names scribbled on that were stuck on desks and scrubbed them clean. I replaced the post-its with nameplates that had different things on them, like cursive, fractions, planets and some other stuff. I wrote each one of the students' names with black marker and taped them down onto the desks. I remember overlapping the tape so it would be next to impossible for the students to stick their pens or fingers under and rip off. I had Brian scrape off any gum and stuff from underneath their desks. I stopped short of going into their desks and cleaning out the crumpled papers shoved in many of them. I wanted to respect their privacy but it was on my agenda for Monday morning. And I hung some pictures and posters. I made the classroom homey. At the end of the day, my cousin Rachel said we should have taken before and after pictures. I remember feeling and being really proud of what had been accomplished. And being really exhausted.

(Jennifer, Narrative)

Jennifer viewed the classroom as an extension of home. In doing so, she ensured that it was clean and there was a sense of permanency with the nameplates taped on to desks for students. Involving her family and her boyfriend on a Saturday indicated a commitment to the students

and her profession. Decluttering the classroom demonstrated an understanding that students tend to work better when there is a sense of organization and further demonstrates an ethic of care. Her demonstration of care was also evident in the ways she cared for her student, Peter. A student's perception of care by their teachers is important for more than academic success. While academic success is largely focused on, particularly when discussing school reform, we should not be so narrowly confined to educational reform for student academic improvement. Rather, radical transformation of schooling's purpose must be at the heart of reform, focusing on young people in these spaces feeling valued, cared for, and being affirmed.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) insisted that "in order to understand the caring demonstrated by African American women teachers, it is critical that we contextualize their thoughts and actions within their particular cultural and historical legacies" (p. 280). Research on teacher activists (Dixson, 2003; Henry, 1998) emphasizes their sense of responsibility developed from a tradition of struggle. The tradition of struggle is not an exclusive factor tied to this development, however. The hope and ability to imagine a different future are also components essential to activism.

Jennifer's actions on that Saturday morning demonstrate care. Building on previous studies related to perception and demonstration of care, Jennifer's teacher narrative depicts the practical ways in which she exhibited concern for students and families in her classroom. Demonstration of care is the actual performed work done by the Black women teachers, those in this study and those whose teaching way of life mirrors these types of behaviors. A *demonstration* of care differs from a *perception* of care due to the demonstrative and tangible actions that students experience. Students do not have to guess about their teachers' beliefs about them. The word *care* has long been associated with women and femininity. This is not to say that

only those people that identify as women are caring, but historic notions of care have been attributed to woman and even more so to Black women. For example, Black enslaved women in the United States were often caregivers to the children of their white slave masters at the expense of their own children. The term *mammy* derived from this practice and has persisted into contemporary times. The image remains of a Black woman caring for everybody: nannies to babies just beginning life and caregivers to the elderly. This is the history I draw on when I talk about care in relation to this narrative. Because Black women endure at the intersections of many oppressions, we have developed significant amounts of empathy. Jennifer engaged in acts that showcased her willingness to do what some consider small things, but what I assert are big impact practices often overlooked and downplayed in comparison to so-called real teaching.

At the time of this study, Jennifer had shifted out of the classroom into a coaching position at a middle school. In this new position, Jennifer works closely with classroom teachers to improve classroom engagement and lesson delivery. “It’s different. I get why the teachers do some of the things they do because I was there, but on this side you see the overall implications of what teachers do. I think that’s what’s missing... the connection, there’s a gap in understanding and awareness on both ends” (Jennifer, I3). Jennifer has acquired master degrees in elementary education and educational leadership. At the time of the research, Jennifer was entering her 17<sup>th</sup> year of teaching.

**Embodying Excellence in Teaching: Dominique Davis, Middle School Teacher in New York State**

*“When you are Black and good in a school building, it is a lonely place to be.”* (Interview 2,

Dominique Davis, August 4, 2015)

Dominique was born and grew up in a very suburban town (actually a village) in Lands

End, NY. Located only 25 minutes from New York City, it seemed like she and her mom lived in a different world. Dominique's narrative begins with her mother's (Ms. Danielle's) story. Dominique's mother met her father while they were in college attending the same university. She was born during Ms. Danielle's senior year when Ms. Danielle was 21 years old. Ms. Danielle did not finish college at that time, and never married her father. Dominique's father was from upstate NY. Dominique grew up in the family home, which was a two-family house in the middle of the village. Dominique lived upstairs with her mother and her grandmother. An uncle, 14 years her senior, lived downstairs. Their proximity in age allowed the uncle and niece to grow up together. "We would fight over the best cereal in the snack packages" (Dominique, Interview 1, September 1, 2015).

Dominique's family extended to an aunt who was four years older than her mom. Her aunt was married and lived in New York City. She was a fashion designer, and her husband was a producer. Her aunt and uncle eventually moved closer to the family "on the rich side of town" (Dominique, I1). They bought a house that Dominique describes as "enormous" with a pool, media room, studio, eight rooms, and six bathrooms. In Dominique's opinion, it was the "best". Dominique would go over to this house and have the time of her life, running from room to room, and then to one more room.

Though not as large as her aunt's home, Dominique had a great house with a beautiful back yard, and great toys like bikes, roller skates, pogo sticks, etc. The families' lives were spent together even though they lived in separate spaces. Dominique ate dinner upstairs sometimes and downstairs the other times. It was a relatively serene time for Dominique. Her mother worked as a home daycare provider so she was home all of the time. The stability and consistency provided by financial security and familial connectedness made it possible for Dominique to thrive as a



young girl.

The matriarch of the family was Dominique's grandmother with whom she was very close. "I did everything with her" (Dominique, I1). When Dominique was about eight years old, Ms. Danielle went to work at a group home on the 3 pm to 12 am shift, and Dominique was with her grandmother more than ever. Dominique's grandmother worked for the Postal Service and was home every day at 3:00 pm. She would fix Dominique an after school snack each day. Dominique's grandmother even took her along when she would go out and play cards. Dominique shares these memories with periodic smiles and heartfelt laughter. It is sweet to hear and envision Dominique as a little girl, running room to room in one house, riding her bike in the village, having meals in multiple places, and holding her grandmother's hand on the way to the card game. When one listens to Dominique's memories, it is easy to imagine her childhood. Dominique's mother married her stepfather in 1986.

They had a fabulous wedding and I was the flower girl. We all lived upstairs and had a great life. He was a DPW (Department of Public Works) worker for one of the neighboring towns. He earned a decent salary and we always had what we needed and then some. His family lived in the next town, so there was always love and family surrounding me. (Dominique, I1)

Dominique was somewhat subdued as a child with not much energy or activity. She was easy going, loved to dress "fancy" and hated wearing hats in winter (Dominique, I1).

My childhood was filled with board games, teen magazines (Right On and Word Up as I got older) black and white TV in some rooms and color TV in others. My best friend and I would record on a VHS tape music videos and then play and rewind them over and over to learn dance moves. I watched ABC afterschool specials and took the lessons to heart

LOL...I grew up watching Saturday morning cartoons and eating Cocoa Puffs.

(Dominique)

Dominique attended Catholic school, so there was a bit of an air that she had because “my mom didn't let me go to public school” (Dominique, I1). “There's a difference” she assured me with a laugh. Dominique was never defiant as a child, but she did get attitudes when upset and refused to talk. She was never disrespectful, but you could feel when she was upset. This did not go over so well with the nuns as she got older.

Dominique had great friends. Some of them lived in the neighborhood, but most of her friends were from school. At times, she had difficulty fitting in with the neighborhood kids because they thought that she was "uppity" because she did not go to the park, or because she didn't ride her bike past a certain point. Little did the neighborhood children know, but Dominique was not allowed to do either. There were rules in the family that were firmly articulated to her and she was expected to obey them. Dominique would read for fun. She read everything, even labels on boxes. Dominique's mother purchased a grey Volvo, which did not help her plight with the neighborhood children. “They didn't like that so much,” Dominique shared. The neighborhood children teased her for being rich, though Dominique disagrees with another smile and chuckle. “We so weren't. I ate hot dogs and beans and cube steak like everyone else” (Dominique, I1).

Dominique lived in this world until 1991. She described the next phase of her life “as when the bottom dropped out” (Dominique). Dominique's stepfather passed away suddenly and everything changed. The financial stability that was her reality was no longer there. The family finances were not the only change. Dominique's mother changed and decided she needed a new start. Ms. Danielle moved to Georgia in the summer of 1992. It was a transitional period in

Dominique's life. After having attended grades one through eight with the same twenty faces and knowing every child in the school by name, attending high school with 4000 students was stunning. However, Dominique made friends quickly because she was the "girl from New York". Dominique was always a good student and this pattern continued as she began to settle into her new life. Although Dominique adjusted in school almost seamlessly, the home life that Dominique had grown up in and treasured was vastly different.

When we moved to Georgia, we didn't have the same lifestyle that we had in New York.

There was no money and there were times my mother didn't eat because I did. She would cook one chicken breast and I would eat it and she would take it before I threw it away and eat what was left. I didn't realize it then, but now I see that was all she had. Those times were rough. When my stepfather died it was as if the bubble popped. We were poor and I knew it and I was resentful that we were even in this place, but after a while, things began to get better and I liked it. (Dominique, 11)

Just as she was settling, Dominique's mother decided to move them back to New York. Dominique remembered, "I actually didn't want to go because the life I left didn't exist anymore." Dominique returned to New York, and attended high school with the neighborhood kids that she grew up taking the bus with but with whom she never really had a true connection. This was hard. They were all teenagers and Dominique was the new girl. At this time, Dominique was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. "Starting the 11<sup>th</sup> grade with strangers isn't the most fun, but of course, I made the best of it and began making friends" (Dominique). By the time basketball season rolled around, "everything was ok" (Dominique). The small size of the town (village) had its advantages. Dominique's teachers that year had also taught her uncle (a star high school basketball player), her mother, and her aunt. This helped Dominique become a popular student in

high school.

Though Dominique remembers her childhood with warmth and love, there were some non-financial challenges. Dominique's mother was very socially conscious. Dominique was not allowed to play with dolls that did not look like her. Dominique recalled a time a friend came to visit. "Once my friend brought over a Barbie doll with blond hair and my mother took it and put it in a bag until her mother came to pick her up" (Dominique, I1). Dominique knew about race very early. Ms. Danielle would color in the faces on birthday cards to make the children appear black. "Sometimes she was a bit of a fanatic but in hindsight it was the best she could have done for me" (Dominique, I1).

After returning to New York, Dominique's mother remarried a Senegalese man. Upon meeting him she asked, "what in the world is this?" I was conscious, but had no clue as to the growing Western African population in Harlem where he was from. "He was lighter than my mother (who is super light). My first question to him was how are you light skinned LOL" (Dominique, I1). These experiences for Dominique caused her to gain a multi-layered perspective and opened her mind to other people's experiences. Dominique shared, "I never had this experience with the diaspora before and now him not being as dark as I had perceived in my head truly turned my supposed knowledge upside down. But he was a great person. His perspective definitely helped to shape my understanding of 'blackness' and being a member of the diaspora today" (Dominique, I1).

After high school graduation, Dominique attended a private university in upstate New York. Firmly grounded in her desire to become a teacher, she enrolled in the university's school of education. Dominique excelled as a student as a double major in education and African American studies. She was the top performing student in her education cohort and was highly

valued in her second major's programs. "I truly learned through my African-American studies program that I had to work twice as hard, think more deeply, and attend to more detail than other students attending the school" (Dominique, Interview 2, September 4, 2015). Her high grades and excellence throughout both the programs assisted Dominique when as she recalled a professor who "tried to get me kicked out" (Dominique, I2).

Because I was vocal and I questioned why she was teaching some of the ideas she was teaching I became her enemy. She got all the teachers in the program to try and say that I shouldn't continue on. Luckily there were other professors in the program that had my back. But it got to a point, I mean there was a meeting and everything in which my continuation in the program was in jeopardy. (Dominique, I2)

Dominique dedicated herself to becoming the best teacher she could be. She took leadership roles in her school and was tapped to develop the school district's English Language Arts curriculum. She excelled as a teacher, earned high honors, and continuously received distinction in areas pertaining to student achievement. She worked with well her colleagues and often assisted them in improving their instruction and delivery. Dominique felt isolated and alone in her school despite her success. "It's funny you know I get asked to help teachers all the time, but, and it's not like I do it for acknowledgement, but I do a lot of my best work in the shadows. My white colleagues are quite happy keeping me there" (Dominique, Interview 3, September 22, 2015). This experience of a shifting demographic school district has played a role in her reluctance to claim a teacher activist identity.

At the time of this study, Dominique had no desire to leave the classroom. She is currently teaching 7th grade English Language Arts. In her narrative piece, Dominique recalled a memory of being in her classroom on the last day of summer school. It was 92 degrees outside at

10:30 am. Her students were distracted by a box of donuts placed on the left edge of the table. Dominique decided to “cut them some slack, after all, I wasn’t super excited about teaching students about simplifying fractions to lowest terms as the sweat poured down my back in the gym with absolutely no air conditioning” (Dominique, Narrative). Dominique described her group of students as 12 students in a multi-grade group of incoming 5<sup>th</sup> graders to incoming 7<sup>th</sup> graders that “I could ‘handle’”. She used the quotation marks around “handle” and elaborated, “it is so funny to me how we in education seem to identify teachers who can ‘handle’ certain things while others absolutely cannot” (Dominique, Narrative). “Some of my coworkers would remark by saying, I was *super teacher* because ‘they could never teach those students’” (Dominique, Narrative). Perhaps it was her ability to handle things and her ability to be super that made this experience so profound for her. As she continued to describe her students as beginners (new to the country at early stages of language acquisition), she importantly points out, “I am not certified in English as a Second Language, but every time a new student came, they were placed in my homeroom and my math classes” (Dominique, Narrative). She wrote about having no problem with this practice of placing student in her class, because she was used to having students placed based on her ability to handle them.

Dominique decided that she would not teach, but instead pass out the donuts on that hot day. “They were so giddy and to see the innocence that sprinkles on the donuts could give these students is something that I will never forget” (Dominique, Narrative). Listening to her students as they talked quietly, eating their donuts and drinking their water, Dominique wrote:

I kept hearing the Spanish word for “walk” over and over amongst the students. I hadn’t taken a Spanish class since 11<sup>th</sup> grade, but I was certain I heard the students talking about walking. I listened closely and I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. One student, Erika,

was asking each student how they got to America. Again, I am not fluent in Spanish, but working in a district with a large Central and South American immigrant population, you do learn many things. As she was asking, all but two students responded by saying they walked. (Dominique)

When Dominique inquired as to what the students were talking about. She recounted hushed whispers and blank stares aimed in her direction. “Knowing that I have broken some unwritten code, I sit down with a donut and say, ‘It’s impossible to walk to Westford\*.’” Dominique recalls the students looked at each other and then at her, only to laugh. “Erika, the spokesperson for the group, says, ‘Miss, do you understand Spanish?’” (Dominique). After passing the group’s test, which consisted of several phrases in Spanish that Dominique was required to translate successfully, she earned the trust of the group. In her narrative, Dominique wrote that “being a woman of color, who actually grew up and attended the schools in which I now work, I have a unique connection. I think being able to cross the language barrier with the students showed them that I wasn’t just trying to infringe, but actually I was seeking to understand” (Dominique). The connection that Dominique alludes to has been researched extensively by different scholars.

“Miss I walked here from Ecuador.” Erika looked at me with her eyes and I could tell she wasn’t exaggerating. She wasn’t being the overly boisterous tale teller. I looked at the others and their reactions were the same. They each told their stories with their eyes. I didn’t know what to do next. I wanted to know more, but also knew that they were taking a risk opening up to me and I was taking a risk by listening. (Dominique)

The roles of teacher and student became inverted at a certain point. Dominique was no longer the teacher as she listened to story after story, receiving knowledge, “eagerly listening and anticipating.” As Dominique recounted Erika’s story, I was transfixed by her memory of the

experience. Erika's story was beautiful and poignantly retold by Dominique. There was trepidation, bravery, and as Dominique wrote of Erika's recollection, "courage and strength as well as robbed innocence because she was only 10 years old."

This moment in my career was pivotal because it allowed me to see that these children, babies in the grand scheme of life had experienced more than I would my entire life. It allowed my perspective to shift so that I began to see the whole child, not just the child in school. It allowed me to realize that once 3:05 came, they went home to be caregivers, cooks, babysitters, translators, and house cleaners. It allowed me to see how so many of our children have to balance the demands of life with the demands of school.

(Dominique, Narrative)

Dominique remembered Erika asking her whether she had papers, and expressed how deeply personal the conversation was to her. "Yes, I do have my papers" (Dominique, Narrative). Erika continued on to tell her that she was lucky to have her papers because having papers meant having a good life and that was all she herself was hoping for. Dominique's narrative continued with her recounting another student's story and also sharing that Erika ended up being in her math class that fall.

Erika was a student in my math class that fall. She had a wonderful mind and was as sharp as a tack. Whenever I graded her papers, I couldn't help but think that a year ago; she was walking through mountains trying to get to Westford\*. And now, here she was adding integers. I knew that every day she went home, her burden was heavy, but I also knew that her future was going to be determined because of education. I never stopped demanding her best because I knew that was all I could give her. I couldn't give her her "papers". I couldn't give her a mansion to live in, but I could give her the tools she



needed to be successful in school and ultimately life. I could know everything about her life outside of school, and still require excellence. Knowing about her life outside of school though helped me to not only require and want excellence but provide the support that would get her there. (Dominique, Narrative)

Dominique's desire for excellence positions itself firmly in what hooks (1994) refers to as engaged pedagogy. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks used her own teachers to reflect the practice of engaged pedagogy that nurtured her intellect so that she and her classmates could become scholars and thinkers. This is what Dominique does as well, even while recognizing the difficulties and challenges of students outside of school.

Dominique's narrative reminds us to see students as whole beings and not just as students in our classrooms learning at desks. Her writing demonstrates the importance of making authentic connections with students, because it is through these connections that we learn the core of who our students are. Teachers, such as Dominique, are able to experience joy with students when they make these vital connections.

There is something to be said about a connection. Whether along linguistic, ethnic, or racial lines, connections allow us to recognize ourselves in others. For Dominique, it allowed her to connect to lift up the voices of those that are rarely sought and routinely omitted from the conversations that need them most. Beyond this, connections require a knowing and respect that allow for transformation. Dominique and her students did not share a linguistic, ethnic, or racial connection. Dominique valued the language of many of the children within her school district. The connection Dominique had with her students moved beyond those readily and easily identified to something more essential: a connection based on recognized humanity. Referring back to the narrative when she wrote, Dominique pointed out that "working in a district with a

large Central and South American immigrant population, you do learn many things”.

Dominique’s phrase, “you do learn many things,” indicates an outlook that recognizes the importance of communities and families as teachers. There is a willingness to learn, and an understanding that learning must be required of educators as well in order to traverse many different literacies.

Dominique’s decision to present her students’ voices in her narrative was compelling. It would have been simple for her to write her narrative and share what she ultimately learned without the inclusion of Erika’s and other students’ words, but she centered her piece with the actual words shared with her. This is significant for many reasons as we think about the types of teachers we want present in our young people’s classrooms. Teachers who are committed to breaking linguistic barriers with students and families, along with those who are committed to lifting up the voices that are too often stifled and suppressed in schools and society, are the most needed.

The changing demographics of our public schools indicate a decline in the numbers of white students enrolled compared to the numbers of Hispanic students. Therefore, it is necessary to engage in discussions about language. Dominique discusses this in one of her interviews. These changing demographics have made it necessary for her as a teacher to acquire more than just the conversational language that she has picked up from working in her school district. Dominique is willing to use her marginal Spanish-speaking skills to gain trust with her students. This allowed her to hear Erika’s story and consequently use her written voice to lift another voice.

The voices and stories of young people, particularly children of color, in our schools and society are often been either systematically excluded or dismissed as confrontational or

aggressive. Therefore, the positioning of student voices within this narrative is not lost on me. When we as teachers silence student voice or cease to seek out student voice, we take away their opportunities to develop necessary capabilities, to speak, to disrupt, and “to trouble”. Dominique’s narrative encourages deeper examination into the ways our students’ voices are engaged in classrooms, schools, and communities. Dominique’s narrative implores us to rethink how we engage students in our classrooms.

Dominique’s pedagogy is rooted firmly in notions of excellence. She believes that teachers should encourage excellence for the students in their care, but also that teachers should demonstrate excellence in regards to their teaching practices. At the time of the study, Dominique was pondering returning to school.

**Raine Roberts, Elementary School Teacher in New York State**

*“I’ve never had the luxury of living just for me, I’ve always lived life in connection to my mother and siblings.”* (Interview 1, Raine Roberts, June 12, 2015)

Raine Roberts was born in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands to a 20-year-old mother, Ms. Sharena. Ms. Sharena became pregnant with Raine’s oldest brother, Ray, at the age of 14. By the time Raine was born, Ms. Sharena had another son, Evan, and had lost a child, Elena, two days after her birth. On one occasion, Ms. Sharena responded to Raine’s expression of sadness over this. “Don’t be sad because if she were here you would not be” (Raine). Raine remembered this growing up and promised to use her life in a way that would reflect this understanding.

Raine spent the first years of her life living on the island of St. Thomas in close proximity to her grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Ms. Sharena left her parents’ home at the age of 18, seeking as was told to Raine, “to raise my sons away from what I felt was a depressive environment and let them know they were not the cause of it. I wanted to raise them free from

name-calling, ridicule, and with the knowledge that I was their mother, not their sister in my parents' house" (Raine). By the time Ms. Sharena was 22, she left the island all together in search of a decent job and moved to New York City. With her children aged 7, 5, and 2, Ms. Sharena moved into her eldest brother's apartment in the Bronx, New York. She had plans to take her children to Disney Land as soon as she could and return to St. Thomas within ten years. Raine's mother remains in the Bronx and Raine has never been to Disney Land. Early life for Raine, her siblings, and mother was challenging.

Growing up in the South Bronx was complicated. I look back now and think of all the ways we were set up to fail but did not. I attribute this to my mother. She taught me strength of character, and instructed me to find my purpose. She shared with me on many occasions, "I want you to live a life that does not resemble this one. I want you to always fight for what you believe in and never be silent. (Raine, II)

As a young Black girl growing up with her two older brothers, a younger sister, and single mother in the Bronx, there were bouts of homelessness, periods of living in shelters, hunger that seemed to last too long, and laughter and joy.

There was a lot of laughter and joy! There was my mother despite not having a stable place to live showing up to school to see me receive my perfect attendance awards year after year. There were days in the new apartment that we moved into where we would all be in separate rooms heads buried in various books and being transported to different times. (Raine)

The new apartment, located in the South Bronx, was a result of someone reading a written piece that Raine's mother wrote about the struggles and joys of being a single mom to three children while being homeless. This may be one reason that education is profoundly important to her. It

was through literacy that Raine saw her life trajectory change. Raine's mother's love of writing and reading were passed down to her. "I don't remember my mother explicitly telling my brothers and me to read but I remember seeing her read often, she was always reading and she was always giving us books to read. I think my mother did that as a diversion for not only taking our minds off things, but also to quiet us down when we weren't supposed to be making noise" (Raine, 11). Raine's love of school was evident in the many perfect attendance awards she received. "Even when we were living in a shelter my mother found a way to get us to school" (Raine). Sometimes Raine and her brothers traveled between boroughs early morning and returned late in the evenings to make it to school. "We definitely did what we needed to do. My mom would get us up early and she would drop us at school and then return to Manhattan to work while we were in school" (Raine, 11). School was an opportunity to make her mom proud and also a space in which she could be a child.

It was in school that I was able to escape the harshness of a life routinely uprooted when rent could not be paid because you know...life! And long after the initial settling in of the apartment that my brother and his family now live in, there were eviction notices on the apartment door as I came home from basketball or volleyball practice while I attended both middle and high school. (Raine)

Raine viewed school as a consistency. There was an understanding and acknowledgement that she would learn and grow in school. There was something even more persistent, which provided sustenance for her.

There has always been the actual emotional and physical presence of mom. Even now as three out of her four children have either pursued or are in pursuit of doctoral degrees, she has no home of her own. Currently living with the only long-lasting father figure I

ever had (my uncle-her eldest brother), my mom has been the smartest woman I know. She is who I watched intervene on our way to see Winnie Mandela as a man on a street slapped and punched his wife while onlookers stood by and watched.

