

AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND CHILDREN EXPLORE  
TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH A WHITE TEACHER EDUCATOR

by

LINDA JEAN GRANT

(Under the Direction of Stacey Neuharth-Pritchett)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research project describes what I discovered, as a white teacher educator, as I explored the teacher-child relationships of five African American early childhood educators. Through classroom participation and observation using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), as well as personal interviews, I documented the teacher-child interactions of five African American teachers of preschoolers. The study also attempted to examine the perspective of the African American children themselves using the Young Children's Appraisal of Teacher Support (Y-CATS), as well as children's qualitative remarks. Using the framework of Black feminist epistemology, coupled with attachment theory and a socio-historical perspective, the study introduces the ways in which the pedagogical practices of these teachers might lead to new insight for white teacher educators about how they might better prepare preschool teachers to serve African American children more effectively.

INDEX WORDS: African American preschool teachers, teacher-child interactions, early childhood education

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## DEDICATION

This document is dedicated to Betsy Young, who has been to me an unconditional source of love and support for the last 25 years, as well as an inspiring model of anti-racism and compassion. Thank you Betsy for all that you are.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

*The cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or a sect, a party, or a class – it is the cause of humankind, the very birthright of humanity.*

*Anna Julia Cooper (1892)*

#### *Statement of Problem*

Despite the many controversies surrounding the federal No Child Left Behind Legislation, this law has focused considerable attention on what has been labeled the achievement gap between white, middle, and upper-class children and their peers from poor, African American, or other non-white families. This fact compels researchers and educators to look further into what happens among children and teachers in classrooms that supports only some children's success while others fall behind. The strength of the relationships that teachers and children experience is not often a part of the public discourse surrounding this disparity, yet, intuitively it seems, that relationships significantly influence how learning evolves in classrooms. Recent research has begun to support this notion of early teacher-child relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2003) as a paramount concern influencing child outcomes. Because the overwhelming majority of public school teachers are white, middle-class females and the demographic of public school children is considerably more diverse, differences in values, approaches to learning, and ways of knowing are bound to emerge between teachers and children. This leads me to question if the achievement gap results in some measure because white teachers connect differently with

white, middle, and upper-class children in ways that are more likely to lead to what American culture perceives as successful outcomes.

Also key to a better understanding of these achievement disparities is the very first impressions of school and of teachers that children experience. The initial formal educational experience for many children is the child care center, Head Start, or preschool. The first exposure to a "school" environment, including relationships with teachers, interaction with peers, and exposure to "academic" learning can have a great impact on the child's perceptions of teachers and schooling in general. Recent brain research (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) has brought about new appreciation of the years from birth through age five as critical to future academic success. Vital to a full understanding of the achievement gap in elementary school settings is an examination of what happens before children turn five or six and enter kindergarten. The teachers these children encounter in the infant/toddler center or preschool lay the groundwork for children's entire educational experience in ways that are worthy of further study.

### *Rationale*

This qualitative research project using narrative inquiry and participant observation describes the findings of a white teacher educator as I explored the pedagogy of five African American early childhood teachers of very young children (ages three to four years old). The study will also attempt to examine the perspective of the African American children themselves. Through interviews and classroom participation, I document the pedagogical beliefs of African American teachers of the youngest learners, and tell the story of the children's experience in their classrooms. The study does not seek to universalize the perspective of these women to all Black<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The terms African American and Black are used interchangeable in this document. The word "Black" is always capitalized because I see it as a proper noun and want to demonstrate respect for the practice of many African

women educators, but strives instead to describe, in their own words, their unique experiences in the hope of gaining insight into their multi-faceted pedagogical beliefs.

The voices of Black women have only recently begun to appear in the literature which influences teacher education, research, and praxis. Recent narrative data which documents the words and ideas of the educators themselves have helped to bring about an emerging understanding of specific pedagogical practices and beliefs of Black women teachers that are instrumental in positive outcomes for Black children. (Case, 1997; Casey, 1993; Foster, 1995, 1997; Henry, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Noblit, 1993). But all of these studies involved teachers of children in kindergarten and later grades. There is no literature which documents the voices of African American infant, toddler, and preschool educators. The practices and beliefs held by teachers of the youngest American children are crucial to a collective respect for their integrity as teachers and valuable contributors to the discourse surrounding “culturally relevant” pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Inquiry questions driving this study were: 1) what do these African American women see the cultural, social, political, and economic complexities surrounding their relationships with African American preschool children; 2) what, if any, are the qualitative differences in these teachers’ relationships with European American and African American children, using the criteria of closeness, conflict, and dependency (Pianta, 1996, 2001); 3) what narrative data can be shared by three and four year old African American children in these teachers’ classrooms regarding their relationships with teachers and experience in that classroom; and 4) what can the words of teachers and children themselves reveal about the impact of race on teacher-child relationships during the preschool years?

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American authors who believe it should be capitalized. The term “white” is not capitalized in an attempt to balance power away from what bell hooks calls “white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (1989).