I learned to intervene from watching my mother on numerous occasions mediate our existence in a harsh world. I remember living in the shelter and looking back now, I see my mother's intervening as more proactive than reactive. So even as we were living in these conditions my mother was advocating for the families in the hotel. My mother was very proactive about building communities of people who she often said, 'would look out for my children even if I wasn't there because they knew I loved them and cared for their families too.' My mother became a liaison between the many non-profit programs that wanted to work with families in the hotel, the Children's Aid Society and the Coalition for the Homeless are some that I remember. They often would reach out to my mother first as a way to reach all the families. One Christmas my mother helped plan a Christmas dinner for the families and got toys donated and gifts donated to the families in the hotel. That night all the presents were wrapped and labeled in our room. Perhaps it is her unacknowledged brilliance by outsiders, tapped yet unending reservoir of strength that I draw from. (Raine, 11)

Raine shared her thoughts pertaining to Black women teachers. "My mother was my first teacher. Often times I would say that I did not have my first Black woman teacher until high school, this is not an accurate statement. My mother taught me many lessons, some taken for granted, and some not easily understood until much later in life, but she taught them" (Raine, 11).

Raine eventually graduated from high school and attended a private university in upstate New York. She travelled to school on the Greyhound bus alone, because there was no additional

money for her mother to accompany her. She transferred into the teacher preparation program during the spring semester of her freshman year. During her four and a half years at the university, she joined numerous organizations such as National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Club (NANBPWC), the Caribbean Student Union, and pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

Raine's pedagogy is rooted in the belief that schools should function as not only sites for knowledge acquisition but as respites from the increasingly harsh and unjust world. Her belief is that, in schools, students should be engaged in the active critique of the social structure around them and work to address these inequities in both thought and action.

### **Conclusion**

The Black women teachers in this study have had vastly different experiences, but they have commonalities as well. The experiences that shaped them serve as opportunities to engage in dialog with each other about these influences. Delving into the life-histories of these teachers helped to illuminate the many choices that they made over time and the ways in which their understandings of justice and children were enhanced. One of the benefits of conducting these types of examinations is understanding what informed the actions and beliefs that these teachers hold. It is essential that teachers honestly think about how their life and experiences impact the way they engage with children. The different experiences and upbringing of the participants further demonstrate the breadth of Black women's experience and how these experiences provide a framework in which these teachers would live and teach.

Despite the existence of stereotypes in discourses surrounding Black women, Black women are not wholly determined by those expectations. Consequently, Black women's lived experiences (each time we do well, each time we succeed, each time we speak up in a cafeteria

filled with white women, each time we are not silent, each time we operate beyond the parameters of the dominant narrative) create broader opportunities and acts of resistance. Our lived experiences give us pause to recognize that the master narrative is limiting. In understanding that, we imagine the possibilities from the margins of society, but more importantly from the center of us, beyond sheer survival for ourselves and others to a realized existence of thriving and living. The margin becomes, as hooks articulated, “more than just a site of deprivation... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance (1990, p. 149). The teachers in this study have all learned to operate from the margins by engaging in practices that aim to transform schooling experiences and outcomes for children.

The life histories included in this study make the participants visible to the reader in unique ways. It is especially important to include these biographical sketches in this study. I was able to create these life histories by reporting and analyzing what the participants wrote in their narratives and said in interview data. These revealed life experiences are inextricably connected to the engaged daily thinking and teaching practices of the participants. Their early childhood experiences in schools and in their families helped to shape the who they became. This chapter aligns with previous research that expressed that Black women’s pedagogical philosophies and practices are largely informed by their experiences. The data presented in this chapter highlights the complexity and nuance of Black women’s lived experience and the ways in which these experiences converge to cultivate these participants’ teaching practices and beliefs.



## **CHAPTER 5: SHE NEVER WALKED IN: TEACHER PREPARATION AND BLACK WOMEN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS**

In the previous chapter, I presented biographical profiles comprised of life history data along with teacher submitted narratives. In these profiles, there exist a clear commitment to strong student-centered advocacy in teaching and learning reflected in the teachers' actions and thoughts. By working in ways that foregrounded the students in their classrooms, schools, and communities, they placed significant value on actions that seek to improve and transform the conditions and experiences of young people. The Black women teachers in this study worked to create classroom and school cultures that were indicative of these commitments through their day to day work. Chapter 4 highlighted the specific ways that Black women engaged in activism even when these practices were not often discussed, and provided a context in which one can see the ways participants' early lives and educative experiences shaped the type of teacher these women would become.

This chapter presents the data gathered from the interviews conducted with the participants that pertains to teacher preparation, and aims to elucidate the experiences of the participants within their teacher preparation programs. Participants were interviewed over a period of three months during the summer and early fall of 2015. Each interview lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. Initial interviews began with questions that arose from a preliminary analysis of the narratives submitted. Some of these questions sought clarification of statements written in narratives while other questions sought the expansion of ideas presented in the narratives. The first interview also allowed for the obtaining of significant amounts of background knowledge from each of the participants. This background knowledge was used to construct the biographical profiles offered in Chapter 4. This allows us to see how specific experiences impacted the

development of the teachers in my study, and also to see what can be gained from such activities. The second set of interviews focused on the participants' experiences within their respective teacher preparation programs. While there existed many commonalities between the participants for this study, four significant themes emerged. Three major findings pointed to 1) isolation and marginalization, 2) silencing and voice suppression, 3) engaging silence and using voice, and 4) whiteness as a construct.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of the social construct of whiteness and its relevance to this study. A conglomerate characterization of whiteness is put forward, and establishes its relational impacts as integral to the study of Black women teachers specifically how the Black women teachers in this study became who they are within a structure of whiteness. In the second section, I provide a description of teacher preparation programs and the main components of such programs. The third section presents the findings from the interview transcripts, and emphasizes the commonalities mentioned above found throughout the data pertaining to teacher preparation. The insights presented here could help to drive necessary shifts in both K-12 and higher education.

**Whiteness: “I was like the little chocolate-chip left behind swimming in a glass of milk. Always swimming, always small in comparison.”**

The following section on Whiteness is purposefully and deliberately discussed outside of the study findings. Whiteness, within the context of this study, is a counter-resistance to Black women teachers' activism and Black women's presence in teacher preparation. Whiteness functions inherently as a defense mechanism of the White majority in spaces not traditionally occupied by Black women. Whiteness is the landscape in which Black girls and women have to navigate. It is the majority of White faculty in teacher preparation and the majority of White

women teachers in school staff meetings. Because Whiteness is so often unchecked and unnamed, it continues to be preserved and blameless. Whiteness is allowed to produce policies that maintain Whiteness. As a Black woman, teacher, and researcher, I utilize my voice, the voices of my participants, my writing, their writing, our collective work, and our struggle to not only illuminate Whiteness to those that do not see it, but to color the landscape in efforts to dismantle its oppressive nature. George Yancy (2000) wrote, “constituting itself as the site of absolute presence...as such, whiteness assumes the authority to marginalize other identities, discourses, perspectives, and voices. By constituting itself as center, non-white voices are Othered, marginalized and rendered voiceless” (p. 157). The participants’ experiences over the course of their lives and within teacher preparation programs are racialized experiences. Therefore, understanding the ways whiteness operates and impacts the participants is necessary and fitting for the purposes of this study. This is not to say that the interconnected nature of race, class, and gender can be decontextualized for Black women. However, I do believe that whiteness has an effect on what Brewer (1993) referred to as the “simultaneous forces” whose meaning can be understood within the context of their intersection (p. 16). For the participants, who were also once little Black girls in K-12 schools, whiteness as a structure has perpetually shaped the learning and living environments that they must navigate.

Unless you are *woke*, to borrow a term from socially conscious speakers, whiteness exists unchecked and unmarked and is allowed to stand for the totality of experiences (Yancy, 2000). The notion of being woke is simply being aware and knowing what is going on in society, particularly when it pertains to social justice issues. Whiteness provides an environment in which all other non-white people are routinely and systematically held to the standard of whiteness. For Black women growing up in a world where whiteness is privileged, it signifies lack of health

care, unsolicited touching of our hair with remarks of its uniqueness and strangeness, disinvestment from schools in predominantly black communities, and a constricted flow of opportunity, among many other things. It means you can be arrested for a traffic violation and die in police custody. It means that as a Black girl you can be accosted by those in power while swimming at a pool (Cole-Frowe, 2015), or sitting at your desk at school (Brown, Rees & Izadi, 2015). Black girls can be placed in juvenile detention centers, and be dead less than 24 hours with no one required to answer how and why (Graham, 2016).

For Black women, their very arrival on predominantly and historically white college campuses is an act of resistance and revolution. Higher education in the United States was developed for elite, white, men, and is still dominated by these perspectives while other perspectives are rarely found in teaching or research. According to Lomotey (2010), U.S. higher education is rooted in the establishment of the predominantly white college, but over time has changed and proliferated. “The patterns and traditions of White colleges and universities are rooted in those of Western Europe” (Lomotey, 2010, p. 523). Enrolling in, learning in, and graduating from teacher preparation programs whose student body and faculty presence takes on the visible manifestation of whiteness is both an act of resistance and revolution. Whiteness, as framed herein, perpetuates the neglect of the experiences of teachers of color. Villegas and Davis (2008) accentuated that teachers of color have been “largely overlooked in teacher education. One might argue that this void is symptomatic of the relatively low percentage of students of color within teacher preparation programs and consequently the teaching force” (p. 596). bell hooks (1981) wrote, “in a racially imperialist nation such as ours, it is the dominant race that reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily

aware of their racial identity. It is the dominant race that can make it seem their experience is representative” (p. 138).

In most of their writing, the white American woman’s experience is made synonymous with the American woman’s experience. While it is in no way racist for any author to write a book exclusively about white women, it is fundamentally racist for books to be published that focus solely on the American white woman’s experience in which that experience is assumed to be the American woman’s experience. (hooks, 1981, p. 137)

In public school institutions as well as institutions of higher learning, Black girls and women have to learn and become who they were under this veil of whiteness. The Black women who participated in this study were taught at historically and PWIs of higher education. This is imperative to keep at the forefront of their classroom experiences, field placements, and student teaching experiences. They were all completed in the presence and under the structure of whiteness. This whiteness is apparent in teacher preparation programs and the composition of the predominantly white teaching force. Whiteness is not limited to the overwhelming visible manifestation witnessed daily.

To speak of whiteness... refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced, and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination. Naming whiteness displaces it from unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of dominance. Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility. (Frankenberg & Mani, 1993, p. 6)

However, whiteness operates markedly differently on non-white people. For example, the Black woman teachers in this study felt “strange,” “alone,” “uncommon,” “different,” and “unusual”.

They also remembered feeling hyper-visible. This is in direct contrast to what was articulated by Frankenberg and Mani (1993).

I made a conscious decision early on in my program to sit in the front of the class. I thought I'd make it easy on the professors, not that it would be difficult to spot me. I was like the little chocolate-chip left behind swimming in a glass of milk. Always swimming, always small in comparison. (Lisa)

Lisa's analogy paints a vivid picture of just how isolating and overwhelming whiteness was for her and can be for others like her within teacher education programs. Her "always swimming" phrase reminded me of a character from one of my favorite animated movies, *Finding Nemo*, in which Dory repeats, just keep swimming as her response and action to times when life gets her down. Black women becoming teachers in sites dominated by whiteness are seldom allowed to rest and often carry heavy burdens while also learning the pedagogical skills associated with the profession. Lisa's follow up phrase, "always small in comparison" was not about her insecurities with who she was, but more about what she was not able to do because of who she was. When asked for further clarification, Lisa remarked, "I always felt like I could hold my own but I never felt loud enough. Like there wasn't enough of me to be louder or even as loud as my friends." The phrase also seems to allude to perceived strength in numbers. This is particularly significant because as often times designated and tokenized representatives of their race, the number of Black pre-service teachers in teacher preparation programs is minute in comparison to their white counterparts.

How did this type of experience, a feeling of not being loud enough, impact Lisa and others who have had similar experiences? Whiteness does not only render people invisible, but also works to muffle and silence voices. In cases such as Lisa's, whiteness moved beyond the

invisibilizing to the silencing that occurs when maintaining whiteness is a priority. The experience speaks to a formation of a norm of silence that exists in teacher preparation programs attended by the participants. As a system of ideologies and material effects (privilege and oppression), whiteness is also a well-entrenched structure that is manifested in and gives shape to institutions (Castagno, 2008). In this study, whiteness worked to shape both the silence and absence of voices of Black women voices and bodies in teacher preparation programs.

Whiteness is not singularly understood in terms of locations (Frankenberg & Mani, 1993). In reality, for people of color, whiteness just is. Whiteness is not relegated to the sidelines or the margins. Whiteness is everywhere and it is suffocating. This is true in society as well as institutions such as schools. As Aveling (2001) shared, “in teacher education Whiteness is epitomized in history, symbolized in language, and glorified in culture” (p. 38). Whiteness is viewed as natural, normal, and desirable. Foregrounding this understanding of whiteness in the context of the participants’ academic preparation is critical. How they come to be who they are as well as the types of teachers they become was largely shaped by these experiences. Hall (2000) conveys that “identity is not already ‘there’; rather, it is a production, emergent, in process” (p. 24).

Whiteness challenges the very belief of excellence for people of color. Learning through whiteness for the participants in this study was a constant negotiation of self in spaces that were not perceived by participants as welcoming or transformative. Viewed as tokens in their programs, participants described never feeling of equal status with their white counterparts. The desire to not just feel, but rather be, of equal status is crucial as extremely underrepresented groups are often scrutinized and their very presence is always in question. Lisa recalls, “I never felt like I could skate by. You know I couldn’t go out and party and then show up to class

groggy. I wouldn't have been assumed to be tired or sick. I would probably have had a hangover. I just always felt like I just couldn't be anything less than ideal.”

Past research has indicated that many educational programs that espouse a social justice orientation often present its work in frames that perpetuate racism and continued bias. Teacher preparations infused with social justice often privilege whiteness at the expense of minority others (Juarez, Smith, & Hayes, 2008). Data gathered from this study further substantiates this claim, and provides additional motivation to examine teacher preparation models in this context and also to challenge and transform the approaches utilized to prepare teachers. Tazarea reflected on her schooling within an education program, and shared her surprise at stepping into an inner-city school and finding white children.

This was not my experience. You know in our classes everything is framed in a certain way and we're given these sort of disclaimers as to what we would be seeing when we walked into these places [urban placements]. I felt in my most of my education classes I was being prepared to go to war when we talked about urban placement and majority black kids. The conversations never included that we would see poor white kids, struggling just as much, living just as poor as the black kids whose parents we were often told might be absent from their lives. So I was at a complete lost when it was the blonde haired, blue-eyed Johnny kicking at my chair. The discussions in class set us up to view certain students in very interesting ways, like we were supposed to go in and save them, and make their world better. We were supposed to be their saviors. (Tazarea, Interview 2, June 20, 2015)

Critical race theory helps us to examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, patterns, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p.



70). In this particular instance, the message relayed to Tazarea and other teacher candidates positioned students of color as enemies. The language of war requires questioning who and what are battled against. The racism embedded in code words such as war, language of poverty, broken families, and trauma attempt to disguise CRT, and allow for a critique of the assumption that students of color come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies that necessitate a type of preparation parallel to that of war. Tazarea's reflection reveals the very way in which privileging whiteness supports an education system that continues to wreak havoc on children of color in our schools. It was apparent from this experience that in attempting to ready teachers for the "front line" of teaching, teacher educators were directly and indirectly setting future teachers up to associate certain negative views with specific children. Tazarea is critiquing the system and calling out whiteness as she sees how it adversely affects the children that she serves. The views that are carried into classrooms on a daily basis operate as barricades to positive outcomes and experiences in schooling for many of our nation's students, particularly in our most marginalized and disenfranchised communities. Outcomes and experiences for both teachers and students are inextricably linked. Learning to teach and teaching all children effectively is a demographic imperative (Banks, 1991). Yet, an inability to do this in any sustaining way persists. The failure to effectively prepare teachers to teach all children is evident, however, it is also strikingly clear that marked success was gained in maintaining whiteness in its uninterrupted and uncolored existence.

At the core, Black women students attending and graduating from historically white institutions, particularly in programs that are even more racially isolated than the college campus, and Black women activist teachers endeavor to deconstruct and dismantle oppressive structures that impede their success and their students' education, growth, and well-being. To be

a Black woman in teacher preparation or a Black woman teacher is to contend on a daily basis with a counter-resistance within an inherently White landscape. The experiences keenly felt by Black women and girls, because of the historical positioning of Black women at the bottom of the power hierarchy, is what positions us to be teacher activists. Ironically, it is this reality that best positions Black women teachers and Black women students in White-dominated spaces to readily identify the negative effects of oppressive structures and advocate for all students. Understanding the structure of whiteness and the ways in which the participants in the study experienced their teacher preparation programs is essential. It is equally important to understand exactly what is meant when the term *traditional teacher preparation* is presented.

### **Contextualizing Teacher Preparation Programs**

This section speaks precisely to teacher preparation programs and the ways teacher educators develop future educators to engage in various teaching practices. I begin this section with a contextualizing of teacher preparation programs. This includes my understanding of teacher preparation programs framed by multiple lenses as a former undergraduate student and graduate of a traditional teacher education program, a current doctoral candidate within a teacher preparation program, and as an instructor within a teacher preparation program. These three lenses allow me to have an informed perspective on the general composition of traditional teacher education programs.

While those in the education field have a firm sense of what traditional teacher preparation programs consist of, I thought it important to provide a sense of these components to those readers who may not be educators or may not belong to the field of education. As criticisms of teacher preparation program continue, it is important to have an understanding of the components embedded in teacher preparation programs.

Traditional, undergraduate teacher preparation programs are four-year programs that include courses in general education and other specialized courses. The degree program integrates content knowledge, professional knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge in depth to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for the teacher candidates. In some instances, candidates might have a certification area focus. This ultimately leads to teaching candidates' eligibility for certification at different grade levels. In some instances, as in middle and high school, teacher candidates receive content specialization in a designated content field.

The experiences of pre-service teachers can summarily be contextualized to include classroom experiences along with required coursework, practicum field placements, and student teaching. Though participants of this study had mixed feelings in regards to their overall experiences within their teacher preparation programs, they all recognized their time in these programs as critical moments in their development as teachers. Overall, the Black women teachers felt fortunate to have had teaching education that provided foundational knowledge and educational theory that helped them to ultimately become teachers. The initial site in which pre-service teachers receive foundational knowledge is through their classroom experience and coursework. In the section, I present the participants' accounts and experiences with the coursework within their teacher preparation programs. The experiences of the participants related to field work and student teaching are presented immediately following the description of the two components, as these were the primary themes that emerged from the interviews.

### **Classroom Experience and Course Work**

Experiences within teacher preparation programs typically involve students attending classes that focus on theory and foundations of teaching and learning. The coursework varies and aims to build pedagogical skills and foundational knowledge related to topics such as student

learning. Students within these programs are instructed in classroom strategies and are exposed to research-identified best practices. The Black women teachers in this study all identified their teacher preparation programs as being either social justice focused or multicultural focused education programs. This is not surprising as many teacher preparation programs made a conscious shift to include these characteristics after the continued persistence of the ill-labeled achievement gap which as Ladson-Billings (2006) said is more of an educational debt or opportunity gap, or as Nieto (2000) calls a resource gap or the caring gap, because “the gap is often a result of widely varying resources provided to students based on their zip codes, as well as widely varying amounts of support and care given to children based on their identities” (p. 8).

When asked about their programs’ commitment to social justice education, participants found that though espoused in the programs’ literature, topics of social justice were not readily discussed in classrooms. One participant, Lisa, said “if you say you are an urban education teacher preparation program, how can your coursework and very conceptualizing of your program not be about making things better for the students in our public schools but more particularly black students.” Raine offered this statement as a response to the lack of social justice teacher education in her teacher prep program. “While my program reported to focus on multiculturalism and social justice, there were relatively few professors who were willing to engage in this type of teaching and learning. I don’t think they (the professors) themselves had a firm understanding of the factors or they did not know how to facilitate these tense classes” (Raine). Jennifer stated, “though my program was focused on multicultural education, it wasn’t as though it was threaded throughout my classes. There were still very distinct courses and times that conversations pertaining to race, class, poverty and all those other ‘multicultural’ topics were addressed.” The responses offered by Lisa, Raine, and Jennifer point to the dissonance

between espoused theory and truly practiced theory at their educational institutions. The espoused theory illustrates that people are unaware that their practiced theories or their “theories in use” do not mirror or align with their espoused theories, and even further that they are often unaware of their theories in use (Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985, p. 82). This is significant because deans of schools and program developers often design programs or buy into conceptions that are viewed as transformative, but implementation at their universities does not match. Yet, they think they do. This takes shape in other ways for preservice teachers. I am often asked while working with pre-service teachers, “But Reba, why is it that what we are learning here doesn’t reflect what we are seeing in the field?” This is an important question for pre-service teachers who are learning and then being expected to perform in ways that reflect and demonstrate their understanding.

Coursework in teacher preparation was described as busy work. “My time spent in actual class and completing mandatory assignments was not memorable. I just remember being busy all the time” (Tazarea, I2). Lisa recalled her own sense of disappointment in her teacher preparatory classes in the following way. “A great deal of the work I would categorize as busy work. It required little cognitive demand and shallow reflection. I knew I had to play the game in order to push through and make it to and through the next hoop” (Lisa, I2).

When I look back at the time I spent on assignments in both my majors, it is clear to me that my work in AAS was more challenging because I had to do more readings but not empty readings just because. But readings that would encourage me to think and question. Now the coursework and assignments in my education classes kept me busy. I focused on my reflections more than anything because I knew those would help me become a better teacher, but the other work it was just different. It was a different kind of

work, something that I always seemed to be doing but reflective and critical, not really.

(Dominique, I2)

It is indeed very telling that the participants in this study collectively considered their coursework in teacher preparation to be rudimentary and busy work, especially as teachers learning about the ill-advised assigning of busy work.

The coursework that I experienced while enrolled in my teacher preparation program was focused on content and not very strategic on how to teach it. And if we did talk strategies at any time, it wasn't really about engaging all students and how to differentiate or being culturally competent. We didn't touch on any of that. Reflecting back now I question what we did cover (laughs). Also, I would add, the assignments did not really challenge me to think critically. (Janel, I2)

Both Dominique and Janel reveal gaps in their teacher preparation programs related to the coursework assigned. They bring into focus the criticality or lack thereof of the required classwork within their teacher preparation programs. Dominique further discussed the work she was expected to complete in her education classes in comparison to the work she had to do to fulfill her African American Studies requirements. Dominique shared:

When I completed reflections about my school day a requirement in my teacher ed. program I did so purposefully. I would always ask what does this mean for me as the teacher? This is the moment when you have to construct some meaning from what just happened, so those reflections for me were really purposeful. When I happened to see the other reflections that were coming in, they were very surface, like oh I did this. I did that. So and so didn't have colors, so I gave him a pink and he was so happy. I'm like that was it, and I'm like really? That's what you're writing down. Like my reflections were like

five pages long whereas others were like two pages, double spaced. I'm like you handed that in? Are you serious? But again coming from AAS background, I'm like oh, I don't even use double space. We use that? My Social Studies methods professor said something to me about keeping my reflections. She's like, "These are great. Can I keep a copy? She was like there's so much insight, you were taking this seriously. I was like well, you kind of have to. (Dominique, I2)

Dominique's professor commented on the insight in Dominique's reflections and wanted to copy them, presumably to use them as exemplars for future students. This illustrates the professor's recognition that Dominique was engaged differently, more critically with the assignment required. Dominique recalled, "at first, I was flattered and was like just tell me before you make them available, but then I began to wonder, besides the insight was there some other reason she was surprised or impressed by my work." Experiences such as these, when Black women begin to question their excellence, are not isolated. They are shared experiences, and the more that these common barriers are identified, the more stories and access to wisdom can be had by future pre-service teachers.

The rudimentary characterization of course work was not the only problem that the Black women teachers in this study identified. The participants also highlighted the absence of contributions to the teaching profession of various scholars, but particularly Black women scholars. Responding to my question, "Were there reflections of you in your teacher preparation materials or textbooks?" I received some eye rolls and side-eyes. However, I can say that all except one of the Black women teachers had some exposure to Ladson-Billings (2009a) profession shaping work *Dream Keepers*. Raine articulated, "that was the only book I kept upon graduation. I still have it." Lisa shared, "I remember one class in all of my classes used the

Dream Keepers book.” The importance of being exposed to one of the most influential and important scholarly and contemporary writings by a Black woman was a repeated theme in interview responses. I was curious, after hearing this common name, if the teachers had any other experience with reflections of themselves in their curriculum. The fact that none of the Black women teachers could name any specific instance of engaging in learning that foregrounded the work of Black women scholars and intellectuals was not surprising. Many texts neglect to mention the complex histories of and realities of people of color in this country or merely acknowledge them in very marginal and superficial ways (Perez Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006). When teacher preparations fail to provide opportunities for teachers to engage in texts with alternate perspectives, it reinforces and promotes white cultural values and perspectives (Kohli, 2009). Jennifer shared an experience that occurred between her and a faculty member because of her experience with the BSU on campus. She became critical of how and what she was learning in her education courses.

I remember after one of the BSU meetings, we were all really aware of the space we were in. That even though we were there like why were we there. I remember going to my professor after class and it was like a history of education course. And I asked him, “Are we going to learn about the Freedom Schools?” I remember he looked at me and said, “We don’t have time to cover the entire span of education in this country.” I’m not sure he was aware of the history of the Freedom Schools and how integral they were. He told me if I wanted to write an extra credit paper on the Freedom Schools for my purposes that would be fine with him. I was getting an A in the class, I didn’t need extra credit. (Jennifer, I2)



The memory that Jennifer shared regarding this interaction with one of her professors is informative on many fronts. First, it is clear that belonging to a student group such as the BSU afforded Jennifer some support on her predominantly white campus. What is troubling about this recollection is the message that is sent about the inclusion of the historic offerings made by Black scholars. The message that is reified by the professor's response is that only some contributions are valuable and the white male professor can serve as the gatekeeper. In other words, Dominique's male professor operated from status at center while placing Dominique's learning at the margin. Delpit (1988) noted that those in the culture of power are frequently unaware of their power positions and consequent actions, assuming to know that they know what is best for everyone else. There is constrained time within courses and it is quite clear that one cannot cover every idea in a single course. However, which history gets selected to be the core of the class and which history gets relegated to the sidelines for individual purposes as extra credit, has an impact on students' understandings. According to Kohli (2009), by prioritizing contributions from European history, and ignoring or tokenizing the contributions and experiences of non-whites, affirms a racial hierarchy. Lisa shared a similar story that transpired between her and one of her professors.

I raised my hand in class one morning. I was a little bit tentative but I had a question that I wanted an answer to. One of my methods classes. I said, "one of the things we keep hearing in this class is how important it is to engage in culturally relevant teaching and to make sure that we use various texts and materials in our classrooms, and I'm just curious when we will experience that here. I must admit maybe it came off wrong or maybe I should have said something in private, but this wasn't just my issue, this should have been everyone's issue. (Lisa, I2)

**Field Placements and Practicums**

Field placements and practicums provide opportunities for prospective teachers to work closely with mentor teachers, university liaisons, and university course instructors to practice what they have learned and continue to learn about subject matter, curriculum, pedagogy, and learners. Field placements ensure that students have ample opportunity for practical experience within K-12 schools. For the most part, universities and school districts have developed district/university partnerships that are mutually beneficial. Universities benefit from the collaboration in access to classrooms and students to help further develop pre-service teachers. School districts benefit from the presence of additional human resources in classrooms and schools. Though this collaboration is mutually beneficial, there does appear to be dissonance between what is learned in university spaces and what is experienced in school district spaces.

Field placements or practicums provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to explore and encounter realities of classroom life early on in their formal preparation. Additional opportunities are provided for pre-service teachers to engage with young people in various settings that may not or may not occur within a school building. During this time, pre-service teachers may be present in classrooms, observing and implementing small group work under the guidance of a practicing cooperating teacher. Pre-service teachers are supervised throughout this time, mostly by retired educators, doctoral students, or other educators.

**Student Teaching**

Student teaching experiences are often combined with a student teaching seminar. These experiences occur later in the formal preparation program, and involve student teachers taking on the role of a classroom teacher through extensive lesson planning and delivery of instruction. The experiences are usually the only courses that student teachers are enrolled in at the time to

provide some resemblance to real-world teaching. Real-world teaching provides student teachers the opportunity to utilize the knowledge they have acquired through coursework and classroom experience.

These components make up the teaching preparation programs for vast numbers of teacher candidates. The participants in the current study agreed that the topics discussed in this section constitute a reflective view of their respective teacher preparation programs. The next section of this chapter reports on the findings related to teacher preparation programs. These findings include: 1) marginalization and isolation, 2) silencing and voice suppression, and 3) engaging silence and using voice.

### **Silence and Isolation in Teacher Preparation Programs**

#### **Marginalization and Isolation in Teacher Preparation Programs**

Feelings stemming from marginalization and isolation were consistently revealed while discussing experiences within teacher preparation programs. These feelings were present while participants attended universities and colleges to earn their teaching credentials. In a field such as education that is often marginalized, it is inevitable that the students in such a field would have feelings of being sidelined, isolated, and viewed as after thoughts.

Any of us who have paid attention have heard much over the years about how teacher education is a marginalized field about how we who are charged with the preparation of teachers for public school classrooms must operate from the margins, from positions of limited power and authority, responsible to many others and not given adequate responsibility and authority to effectively accomplish that with which we are charged...By definition all public endeavors are carried out on the cheap, by the lowest bidder, and this dynamic has always plagued our public schools. Add the factor that

teaching has been and continues to be primarily a women's profession, within a societal complex that even today pays women 20% less for equal work, and even more poorly when they, women are the vast majority of any sector of the work force, such as teaching. (Jones, 2009, p. 9)

The feelings identified may affect all pre-service women teacher candidates, however, Black Feminist Thought and intersectionality allows me to understand how these feelings are intensified for Black women in white female dominated spaces, especially as relates to peers, professors, instructors, supervisors, and host teachers.

I remember sitting in class one day, truly excited because we were about to be out in the field student teaching. We were there that day to meet the supervisors who would come and observe us teaching throughout the semester. I just remember sitting there and they began walking in. One after the other. There were about eight of them I think, and I kept looking to the door, wondering is there a Black one? Sounds strange right, but I really remember my eyes on the door hoping that a Black woman would walk in. (Lisa, I2)

When asked, if a "Black one" ever walked in, Lisa replied by sucking her teeth, laughing, and said "no Reba, she never walked in." Lisa's account reveals the depths of isolation that occur within teacher preparation programs that are not limited to the only student, but often the only Black face in their entire programs from professors, instructors, host teachers to supervisors. The encounters of the teachers in this study were varied, but their results were similar.

It was really frustrating for me to participate and share thoughts because I always felt as if my thoughts were not valued. There were times when I would share an opinion and the professor wouldn't engage with me. But then one of my white peers would say the same thing but maybe switch up a word or two and it would spark this great discussion. This

happened to me quite often and then I couldn't retreat, you know because then they would say I was angry or I had an attitude so I was always trying to figure out how to be in a space that didn't value me or my thoughts. (Janel, I2)

Janel's feelings of frustration at not feeling valued is heightened because she also feels unable to retreat. The frustration is compounded because she knows what comes along with her retreat. Black women, especially students in institutionalized classrooms, are not afforded the same space as their white counterparts to be quiet or angry. Their quietness signals something else. Their quietness signals disengagement and anger towards everything, rather than isolated and warranted reactions to specific situations. Janel's description of the way she experienced marginalization is one that appeared consistently throughout the remaining participants. For example, Lisa described a time when she was left out of group work.

The girls in my cohort were always together. They would go to one another's houses, form study groups, and I wasn't invited. It made me work harder to prove that I should be in these groups. But even when I did this, it never was enough. So I spent a lot of time by myself. And this was consistent. It wasn't like this happened one time and that was it. (Lisa, I1)

Jennifer also discussed being isolated and alone. "I mean if it weren't for the Black Student Union, I don't know when I would have seen another face that looked like mine. There were absolutely no professors of color" (Jennifer, I2). The accounts that participants shared point to the additional labor that the Black women teachers in the study endured. Not only were they isolated and marginalized, but they internalized some of these messages as meaning they were not good enough. They had to learn who they were as emerging teachers in an environment that did not recognize, and refused to see, their value. Raine discussed isolation very descriptively.

Let me just say when I say I was alone I mean I was all by myself or at least that's how it felt. All my professors were white, the majority of my peers were white, my practicum supervisor was white, my field placement supervisor was white, my host teachers were white, and all the speakers that came into my university classes, guess what, were white. Anytime we talked about race issues I was singled out to offer the Black opinion. I always felt like there were eyes on me whenever we were talking about race or poverty. I always felt like people were watching to see how I'd react. This was exhausting physically, emotionally, and mentally. And yet I was still expected to perform. (Raine, I1)

What Raine described supports previous participants' revelations and again substantiates the additional burden that Black women in college classrooms on historically white campuses often carry. Acknowledging this as truth is important because it allows those in decision-making positions to attend to the factors that contribute to these types of stratified spaces. Tazarea acknowledged her own feelings of isolation when she relived the experience of walking into her Math Strategies class.

I should have grown used to being the only black girl in the class. I had been traveling in a group of aspiring teachers since my freshman year, mostly all white, predominantly all female, but it always struck me that I was the one and only. In this particular case, I felt alone because my math experience was completely different from their math experience, and even though they didn't have all of the same, exact math experiences, I could tell that overall, mine was like night and day. It was one of the times I felt most alone and insecure and I wondered if the path I was taking was the right one. (Tazarea, I1)

Anxiety-filled days such as those described by Tazarea, are common for pre-service teachers of color. The persistence in which pre-service teachers of color are exposed to isolation, insecurity, and self-doubt prevents non-traditional students from engaging fully in what is offered to them academically. Researchers have stated that academic culture is not uniformly accessed or experienced (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). These mechanisms serve as hindrances for many students and (though not easily maneuvered through) have been successfully negotiated by the participants in this study. Further, despite these systemic obstacles, because Black women have traditionally come from an activist history that requires awareness, resilience, and active engagement, they are able to overcome these feelings of doubt, isolation, and trepidation. Groups that have been marginalized and have lived under oppression, specifically people of color and women, have been expected and required to develop understandings of the dominant culture even while developing senses of self. Black women who are consciously aware are expected to actively identify and disrupt the persistence of whiteness even as they are coming into their own existence. Marginalization and isolation in their teacher preparation programs impacted their professional teacher lives as well.

The effects of marginalization and isolation extend beyond teacher preparation programs. The isolation that participants spoke about in relation to their teacher preparation programs did not end once they became practicing classroom teachers. In fact, the isolation felt worse and impacted them much more heavily.

Some negative effects, you know, just keep it, to be honest, it just feels awkward in staff meetings to be in a room with, you know, 50 staff members, and, you know, you're the only person of color. I mean just naturally, it just feels weird, but at the same time it reminds me of college. It reminds me of my teacher preparation program. It would just be

me and like two guys, and then everybody else is, you know, a white female, which is obviously a reflection of the real world of education, the majority white women, and, you know, you know, everybody smiles, but then (while a student) I had people that I know I would, I would go and ask for help like my professors. But once I began teaching especially in the district I am currently in, I didn't feel comfortable appearing not to know, even though I was a new teacher. So I worked alone a lot. (Tazarea, I1)

Jennifer articulated something similar.

I don't know if it was because I had grown accustomed to working alone and being alone in my teacher prep classes but early on in my teaching career it wasn't shocking to see my classroom door closed. I separated myself and my students from the outside world because I didn't want to be scrutinized, but also because I had a connection with my students that I didn't have with my white female colleagues. I felt I could reach them in my way with no outside input. And it worked for me and my students but I didn't develop relationships with fellow teachers until later. A lot of the teachers thought I was stuck up, but that wasn't it. I just didn't want to be under the microscope. (Jennifer, I1)

Lisa's experience as a teacher also seemed to mirror Tazarea and Jennifer's statements.

When I first began teaching I was the only Black teacher on my grade level. There were times when all the other teachers would get together and grade. Sometimes this would happen on lunch and I'm not sure if what I witnessed happening during teacher preparation like the demeaning way the teachers talked about their students made me steer clear of teacher lounges. But I know I didn't have lunch with them. I ate lunch with my students. Sometimes I would sit with them in the cafeteria or bring groups of them



back to the classroom for lunch. Did I isolate myself or did I make a decision that was protective of me based on past experiences? (Lisa, I3)

The constant scrutiny that was a mainstay of their teacher preparation programs caused them to take up teaching in different ways. As the participants came into their own as teachers, they were still grappling with effects of their teacher preparation programs. This might seem inconsequential for those who do not experience such heightened scrutiny and simultaneous invisibilizing and marginalization in their preparation programs, but the transfer of the same feelings in their professional lives only prolonged the effects. More than two decades ago, hooks (1984) explained that working from the margins needs to be viewed and recognized as a critical choice.

Though incomplete, I was working to identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation. In fact, I was saying just the opposite: that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (hooks, 1984, p. 341)

For the Black women teachers in this study, teaching from the margins comes from the knowledge acquired through their lived experiences. It is from their marginalization as young girls in their schools that their impetus to act and teach in certain ways gains nourishment and sustenance. Their experiences of marginalization helped them to see their students fully and

wholly, create and sustain classroom environments in which young people gained an understanding of self that equipped them with the tools needed to be successful, and to imagine an education system that is not precipitated and dependent on stratification and marginalization. In most instances, these Black women teachers taught in ways that were reflective of and complicated by the effects of marginalization in both their early and later schooling experiences. When bell hooks (1990) said of marginalization, "...it nourishes one's capacity to resist" (p. 145). She draws on the legacy of Black women that have worked to shift and reframe discourses on Black women, that have powered social movements, and have served as motivation in their everyday lives. hooks (1990) wrote of the margin as a place where language is developed to oppose dominant and hegemonic practice; where a practice of resistance can create a "space for alternative epistemologies—different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to create a counter-hegemonic worldview" (p. 145).

Specifically, being marginalized served as a stimulus for the Black women teachers in this study to dream and imagine schooling differently. The controls of marginalization that could be viewed as barriers actually served as openings to enter space differently and to think critically in that space.

The truth is that the oppressed are not 'marginal,' are not living 'outside' society. They have always been 'inside' the structure which made them 'beings of others.' The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves.' (Freire, 1970, p. 74)

In addition to the marginalization and isolation that Black women teachers experienced in their teacher preparation programs, participants discussed the ways in which their voices were silenced and suppressed.

### **Silencing and Voice Suppression**

The ability of Black women teachers to use their voices is crucial in isolated classrooms and within a society that does not value such voices. Therefore, it was important for me to highlight the experiences in which the teachers saw their voices suppressed while in their teaching preparation programs. Voice in teacher development is important for many reasons. One reason is that voice allows us to represent the lives and experiences of oppressed groups. Secondly, voice is inextricably linked to social justice. Collins (2013) noted, “while a piece of the oppressor may be planted deep within each of us, we each have a choice of accepting that piece or challenging it as part of the true focus of revolutionary change” (p. 340). Utilizing Collins words, it becomes important to not only examine the ways pre-service teachers experience voice suppression, but what occurs as a result of this oppressive practice.

Participants within this study reported feelings that pertained to voice suppression as a result of both direct and indirect words and actions of teacher educators and those responsible for developing the then pre-service teachers. This voice suppression during their teacher preparation years played a substantial role in their teacher activist identity development. Developing and using one’s voice is essential as activist identities are embodied.

The instances in which the participants were expected to remain silent about issues they experienced in the field were catalysts for their activism as they became classroom teachers. Jennifer recalled a time during which she brought up a concern over the language used by staff members in the school building when describing the students:

I was sitting in the classroom and overheard a conversation between the classroom teacher and the art teacher in which they were talking about her students. During the conversation the classroom teacher stated something to the effect that ‘These students are

not the sharpest crayons in the box.’ And I remember cringing but feeling helpless to do anything or say anything. I went back to my class the next day and shared my frustration with the situation, and I remember this clear as day. My instructor said, “You will hear a lot of comments that challenge what you believe but there is really nothing you can do about it. (Jennifer, I2)

The language used by Jennifer’s professor diminished what could be done and or said. Not only did it prevent her from using her voice to push back against what she found to be problematic, there was also no example provided by the professor as to what could be done. Even amidst power relationships, there is always something that can be done. In fact, Jennifer did do something. She shared the story with someone she saw as on equal footing with the host teacher. Jennifer shared:

I felt powerless in that instance. I didn’t know how to be in that classroom and around those veteran teachers that I was supposed to be learning from. I wanted to be able to say something but I was so concerned with receiving a good evaluation that I didn’t want to make waves. No actually it wasn’t that I didn’t want to make waves, I was specifically told not to say anything. You know take it in and learn what not to do. And I did, I took everything I saw there and vowed I wouldn’t do any of those things in my own classroom. (Jennifer, I2)

This experience speaks to the tension that exist between those in power, who can speak up and choose not to, and those with relative power who want to speak up but do not have the capital to do so. Pre-service teachers learning to be educators under this type of guidance often become complicit in the oppressive schooling institutions where this is viewed as acceptable. The feeling of being powerless that Jennifer experienced is one felt by other participants in the study. Similar

to Jennifer, Lisa discussed her annoyance at some of the actions of her host teachers and her disappointment in not being able to say anything. Lisa said, “it was really frustrating witnessing or hearing horrible things being said by the adults around me and of course I wanted to say something, but we were always told not to get into those types of discussions with our host teachers. You know we were told that these were experienced teachers and therefore they knew best.” Raine had a similar experience.

After coming back after the first week of my second placement, I wanted to talk about some of the conversations that I was hearing as I sat in the teacher’s lounge with my host teacher. She was not silent during these conversations. She laughed at the demeaning things being said about students. But right before I could say anything, my seminar supervisor said, You’re with such and such right, isn’t she great, isn’t the school great? I didn’t feel comfortable saying anything then. I thought well maybe I was wrong, but deep down I knew I wasn’t. The university had already established this school and my host teacher as being a friend to the program. I just didn’t want to draw more attention to myself. (Raine, I2)

In that moment, Raine’s voice was preemptively silenced through her seminar supervisor’s praise regarding the host teacher and site. The idea that pre-service teachers are expected to view problematic sites in high regard is an issue that teacher preparation programs must address. For the pre-service teacher, this type of voice suppression limits their capacity to publicly critique the spaces in which they are expected to practice their teaching. Janel shared her experience

It wasn’t like they said, “No you can’t speak!” It was more along the lines of trying not to stand-out. You know you didn’t want your grade to suffer or you didn’t want to get a bad reputation amongst the supervisors. I just wanted to get through the program with as little

fanfare as possible. I just didn't want the extra eyes on me, so even when I wanted to say something, I always said to myself, is this the line that you're drawing? (Janel, I2)

One of the issues evident in this excerpt is again a recognition of the power between pre-service teachers and those responsible for their grades and continued journey through the program. For Black women, systems of power have routinely had to be understood. Simmonds (1992) suggested that it is only recognizing our own power, powerlessness, advantages, and disadvantages that helps us create new meanings in our own lives, and affects our relationship with others.

Dominique's experience with voice suppression came from the highest person within her teacher preparation program. Dominique disclosed her experience with the dean of her school.

So after I had this issue with my "diversity" professor she did everything in her power to get me kicked out of the program. Had it not been for other professors, but one particular professor who happened to be the only Black woman I had contact with in my program, I don't know what might have happened. She was that upset with me for questioning her approach. I had to meet with a committee because she said my disposition was not that of an elementary school teacher. I was too angry. So all of this is going on, I'm like one of the few maybe there was another Black girl a semester ahead of me, but I was it in my group. And because I was it in the group, I was called on a lot by the powers that be in the school to represent them. This afforded me the opportunity to have relationships with different people within the school such as the dean. So you know I felt good, like she's not going to be successful because you know I'm having dinner with the dean and donors and I'm the Black face of the white school of education. Reba, this went so far all the way to the dean's office and he called me in and I'll never forget it. He asked me, "Why

do you have to be so vocal?” Girl, I had to collect myself because I was not expecting that. You know because you (the dean) like me to be vocal when I’m talking about the school to prospective students, or at donor lunches, but I can’t ask my professor a question. I remember sitting back in the chair and feeling like whoa- I really have to collect myself. He must have sensed a shift in my attitude because he then said, “Look you need to just get through this program. Don’t make it harder on yourself than you have to. (Dominique, I2)

Listening to Dominique recall this experience was riveting. I could hear in her voice the moment when she came to understand her place and power. It rocked her as a twenty-year old woman, and continues with her as a practicing teacher. Dominique’s experience illustrated how Black women voices have been valued and then devalued when it comes to accessing agency and power. In one instance, Dominique is paraded as The Black face, but then was told to bury the same face and voice in the sand. The interlocking systems of oppression are clearly evident in Dominique’s recollection. There is also a sense of the fleeting power that Black women possess at various times throughout their lives.

Examining the experiences of Black women teachers in their pre-service programs identifies areas that would improve circumstances for Black women teachers and for all teachers. However, explicitly looking at these experiences from a Black woman’s perspective can help to make teacher preparation programs, particular those at historically and PWIs, more viable spaces for Black teacher candidates. Attending to the microaggressions that Black women teachers are exposed to by both faculty and peers throughout their programs indicates an emerging commitment to Black women students in teacher preparation programs. Microaggressions are defined as “commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, derogatory

racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue, 2007, p. 271). If the climate in any teacher preparation program is toxic and not accepting of Black women teachers, this impacts Black women teachers entering the teaching profession. Significant amounts of research have been conducted that highlight the benefit of the teacher-student cultural match. The particular issues facing Black women teacher candidates at historically and predominantly white campuses, in programs that are also historically and predominantly white, help make connections to the experiences of students in K-12 schools.

Voice suppression is not limited to the silencing of individuals as demonstrated through the experiences of the participants. It also relates to the silencing of collective voices through their erasure from history, the absence and void of their contributions to research and practice, and the deliberate smudging of Black women’s work that is then repackaged so that no trace of the origin exists. When the Black women teachers in this study identify a void of the contributions of scholars and Black women in their teacher preparation curriculum, it becomes simple to also see this symptom in our K-12 schools. If Black women teachers are not seeing contributions of Black female scholars in their education programs, what impetus do any teachers have to highlight the contributions of Black scholars to their students?

### **Silence, Silencing, and Coming to Voice**

The third theme that emerged from the interview data focused on silence, silencing, and coming to voice. The emotional experience of participants pointed to what appeared to be a lack of awareness and recognition of the burden and connection of silencing in their teacher preparation program. For Black women, the politics of voice and silence have to be understood as such. When I refer to the *politics* of voice and silence, I am referring to the process by which the teachers in this study determined and negotiated when to speak or when to engage in silence.



I also draw attention to the ways the Black women pre-service teachers were silenced. When Black pre-service teachers are silent or come to voice, they come to do this within a broader social context of racial and gendered norms. The academic experiences of Black women teachers in this study must be understood and valued as a critical function of how they make sense of their experiences while learning to teach. Colleges and universities, as smaller pieces of a larger social system, have an institutionalized classroom culture where rules on how to behave, when to speak, and when not to speak are imposed on students (Howard, 2002). The fact is that these rules are informed, manipulated, shaped, and influenced by the dominant class “to promote their interest, while undermining, and marginalizing the ideas of underrepresented de-privileged constituencies” (Perdomo, 2012, p. 27). This necessitates an examination of how these particular teachers experienced silencing and coming to voice in their teacher preparation programs.

My teacher preparation program did not talk about the emotions that come when you walk into classrooms. My classes surely did not prepare me for the feelings of despair that would often wash over me. I don't know- it has always been very difficult to look at students that look like me facing and having to learn in such inequity. I wish my teacher prep program had done something to address this. I am not sure how my white counterparts deal with this. I just always recalled being really emotional when we were talking on surface levels and not going deep. So I was emotional about the realities of the conditions but then also angry about the absence of meaningful conversations and how I could move forward. (Lisa. I2)

Raine shared something similar when she wrote about an experience in one of her student teaching placements.