### *Subjectivity Statement*

In reflecting upon this project, I believe it is relevant to disclose information about myself and my orientation toward children and toward education itself. This personal subjectivity undoubtedly influenced the ways in which I viewed the data collected and how I approached its analysis. My position and my philosophical orientation shaped my decision to choose this topic and undertake this study.

For the past ten years, I have taught early childhood education courses at a two-year college. Students graduating will receive an Associates Degree. The majority of my students are African American women, with a very small percentage of white women, African American men, and some international students from African, the Caribbean, India, and the Middle East. I am a 45-year old European-American female, with Irish and Lithuanian heritage. My position as a white educator of people of color is one that requires continual awareness of and openness to examining my own biases. I attempt through my own readings, my graduate study, and my personal relationships to seek an ever growing understanding of racial and ethnic identity (my own and that of others) and how it impacts my work and my entire being. In addition, I look to my students to enrich my perspective on how race and ethnicity play a part in everything we do as teachers and learners. My experience working with children living in poverty, and currently working with people of color has contributed to my strong sense of teaching for social justice. I believe that what we do in the classroom is political and global. Teaching has deep, long-lasting effects in our community and therefore in our world. Race and culture and their impact on teaching are common topics of discussion in my classes. The perspectives shared by my students continually enlighten me to my own biases.

Recognizing my positionality as a white teacher, I believe I need to demonstrate a deep level of respect for my students in order to build the trust necessary for these dialogues to take place in my classroom. I also try to convey my sense of humility about not having the lived experience of a person who does not gain easy acceptance into the dominant discourse, as I do. My belief is that I am learner and a teacher at the same time. I have the fortunate honor of working with a group of people whose lives, whose values, whose resources, whose families, and communities are all different from mine in some ways. My position allows me to potentially develop a new perspective for white teacher educators who may not often integrate Black feminist epistemology into their teaching.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

Before beginning a review of the literature, I believe it is important to assert that not all African American women teachers have held identical views about teaching throughout history. As is still true today, there is variation among educators' beliefs about what constitutes "good" teaching. I do not seek to universalize the perspectives of Black women teachers or to imply that simply being African American means that teachers will espouse the same philosophy. However, researchers have uncovered similarities among the teaching practices of exemplary Black teachers of African American children, which I believe can serve as an important starting point for dialogue about what practices make sense for any and all teachers serving Black children. As a white teacher educator and researcher, I placed myself in a position of co-learner alongside the women and children participating in the study.

Furthermore, the research on Black women's pedagogy focuses specifically on their work with Black children. This is the research that is reviewed here. This is not meant to imply that Black teachers are only effective with Black children. Throughout American history, however, Black people have had to rely on their own community to educate their children, which resulted, in the past, in Black children being taught predominantly by Black teachers. Most public school teachers in the United States are white, middle-class and female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The same is true for teachers in child care and preschool (Burton, et al, 2002). Consequently, any child who is not Caucasian is likely to encounter many teachers whose ethnicity do not match his own, beginning in the very early years. Therefore, it behooves

educators and researchers to examine the practices of those women who have had the most experience and success with African American children.

### *The pedagogy of African American women teachers*

Most of the research of Black women's pedagogy uses feminist standpoint epistemology (Collins, 1991) and womanist (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Henry, 1992, 1996) perspectives to examine the teaching approaches of Black women. This type of scholarly inquiry is "consistent with the ways in which people of African descent see and experience the world (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.146)." An ethic of valuing concrete experiences, dialogue, caring, and personal accountability are key features of the study methodologies used. Collins describes the components of Black feminist epistemology as including: "value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy which pervade the African American culture (Collins, 1991)." Therefore, in order to fully understand Black women teachers' perspective on teacher-child relationships, I will summarize the literature while using predominantly the words of the teachers themselves.

Even before the abolition of slavery, Black people in American held a strong belief in the power of being educated and literate (Anderson, 1988). In fact, former slaves were strong advocates against the white, post-Civil War farmers in the South who were vehemently opposed to universal public education for their own children. W.E.B. DuBois is quoted as affirming that, "Public education for all at public expense was, in the South, A Negro idea (p.6)." The belief that education is paramount to self-reliance, self-determination, and racial uplift permeates the history of education for Black people in the United States. Black women who, in addition to being schooled for domestic work, were trained as elementary school teachers because

teaching was seen as key to “the salvation of the race (Perkins in Johnson, 2000).” According to Perkins:

Idealism arose from the expectation that the educated woman held the key to race uplift on two fronts: one, as the ‘intelligent wife, the Christian mother,’ she was ‘both the lever and the fulcrum for uplifting the race,’ and, as a school teacher, fitted by nature to her task of teaching the young, she held the key to the salvation of the race (p.26).

Anna Julian Cooper and W.E.B. DuBois agreed that race uplift was dependent upon educated women whose “motherly instincts”... [were an] important aspect of black women’s role in leading the race toward a higher level of civilization (Alridge, 2007, p.427).”