I remember leaving my student teaching experience with tears in my eyes every day. It was the worst experience ever, not because of the students but because of how I saw the students being treated. I remember there was one boy named Alex-he was beautiful and my host teacher was so mean to him. I mean really mean. It was just so difficult being in that classroom. It was suffocating and I wasn't able to talk about it in my seminar. On a happier note, though I was working part time in a local record store at the same time and Alex rode his bike past one day. I was so happy to see him smiling. He started stopping into the store when I was there and we should share Salt and Vinegar chips-his favorite. (Raine, I2)

Raine's account indicated a palpable tension between her student teaching experience and her university based courses.

Even though we had seminar conversations, they were always halted when they would seemingly be about to become gripe sessions. I remember my seminar instructor actually saying that to my classmates and I- "This isn't an opportunity for you all to unload everything you see wrong in your placements. I remember this because it was a statement that stayed with me because as I said earlier I was crying each and every day after I left that school. (Raine, I2)

Dominique shared about her and her classmates' experiences in the field and coming back to the university.

We were right there in the field. We were there having all of these experiences and no outlet in which to say whoa, what is this? How come I went to a school and the kids are putting the chicken nuggets in their pockets on Friday? There was no preparation for that. It was just basically like this is where you are and you just deal. I didn't come from the

socioeconomic status which reflected the majority of the placements that I was in, it was very eye opening even for me, and I'm a Black woman, and I was like whoa, what is this.

(Dominique)

These recollections shared by Lisa, Raine and Dominique indicate a serious lack of attention to the concern of pre-service teachers' emotional needs associated with what they experience in field placements when confronted with issues of race and class, and how these not only influence the lives of students in their classrooms but how pre-service teachers also are impacted by these conditions. The experiences shared illustrate silence through absence of engaged conversations. The absence of such conversations served to add to the emotional burden held by the teachers in this study. Another example of this is reflected through one of Tazarea's experiences. What makes this experience different is Tazarea's coming to voice when she deemed it necessary.

So we were supposed to be role-playing about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Boycott and we were not provided much direction other than to use what was provided to role play the incident. You know, I played along and I was in the group where people either ran out of names and they just decided to, the two white guys in my program and we were cool decided to be the wheels on the bus. And so here we are in class and we're practicing and he goes, "The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round," and everybody is having a good time because the class is boring. So I saw, I saw it going from let's have a good time or let's enjoy this class to we're going to make up our own fun, and he, I watched him watch what was going on, and at no point did he intervene to talk about what was happening, and I vividly remember this one girl and she's Jewish, and he, the professor himself is Jewish. This Jewish girl, who we were cool, she sat there and she was Rosa. She was Ms. Rosa Parks and I was Dr. Martin

Luther King, and she pretended to get on the bus, and she was like, "I ain't getting up."

And I just remember, like, my face flushed red and I felt like it was the most, probably the most humiliating experience for me probably in my life. I felt really uncomfortable. I felt like I was just a fly on the wall. I felt like it was like white talk, and I had no presence because it's like damn, they're not even going to clean this up and I'm here. Like it was just like, it was foul. And I'm looking at him and he said nothing, and I remember when they, when the police officer, because the white guy was the police officer, he came over to the girl pretending to be the late Ms. Rosa Parks, he came over to her and he said, "You're going to have to get up. You're going to have to get up." And he started pulling on her, and that's when I stopped. I took my nametag off. I put it on my computer and to this day, it's still on my computer actually. And I sat down, and I folded my hands, and I think it might have gone on for maybe another minute or so, and then he shut it down. He shut it down, and I was shaking. I went to my seat. I was actually trying to keep my composure. I actually wanted to have a conversation with him afterwards. I didn't expect for it to be dealt with at that moment, but he was like, I felt like he was going on as normal. He was like, all right, so when we're learning different perspectives and this, that and the third, and I raised my hand and I asked to leave. I asked if I could be, you know, dismissed or whatever. So I left. The next day, I came to class and there was a letter on my desk and on everybody's desk and we all had to read it, and it was like, "How did what we do last class, how is that an example of racism?" And I remember one person, who she's crying at this point. She's crying and she comes over to me and she apologizes, and then she asks me, did he even have my permission to do this? And I said no, I haven't spoken to him. Like he's not contacted me. So, this is just a shock to me. And my name is

in it, like how did *we* do what we did to Tazarea, blah, blah, blah. He even spelled my name wrong in the letter. And all these different things, and so then I, because he took it to that level, I could not not say anything. And so I remember saying to him, and to the class that, you know, people died for this. Those same wheels that you're pretending to be riding, someone's head slammed into that when the hose pushed them left, and the hose pushed them back X amount of feet, like, and I said it straight up to him, how would you feel if I made a mockery of striped pajamas? If I walked in here and I made up a song about one stripe, two stripes, three stripes, four, I'll never forget it, and he looked at me very, like, it was an unreadable. I didn't know if I had affected him or if I offended him. I didn't know what it was, but I said, you know, we have a responsibility as people, like this is not even about education, but like the irony is we're supposed to know better. And I pointed my finger at him and said, "You are paid to know better." Like this is what you're teaching and this isn't about me. So, this is not about how you affected Tazarea's day? I don't want you all to look at it like that, now I'm talking to the entire class. These are the same kids that you all claim now to want to teach. These are the kids who you're going to see out in the field and teach a required social studies lesson. What are you going to teach them if you don't respect their history? Like what are you teaching them?

(Tazarea, I2)

The vividness in which this memory came back to Tazarea, and her ability to recall it in such detail, demonstrate how truly affected she was by this day and experience. The idea that the nametag that she took off is still on her computer depicts a desire to remember a lesson never to be forgotten. Tazarea's retelling provides an opportunity to witness the ways she was silenced, the ways she evoked silence, and the way she came to voice. When Tazarea recalled removing

the nametag and returning to her seat, she demonstrated silence as resistance. Her request to leave was a second sign of resistance. Tazarea's ultimate speaking up in class the next day was another example of resistance and coming to voice. Her coming to voice was necessitated by the actions of her professor, who should have known better. However, this experience did not end there. Tazarea had to deal with the accompanying feelings that arrive when one goes against what has been deemed as normal behavior. Tazarea reported that after vocalizing her angst that she began to feel like a sore thumb.

I was second guessing whether or not, not that I should have said anything, I knew I should have said something, but I was second guessing whether or not I should have, how I handled it, like with all the emotion that I had. I didn't want to come off so emotional because it was right in the moment, I'm second guessing whether or not I should have just slept on it and then I guess address the situation more professionally, as they would like to call it. Or whether or not, how it happened was, how, like it was what it is, and so thinking of my voice, we think about what it means to be professional and I think about what it means, professionalism in itself, in my opinion, has been normalized to look a certain way, to wear your hair a certain way, to speak a certain way, to walk a certain way to react a certain way. (Tazarea, I2)

Listening to Tazarea's account almost had me in tears due to the exhaustion of feeling as if you were wrong, even when you were not. Tazarea talked about this normalized way of looking, responding, and feeling as though her response was unprofessional. The questioning and the self-doubt that she faced after that incident remained with her for a long time. She had to learn to negotiate her emotions so as not to make everyone else feel uncomfortable. The educators in her

teaching preparation program did not attend to her emotional needs. Tazarea recalled another experience late in her program in which she chose to remain silent.

The semester right before student teaching was challenging. I remember being in class one morning and we were discussing our placements for the upcoming student teaching semester. And you know my classmates were discussing that they were not excited to go to a particular school. I asked them why and they said you know it's really just not safe to go there. I don't know why they would place us there. Other classmates nodded and I was left to either say something or just let it go. And you know I still beat myself up to this day because I didn't say anything. I just let them have that. And I look back and wish I would have said something. Wish I would have called them on their bullshit, but I didn't. (Tazarea, I2)

This exchange between Tazarea and her classmates is what McIntyre (1997) refers to as *whitetalk*. White pre-service teachers engaging in “whitetalk,” talking uncritically with or to other whites while resisting critique and massaging each other's racist attitudes, beliefs, and actions that have no place in teacher preparation (McIntyre, 1997). There is great significance to Tazarea's account because it points to the danger of whitetalk in teacher preparation, and also the existence of black silence in teacher preparation. Black silence is often a result of and in direct response to isolation, marginalization, and policies and actions that create toxic environments for students of color. Black silence is often accompanied by actions in which pre-service teachers of color are forced to sit in classrooms retreating from the gaze of their professors, classmates, supervisors, and everyone else, even from themselves. This includes retreat from what they know they should do in moments when they do not have the words or even the strength to speak back. Some feminists and educational scholars suggest that women of color employ voice and silence

as strategies of survival in the academy (Anzaldua, 1990; Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1994). A number of women of color deliberately adopt silence as a method of knowledge acquisition and/or resistance within classrooms.

The silencing of Black women is one result of the racialized and gendered society within which Black women exist. The oppressive nature of patriarchy is present on college campuses even in programs where women are the majority. For Black women in teacher preparation programs, silencing occurs as a result of many different factors. In teacher preparation programs that are predominantly white, Black women pre-service teachers have been silenced both directly and indirectly. Tazarea's experience illustrates the very way that most Black women are "compelled to consume the universalized images of white American women, including body image, linguistic patterns, styles of interacting, and so forth" (Fordham, 1993, p. 8). Negative experiences within classroom spaces for the Black women teachers in this study were plentiful. These experiences informed the way they engaged with the students in their classrooms.

During the meeting we were all meeting our supervisors. They were telling us their expectations of communication with them and how we should perform in student-teaching, such as calling them if we were not going to show up to placement and calling the school. My supervisor a white former elementary school teacher said to the group of us that would be hers, "Now you all are in one of the toughest schools in the district. There are a large number of Black kids and their parents are not very involved in their lives. There's no real home-training. (Janel, I2)

As Janel was sharing this incident, I could see the tears start to well in her eyes.

Reba, I was so upset. I was so angry, so sad and I felt my face growing hot and I think all that I was feeling was showing on my face. Then one of my peers patted me on the



shoulder as if to say, we know that's not you and I lost it. Because not only was this white older woman with such an important role in my becoming a teacher disparaging children who look like me but here is this white girl trying to console me. Then the supervisor stopped talking and pointed her attention to me and said, "You are going to have to be excellent in spite of this." Reba, I lost it. I was usually very calm and quiet, very aware of my attitude but I couldn't take it. I asked calmly, "Why are you telling us this? Why are you referring to the students we are expected to teach as having no home-training? Who are you to do that? Then I just got up and left. I went to my head person and said I needed to work with another supervisor. I knew I would not be able to work with her and put this behind me, not immediately anyway and I just couldn't stand being close to her. (Janel, I2)

Certainly, the emotional expense of Janel's sharing is evident, not only in the retelling of the incident years later but in the pool of tears in her eyes as she retells it. The impact that this event had on Janel is clear. The idea that such an integral person in Janel's teaching trajectory had such disdain for the children in schools that she formerly taught in, and at the time served as a supervisor to pre-service teachers, is indicative of a larger problem in teacher preparation programs. What lesson is being conveyed both intentionally and unintentionally to the pre-service teachers under her guidance? Ironically, these experiences within their teacher preparation programs served as catalysts for the Black women teachers in the study. The instances of having to talk back and break silence in their teacher preparation programs helped to create the space for the Black women teachers in this study to engage student voice in their future classrooms. Rodriguez (2006) emphasizes the responsibility of women of color to "interrogate our silences" and engage in critical self-analysis and self-transformation by

remembering, speaking, voicing, and acting (p. 1087). As Rodriguez (2006) established, the teachers in my study did all of these critical pieces of work to become better teachers.

The recollections shared by the Black women teachers in this study indicate a void in teacher preparation programs attending to the emotional burden of silence, silencing, and coming to voice for Black students in teacher preparation programs. The emotional dimension of teaching is left out of conversations occurring in college classrooms, often because of constrained time and professors who cannot honestly engage in difficult discussions.

So when we began to talk about the real things, the things that we were seeing with one particular instructor who was the one who was “supposed” to talk about these things. She was the diversity professor. When I tried to talk about what I was seeing and how her coursework wasn’t helping me to make sense of what I was actually seeing in the field, she was very agitated, and of course it’s easier to go into a personality issue and say you’re being oppositional and it was easier for her to attack me as a person than to step back and say hmm, maybe we need to actually look at this and think about it. Needless to say I did not have a positive experience in that course. (Dominique, I2)

One participant noted that there appeared to be some willingness to engage in important conversations around social issues, but her peers, faculty, and professors seldom addressed current happenings in their classrooms. Lisa, echoed this sentiment.

Sometimes I would walk into my classes and expect everyone to be feeling down like I was about something. And I would walk in and it would be just like any other day.

Sometimes I would wonder, “Are we living in the same world?” I wanted some type of acknowledgement that they knew or that they felt like something is not right. (Lisa, I2)

When the teachers in the study speak up, they are often met with firmly established responses. For example, Dominique speaking up was met with a reactionary response that labeled her as oppositional (code word for angry). Black women are often made out to be angry, but perhaps it is this anger that is necessary to call out the injustices that are persistent in the schooling experiences of children of color in K-12 schools. Lisa may have very well been angry in that moment, but in essence she was asking for support. Support was not provided because it was requested from an “oppositional” place. There was an opportunity missed because Lisa’s request was viewed negatively.

The reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them... Race and gender are forms of social identity that share at least two features: they are fundamental rather than peripheral to the self... they operate through visual markers on the body. (Alcoff, 2006, p. 5-6)

Alcoff’s point reflects the many experiences of the teachers within my study. Their experiences in teacher preparation programs have largely been shaped by these identity markers. The ways in which professors, instructors, peers, host teachers, and site-supervisors engaged with them were indicative of patterned responses to those identity markers.

In this chapter, whiteness was contextualized as a structure within traditional teacher preparation programs. Additionally, I presented findings such as isolation and marginalization, silence and voice suppression, and engaging silence and coming to voice. These three major findings have significant implications for teacher preparation programs and will be discussed further in Chapter 7. The next chapter presents findings related to the participants’ teacher activism, as contextualized according to their activist literacies.

**CHAPTER 6: THIS IS JUST WHAT WE ARE SUPPOSED TO DO – BLACK WOMEN  
TEACHERS ENGAGING IN ACTIVIST LITERACIES**

The previous chapter included an examination of the participants' experiences within their traditional teacher preparation programs. In this chapter, I present findings related to the third and final research question: what are the ways that Black women teachers enact activist literacies in their classrooms, schools, and communities? The findings presented in this chapter reflect the daily engaged practices of the Black women teachers in this study that were defined as activist literacies. Prior to the presentation of these findings, I present my understanding of teacher activism and activist literacies. Immediately following, I present the participants' views on activism as well as the tension that exists as a result. Finally, I present the themes that were consistent between the participants. There were many ways that the teachers in the study enacted activist literacies in their classrooms, schools, and communities, I present findings organized around three major themes of 1) going against the grain, 2) teaching and working with intentionality, and 3) development of student agency.

**Black Women Teachers' Activist Literacies**

In thinking about some of the participants' reluctance in naming themselves as activists, I thought about how I contextualized activism and more particularly a Black woman teacher's activist literacies. I entered into this study viewing Black women teachers' activist literacies in a particular way. The lens through which I viewed activist literacies was informed by historical and contemporary practices of Black women teachers engaging in daily thinking and practices that work to transform the lives of young people in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Beyond this framing, my contextualization of activist literacies considered and recognized the ways in which I, as a Black woman educator, embraced the multiple roles that comprised my

teacher identity. I asked myself, was it important for the teachers in my study to claim the identity marker activist and name themselves as such? For me, the answer was simple. Yes! I struggled with this as I read their narratives and conducted their interviews, because in my mind I viewed them as activists. Particularly, I viewed the ways in which they thought about children and communities and their methods of engaging with and for children and communities as activist informed literacies. Black educators enact a sophisticated and complex pedagogy linked to the social realities of African Americans as a cultural group and founded on culturally specific ethics, or ways of thinking about teaching (Foster, 1994; Ware, 2002). It is these underlying culturally-influenced ethics that powers their pedagogy (Howard, 2002; Ware, 2002). In my opinion, the teachers were performing in very specific ways that aimed to be transformative for the children in their classrooms, schools, and communities.

After answering whether it was important for teachers in my study to claim the activist identity marker, the next question I sought to answer was why. Why was it important for the teachers in the study to take on the activist identity marker? It was important for me because it connected Black women teachers to the historical legacy of Black women activists who came before and paved a way for contemporary Black women teachers to exist in and disrupt oppressive spaces such as schooling institutions. Dixson (2003) maintained that African-American teachers have long worked for and toward social justice waging “daily political battles on behalf of their students and the African American community” (p. 217). A reluctance existed in some Black women teachers to name themselves as activists. There has been a concerted effort to minimize the contributions of Black women teachers and their political contributions to not only the African American community and society in general. Dixson (2003) found in her study that the teachers’ pedagogy was inherently political. In the current study, I found that some

of the teachers viewed their activism as inextricably attached to their teaching pedagogy, and therefore did not view themselves as activists, while other participants were intentional in naming themselves activists. Whatever the case, the Black women teachers involved in this study engaged in daily practices that were activist informed. The activist literacies that teachers engaged in daily, though not readily identified as such, can be viewed as transformative educator practices.

For Black women, much of what needs to be done *just* gets done. However, I argue that there is danger in not specifically naming the practices carried out by Black women, in this case Black women teachers' activism or activist literacies. I also caution against the limited contextualizing of what makes an activist. These limited and restrictive views on activism run the risk of continued depoliticizing of specific types of pedagogy that are inherently political and social justice seeking.

### **Teaching as Political**

The political nature of teaching is evident as issues of racism and basic inequities are inherent in the American public school system. Political does not mean only labor disputes and contract negotiations, but that all teaching actions are political because they have an impact on the future opportunities of students (Bjork, Johnston, & Ross, 2015).

Teaching is political in the sense that power and privilege—through decisions about funding, curriculum, class size, testing, tracking, and other matters of policy and practice—exacerbate rather than ease social class and race inequalities. In effect, then, education helps determine the life chances of young people based on their identities and zip codes. Teachers are an important part of this mix because what teachers do every day can have a tremendous impact on the lives of their students. Moreover, many of the

students in our nation's classrooms reflect the tremendous structural inequalities that are today becoming more apparent than ever before. (Nieto, 2006, p. 1)

Nieto's characterization of teaching as political provides context to understand the many ways in which teachers may be viewed as political agents. For Black women educators, the political nature of teaching is not only understood as teachers' actions, but the philosophies that guide how teachers see and interact with their students (Delpit, 1988; Henry, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Black women teachers who view their teaching as political recognize that they have the power to legitimize certain knowledges and not others. When teachers fail to see and connect these understandings, teaching becomes depoliticized.

Depoliticized education is the belief that teaching is a separate space where social and political issues, such as inequality, are inconsequential to the daily practices within schools. The introduction to this study when the teacher replied, "I just don't see what this has to do with education" is one clear example of this. Though there has been extensive research conducted that points to such faulty premises, a culture of developing teachers with these ideas deeply embedded in their teacher preparation programs still exists. This view about education does not happen by accident, but rather through concerted efforts that create environments for this type of thinking. One of the ways this is accomplished is by silencing or removing the voices of teachers who have orientations towards social justice education. Ladson-Billings (2004) argued that one of the issues with *Brown v Board of Education*, one of the nation's most historic and groundbreaking law cases which ended legal segregation was its impact on the "job loss and demotions for Black teachers and administrators" (p. 6). The depoliticizing of education is the watering down and white-washing of alternatives to traditional education, such as multi-cultural education and social justice education. These two approaches to teacher preparation, when done

in the context of whiteness, have depoliticizing effects on the goals of such models. Data from the interviews in this study exposed a range of personal views on activist roles and various ways of enacting activist literacies. Some of the Black women teachers in this study initially questioned, shunned, and distanced themselves from the term. Others embraced it, and wore the term as a badge of honor. The participants ultimately embraced the activist term.

The following themes emerged from the interview data as it pertains to activism. Activism was viewed as inextricably linked to some participants' teaching and just "what we are supposed to do". However, activism was also contextualized by 1) going against the grain, 2) teaching and working with intentionality, and 3) development of student agency. Before I begin to discuss these themes in more depth, I must discuss the ways in which activist literacies or teacher activism was understood by the participants in my study. I thought it important to acknowledge these views because the teachers in my study had contrasting views on activism.

### **Black Women Teachers' Views on Activism**

At the onset of my interviews pertaining to teacher activism, Black women teachers' activist literacies were viewed in varying and contrasting ways by the participants in the study. Though the original solicitation to participate in this study refrained from requiring teachers to identify and label themselves as teacher activists, the narratives originally submitted by participants indicated to me that these specific teachers were engaging in activism and enacting activist literacies daily in their classrooms, schools, and communities. It is important to state as well that participants felt there were varying degrees of activism, and all expressed a desire and willingness to become more actively engaged. When questioned outright whether they considered themselves a teacher activist, there were varying responses as detailed in Table 2.



Table 2

*Participants' Activist Identity Responses*

Lisa	No, I'm not an activist.
Raine	Yes, definitely yes.
Jennifer	I'm not sure.
Dominique	Purposefully no
Tazarea	Of course I'm an activist, how could I not be?
Janel	Yes, being a teacher means being an activist.

*Note.* Verbal responses collected during in-person interviews with participants.

These replies might yield concern considering the negative responses by Lisa, Dominique and Jennifer. I wondered whether or not to include this information, but as a researcher committed to transparency and honesty, not to mention research validity, it was important for the authenticity of the research to include the words shared by the participants. Beyond the authenticity of the study, disclosing these answers portrays the inconsistencies between what teachers think they do and what they actually do. Contrasting responses such as those provided by the teachers in the study demonstrate a hesitance, reluctance, and an acceptance of this role. The hesitancy and reluctance to identify as activists was perplexing to me. I wondered if there was a stigma or attached fear or risk associated with the term. Activist, Eve Ensler (2015) in an interview said:

I think any time one stands up against the powers that be, or the given reality, one risks being condemned, belittled, exiled and alone. But the greatest risk to me feels like not having done enough, not going far enough to resist, not being brave enough or bold

enough or creative enough or committed enough. The greatest risk is stepping into the struggle and not going the distance, fighting with any means necessary, the risk of losing everything. (para. 2)

The participants' replies contrasted with my understanding and belief about teacher activism. As I conceptualized this study, I held a position on teacher activism and teachers enacting activist literacies that framed my thinking about the topic. From my personal point of view, Black women teachers enacting activist literacies was always about the work that teachers engage in both deliberately and in the often unsung ways that work toward improving lives, school experiences, and outcomes for marginalized young people. I found that participants' hesitation was not due to fear or stigma for the most part, but because activism was seen as doing what we are supposed to do. Activism was inextricably connected to some of the teachers' identities.

**Doing what we are supposed to do.** Dominique's response, "purposefully no," demonstrates that the role of teacher activist is not always undertaken with intention, but it becomes part of who you are as an educator.

The main goal, right, is to deliver the instructions to meet the curriculum goals that the district has set forth and to whatever, progress, seek progression and academic success and achievement. So, that's really what my teaching has shown. However, the layers of what has happened over the years which has been a myriad of different things, so in addition to being a good teacher and what you're conveying, all that academic information, etc., you're also the social worker and you're the psychologist and you're the nurse and you're so much more even when you yourself are running on empty, so then you start to fold into all of these other roles, and then you begin to touch other lives and

you begin to become this change agent. In addition to all of that, when you work with groups of kids who again in the same town that I grew up in, that I work in, was just changed dramatically in terms of its racial makeup and socioeconomic makeup, has changed dramatically and then become advocates for students in terms of the academics, in terms of their placement inside of, classrooms, inside of the school structure. You become advocates for them outside of school, in terms of all the social issues that they have and providing for their needs and then you become advocates for them, even though they don't know that. In terms of interacting with my colleagues and justifying why this happened, and that's okay because this story, this child's story is X-Y-Z, so I guess going back to the original question is the thing in this one as well, what is the teaching. The teaching really is whatever I'm supposed, whatever's prescribed by my district that's what I'm supposed to do. That's what you do. That's what everybody is supposed to do. However, when you become a teacher, you're doing that but you're doing a host of other things all simultaneously, so it's hard to kind of deconstruct and take apart and think well, I'm this person here and I'm this person there because you're doing them all at the same time. (Dominique, Interview 3)

Dominique's view on teacher activism aligns itself with other thoughts on teacher roles, as well as the ways in which Black women educators engage in their calling. For many Black women educators, including those in this study, working in the best interests of their students and families is what they do. They do not think of it in terms of activism; it is just something that they do. Dominique's thoughts on the subject also pointed to the taking on of such a role of activist because one is compelled to resist. She described this in reference to the shifting demographics in her school district and the need to be present and engage differently for students

and their families. This awareness comes with this type of shifting is a form of resistance. Though she does not name what she does as activism, she is clearly working to resist and reframe what she sees happening within her district. As the economy and student body in the district changed, Dominique recognized the need to engage differently and work to negate some of the barriers that students and families within the district face.

No I'm not an activist. I am a Black woman concerned with the lives of my students outside of my classroom. So I do whatever it is I need to do to ensure my students are successful. If that means I stand up for them when adults are in the wrong and act as an advocate for them or if I have to serve as a mediator between my students and their families, then that's what I do. Sometimes my students just need someone else standing beside them. I don't label that activism. Activism seems separate from what I do every day in my classroom. I'm not standing out in the cold protesting. I'm just being a teacher and doing what I'm supposed to do. (Lisa, Interview 3)

Though Lisa identifies specific ways she engaged with students based on her understanding of their lives outside of the confines of her school building, she is reluctant to label what she does as activism. Lisa's concern with the lives of her students outside of her classroom is significant. Noddings (2000) argued that "caring requires relations intimate enough for personal understanding." (p. 101). Lisa's attention to the student outside of her classroom door is what Harding (1990) called attention to and commitment to a "community in struggle" (p. 75). What we see in Lisa's assertion is an acknowledgement and awareness of the larger struggle of a community and not just the student in her classroom. Caring can also be "envisaged as emancipatory acts of political resistance" (Henry, 2011, p. 129) or as Lorde (1994) said "a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlying our lives" (p. 129). Caring for all children,

marginalized children in particular, is a “key manifestation of their resistance to the racism of schools” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997, p. 6). Yet, Lisa viewed activism as being removed from and apart from her role as a teacher.

Lisa and Dominique viewed activism or activist literacies as practices that they cannot separate from their overall teaching role, but also in some ways as separate from their teaching role. When Dominique says “that’s what everybody is supposed to do,” she is referring to the practices she engages in as a teacher. She went on to articulate that though this is something that all teachers are supposed to do, not all teachers perform like this. Additionally, Jennifer was initially unsure about her role as an activist, but also equated her role as a teacher to being an activist:

To some degree I think that my role as educator is that I am. Just the mere fact that I am an educator to me I believe that is one form of being an activist, right, and not only that but there are certain things that I tend to want to promote, so for me it's like the young girls or, you know, specifically the black girls and the black boys, for me. I don't know if it's because the school where I am now is predominantly Hispanic, I mean, the district is predominantly Hispanic, and most times, you know, some like Camille, it's the little Spanish girl that they will call on and not so much the black girl, and by black I mean from African descent. Whether Black American or African-American, like those coming in just first time here to the country, learning the English language, and they're to me sometimes shunned to the side or just looked over because, oh, they don't know the language that well and when you really dig deeper and work with them and you'll see that these are bright children. They do know a lot. They just kind of need an opportunity to shine. So that's something that I know I'm always aware of-whose being given an

opportunity to talk and develop as a thinker and student and who's not being called on.

(Jennifer, Interview 3)

Jennifer articulated one of the most understood points of Black Feminist Thought, which is attending to those voices that need to be heard rather than silenced. Jennifer brought her awareness and knowledge of injustice to her experiences and interactions in the school and classroom. While Jennifer spoke of her attention to the students in schools that were being marginalized, Dominique spoke about her actions to go one step further. Recalling an incident in which she saw a student inadequately dressed for the cold weather, Dominique said:

I had to say to him, do you have long pants, and he was like, yeah, just two pair. I said, okay, do you need two more, and he was like yeah. So I had to go and buy two more pair of pants because that's all he had. You don't distinguish and you don't say, okay, well, that moment I had to be the social worker. It's just what you do. I think it's hard for me to answer because what is it? It's everything. It's everything in the immediate moment that's necessary and if it means being, if it means being the advocate, if it means being the person who sticks up for and takes on the cause of, that's what it becomes. Does everybody do that? No. Some people really will just say you should wear long pants tomorrow and so talk to you later. So it is going the extra step and it is going further but I feel like I did not intentionally set out to become anything else except the deliverer of instruction. That was it. There was no other motivation behind it but when you're in the moment, and when you can respond appropriately to the situation that you see unfolding, that's when you take on and you wear all these different hats simultaneously, and that's what happened with me in my career, and as the district, the face of our district changes, it's been more necessary to be more of the voice for students. I don't know if advocate is

really, I mean, it's really just giving students voices, so I guess those we can use them interchangeably because even with my initial narrative to you, I was ignorant of a lot of experiences that students have and that they come from and I was like, yeah, right, what do you mean you walked here, get out of here, but that was real and so when you start to step back and oh my gosh, and just realize, and then you have to give a voice and you have to acknowledge what they've been through and then stand up for those students.

(Dominique, Interview 3)

As Dominique's vignette revealed there are situations that compel one to act. These situations can be small or large in nature. They can be in classrooms or school halls, or even within larger districts. When Dominique discussed going the extra step, she identified what sets her apart from other individuals in her school. Yet, she does not see anything special in that. I believe this to be one of the most important findings from the data. The fact that Dominique makes a decision to act by going the extra step is just seen as doing what makes sense to her, but not everyone engages in this way. This is what identifies the specific practices that the Black women teachers in this study engage in as activist literacies. It provides a shared language, a space in which to enter and begin to develop the agency of other teachers.

The thoughts expressed by Dominique, Lisa, and Jennifer provide an opportunity to think about the image that is conjured when one hears the word activist. There is an opportunity to grapple with what being politically present signifies for these teachers, because teaching for Black women has always been political. In a recent article titled, "Sick Woman Theory," readers are asked to grapple with the definition of the political as any action that is performed in public and contend with what that definition excludes (Hedva, 2016). For the sake of this study, it was important to understand the ways teachers understood activism, what they include and exclude as

depictions of activism. In Dominique's case, she viewed activism as being just part of who she was. For Lisa, her resistance to the term teacher activist was a result of her understanding and characterizing activism as militant. When asked to explain this, Lisa replied "well think about the activists you see or know-they are always protesting. You know standing with picket signs and marching." Clearly, Lisa has an image in her head of a particular type of activist, but this particular framing of an activist excludes all the people who do not show up to the marches for a host of reasons, but still believe in the cause and work and perform in their own ways to support the cause. As Black women in the past have shaped political movements, Black women today shift the understanding of political movements. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement is not a leaderless movement, but rather a leader-full movement pushing back against and resisting the idea that there needs to be one charismatic leader in the forefront leading the people.

The teachers' views on identifying themselves as activists were contrasting. While some teachers did not readily label their daily practices as activism, the remaining participants were unmistakable in their assertions that they were activists. Janel shared:

I am very clear that I am an activist. I take that label on because it speaks to an understanding or a recognition that I see my teaching as political. Every choice, every decision to either disrupt or allow something to exist is purposeful and everything, I mean everything says something about what you believe and what you stand for. Sometimes I feel as though we are afraid, but we cannot be afraid. There's too much at risk to be afraid to stand up and speak out when everything needs to be changed. (Janel, Interview

3)



Janel's account demonstrates her expansive view on what teaching is. It aligns with the understanding that there is no neutrality in education. Janel said, "everything says something about what you believe and stand for."

Every time I have an opportunity to work with, teach and learn from the students I have access to, I recognize the influence we have on each other. I can't teach them just how to get along for the sake of getting along. I have to connect their issues to larger issues. I have to encourage them and expect them to be critical and ask questions. This is how transformation occurs. I am political. My students need to see themselves as political. They need to believe that they can dare to see something different for their lives. That is political, daring to dream of something beyond. (Raine, Interview 3)

Tazarea summarized her thoughts on calling herself an activist.

Teaching to me is a mission. I am doing work that aids the public good. There's nothing more activist than that, standing in a position to serve others is what activism is all about. I don't want to not claim that word. It's part of who I am. I don't want to be scared of it. I want people to associate that word with the teaching profession because there's a lot of meaning behind that word. A lot of history, a lot of blood sweat and tears. For a Black woman like me it is essential to my survival. (Tazarea, Interview 3)

Janel, Raine, and Tazarea collectively conveyed the importance of taking on the identity of activist. For them, teachers are either recreating what is, conforming, or teachers are critically evaluating our world and what we think we know. Their recognition and labeling of their work as a teacher as being political is political. Though Tazarea does not use the word political, it is evident in her description that she does not shy away from the term activist. This research data aligned with Nieto (2005). "Teaching is inherently political work. Although I do not mean to be

unnecessarily provocative in making this assertion, after 40 years of teaching as both a K-12 teacher, and, later, as a teacher educator, I have become convinced of the truth of this statement” (Nieto, 2005, p. 3). Nieto’s characterization of teaching as inherently political work is rooted in her lived experiences, yet articulated with awareness of the climate in which such a statement would be received.

Despite the contrasting views on labeling one’s self as an activist, the participants all performed in consistent ways which reflect their commitment and courage to teach young people growing up in a society seeking to maintain structural inequities. The activist literacies of the teachers in my study supported 1) going against the grain, 2) teaching and working with intentionality, and 3) changing and growing through reflective and action oriented practices.

**Going against the grain.** One theme that was consistent while examining the data was that the Black women teachers in this study went *against the grain* in their professional lives. The participants went against the grain in different ways, but they all clearly acted and thought in ways that sought to disrupt and disturb the everyday happenings in their schools that were viewed as hindrances to students’ success and overall joy in the classrooms. Comfortably housed in the teacher education for social justice literature, Cochran-Smith (1991) depicts the idiom of going against the grain as a moment, or a lifetime of moments, in which someone decides to do something that is opposite of what is usually done. Collins (1990), through the lens of Black Feminist Thought, also recognizes this practice as a catalyst for the shifting of paradigms, following the critical identification of injustice called for by CRT. Cochran-Smith (2004) wrote “teaching against the grain is embedded in the culture and history of teaching at individual schools and in the biographies of teachers and their collaborative efforts to alter curricula, raise questions about common practices, and resist inappropriate decisions” (p. 24-25). It signifies

standing on one's own in opposition to something perceived to be wrong and unjust. Going against the grain derives from the act of cutting wood in the direction opposite to the direction the wood lies. When one goes against, as opposed to along the wood, which smooths the wood, this action results in jags and unevenness. This understanding is important as we understand what this signifies for teachers who act in ways that go against the grain. In general, going against the grain means to do something that is not usually done. In teaching, it signifies acting in ways that are at times in direct contrast to institutional policies as well as individual expectations. When the teachers in my study go against the grain, results and consequences were not always met with positive responses. Their actions disrupted and agitated existing norms in schools. The teachers in my study report having done this time and time again. Lisa's narrative highlighted the work that she engaged in that went against the leadership expectations regarding the scope and sequence of the math curriculum in her school.

I have to do more than teach, I have to educate students each and every time I am provided the opportunity. This means sometimes going against what I've been told to do or focus on! It means working with the belief that I am operating in the best interests of the students in the classroom, not the ones they try to get us to think about abstractly at professional development meetings. Like there are real students in my class struggling with concepts in math and we want to talk about pushing forward despite them not getting it. I can't do that! I won't do that! (Lisa)

Lisa's account asserted that she cannot and would not act in ways that she deemed counterproductive and damaging for the children in her class. This demonstrates an understanding of her position as a teacher who recognizes the need to take a stand. She is clear in the fact that she teaches actual young people and not numbers on a computer screen. It is evident

that as a teacher Lisa goes through her day to day teaching life thinking about and working for and with the students in her class. Lisa makes purposeful and intentional decisions in the arc of her teaching, and does not let leader expectations within her school dictate her decisions or actions. Lisa's insistence that the students in her class not be pushed forward to the next mathematical concept without true understanding of a current stage should be viewed as an act of resistance. This resistance is targeted at those in power who continue to make decisions for children with little to no regard for the children in these spaces. Advocacy for her students' well-being, and resistance to harmful policy decisions regarding them, even from superiors, evidence an awareness of the problematic nature in which students are expected to engage in learning. There is a clear commitment to keeping existing students grounded in her practices and to avoid habits (going with the grain) that rely on thinking hypothetically about imagined students.

Changing her outlook on being in school became my primary goal that year. I didn't care if she passed a single test, I just wanted her to like being in school. This meant I wasn't calling her mother in for every "bad" thing she did "wrong"! It meant going against the expectations of the dean of students and handling things in my own way. (Janel)

The quotation marks that Janel utilized surrounding the words bad and wrong were her own. They serve as a visible articulation to Janel's oppositional view to thinking about and framing her student's behavior in negative ways. The quotations also point to Janel's resistance to these normative and deficiency-filtered frames. The practice highlighted and word emphasis convey a discounting of patterned teacher reactions, which include calling parents or school safety resource officers into classrooms to deal with what are deemed disruptive behaviors. Instead, Janel and other participants consistently responded in ways that are counter to these normalized ways of viewing students. They ultimately created space for students to succeed in and develop a

love for school and learning. They rejected harmful assumptions about students and worked purposefully to respond in more thoughtful and responsible ways. Participants in my study did this even in environments where atypical responses were not viewed in a positive light. A belief about students and the discourse that depicts their opinions exists in the everyday schooling culture and climate. As a practicing educator in the field and due to my current involvement in policy and development of best practices in a large urban school district that surrounds my university, I continue to be privy to the negative beliefs and assumptions regarding the ability, aspirations, and work ethic of systematically marginalized people. Beyond my own understanding and experiential knowledge, however, is the widely-researched deficit perspective. The deficit perspective is deeply embedded in the fabric of schools, and is often disseminated through educational research and within teacher training programs (Gonzalez, 2005). The cultural deficit perspective is, in short, a perspective that minority group members are different because their culture is deficient in important ways from the dominant majority group (Wages, 2015). In contrast, participants in this study rejected dangerous assumptions about students and worked purposefully to respond in more thoughtful and responsible ways. *In Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Collins (1998) examined how outsiders resist the majority's perspective. Participants in my study did resist the deficient characterization of young people even in environments where atypical responses were not viewed in a positive light. Atypical responses include working to handle things in their own ways, as Janel shared. Many of the teachers in my study went against the grain despite dangers of administrative recourse and admonishment. This was mostly due to their own willingness to see immediate responses as having long-term effects, and understanding the overall impact that these decisions would ultimately have on their students' outcomes and experiences. Janel wrote, "handling things my

own way didn't always make me popular with my colleagues, but there was to me always something more important and that was that my students, like Jasmine would come to love being in school."

Going against the grain is also evident in Raine's narrative. In response to the prompt, Raine shared an experience that found her speaking against one of her colleague's characterization of her class.

I had a very independent class this particular year. I worked on having them be as independent as possible because I knew as grade leader and graduation coordinator, I would be out of my classroom often. I prioritized cultivating a classroom that was reflective of this desire. I did little things such as placing supplies in the reach of students. I unlocked and kept open supply closets in my classroom. I provided typed assignments and checklists for my students for as many class projects as I could. My students became student teachers and often led class groups for their peers. I wanted them to love being in my classroom. This was something that teachers were not accustomed to seeing and experiencing. When prep teachers came into my room they were unsure of how to work with my students, who for the majority of the day were working independent of me. It was challenging for teachers to come into my classroom where my students had been taught to read one another's vibe and know when to participate in the conversations. It clashed with everything the teachers at my school had come to know and believe about how classrooms were supposed to function. I didn't have my students raise their hands to ask questions and participate or to go the bathroom, they knew how to interject because I taught them this skill. I wanted my students to have agency and it might not be what people think about when they hear that

word and might not attribute it to 5<sup>th</sup> graders but they got it and it was one of my most enjoyable years as a teacher. (Raine)

Raine further revealed issues related to classroom dynamics, power relations, and teachers' understanding of the ways children were supposed to perform in school. Raine went against the grain by challenging and disrupting traditional roles of what it means to be a student. She did this by presenting an alternate way for students to be in her classroom, which they had not been exposed to before. The clash between teachers' understanding of the performative roles of students and what they actually saw happening in Raine's class triggered conflict for the teachers. These conflicting tensions also put Raine at odds with her colleagues. However, Raine did not compromise.

Every day I came back from prep period, there was a negative report about my class. It went on like this for weeks and I grew so fed up with the other teachers coming into my room that I started staying in my room and observing what was happening. I saw clearly my students taking on this identity of independent student and independent thinker and I saw teachers resisting that because they (teachers) were not ready. I remember telling my students, "Well they need to get ready because we are not changing our classroom personality. I just wasn't willing to compromise with them at the danger of losing my students so I just dealt with the reports and eventually worked with the teachers. (Raine, Narrative)

An additional instance of going against the grain that was common in the narratives came through Jennifer's recollection. As an experienced teacher, she reflected on her early years of teaching, her experience with one student, her initial refusal to do anything different than what she had learned from her teacher preparation program, and then her consequent shift.

I thought about Peter with my teaching style in mind but decided not to change in spite of hearing about his behavioral issues from other teachers and administrators. Days turned into weeks, Peter continued to sit by the window towards the back of the room. I tried my best to have him participate during class time. I frequently called on him especially during mathematics period because he was a great math student when he checked in. Most of the time he would know the answers but he didn't like when I called on him so I would get an unpleasant answer. Whenever he got an answer incorrect, he would become very upset. (Jennifer, Narrative)

On an individual level, Jennifer exhibited an allegiance to her teaching style even though she was a brand new teacher at the time. This allegiance to her teaching style was formalized during her teacher preparation program. She decided to stay the course for weeks even though she recognized that she was not reaching her student. She also described an approach commonly taught in classroom management classes to influence student classroom participation that includes calling on students even when they have not raised their hand to answer a question. This is a common approach to engage students when they appear to be disengaged in their learning. However, this approach was not working for at least one of the students in her class. Though Jennifer did not initially change her approach and methods, she wrote, "towards the end of the month, I spent most nights trying to figure out a way to connect better with Peter". This demonstrated Jennifer's willingness to connect with Peter on a deeper level, but her willingness to connect was not enough. Jennifer went against the grain when she decided not to suspend Peter because he was expecting to be suspended. However, one event transpired that forced her hand. What happened following Peter's suspension was the moment when Jennifer's shift occurred.



I figured something had to change maybe it was I who needed to change. That Monday morning when Peter returned to school I decided to sit down and talk with him. I started off the conversation by telling him that today is a new day that we were starting all over again. We spoke about several different things but most importantly I told him that if he was to ever feel as if he was about to lose control I would give him permission to step out of the class for a moment until he calms down. From that day until the rest of the school year I spoke to Peter in a calm respectful manner at **all** times and he listened, participated in ways I could not imagine possible. I had the best first year of teaching ever despite the rough start. Peter along with majority of the class was able to successfully pass to Grade 6. It turns out Peter was much brighter than we thought. (Jennifer, Narrative)

Jennifer's recollection of this particular moment between her and Peter was a pivotal one that changed the trajectory of both their school years. Jennifer gave Peter permission to respond in a way that was honest for him. At the time of this incident, schoolwide policies were clear in the ways undesired behaviors should be handled. There was little space for a student such as Peter to express himself. Despite her knowledge of these policies, Jennifer's conviction is clearly stated. "I knew that I wasn't supposed to give Peter these chances, there was zero tolerance for misbehavior, but I could not keep this up. I could not watch Peter grow angrier and angrier with me and school and somehow be alright with that dynamic at the end of the day" (Jennifer). Jennifer decided that she would not simply go along with these expectations and turn a blind, unaffected eye to the effects of these interactions. Jennifer did not say you cannot be angry or lose control, but rather said you "can step out, calm down, and come back in." This approach gave Peter ownership over his feelings, and demonstrated that Peter's feelings would not disqualify him from participating in his education. Jennifer valued Peter's understanding. She

wanted him to know that he was valued and that even if there were moments of struggle, he would be welcomed back. In a school building that Jennifer described as “dangerously toxic and unrelenting towards students who aren’t easy to teach and work with,” her words to Peter are significant.

Schools that operate in ways that are toxic to students often do not allow for the type of flexibility that Jennifer described. Jennifer employed this flexibility even through the rigidity of schoolwide policies and rules required students to be in class at all times. The impact of being welcomed back into class cannot be underestimated for students such as Peter. It cannot be underestimated for teachers either. The decision that Jennifer made to speak respectfully and calmly to Peter “at **all** times,” not just when it was easy, was crucial to the successful school year and to the success of Peter’s educational journey (Jennifer). Jennifer’s bolded “all” draws attention to her purposeful commitment.

Part of Jennifer’s experience required that she reevaluate her teaching style and her approach to dealing with a less compliant student. Beyond her willingness to change, there was an actual action that aligned with this readiness to improve schooling experiences and outcomes for all of the students. There was a period of honest and critical reflection that preceded the action. It is important to stress that honest and critical reflection is not always easy. Sometimes it challenges everything we think we know and have learned. This difficulty cannot impede our responsibility to respond appropriately to various circumstances and situations. Honest and critical reflection along with purposeful and deliberate action begs us to ask how else we might improve and what more is needed.

Lisa’s narrative described one particular experience involving both a student and an administration.

It's hard when your practices are counter to what is considered to be normal ideology. Normal ideology says teach what you are told within the guidelines that you are told to do so. You are a teacher who has to teach the curriculum that is placed in front of you. Forget the fact that the people who designed it have no idea what your students face every day. Forget the fact that they (students) might have ideas and want to voice them. Damn, forget the fact that you as a teacher might have ideas and want to voice them. But I had to remember that my thoughts and knowledge based on my experience with my students everyday provided me with an advantage. I had to trust that. I had to trust that my care and love for them, my hopes for their futures would make my counter decisions the right decisions. (Lisa)

Lisa's account reflected the tension that exists when teachers attempt to work in ways that go against normal school practices.

Going against the grain suggests that participants made choices and acted in ways that required, first, their understanding of the cultural norms within a school building. Then, rejecting these norms, actively worked to disrupt common practices. Their resistance and activism in the rejection of unfair norms were motivated by the pursuit of justice for the young people in their classrooms. In the definitional paradigm established throughout this work, going against the grain in the interest of students in the face of recrimination falls assuredly in the category of activism. Though not necessarily always claimed as activism by the Black women teachers in my study, the practice was a deliberate and integral part of their approach to the teaching and learning spaces they managed. The ways in which they responded to specific situations and the ways in which they created spaces for students in their classrooms to feel and be empowered

played an essential role in the construction of their activist literacies. The theme of going against the grain represents one way that the teachers in my study engaged in activism.

### **Teaching and Working with Intentionality**

Receiving initial responses that teachers might not readily identify their work as a classroom teacher as political or view and identify themselves as social justice change agents despite acting in intentional ways was a bit unnerving. The responses point to a constrained and restricted view of what it means to be an activist or to engage in activist literacies. Lisa helped highlight this further when she declared, “You know I teach! That’s what I do! As a math teacher, I teach my students how to see math in their everyday lives. That was the focus of my program.” I wanted to shake Lisa and ask how she does not see what she does as so much more. I asked Lisa to tell me about one of her most rewarding times as a teacher.

It must have been the period of time I met some of my students’ parents at a local library close to the school for about seven Saturday mornings for about 45-50 minutes each time! I knew that many of my students’ parents were immigrants and it was also clear to me that my students were struggling with some of the new material I was expected to teach. So I decided I would hold some Saturday sessions in which I helped parents understand some of what I was teaching in class. It wasn’t perfect by all means, you know there were some language barriers. We couldn’t understand each other but we figured out how to communicate somehow. Sometimes my students would come and be translators which would help them anyway. (Lisa)

Lisa’s recollection showcases her commitment to students’ academic success as well as her willingness to engage parents in their own familiar neighborhood spaces. Lisa constructed an alternative space in which she sought to provide additional opportunities that extend beyond

traditional idea of schooling and parental involvement. Lisa did this intentionally. Creating alternate spaces have always been necessary for the survival of Black women and for the continued growth of the communities in which Black women reside. She engaged families in an attempt to mitigate some of the issues present in her student's academic lives. She made herself available so students and their families could access the necessary content to be successful in her classroom and gain required knowledge and skills. Lisa set up space in the local library on a weekend. This demonstrated a way of thinking that aimed to challenge and disrupt the traditional ways of families being involved in school. The alternate space that Black women have had to continually develop to challenge traditional understandings can be seen through Lisa's action. The language used to describe the difficulty in communication consciously articulated a more complex understanding of parent/family-teacher relationships. The phrase "we couldn't understand each other" places some onus at her own feet rather than placing all responsibility on the families and parents for communication challenges. These are not inconsequential decisions. They are purposeful and designed to foster change. Intentional teaching can be understood to mean that teachers act with specific goals in mind for the children in their care. Lisa went on to say, "I made a choice to do something different because I just couldn't continue doing what was being done. It wasn't helping me and my students were not benefiting". Afrocentric Feminist Thought suggests that there is always choice and power to act (Collins, 1990). For Lisa and the Black women teachers in my study, this is what guided them to make the decisions they made daily.

Though there was a reluctance early in Dominique's interview on activism to characterize herself as an activist or the work that she does in her day to day teaching as activism, she did

arrive at a point where she discusses intentionality in her decision making, constructing, and planning.

So one thing I'll add to this is that I don't, with outside of, I don't even know how to say it, in my classroom I do see myself as a change agent or vehicle for my students, in terms of what I'm presenting, so, for example, I have been very intentional and purposeful about inserting certain things in my ELA curriculum, in particular, how I divide the unit so I was responsible for planning with the consultant all of our ELA units and I designed them purposefully so that they were more culturally responsive and reflective of the students that we have in our building. And I did that purposefully only because that may be the only time that you get to talk about issues of justice and injustice and cultural values and then and this is where I promise you may have some sort of connection to what you're learning, so, yeah, you're getting all the standards that are being taught, all of the skills are being done and taught, but they're all embedded through material that is culturally sound and appropriate and responsive and reflective of the kids in my room. I think that, yes, for me that this is one intentional purposeful action. (Dominique)

Janel is purposeful with her work with her colleagues both in and out of school.

When I first began teaching, I would just close my door and do things in my own classroom. But then I started feeling as if I could be doing more. So when I saw my colleagues struggling with either connecting to students or with engaging students, I offered myself as a resource. One specific time was a colleague of mine was apprehensive about meeting with a father of a student's brother who I had the previous year. Michael the younger brother was having some adjustment issues in school so she wanted to talk to his father. However, she did not want to come across as needing the

father to handle her discipline issues. I said well, “you do need Mr. Jones, maybe not to handle “discipline” but to engage him in conversation in finding out what might be causing Michael’s behavior this is after of course you’ve done some examination of your teaching practices. That became my phrase one year-what have you done? Have you examined your teaching practices? I think my colleagues got tired of me asking them so they eventually would start conversations like, Janel, I’ve done this and this and it’s not working. Then I started saying, it hasn’t worked yet so what’s next. Then my colleagues, just sort of understood that I was on the children’s side and because I was on the children’s side I would be on their side because I wanted what was best for the students.

(Janel)

Janel’s description of her work with colleagues is an example of working with intentionality with staff in a school building to change the way families are viewed and to begin to examine the practices of teachers. It was her commitment to students that drove her work with her colleagues.

When I was teaching fourth grade and I found out whose class my “problem students” were going to for fifth grade, I immediately went to that teacher and offered myself as a resource. Sometimes the other teacher would be grateful, other times I got responses like and what’s going to happen when they leave the building and you’re not there or they need to learn to be without you. I never understood that if we were trying to make the experiences for children within schools positive ones, why would we try to limit the support that students needed or did well with. Selfishly, it was probably because I didn’t want to see those students that I invested so much time and energy with running through the halls again but it still would have benefited the student. (Raine)

The Black women teachers in my study chose to work with intentionality when it came to engaging with students, families, and colleagues. For these participants, teaching and working with intentionality necessitated having firm and established beliefs about children, families, and communities and then ensuring that these beliefs were mirrored through their practices. Teaching and working with intentionality was one example of their activist literacies.

### **Engaging Student Voice and Developing Student Agency**

Another common theme that emerged from the data was developing students to be student activists. Voices of students are often absent and left out of conversations related to the very issues that are most pertinent to their schooling experiences. All of the participants communicated the importance of developing students' activism. Student activism is essential in the much-demanded transformation of our nation's schools. Part of this commitment has to be to the communities in which students are educated and live. Historically, the discourse in many schools has suggested that student should succeed with the goal of being allowed to leave the school - do well so you can leave.

It was common for me to begin my school year with prose about doing well in school so that you can get out of the dysfunction that many of our students were living in. I thought I was doing something good when I said that to my students, like I was motivating them. I realized later that my students shouldn't have to escape to find better opportunities or to feel safe. These should not be privileges for some students but realities for all children.

(Raine)

Raine's awareness after years of her teaching career was difficult for her.

How many classes had I said that to? How many children have felt because of what I said that our neighborhoods were not good enough? I didn't help them to see that there were



systems that caused us to think of and view our neighborhoods as less than. I was doing something with those words and I hadn't really thought about it. Lisa shared her own experience with this idea during one interview...As a student it was common for my teachers to tell us, if you want to make it out of here it starts now. What you do now has an impact on the rest of your life. I heard this message growing up. I continued to share the message with my students. I knew that students in my school were viewed as having no or lesser value than students in richer and better performing school districts. It was obvious from the limited resources and limited teaching experience of the teachers within my school. I think in my school the longest amount of time anyone teacher had was 6 years. There might have been two older teachers but they were new to the profession as well. There was such a turnover each year, not many teachers stayed because it was hard. It was challenging. And I told my students, look if you want the world to take you seriously you have to make something of yourself and leave this neighborhood. Then one of my students said to me one day, 'If this is so bad, why are you here?' I gave him some answer like, because you all have potential to be great and I want to teach you. So lame.

(Raine)

For teachers such as Raine and Lisa who work in communities that are persistently subjected to generations of noninvestment, failed policy enactment, discrimination, and racism, it is not uncommon to desire more and better for the children growing up in these spaces. The realities of the lived experiences of students often require teachers, students, and their families to imagine a life outside the confines of the isolated and segregated neighborhoods that federal housing policies have made commonplace in many urban localities. The words imparted to students from teachers that genuinely care about students' futures were spoken out of desire for there to exist

more equity in an unjust world. It is not far-fetched to want the students that they love and care about to escape an environment segregated by artificial and unnecessary barriers in which students are purposefully forgotten and marginalized.

However, the reality is that teachers committed to social justice and those who consider themselves to be teacher activists must do more than continue the narrative of do well to escape, which closely mirrors the old pull yourself up by the bootstraps mentality. Beyond the discourse of doing well, it is important to shift the language that reinforces meritocracy. Raine said, “After I was able to think about these ideas I knew it was important for me as a teacher to get students to think critically about these things and not only think about them but to encourage them to use their voice.” This is what Raine does with her students by exposing them to and facilitating a utilization of critique on the oppressive systems that are conferring on their minds, bodies, spirits, and souls. Black Feminist Thought in action allows educators to see what is happening both inside and outside of the school. Through the Black Feminist Thought prism, Black women educators are able to take the present conditions in and yet emanate out a comprehensive image of change. Because Black Feminist Thought does not allow Black women teachers to look at students as deficient, they aim their gaze at what is happening around them and to them. Further recognizing their students as the living embodiment of change in this world, it becomes vital that students are equipped to see these things happening. The purpose of education then is not entrenched within the discourse of escape, but rather a discourse towards disrupting, dismantling, and designing schools and classrooms as sites of liberation. The teacher thus acts in specific ways that cultivate these types of students.

For example, Raine described a time in her fifth-grade classroom that a student initiated a conversation that would spark a grade-level policy initiative.

Malik was one of my most memorable students. He's one that I loved, like really really loved. He was honest. If he didn't like something he would let you know. One morning Malik came to me and began a conversation. The conversation went something like this "Ms. Roberts you know sometimes it's hard for me to pay attention to you all day." Oh really Malik, is it? I responded. "Yes but I really do try because it's you and I like you." Malik went on to say that he thought students should have get out of class pass. He said you know not like when you send me to Ms. Johnson (my close friend and his former teacher) because you need a break from me but when I need a break from you. I laughed out loud and asked, "You need a break from me? How's this going to work. Malik went on to explain the G-O-C-P as he called it and how it would work. Basically, it was him saying that he would have the ability to use this pass not whenever he felt like it but when "I really need a moment from you." I remember laughing because I recognized the language he was using as language I used with him when I would ask him to go to Johnson's class just for a moment. What I took from that though wasn't an attack on me but a self-monitoring strategy for him. I thought it was pretty cool that he came to me with that. So of course I had him write it up for the administration and he designed the look of the pass and everything. He presented the idea to teachers at a grade meeting and they appreciated it. He was so cute and assured. He said, "I know some of you teachers have kids that can use this pass, we talk!" The pass became a staple in the fifth grade for the duration of the school year. (Raine)

The idea that a student's honest voice could start an initiative is powerful. It is powerful in the sense that students can see that they have the capacity to transform currently established ideas. It is equally powerful for teachers who recognize that engaging student voice is transformative. If

Raine had reacted differently or negatively to Malik in that moment, it would have created an environment where student voice was not truly valued and recognized. It may have changed the dynamic between student and teacher in a negative way. Malik may not have recognized early on his own power and agency. Reflective in Raine's work is the way Malik comes to understand his capability to contest and transform systems. This learning aligns with youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Ginwright, 2010; Tuck & Yang, 2015) which "provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems" (Camarota & Fine, 2008, p. 2).

Jennifer started a student group to get students involved in the decision-making process in her school.

Last year we actually started the student government in the school where I am now, so that was partly, I don't want to take full credit for it, but it was something that I brought up that we were missing, in terms of having students actively engaged in our school. The students didn't really have like a student committee or a school council. So that was something that I would say that I took part in. The school council is up and running now and I'm not part of it, but last year when we first unfolded it and we brought it out, the kids, you know, they're running for different positions, president, vice-president, treasurer. They were excited. They're meeting still. There's just a group young ladies, young leaders and I go and do some work with those girls with one of their guidance counselors that facilitate the program. (Jennifer)

Engaging student voice and developing student agency is essential because young people with agency tend to act with purpose to achieve desired conditions in their own and other's lives. The Black women teachers engage student voice and are respectful of and seek the opinions of

their students. They do so in efforts to build youth activism. The teachers in this study recognize that developing student agency is not only important for students to be active participants in their learning but also active participants in their lives. Lisa said, “I want to ensure my students recognize that they can be catalyst for change, and I do that in small but important ways.” The Black women teachers in this study recognized the importance of developing youth leaders committed to changing their own communities. Dominique shared, “The students are being most affected by the decisions we make. They should be part of the decision-making process. They should be presenting ideas.” As youth activism has positioned itself within the mainstream conversation on activism, it is necessary that teachers be intentional about engaging voice and developing student agency. Youth-led activism is crucial, particularly within the current sociopolitical context. The teachers in this study recognize that when students put skills such as presenting ideas (in Malik’s case) or making space for leaders to emerge (like student government) that these can alter existing relations and create change throughout their schools and communities.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The experiences of the Black women teachers in my study have consciously and subconsciously played a vital role in their teacher activism and in the development of their activist literacies. Their experiences as young girls in K-12 schools and while attending PWIs of higher learning were central to their development and the ways they engage in the work of teaching. Feelings of marginalization and isolation were common amongst the participants, and these feelings and lived realities informed their ways of engaging with children. The assigned work in teaching preparation programs was viewed as unchallenging, and experiences within classrooms saw their voices and agency suppressed.

Some of the Black women teachers in this study were hesitant to identify themselves as activists while others were clear and decisive in owning their teacher activist identity. Those that were hesitant were tentative only because they did not view the enacting of activist literacies as separate and aside from teaching. For these teachers, they were doing what they were supposed to do or what was best for the students in their class. On the other hand, the teachers who took on the teacher activist identity were clear that teaching was political. Though some teachers viewed themselves as teacher activists and others did not, they collectively performed in ways that aligned with activist-informed work. This included teaching with intentionality, engaging student voice, and developing student agency.

Teachers inevitably are activists, even when they try not to be. The teachers that close their doors and decide to keep their heads down are choosing to be a type of political agent. Teachers make decisions every day about what they bring in to their classrooms and school buildings. They make choices about what is allowable in schools. Teaching has become a reactionary profession in which mandates and policies are given to teachers. Though this is shifting, it is uncommon for teachers to be involved at the beginning to craft policy and inform these decisions. Teachers must begin to use their voice and their vast experience to be influential in making changes, particularly for the most marginalized groups of students.

As illustrated throughout this chapter, the teachers within my study undertake many different acts that lend themselves to activism and activist literacies. Janel's insistence on using the term *serve* to define what she viewed as not just her role as a teacher but the ultimate role of all teachers is encompassing. The participants' unpopular responses to colleagues' and administrators' thoughts and beliefs about students highlight this truth, as they are often labeled as radical or argumentative and pushed to the sidelines within the profession. When teachers in

my study confronted the varying negative assumptions that are entrenched in schools and their policies and procedures, they were engaging in activism to work more effectively and purposefully in the best interests of their students and communities. Working with their colleagues to help them become more culturally responsive is activism. Dominique's activism was apparent not in her noticing that her male student was wearing short pants on an extremely cold day, but in actually doing something about it. In this particular instance, Dominique went out and purchased him additional pants. It certainly takes more than simply monetary assistance. It takes more than just imagining a better space for children. Indeed, it takes putting in work that helps to make an imagined and envisioned space an actual reality. The actions are what elevate advocacy to activism.

The teachers in my study were cognizant of the many acts they engaged in that benefitted their students, but did not easily and readily characterize such acts as activism. Perhaps this reluctance stemmed from a limited idea of what activism is or perhaps they simply "act every day in the best ways for the students in front of me" (Source). It is important to actively and explicitly highlight how these acts fall under activist literacies to better develop future teachers to take up this work in ways that are transformative for educational experiences and outcomes. We need to encourage teachers to use their teaching voice not just to reach to the back of classrooms, but to reach the front of spaces where decisions are being made.

What additional questions should be asked regarding activist literacies that can be taught in teacher preparation programs to improve teachers' ability to act in response to injustices? What skills would they teach? How would teacher candidates acquire such skills? What would these classrooms be like? How would pre-service teachers demonstrate knowledge acquisition?

Contextualizing activist literacies to include skills that can be taught and learned through teacher preparation is an important first step and has been initiated with this research.



**CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION**

*You don't make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering, and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas. -Shirley Chisolm (1969)*

This investigation explored how six Black women teachers engage in the work of activist literacies in their classrooms, schools, and communities in a larger socio-political context in which activism of all types has seen a resurgence. The methodology employed afforded the examination of their life histories, their experiences in teacher preparation programs, how these experiences have informed their teaching practices and beliefs about children and schooling. Through examinations of teacher submitted narratives and repeated interviewing, the findings revealed the daily work that extended beyond the traditional school day that participants engaged within their classrooms, schools, communities with students, colleagues, and leadership. Their varied works and practices are explicitly named *activist literacies* to reframe the idea of teacher activists' efforts to be more purposeful. Providing a shared language helps to advance this work. The data collected and analyzed uncovered what it meant for these six Black women educators to engage in activist practices, even though some were reluctant to name it as such. By completing this dissertation and intentionally foregrounding their voices and sharing their stories, I provide a snapshot into the ways participants' pedagogy and beliefs about children and schooling were informed by their life histories and experiences within teacher preparation programs.

The first research question sought to uncover and reveal the life histories of the teachers. I identified the way these life histories and early educative experiences informed the way the teachers engaged in activist literacy practices. The experiences that the Black women teachers revealed were those that raised their awareness and the development of their critical consciousness. These experiences as Black girls in K-12 schools served as part of an impetus for them to perform and act in ways that were, arguably, consistently activist-informed. These

experiences were the catalysts for their commitment to social justice teaching and transformative and liberatory education.

The second research question aimed to solicit responses pertaining to the experiences of Black women teachers in teacher preparation programs. The participants of this study learned substantive teaching content while attending predominantly and historically white institutions of higher learning. This commonality amongst the participants in the study provided a complex view into teacher preparation programs that have maintained whiteness even as these programs align themselves to urban public education.

The third question explored each teacher's pedagogy. I explored each participant's understanding of her role as an educator and what it meant to be a teacher activist or as a teacher engaging in activist literacies. The term *activist* filled many of my participants with seeming anxiety and reservation. The memory recollection and shared conversations provided the participants opportunities to critically and honestly reflect in ways they had not done in quite some time. The level of reflection for the participants created an opportunity for them to engage in dialogue that had been missing from their professional lives. The participants thought about and began to view their practice with a wider lens. They began to recognize their taken for granted knowledge and actions as something more. They began to see that these actions and ways of thinking should not be viewed in an inconsequential way. Dominique shared this sentiment succinctly.

For so long, I have gone about my day simply doing what needed to be done. I never thought about this as something intentional or something purposeful. I surely never thought about it being used as a model for preparing future teachers. I mean who would tell me this? Who would shine light on me and say that I am great, that I am doing

tremendous, important, and impactful work-who but another Black woman would not allow me to minimize what I am doing daily? (Dominique)

Dominique's declaration towards the end of this investigative process points to the essential nature of this study. Despite the tremendous work done by the educators in this study towards liberation for their students and the success that they achieved, the Black women teachers within this study are largely unsung. Perhaps it is because the teachers in this study, like many Black women, do the work they have been charged to do with no expectation of fanfare. However, this disadvantages all of us, especially those with the ability to identify these practices and share them with future teachers as best practices in the field. Findings from the data chapters are presented in this chapter, and discussed with specific implications for teacher activist literacies in K-12 schools and teacher education.

### **Findings**

Chapter 4 presented the biographical profiles of each of the participants in the study. These profiles were constructed through the use of participant interview data. Additionally, Chapter 4 discussed the ways participants drew on memories to locate instances in their teaching lives that were most important to them. This was accomplished through the constructing of teacher narratives. Beyond being identified as important events in their lives, these memories were used to serve as lessons for future and practicing teachers. Remembering as a tool of resistance encourages practicing teachers to engage in the act of remembering.

However, all too often, we have been seduced into forgetting (or have chosen to do so), given the weight and power of our memories and the often radical act of (re)membering in our present lives and work, that is (re)membering is an act of decolonization. (Dillard, 2012, p. 4)

Memory is important throughout this study, as discussed in Chapter 3 in terms of researcher reflexivity. Remembering as resistance, much like Dillard's description, serves a function beyond recollecting. The memories that were recalled and accessed by the Black women teachers in this study were powerful in that they allowed them to revisit times that were transformational for them as teachers. Beyond the professional gain, these memories became instructional and informative for future teachers. By remembering specific experiences and writing these memories down, the teachers in this study provided an expansive understanding of the ways teachers engage in activism even in ways they might not readily acknowledge. Explicitly naming the ways the Black women teachers in the study performed in their everyday teaching practices as activist literacies broadens the conceptualization of teacher activists and what teacher activists do. These memories and the consequent lessons extrapolated from the teacher narratives raise awareness and compel a different way of seeing and thinking about the daily actions of teaching that are not limited to delivering instruction. By understanding the actions of the teachers as activism, it becomes possible to imagine teachers beyond the restrictive notion as a sharer of knowledge. Sharing knowledge with young people is an important goal of education, but today's teachers must recognize their role as more than that. Teachers must be energetically committed to transforming the institutions in which they teach to become more socially just and to work in collaboration with communities towards larger institutional and societal transformation.

Each participant in the study provided individual lessons that align themselves to activism. For example, Lisa utilized an alternative community site to provide services to her students and their families. She did this to resist the confining structures of school buildings. Lisa was able to simultaneously resist the structural systems creating the injustice and engage with local community sites to provide an alternative space for educating students and families.

Dominique amplified student voice in her teacher memory narrative. Dominique centered her students' voices in her narrative writing and used her writing to share how she was changed by the shared stories of her students. When one amplifies not only their historically and traditionally marginalized voice but other silenced voices that render people invisible as well, this act should be viewed as revolutionary.

In Chapter 5, findings were gathered from the multiple data sources that highlighted the ways Black women experienced their teacher preparation programs that continue to normalize whiteness. Haddix (2016) cautioned that education programs that do this “may produce a teaching force that is unaware of how they can use their work to dismantle power, whiteness, and racism. As a result, even real moves toward a mission and vision ‘teaching for social justice’ are jeopardized and only then implemented on a superficial level” (p. 48). This research allows for a window into deconstructing the systems and individuals that uphold privilege and whiteness. The Black women educators in this study were hyperaware of the systems around them that required deconstruction and dismantling, and performed in ways that aimed to do this. Placing the discussion of whiteness at the beginning of the study was a strategic decision made to demonstrate that whiteness for Black women teachers is always present.

In Chapter 6, themes pertaining to the teachers' daily engaged practices of transforming the educational experiences, outcomes, and opportunities for students were highlighted. A large aspect of Chapter 6 included discussions about the ways these particular teachers go against the grain in their daily classroom, school, and community. In addition, the chapter discussed the importance of teaching and working with intentionality and developing student agency. These themes helped contextualize teacher activist literacies to include the daily thoughts and acts engaged in by the teachers within this study. One of the major findings presented in the chapter

demonstrated the differing views on teacher activism and taking on the title of teacher activist. Data showed that for some of the participants in the study there was a reluctance and hesitation in naming the work they engage in as teachers as activism.

The overall study allowed the teachers to engage in reflective practices that they had not experienced prior to the study. These reflective practices prompted the Black women teachers to inquire further around the need for what I have termed *critical collegueship through sisterhood circles*. Critical collegueship through sisterhood circles elucidates the reality that professional collegueship within the teaching profession is important. However, belonging to a space that is also acutely aware of the challenges faced by Black women teachers is also critical. Sisterhood circles do this while also operating as sites of affirmation for the members within the circle. This varies significantly from the larger networks of connected educators that are essentially strangers to one another within a shared space. Dominique said, “I would have loved to read the narratives submitted by the other participants in the study. If only to read, respond, and reflect with one another on what we were experiencing.” Tazarea added, “Sometimes, I feel so lonely being here in this space as the only one. I wish I had a connection with other teachers who look like me teaching in a similar situation. I know we could learn from each other. I know we could share strength and build together stronger versions of ourselves.” When one listens to Tazarea’s open and honest desire, the magnitude of what these sisterhood circles could be for teachers becomes clear. *A stronger version of ourselves* can provide the foundational strength for educators to better resist damaging and oppressive structures that continue to perpetuate the status quo.

### **Implications**

This study began with the purpose of highlighting the Black women teachers as knowledge creators and experts in their field. This work endeavored to acknowledge the value of

different perspectives that are so critical to teacher education. The complexity and weight of this undertaking was understood by the researcher and participants. When asked in her final interview, what if there was anything she wanted to add, Jennifer responded:

I can't tell you how much being a part of this study has done for me. I think we as Black women often go through our days, simply doing what has to be done. We're always moving, always pushing forward. Rarely do we stop and take account of what it is we are actually doing. I think when we move in these ways it prevents us from appreciating all we do. For me my teaching has always been about the children and I've done a great job, but I've never allowed myself to get caught up in that. I've never allowed myself to own my expertise, and this study, reflecting in this way has done that for me. (Jennifer)

Jennifer's comment at the end of the study indicated the importance of engaging in activities that cause one to critically remember, reflect, and enact change in not only students' lives but in teachers' lives as well.

Examining the life histories, experiences within teacher preparation programs, and the daily teaching practices of the Black women teachers in this study is important for the individual teachers, but there are broader implications to the field of education and educational research. In this dissertation, the Black women teachers-subjects and I, as scholar-subject, shared qualms about the effectiveness of preparation of teachers to do critically conscious work in struggles towards social justice. The memories and stories shared surrounding their thoughts on students and the actual work they engage in on a daily basis, helped to challenge the ways teachers are conditioned to view themselves. These stories helped to challenge the limited scope of the role of a teacher.

**Towards a Black Feminist Orientation Teacher Preparation Program (BFOTPP)**

Moving towards a Black Feminist Oriented Teacher Preparation Program (BFOTPP) is a framework that evolved from the knowledge gathered through this study. That is to say this dissertation calls for the preparation of teacher candidates who engage in activist literacies on a daily basis in their professional lives to be intentionally grounded in the work of Black women feminist intellectuals, scholars, poets, authors, etc. The BFOTPP framework presented in this study is the result of the deep probing and intellectual conversations shared between the participants and researcher. The extensive conversations that transpired between the Black women teachers and myself and the lived experiences of seldom sought voices in the educational field indicate that a shift in teacher preparation is essential.

A shift towards a BFOTPP expands on current best practices but is informed by a particular way of seeing students beyond academic and educational outcomes. The BFOTPP develops socially just and critical conscious teachers prepared to work in today's classrooms. As we continue to exist within systems of public schooling that remain focused on standardization, we must be purposeful in preparing future teachers with this reality. However, it is not enough to go into classrooms and work, teachers must go into schools and agitate to disrupt existing norms that rely heavily on maintaining the status quo and perpetuating the vast inequities that exist in schools and communities. In order to support the development of these types of teachers, teacher preparation programs must provide candidates opportunities to find, develop, and use their voice in the struggle for liberation for all students.

BFOTPP asks teacher educators to consider vital questions when preparing future educators. Where do educators learn the stereotypes, prejudices, and biases they hold towards students? More importantly, where do educators unlearn these problematic stances that continue



to inform the ways they interact, engage with, and educate the children they will ultimately serve in classrooms and communities? This is part of the work necessary to realize change. Teacher education programs are the ideal environments to take up this work. However, the conceptual understanding and framing of these programs must shift to an orientation that is informed by the beliefs and actions of those who have historically been committed to pedagogy that seeks to both liberate and educate. We must be proactive, practical, and visionary as we work to shift the ways in which we educate future teachers. This takes more than just wishful thinking; it takes a dedication to become engrossed in practices guided by the realities of contemporary issues facing teachers. I view these habits as obligatory. This includes ensuring that our future teachers are well versed in activist practices.

Ladson-Billings (2009a) first introduced us to the concept of *just good teaching*. I recall being introduced to this book as a 19-year-old in my teacher preparation program. This book was one of the few that I did not sell back to the bookstore at the end of the semester. *The Dream Keepers* (Ladson-Billings, 2009a) stayed with me long after my time at the historically white campus I attended. While I think I kept it because of its content, I must honestly reveal that the book remained with me because it was one of the few times within my teacher preparation program that a Black woman's voice was utilized as a resource for pre-service teachers. More importantly, it was the only time I saw someone who I could see a reflection of myself in regarded as an expert. I want to explicitly name what we have been witness to as a Black Feminist Orientation (BFO) within teacher preparation. The BFO is a conceptualized model for teacher preparation that is grounded in the historicized work and teaching of Black women. Research has highlighted that Black women teachers have a "collective social conscience" in which they see their jobs as a deeply political communal responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant,

2002). BFO orients teachers to view societal problems as challenges they must take up in their everyday teacher practices.

BFO is highly informed by works of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, and Patricia Hill Collins, but it is also grounded in the tradition of Black women educators such as Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Prudence Crandall, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Septima Clark, Amelia Boynton in the recognition that what we do and have always done is just good teaching. BFOTPP is significantly informed by the Black women teachers involved in this study that aim to transform the educational opportunities of young people in K-12 schools. It is important that we imagine and create space for this type of teacher to be the norm and not the exception. We must recognize that Black women teachers innately practiced commitment to self, students, families, and communities, and that these are necessary orientations for future teachers. Teacher preparation programs foreground our work with future educators.

BFO is unapologetic in its assertions that teacher preparation programs continue to center whiteness even in spaces specifically grounded in social justice education, inclusive education, and diversity, and therefore cement deliberately designed foundations rather than providing tools necessary to challenge and dismantle the structures. Through the reification of white supremacy, and espoused but non-practiced beliefs and practices regarding justice, teacher preparation programs are complicit in the maintenance of the status quo. Recognizing that other damaging practices and denigrating policies contribute to the incessant issues at the crux of our schooling institutions, BFOTPP maintains that structures that excel at reifying white supremacy, yet fail at raising critical self-awareness and sociopolitical consciousness of its teacher candidates, perpetrate the ultimate harm. BFOTPP firmly believes that teachers are uniquely positioned to

resist perpetuation of the status quo and must work deliberately, intentionally, and collectively to raise their voices in the fight for equity and justice. BFO is purposeful and intentional in putting forward the following commitments in teacher preparation programs. I use the word commitment in addition to requirements because BFO firmly believes that people and institutions that are committed to enacting social and institutional transformation act in particular ways. The requirements that are put forward at various levels of conceptualizing, planning, and creating teacher preparation programs are vital to make re(envisioned) BFOTPPs a working success model. The active commitment of participants will ensure a steady dedication and enduring promise to the actualization of true institutional transformation. The overarching belief of BFOTPP is that teaching is purposeful and intentional, never neutral. It is an act that Black women teachers and scholars view as deeply political. BFOTPPs equip teaching candidates to recognize challenges within school days as opportunities to rethink, reimagine, and refocus. Teaching and learning is not confined to the space between the walls of the classroom, but occurs in multiple settings.

### **BFOTPP Goals**

The goals of BFOTPP are as follows:

- Raise the sociopolitical consciousness of teacher candidates to ensure that pre-service and future teachers express dissatisfaction with institutional inequity and actively work towards institutional transformation that dictates a comprehension and recognition of individual and systemic complacency in the sociopolitical conditions of our nation's schools.
- Provide critical whiteness studies so that pre-service teachers understand that historic and contemporary whiteness frames the world, tells and controls the narratives, and must be

actively reframed to disrupt those images while simultaneously presenting alternate narratives for distribution and consumption by larger society.

- Position community engagement at the same level as field placement and student teaching as a way to signify that schools cannot be separated from the communities in which they are embedded. Due to the fact that great portions of our teaching force do not reside within the communities that they will teach, and because the communities of many of our K-12 students are increasingly more and more segregated, the likelihood that pre-service teachers have limited or no social interaction with diverse populations has significantly increased. With overarching goals of trust building, respect garnering, and collaborative partnerships that center student success, BFOTPP demands an immersion into communities that categorically helps to counter problematic narratives often crammed with cultural-deficit language that are associated with urban neighborhoods, read black neighborhoods.
- Implement an inclusive curriculum where topics are not studied in isolation but are integrated to demonstrate the interrelatedness and interconnectedness among them. BFO dictates the implementation of an inclusive curriculum that works towards the dismantling of white supremacy in the classroom. BFO in teacher preparation firmly states that the privileged worldview is just one view, not the sole view. Therefore, the privileged view will constantly be scrutinized and used to demonstrate how ideologies are shaped and defined in particular ways that have a tendency to miseducate while aiding in the perpetuation of social inequalities.

**Black Feminist Oriented Teacher Candidates**

- Study race and intersectionality to ensure that implicit biases are unpacked, examined, interrogated, and no longer ignored. Students must have an in-depth and historically accurate understandings of how the social construction of race has insistently and unwaveringly caused and exacerbated the current sociopolitical conditions navigated by students in our nation's schools. Students must come to understand that meritocracy is a myth and that a system of denied access is what exists in today's society.
- Engage in learning related to racial privilege and institutionalized racism to better recognize how systems reproduce inequity. Institutionalized racism is manifested in purposefully designed segregated schools, unjust resource distributions, inequitable funding, and Eurocentric curriculum. Teacher candidates must see the interconnectedness of these factors and engage in thought and intentional practices that work to disrupt such longstanding policies.
- Construct a greater self-awareness so that they genuinely understand how they come across to others (parents, families, and students) and how their actions affect other people. Teacher candidates that lack a critical self-awareness often have views of self that are not aligned with how others see them. Teacher candidates must develop self-awareness and understand that this self-awareness impacts the ways they think about and handle issues. Self-awareness is central to developing relationships with others. BFO believes that persons, though shaped by systems, stand in front of students and must work as disruptors of these structures.
- View classrooms as spaces that honor the rich and lasting history of all students, particularly those whose stories have often been untold in traditional schooling. BFO

emphasizes that classrooms are spaces of learning that do not solely exist within the four walls of an erected school building, but within and outside the various spaces navigated by students.

- Hold space for their students. BFO articulates that holding space for students means to experience a reciprocity in the classroom that expects teaching and learning to ebb and flow from teacher to student and vice versa. Holding space means not passing judgment but opening hearts and minds while providing support and letting go of our ingrained need for control. BFO views setting intentions and setting expectations for the space as crucial work in cultivating learning environments that are responsive to students' strengths while simultaneously addressing students' needs.

### **A Black Feminist Orientation Vision for Diversifying Faculty and Leadership**

Classrooms must be informed by multiple perspectives that include community members positioned as experts. It is unacceptable to have every individual that a pre-service teacher interacts with in their program be white, as was the case for many of the Black women educators in the study. Diversification in classroom teachers, site-supervisors, and university classroom speakers must be more reflective of the world in which many pre-service teachers will teach. This diversification presents the possibility of multiple voices as well as perspectives reaching pre-service teachers.

Leadership in teacher preparation programs must reflect a shift as well. It is insufficient to continue to call for diversification of faculty and students, yet fall silent when it comes to those in leadership positions. Diversifying the leadership level in schools will aid in the recruitment of pre-service candidates of color because representation matters. Diverse leadership

can help to expand the conversations in schools and set goals that are more aligned with the needs of children in community schools.

### **A Black Feminist Orientation Vision for Community Engagement**

Narrowly defined understandings and presentations of what community engagement looks like in higher education have constructed communities in neighborhoods of color in certain ways. Often positioning the work done by students as a means to an end, service in communities most often include logging hours, standing on the periphery while observing, and taking up space. The community engagement agenda at many universities have been put in place to demonstrate commitment to servicing the needs of communities. While traditional conceptualizations of public service and outreach emphasize a one-way approach to delivering knowledge and service to the public, higher education leaders began using the term *engagement* to describe a two-way approach to interacting with community partners to address societal needs (Kellogg Commission, 1999). While this shift in philosophy was necessary, how well are universities and particularly Schools of Education creating opportunities for pre-service teachers to work collaboratively with community partners? This is a chief question pondered and tackled within a BFOTPP.

Teacher preparation programs that prepare educators to visit communities, yet remain disconnected and disengaged from the people and issues within, are failing at the most basic level. When we continue to prepare future teachers in this way, we give the impetus to view communities as places to be rather than as spaces to belong. Community-engaged teacher preparation students must view communities as sites where they can be both teacher and learner. Community engagement according to Haddix (2016) is one way for beginning teachers' critical interrogation of their social locations and the ways they engage with the realities of teaching and

learning. With this understanding of community engagement, pre-service teachers cannot simply show up, observe, and take notes. Partner groups that are sites for community engaged service must ask critical questions. It is through community engagement that pre-service teachers learn to see the richness that exists within communities. Community-engaged teachers recognize that schools are integral to communities and that parents and communities have a great deal to offer.

There are many ways that pre-service teachers can engage, including:

- Pre-service teachers attend community forums, community sponsored events, school-board meetings and other community related activities in which community members serve as facilitators and leaders.
- Pre-service teachers come to recognize that communities have a wealth of knowledge, a valuable cultural capital from which they can and are expected to learn from.
- Pre-service teachers recognize that that strengths and valuable resources are available to them in communities.

Community engagement from a BFOTPP disrupts the notion of communities as places to visit or as areas that must be driven through on the way to school. In describing communities, I articulate communities within the BFOTPP framework as sites of resistance, sites of belonging, and sites of transformation. An example of the BFOTPP conceptualization of community engagement is provided in Table 3. This does not serve as an exhaustive look, but as a snapshot.



Table 3

*Black Feminist Orientation of Community Engagement in Teacher Preparation Programs*

Location	Participants	Purpose	Short and Long-term Desired Outcomes for Pre-service Teachers
Student-led Forums	Elementary, Middle, High school students, College Students, community members	Opportunities for marginalized students to share experiences and the challenges that some of these experiences have in their overall education experiences	Recognize public school students as critical resources in understanding schooling experiences  Raises consciousness of the ways discussed topics in classroom courses play out and impact everyday lives of students
School board meetings	Students, Parents, community members, school administration, board of education members, community agencies and partners that have a vested interest in the children of a particular	Complex understandings and concerns related to education from the community perspective  Comprehensive understanding of available supports and interventions that are accessible to meet students' individual needs	Increased background knowledge of the multiple and multilayered pieces that come together to form the function of school in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century
Community organizations and events that serve diverse populations and students	Community members, pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, students, TPP faculty	Who they are outside of academics  Holistically, provides pre-service teachers and practicing teachers alternate ways of seeing and knowing young people	Holistic view of students that are not shrouded in deficit thinking

Afterschool programs both in and out of school spaces	Elementary, Middle, High school students, College Students, community members	Opportunities for pre-service teachers to see alternative programming that is not limited by school curriculum	Exposed and opened minds to the many community members also engaged in the education of young people
Extracurricular events such as sporting, concerts, and non-academic events	Elementary, Middle, High school students, College Students, community members	K-12 students are witnessed excelling in activities of their choosing that transcend traditional schooling activities	Connections with families and communities that we serve.
Community Libraries	Elementary, Middle, High school students, College Students, community members, pre-service teachers	How are resources allocated to neighborhoods?	Recognize alternate sites for programs and engagement with young people.
Community Churches	Pre-service teachers, leader of the church, congregation members	Identify, families, community members, leaders in the community	Connections with families and communities that we serve

### **Curriculum Advances in BFO Teacher Preparation Programs**

The BFO curriculum in teacher preparation programs demands that pre-service teachers embody a “radical form of being” (Freire, 1970). The curriculum is wide-ranging and draws on the research and practices of scholars who are women of color. Centralizing this body of work is essential and critical due to its ability to ignite transformative potential in pre-service teachers and ultimately K-12 students. Curriculum is not diverse or inclusive enough if research and work by women of color are viewed as supplemental readings. It is critical that all courses, not just those geared towards social inequalities, maintain liberatory frameworks in order to deconstruct

white supremacist ideologies and help students see the interconnectedness of all human beings (Perlow, Bethea, & Wheeler, 2014). Diversity among teacher preparation staff benefits all students. The various voices and perspectives help to increase cultural awareness as well as deviate away from the normalized Eurocentric perspectives, philosophies, and ideologies. The following ideas are presented:

- Interactive and distance lecturing which involves students being intellectually and actively engaged in lectures led and facilitated by Black women and women of color across different contexts must be included. While lecturing provides opportunity to share information in classes of varied size, pre-service teachers are often limited to instruction by professors and instructors at their individual colleges or universities. With this model, pre-service teachers would participate in classes led by instructors and professors at different universities. This would widen the perspectives in classrooms to continually disrupt and decenter oppressive structures.
- K-12 students as teachers will complicate the established view held by many pre-service teachers that they are always the experts. When pre-service teachers are able to be taught by those who have been marginalized, a shift of consciousness occurs. Pre-service teachers are better equipped to educate in these spaces because they have a broader perspective on the children in these specific spaces.
- Pre-service teachers within BFOTPPs are expected to unpack the privilege they carry by exploring how they have come to understand themselves in relation to the rest of the world. This can be accomplished by constructing and analyzing the life experiences (see Chapter 4) of teacher candidates throughout their programs. Pre-service teachers are consistently engaged in discussions about the normalizing of whiteness and the

exoticizing and othering of non-whites. As a result, pre-service teachers within BFOTPPs are more inclined and prepared to recognize these actions while striving to change their understanding and framing of normal. When one comes to understand that *normal* has been constructed through experiences and teachings that dominate, they begin to see how they participate in oppression. Pre-service teachers come to understand the ways in which the “other” becomes existent and work to resist and challenge the very practices that create these conflicting ways of “being and being seen” (Bannerji, 1995, p. 48).

Just as we expect students within teacher preparation programs to engender a radical form of being, we anticipate the faculty, deans, professors, instructors, and supplementary staff to develop future teachers. Teachers and site supervisors must cooperate to embody the commitments that have been presented in the program framework for a BFOTPP.

The content and process in a BFOTPP requires a connection to classroom materials and requires pre-service teachers to recognize the larger importance of these materials. Pre-service teachers are regularly asked to think about the ways they have come to know or believe some idea to be factual. They are expected to interrogate this process and provide evidence that demonstrates nuanced critique of said process. They ask questions such as:

1. How did I come to learn this?
2. Who taught me this? Who told me this?
3. Why was I being taught this? What was the motivation behind teaching me this?
4. When was the first time I was exposed to this?
5. What were my initial thought as I encountered this?
6. What unspoken messages were used to convey received message
7. What did I already know about this message?

8. Did anything happen to confirm or disrupt the message in that moment?
9. Is this a problem for me?

The series of questions takes students along on a journey towards teacher actualization. This will enable pre-service teachers to question their framework and discard ideas that do not align with the vision of the teacher they want to eventually become as they serve the students they will ultimately teach.

This is what BFO in teacher preparation insists upon and provides the tools to do. At this stage, pre-service students are expected to listen to perspectives that are either in concert with or divert from the internalized message and reconstruct new frames of reference. Question number nine is arguably the most critical because it asks pre-service teachers to make a moral evaluation that orders next steps by pre-service teachers and instructors. If student teachers find deficit thinking about other groups acceptable, how will this impact their teacher identity? How will this inform the ways they engage with and think about students and communities? Additionally, how do instructors and professors move forward with this understanding about a pre-service teacher? BFO requires an unapologetic stance that does not waver in its assertion that students are too valuable to place problematic adults in front of them. The goal of moving towards a BFOTPP framework came as the result of my conversations and engagement with The Black women educators in this study as well as with the historical and contemporary exploration of Black women scholars. It is a work in progress, a developing framework, one that I believe is much needed in teacher preparation programs.

There is a resilient spirit that exist in Black women that allow for them to say Black Girls Rock, Black Girl Magic, Black Girl Genius, Black Girl Brilliance even as many social structures try to deny their humanity. Though this resilient spirit is necessary, Black women also operate

knowing that this resilience often absolves systems from having to make any necessary changes to the structures and policies within schools. This awareness makes teachers prepared within BFOTPP better able to call out and dismantle existing structures that obstruct the path towards liberation and freedom. Part of the work in teacher education requires having open, honest, thoughtful, and uncomfortable dialogue with not only pre-service teachers but professors and staff within these programs as well. These conversations must be on-going and must get at the root causes of the current realities in schools and communities.

### **Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs**

We must create spaces within college classrooms to unequivocally name the work that teachers engage in as activist literacies. Pre-service teachers must learn to discuss, engage, and practice these literacies beyond classroom spaces. To accomplish this, teacher educators have to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn about specific teaching practices that work to disrupt systems of oppression and put this into practice. Teacher educators must encourage and require students to speak up and speak out in class, even if it questions the professor of the class. Pre-service teachers must be supported by schools of education when they do speak up in the face of injustice. It is not sufficient to say to pre-service teachers, “well there’s really nothing you can do about it, you’re just a student teacher.” It is at this crucial stage that future teachers learn that they are not *just* anything. It is here that they learn about their impact and what it means to be *in service* to others. They learn that they are never *just* teachers. The use of the word *just* orders one to stay in a role and does not create a space for pre-service teachers to grow. In fact, using *just* halts and alters the trajectory of teachers and their development as teacher activists. The pre-service teachers are silenced even though they see things that contradict with what they have been taught in college and university instructional spaces. We must diminish our

urge to define and describe pre-service teachers as *just*. These are opportunities for our pre-service teachers to understand existing power relations and learn ways to navigate relationships in ways that do not render them powerless and voiceless. If we want teachers to walk into classrooms, schools, and communities they must learn how to disrupt, speak back, and push back against recognized injustices while they are learning to become teachers. BFOTPP would make these literacies part of the teacher toolbox. They would be integrated with and not seen as addition to it.

Teacher preparation programs must assist their candidates in developing strong identities as they come to understand who they are as people. This development comes as a result of early opportunities in their formal teacher preparation programs to interrogate how their beliefs have been shaped by their personal experiences. Pre-service teachers must learn to question how their ideological beliefs are not universal and what that means for them as future teachers. There needs to be significant attention paid to developing students who are critically aware of their positionality and the ways in which their positionality frames their thinking and beliefs about children and families.

Teacher preparation programs must support their pre-service teachers when they do speak up about injustices they witness occurring in their placements. It is not sufficient to say, “you just have to make it through” or “don’t take it personally”. We need pre-service teachers to see what is being done to children that negatively affects the young people in classrooms as extremely personal. It is this connection to the personal that most motivates people to act as change agents. Teacher education programs must be intentional in the messages they explicitly and implicitly share with pre-service teachers about how they should engage with students, families, and

communities. There must be an opportunity for pre-service teachers to develop as school and community leaders. Their work cannot be isolated from the communities in which they serve.

Additionally, teacher education programs need to support their graduates in ways that we have not thus far. For example, I say often to my pre-service teachers:

Right now, at this very moment you all are saying all the right things. You are committed to being the type of teacher that speaks up, that questions and that works to make things equitable for all the students in your classrooms. Whether you're saying those things because you actually believe they are essential or because you think it is what I want to hear- I'm not 100% sure. However, I am confident that you are going to walk into a school building, where you are going to hear things, you might be the only one who believes as you do and it is in that moment that you will have to decide what type of teacher you are going to be. I won't be there. How are you going to be in that space? How will you sustain your commitment when all around you there's this pull to do what's easy, to do what has historically been done. Are you going to fall in line? What are you going to do that will be radically different in these moments? This is the question you must ask yourself.

I pose this to the pre-service teachers that I am fortunate to work with because I want them to be critical of the spaces in which they are educating, and to at times work in contrast to what they say they believe. I am asking them to be purposeful and prepared in identifying people or spaces that will help to sustain their commitment to children and their families when giving up and giving in to oppressive practices becomes easy. This cannot be done by pre-service teachers alone. Faculty and staff within teacher preparation programs must also be intentional in developing critically and socially conscious educators.



Support in their teacher preparation programs was contextualized differently by the participants in this study. In some cases, participants described support in relation to competency building while assisting participants to manage work load and expectations, and others designated support as a sustained commitment to helping them make sense of their racial identity within schools and the communities where schools are embedded. Support in helping pre-service Black women teachers negotiate their racial and gender identity in relation to teaching and schooling has largely been absent from teacher education. Perhaps this stems from the resiliency discourse associated with Black women that we have yet to tackle in teacher education programs. The accounts shared by these Black women teachers demonstrate that there was and still is a need to mediate the tensions and emotions that exist for this particular group of pre-service teachers. It may seem daunting and maybe even impossible, but findings from this research suggest that teacher preparation programs must be more effective in addressing the emotional concerns and needs of their pre-service teachers. Examining the silence, silencing, and coming to voice of the pre-service teachers in this study presents opportunities to view the social contextual features of teacher preparation classrooms in which silence, silencing, and voice are enacted by the pre-service teachers. Assessing these practices of Black women pre-service teachers requires understanding of not only the sociopolitical context but also the structural features of teacher preparation programs and the complicated intersections of marginalized groups such as Black women.

Teacher preparation programs must demonstrate our commitment to fostering critically and socially conscious educators through our actions. We do this by helping them to understand that engaging in this work is not often popular; it isolates and makes you a target. We cannot continue to prepare teachers with fear as a common characteristic amongst them. Pre-service

teachers must learn that fear of being labeled as oppositional or as an instigator cannot hinder their actions or their voices. Audre Lorde (1997) wrote, “when I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid” (p. 13). This quote again points out the necessity to foreground Black Feminist Thought scholars, researchers, and teachers in teacher preparation programs. Black Feminist Thought is vital to teacher preparation because it calls for one to speak up not just for self but for everyone. Again, Lorde wrote honestly in a poem titled, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (2007).

I began to ask each time: “What’s the worst that could happen to me if I tell this truth?”  
Unlike women in other countries, our breaking silence is unlikely to have us jailed,  
“disappeared” or run off the road at night. Our speaking out will irritate some people, get  
us called bitchy, or hypersensitive, and disrupt some dinner parties. And then our  
speaking out will permit other women to speak, until laws are changed and lives are  
saved and the world is altered forever. Next time, ask: What’s the worst that will happen?  
Then push yourself a little further than you dare. Once you start to speak, people will yell  
at you. They will interrupt you, put you down and suggest it’s personal. And the world  
won’t end. (Lorde, 2007, p. 82)

Lorde is reminding readers of the vital necessity of speaking out and calling out the many systems of oppression that continue to exist in society. The poem continues with the final passage:

And then the speaking will get easier and easier. And you will find you have fallen in  
love with your own vision, which you may never have realized you had. And you will  
lose some friends and lovers, and realize you don’t miss them. And new ones will find

you and cherish you. And you will still flirt and paint your nails, dress up and party, because, as I think Emma Goldman said, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be a part of your revolution.” And at last you’ll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking. (Lorde, 2007, p. 82)

This poem highlights the essential nature of preparing teachers within a Black Feminist Oriented framework for teaching. BFOTPP requires that pre-service teachers be unafraid and to find and use their voice to disrupt existing patterns injustice. While developing teachers with this level of formidableness is tantamount, institutions must do more. Institutions must serve as a constant resource for teachers.

The Black Women teachers in this study discussed relationships that endure. The idea of relationships that endure allows for teachers in teacher preparation programs to reach out to their faculty and other mentors, and have these mentors reach back to them and say, “We got you! You are not alone.” This can be put into practice by creating and sustaining networks of graduates in specific geographical areas which are also comprised of professors and scholars. It is often left up to individual teachers to seek out and join professional networks that align to their content area or specialization. While this is an important step in continuing professional development, it does not provide the type of support that will sustain teachers’ commitments to social justice education and teacher activism. In conjunction with this, pre-service teachers must experience and witness social justice education in their university classes and school placements. It does not advantage anyone to continue to place pre-service teachers in classrooms and schools that are not reflective of the theories and philosophies that are being taught in university classrooms. This would mean that teacher preparation programs, and those responsible for classroom placements, improve the placement options available by working more closely with

neighboring school districts. This also means evaluating the experiences of pre-service teachers by engaging them in genuine conversation that reflects on the time spent in host classrooms. This might need to be done by someone outside of the teacher preparation program for a more honest account by pre-service teachers.

### **Implications for Teachers: Creating a Hyperlocal Sisterhood Collective for K-12 Black Women Teachers**

Black women teachers form Educational Sisterhood Collectives. These circles of educators are vital to the development, sustenance, and retention of Black women educators within the profession. These circles differ from the networks introduced above because they are intentional spaces for Black women educators to come together, collaborate, discuss, and hold space for one another. Each of the participants in this study desired a space such as this. At the end of my final interview with Dominique, she said, “I just want to take this moment to say thank you. This has been truly eye-opening for me. I know I got emotional at certain times but it’s just not often that I am engaged in this way.” Jennifer also said, “Reba, thank you for including me in this study. I am so proud of you. I am so proud of my role in this work. I really hope I can meet the other five teachers you interviewed. It would be a tremendous resource.” There needs to be a space within education for teachers whose essential identity markers have been historically marginalized.

Sisterhood collectives, such as the one identified above, will help Black women teachers engage and use their collective voice to be at the forefront of transformation initiatives. At times when you appear to be the only one, the only one thinking these thoughts or the only one saying these words, it becomes a very lonely and isolating place. Sisterhood collectives would allow

both like-minded and different-minded Black women educators to find commonalities as sites of opportunities.

Specifying these collectives as hyperlocal takes a specific community of Black women teachers in well-defined spaces into account. It recognizes that there are groups of children being exposed to the same mandated curriculum in environments that do not value who they are. However, as Black women teachers in these spaces, especially those teachers who demonstrate proclivity in making connections, sustaining relationships, and impacting school and life trajectories with children, meeting locally as visible and physical support for each other is critical. When Black women teachers create these spaces for themselves, and can affirm the practices that are working and offer recommendations for future groups. Black-only, women-led spaces create environments where teachers can share struggles and triumphs without wondering what does this mean in the eyes of those in power. Sisterhood collectives while beneficial for all Black women educators might be extremely useful for teachers such as Tazarea and Dominique. Both Tazarea and Dominique are currently the only Black women teachers at their respective schools. Isolation from other Black women in their professional lives can cause Black women teachers to leave the profession early. The writers of the Combahee River Collective Black Feminist Statement asserted:

The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. Since we can't depend on others to uplift and encourage us, we must do so ourselves. (1977, para. 6)

Students of color need teachers of color. Therefore, collectives such as the one described above are vital to their retention.

### **Implications for Black Women Administrators**

One of the points discussed in the study examined the ways in which Black women teachers worked to disrupt existing oppressive structures. I did not include a focus on Black women teachers who engage in activism and then become Black women administrators. At the time of this writing, I (i.e., the researcher, a former classroom teacher) served as a school administrator. Retrospectively, I learned that the risk of speaking out and advocating for and with young people is intensified. I struggled at times with not being vocal enough and at times named myself complicit in instances in which young people received poor and unfair treatment. However, because I recognized the importance of both my voice and presence in a frequently toxic school environment, I circumvented the system by engaging in secret tactics that allow for fair and equitable treatment of young people.

Research that focuses on this particular subset of Black women in the field of education is crucial for improving the environments in which Black women teachers and students are expected to thrive. Because of intersectionality, it is recommended this and previous research be utilized for the development and implementation of leadership programs focused on the needs of Black women at all levels throughout the educational structure. Educational administrators across race and gender lines must be cognizant of the myriad challenges that Black women encounter in schools to create the type of spaces that view their contributions and disruptions as valuable and necessary.

### **Implications for School Districts**

School districts should routinely review the criteria for in-service teachers who are selected to serve as host teachers. Presently, some school districts use Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) ratings for teachers as part of their criteria for selection. Teachers must receive ratings of highly effective or effective. However, this criterion does not allow for a comprehensive view of the teacher. They must ask questions that ascertain whether or not the identified criteria gauge a teacher's effectiveness at fostering classroom learning environments in which students and communities are valued. Student teachers need opportunities to witness pedagogical practices that are activist literacies in action. They need to see an alignment of theory and practice, especially when theory is firmly grounded in improving the experiences and outcomes of children of color.

More must be done to not only recruit teachers of color into school districts, but also to attend to their retention in the nation's schools. This entails school districts creating supportive systems for teachers who have been marginalized in efforts to receive the collegial and administrative support crucial to their retention. Much of what has been highlighted through this dissertation has been the ways in which Black women teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices improve the schooling experiences and outcomes of children. Therefore, school districts must work to advance the best practices of Black women teachers in their schools to build school capacity, rather than continuously looking outward for experts to conduct professional development and set development agendas.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This dissertation has provided a snapshot into the experiences and practices of teachers who embody activist literacies and teach for liberation in their classrooms, schools, and

communities. The snapshot that has been provided, though honest and informative is just that, a snapshot. It is limited in a number of ways. First, this dissertation is constrained in that it addresses the experiences of a small number of Black women teachers who were selected utilizing purposeful sampling. Although I have made linkages and drawn connections between the participants, they are not comprehensively representative of the experiences of all Black women educators. This research exclusively focuses on written, shared, recorded, and analyzed information from six participants. Though there was variance in the school settings in which the participants taught, the difference was restricted to urban and suburban elementary and middle school settings. There were no teachers from private or charter schools or those teaching in rural areas. There were also no teachers at the high school level. Additionally, all of the participants completed teacher education programs at historically white institutions. This restriction limits the range of experiences that are present to this context. Future research might look at participants of color who attend historically Black colleges and universities to examine the differences in such preparation programs and their attention to students of color. For example, do teacher preparation programs at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) prepare their candidates differently due to context?

This study does not discount the activist literacies of teachers who are not Black and female. The goal is to center traditionally marginalized voices, activist literacies, and pedagogies, for the purpose of enhancing the holistic efforts of the academy. As such, an additional limitation to this study is the purposefully narrow sampling lens. The study and data collected could have been significantly stronger with the recruitment of more Black women teachers as well as other women of color whose voices too have been absent in the literature and across various school settings. For example, women teachers that identify as non-white, particularly Latinas, could



have been included to reflect the monumental shift in demographics of students in our nation's schools. This objective might have been accomplished through recruitment efforts that were not constrained by the specific criteria to this study. In order to provide a more expansive and broader representation of teachers who embody activist literacies in their classrooms, schools, and communities a larger participant base should be sought.

The data sources of teacher narratives and interview data provided a significant amount of rich and detailed information that helped to provide descriptions of the ways the participants engage in activist literacies. Regarding the submitted teacher narratives, I did not provide any context for them other than to share an important event in their teacher lives. This could have been more specific as some participants were unsure of what to select to write about. Striving to provide as much openness as possible for the participants may have limited the stories they shared. Requiring multiple teacher narratives at various stages of the study might be advantageous in future research.

Throughout the study, I found myself wishing that I could visit these classroom or community sites where the participants were doing the work they discussed in their interviews. This added observational piece would have allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the participants. An additional thought for future research would be to include students in these teachers' classrooms or in classrooms where teachers enact activist literacies. This would provide an additional perspective that is not usually included in research. Questions in this research vein might examine:

- How are students within classrooms experiencing school when their teachers purport to enact activist literacies?
- What are the experiences of students within these sites?

- How do students take-up this work in their daily schooling lives?

Along this line, research with families and communities that delve into similar questions as those mentioned above would be advantageous.

This dissertation has led me to examine the disconnect that is apparent between scholars of color in the academy and teachers of color in schools and communities more critically. During the process, I heard phrases such as, “I’m not sure this is what you need” or “I’ve never been asked a question but always hear this is research based, who did they ask?” I think remarks such as these speak to the tensions that are written about in research, but rarely addressed beyond the dissertation writing. I found myself in an interesting place conducting my research because a few years ago I could have been one of my participants who remained in the classroom. This dissertation has demonstrated for me how a more inclusive way of engaging in research can be helpful for both theory developers and those that implement theory in real life practice. How can Black women scholars in the academy work in conjunction with Black women educators in K-12 classrooms to contribute to the canons and material presented to in-service teachers?

An additional layer of this research was the methodological approach of autoethnography, in which the researcher is an unrevealed participant. This approach should be explored further as a means to further amplify voices not of the academy. bell hooks (1990) spoke of women who have essential wisdom to share and who have practical experience that is the breeding ground for all useful theory. We must begin to bond with one another in ways that renew our solidarity (hooks, 1990, p. 48).

As I bring this dissertation to a close, I reflect on my experience in relation to my participants and this topic. I think about the gaps that have been revealed in my own learning and understanding about Black women educators and their activist literacies. I think about the many

contributions of Black women scholars and educators that have not been centered or used as foundational theory and understanding in teacher preparation programs. This collection of work has vast potential to complicate and further the development of pre-service teachers in ways that have not been attended to within the academy. I think about the fact that I completed an estimated 23 years of formal education: K-12 school, attended and graduated from a four-year traditional college, obtained two masters degrees that took me approximately two years each to complete, and I did not encounter the intellectual work and rigor of Black women scholars such as Anna Julia Cooper, Septima Clarke, and Mary McLeod Bethune. The void that persist in spaces of higher learning and teacher preparation programs that do not present the works of these scholars in the same ways of intellectuals such as Gardner, Piaget and others continues to fascinate me. An important avenue of future research should be to examine the ways teacher preparation programs continue to privilege one type of knowledge producer over others and how this privileging absolutely restricts the positioning of Black women educators, theorists, and scholars in an historical sense. Teacher preparation programs continue to uphold white supremacy and position Black women educators in the margins. This prevents future teachers from drawing on the important historical work of Black women educators.

In this dissertation, I centered the present and contemporary work of Black women educators and historic contributions of Black women intellectuals to inform a framework for a teacher preparation programs. Connecting past experiences and historical offerings to present day issues is crucial for sustained transformation. Cooper (1892) offered:

We look back, not to become inflated with conceit because of depths from which we have arisen, but that we may learn wisdom from the experience. We look within that we may

gather together once more our forces, and by improved and more practical methods, address ourselves to the tasks before us. (p. 27)

I end this dissertation the way it began with a second look at Sweet Honey in the Rock. The acclaimed group recently released another album in the beginning of 2016, *Love in Evolution*. With track listings such as, “A Prayer for the World,” “This Place Inside Where I Can Rest,” and “IDK, But I’m LOL!” The group’s latest album is both a call for more love as well as a call to action and attention to societal needs. In alignment with their traditional activist nature, this latest album draws attention to many injustices remaining in the world. They continue to sing about racial inequality and social justice while inspiring their listeners to continue to work to bring about a more just society. The group’s international music page says,

To all our loyal fans, we love and appreciate you.

Our new single, IDK but I’m LOL offers a jubilant message of encouragement to continue to live in the realm of possibility.

Stay positive. Give love. Continue to move forward. Onward and upward. Live out loud!

Love out loud! Listen out loud! Laugh out loud!

*Blessings,*

*Sweet Honey*

I listened to Sweet Honey in The Rock perform, “IDK, But I’m LOL” which translates to “I don’t know but I’m living out loud: and thought about what would it mean if we were to teaching out loud (TOL). Teaching out loud would necessitate much of the same actions articulated by Sweet Honey: remain positive, give love, and continue to push forward. Teaching out loud would require a recommitment to the goals and the newly defined purposes of education. Teaching out loud would require teachers to act with courage and intentionality. Teachers must

fight for and with their students in the continuing struggle to realize a just society. When teachers teach out loud, they do so informed by their reflective practices. Teachers teaching out loud know and use their voice to uplift their students, communities, and themselves. They are unapologetic and unafraid. Teaching out loud would require teachers to engage in the activist literacies that were uncovered and named by the Black women teachers in this study.

**Appendix A**  
**Participant Demographics**

Name	Age	# of Years Teaching	Grade Levels Taught
Janel Jones	39	19	6,7,8
Lisa Lowe	38	9	6,7
Tazarea Thomas	25	2	3
Jennifer Jamison	38	15	3, 4, 5
Dominique Davis	38	16	5, 6, 7
Raine Roberts	35	11	3, 4, 5

**Appendix B****Participants' Activist Identity Responses**

<b>Lisa</b>	<i>No, I'm not an activist.</i>
<b>Raine</b>	<i>Yes, definitely yes.</i>
<b>Jennifer</b>	<i>I'm not sure.</i>
<b>Dominique</b>	<i>Purposefully no</i>
<b>Tazarea</b>	<i>Of course I'm an activist, how could I not be?</i>
<b>Janel</b>	<i>Yes, being a teacher means being an activist.</i>

## Appendix C

### Black Feminist Orientation of Community Engagement in Teacher Preparation Program

Location	Participants	Purpose	Short and long -term Desired Outcomes for pre- service teachers
Student- led Forums	Elementary, Middle, High school students, College Students, community members	Opportunities for marginalized students to share experiences and the challenges that some of these experiences have in their overall education experiences	Recognize public school students as critical resources in understanding schooling experiences  Raises consciousness of the ways discussed topics in classroom courses play out and impact everyday lives of students
School board meetings	Students, Parents, community members, school administration, board of education members, community agencies and partners that have a vested interest in the children of a particular	Complex understandings and concerns related to education from the community perspective  Comprehensive understanding of available supports and interventions that are accessible to meet students' individual needs	Increased background knowledge of the multiple and multilayered pieces that come together to form the function of school in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century
Community organizations and events that serve diverse populations and students	Community members, pre- service teachers, in service teachers, students, TPP faculty	Who they are outside of academics  Holistically, provides pre-service teachers and practicing teachers alternate ways of seeing and knowing young people	Holistic view of students that are not shrouded in deficit thinking



Afterschool programs both in and out of school spaces	Elementary, Middle, High school students, College Students, community members	Opportunities for pre-service teachers to see alternative programming that is not limited by school curriculum	Exposed and opened minds to the many community members also engaged in the education of young people
Extracurricular events such as sporting, concerts, and non-academic events	Elementary, Middle, High school students, College Students, community members	K-12 students are witnessed excelling in activities of their choosing that transcend traditional schooling activities	Connections with families and communities that we serve.
Community Libraries	Elementary, Middle, High school students, College Students, community members, pre-service teachers	How are resources allocated to neighborhoods?	Recognize alternate sites for programs and engagement with young people.
Community Churches	Pre-service teachers, leader of the church, congregation members	Identify, families, community members, leaders in the community	Connections with families and communities that we serve

**Appendix D**  
**Teacher Profile Sheet**

**TEACHER PROFILE SHEET**

**Participant Name**

**Phone Number**

**Address**

**Pseudonym**

**Email Address**

**Schooling Experience**

**Degrees or  
Certification**

**Teaching Experience**  
**(# of years teaching)**

**Grade Levels Taught**

**Current Grade Level**

**Position Held**

**Dissertation Progress (Narrative)**

**Narrative Submitted**

**Analysis Began**

**Analysis  
Completed**

**Dissertation Progress (Interviews)****Interview 1****Interview 2****Interview 3****Date****Type****Length****Transcribed****Analyzed and****Coded****Comments:**

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## Appendix E

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

#### Interview 1: Life History

- 1) Tell me a bit about yourself
- 2) Tell me a little about your family
- 3) What was your family life like as a young girl?
- 4) What were your early schooling experiences like?
- 5) What were some of your childhood memories that you remember?

#### Interview 2: Teacher Preparation

- 1) How would you describe your teacher preparation program?
- 2) Can you describe to me your experience as a student in your teacher preparation program?
- 3) Were there particular instances (Aha moment) that helped you to think about activism?
- 4) If so can you elaborate?
- 5) What prompted you to go into teaching?
- 6) Who was your most memorable teacher and why?
- 7) How would you define your teacher preparation curriculum?
- 8) What were some of your experiences within your teacher preparation program?
- 9) Can you describe these experiences?
- 10) What are your feelings or thoughts about the ways in which teacher activism or social justice pedagogy were taken up in your program?

#### Interview 3: Teacher Activism

- 1) Describe your current role
- 2) Describe the specific training you have had related to social justice education (e.g., courses, training, assignments, professional development).
- 3) How do you see yourself using social justice teaching in your daily practice?

- 4) How do you see teacher activism and activist literacies fitting within the current landscape in education and larger society?
- 5) Can you talk about a time when your social justice education studies orientation and training collided in your practice within schools?
- 6) Tell me about a time when you advocated on behalf of a student
- 7) Tell me about a time when you have faced barriers to advocating on behalf of a student or family.
- 8) In what ways, do you or do you not feel supported by your administration in teacher activism and social justice pedagogy within your classroom? Within your school? Within your community?
- 9) How do you contextualize teacher activism? How do you think about it in your head?
- 10) What do you see your role as a teacher being?
- 11) In what ways do you engage in activism in your school and/or community?
- 12) Can you describe a situation in which you acted as an activist within your school or community?
- 13) Do your past educational experiences influence your present beliefs and practices? How?
- 14) Is there anything else you would like to share related to your experiences to activist literacies?

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## Curriculum Vitae

**Reba Y. Hodge, C.A.S., M.S.**

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### **ACADEMIC PREPARATION**

#### **PhD in Teaching and Leadership**

Anticipated May 2016

School of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Dissertation topic: "Teaching is a Revolutionary Act: The Legitimate Knowledges of Black women teachers enacting activist literacies"

Advisor: Marcelle Haddix, PhD

#### **Masters of Science Degree in School Building Leadership**

May 2009

School of Education, City College of New York, New York, NY

#### **Masters of Science Degree in Literacy Education**

May 2005

School of Education, City College of New York, New York, NY

#### **Bachelor of Science in Education**

May 2001

School of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

### **TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

#### **University Teaching**

#### **Syracuse University**

##### *Instructor*

- EDU 303: Teaching and Learning for Inclusive Schooling (Spring 2016)
- EED 464: Student Teaching Seminar (Fall 2015)
- EED 336: Elementary Social Studies Methods and Curriculum (Spring 2015)
- EED 336: Elementary Social Studies Methods and Curriculum (Fall 2014)
- EDU 314: Teaching Strategies for Inclusive Education (Spring 2014)
- EDU 314: Teaching Strategies for Inclusive Education (Fall 2013)

##### *Teaching Assistant*

- EED 336: Elementary Social Studies Methods and Curriculum (Fall 2014)
- RED 326/625: Literacy Across the Curriculum (Spring 2012)
- RED 326/625: Literacy Across the Curriculum (Fall 2012)
- RED 326/625: Literacy Across the Curriculum (Fall 2011)

#### **Public School Teaching**

#### **Elementary Education Teacher**

2004-2010

Pura Belpre, New York City School District 75, Bronx, NY

#### **Special Education Teacher**

2001-2004

Pura Belpre, New York City School District 75, Bronx, NY

**TEACHING CREDENTIALS**

Syracuse University Future Professoriate Program

2012, 2013, 2014

- Certificate in University Teaching

Permanent Professional New York State Certification in Pre-K through 6 *Literacy* (2006)Permanent Professional New York State Certification in Pre-K through 12 *Inclusive Education* (2004)**SCHOOL BASED RESEARCH AND SUPERVISION EXPERIENCE****School Site Liaison Intern**

2012-2015

Syracuse Say Yes to Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

- Provided ongoing support, evaluation and assistance to summer school staff, and support staff
- Developed lesson plans and supervised implementation of lesson plans
- Supervised 80-90 youth enrichment specialists at 3 summer school elementary sites

**Research Apprenticeship**

2012-2013

Literacy Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

- Conducted qualitative research, employing interviews to understand the experiences of pre-service teachers of color in their teacher preparation programs

**PUBLICATIONS**

Haddix, M., Everson, J., **Hodge, R. Y.** (2015). Y'all Always Told Me to Stand Up for What I Believe In: 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Youth Writers, Activism, and Civic Engagement. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*

Hodge, R.Y. (2013). *Multiplication is for White People: Raising expectations for other people's children*. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*

**In Preparation****CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS (REFEREED)****National**

Dennis, D., Haddix, M. & **Hodge, R.Y.**, (2013). *From Pre-School to High School: Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers to Meet Students' Needs*. (Paper Presentation) AERA annual conference, San Francisco, CA

Haddix, M., & Hodge, R. Y., (2015). (Presentation) Philadelphia, PA

**Local**

Hodge, R.Y. Dark Girls (Presentation) Cortland, NY

### **GRANT FUNDED EXPERIENCE**

Joan N. Burstyn Endowed Fund for Collaborative Research, Dark Girls: Re-Writing and Re-Imagining Representations of Black Girlhood (Fall 2014)

Haddix, M. Principal Investigator (2012-2015). Syracuse University Dark Girls. Celebration of Black Girlhood

Haddix, M. Principal Investigator (2011-2013). Syracuse University Writing Our Lives

Travel Grant, Graduate Student Organization Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (Fall 2014)

Travel Grant, Graduate Student Organization Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (Fall 2012)

Travel Grant, School of Education Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (Spring 2016)

Travel Grant, American Education Research Association Division K Affirmative Action Committee (Spring 2016)

### **EDUCATION RELATED EXPERIENCE & CONSULTANCIES**

#### **Professional Development**

2011- 2013

Danforth Middle School, Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY

- Facilitated book club for educators and focus groups around Lisa Delpit's, *Multiplication is for White People*
- Conducted focus groups with participants (e.g., special educators, administrators) to visually map their current service delivery model
- Best practice demonstration in classroom to model research bases teaching and instructional delivery strategies in front of a group of practitioners and provided theory, practice, and reflection
- Facilitated a professional learning community focused on strategies to engage students improving reading and writing achievement
- Modeled small group literacy instruction for teachers and facilitated reflection

#### **Educational Consultant**

2013-2014

Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY

- Instrumental in the revision of Syracuse City School District's Code of Conduct Character and Consultant to a restorative approach that has been implemented throughout all schools in the school district.

#### **Family Trainer**

Peace Inc., Syracuse, NY

Summer 2015

- Facilitated training sessions for Syracuse City School District families pertaining to the newly adopted Code of Conduct Character and Support
- Created training materials and resources explaining the five major shifts in the District's Code of Conduct
- Developed student leaders to serve as peer trainers and ambassadors
- Created a framework for criteria and selection

**Co-Facilitator**

Dark Girls After-School Program, Syracuse, NY

2012-2015

- Plan, implement, and facilitate activities to engage young girls aimed at supporting their literacy identity, self-esteem, and social development
- Facilitate workshops on art, dance, writing, literature, and performance that focus on promoting positive representations

**PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

American Education Research Association (AERA), member; Division K: Teacher and Teacher Education

National Education Association (NEA)