These themes of racial uplift, self determination, and self reliance were achieved through specific pedagogical practices of Black women teachers. Teacher-child relationships among African American teachers and children were marked by several characteristics which are still prevalent in the teaching techniques of highly effective African American teachers today. The expectation that all children can and will succeed academically, the practice of “othermothering,” and caring as political activism and spirituality are central to their teaching-learning relationships.

*Belief in potential/High academic expectations* Foster (1997), in her book, *Black Teachers on Teaching*, quotes a Black teacher in the Reconstruction era. In 1862, Charlotte Forten writes of her African American students:

It is very pleasant to see how eager to learn many of the children are. Some of them make wonderful improvement in a short time. It is a great happiness, a great privilege to be allowed to teach them. Every day I enjoy it more and more. (p.xliv)

This sentiment is reflected in other narratives throughout Foster's book, which includes the stories of twenty teachers, some who have been retired for years and others who are novices. Many of these teachers also emphasized holding high expectations for Black students as key to their success; "...we have created a belief system that our children can learn. We have high academic standards for kids that we expect them to meet (p.79)." "I teach black children as if they could one day grow up and be my neighbors because they could and they did (p. 61)."

Historically for Black teachers, teacher-child relationships have been predicated upon an overriding belief in the unlimited potential of Black children. Students of Anna Julia Cooper, internationally renowned African American educator and feminist activist, is described by her students at M Street High School in Washington, D.C. as instilling high ideas of scholarship, racial pride, and self-improvement. "She taught her students to believe in themselves (Chitty in Johnson, 2000, p. 74)." Marva Collins, who began teaching in Alabama in 1957 and went on to found the Westside Preparatory school in Chicago, says, "I teach as if Jesus Christ Himself were in that classroom, and when you do that you are bound to see great things happening (Collins, 1992, p. 43)." She repeats often to her students, "I am not going to give up on you. I am not going to let you give up on yourself (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 87)."

Ladson-Billings (1994) also cites holding high expectations for African American children as one of the key characteristics of exemplary teachers. Her ethnographic study using a community nomination process of teacher selection, teacher interview, classroom observation

and videotaping, and collaborative interpretation and analysis yielded results which have shed new light on critical aspects of culturally relevant teaching. Through carefully selected interview and observation excerpts, Ladson-Billings describes, without being prescriptive, the notion of culturally relevant teaching in terms of how teachers see themselves and others, social relations in the classroom, and teachers' conception of knowledge. Her results showed that successful teachers of African American children engage in fluid and humanely equitable relationships with children which promote their ability to see the child's culture and ethnicity as valuable. These teachers firmly believe that all students can succeed and see themselves as a part of a community, and teaching as "giving back" to that community.

*Othermothering and community-based pedagogy* The work of Karen Case (1997) demonstrates a strong history among Black women teachers of "othermothering," a term introduced by Collins (2000) to describe the assistance delivered to blood mothers in the care of their children. Originally begun as a means of survival during slavery, the practice of sharing the responsibility of raising children and exhibiting a sense of responsibility to the offspring of other mothers and has continued to this day among Black teachers. The mother-child relationship is used as a guide for developing emotional connections with students. Othermothers express ethics of caring and personal responsibility in order to bring transformative power to the black community.

Othermothering as it relates to teaching is a matter of responding to and reacting with the students...They have to feel not only just your voice. They have to feel the warmth and caring that comes from you as a person (Case, 1997, p.35).

The caring exhibited through the interpersonal interactions of othermothers links education to social action and social change (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2002). bell hooks (1994) explains that the teachers in her community

...knew us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family....I was being taught by the same teachers who taught my mother, her sisters, and brothers (p. 3 ).

Henry (1992) describes the relationship between family life, community, and classroom teaching as a symbiotic one for Black teachers. Henry found themes of solidarity, community, and responsibility clearly evident in these women's community-based pedagogy. Teaching children how to succeed in school includes a concern and even involvement in their lives outside of school. This idea stands in contradiction to the Eurocentric, patriarchal view of the family. Black women teachers in Henry's study were very generous with physical affection toward their students offering hugs and kisses, because of their belief that the meaning of schooling for Black children can be conveyed through close, personal interaction with teachers. Collective praise and encouragement were also prevalent as well as an emphasis on group welfare as more important than individual needs. Children are encouraged to applaud for their classmates' achievements. Mutual responsibility was stressed and was integral to children's personal responsibility and commitment to their own learning.

Noblit (1993) in his participant-observation study of a first-grade Black teacher, Pam, found this to be true as well. Pam taught with an emphasis on collectivity among her students by creating a series of rituals and classroom ethics of mutual responsibility and caring. Pam would often say, "We'll do this together." As a child was called upon by Pam to answer a question, she

would smile and make eye contact, and always comment on the child's answer even if it was unrelated to the question. She used humor, words and momentary undivided attention toward one individual child to "make the collectivity stronger and each child stronger as a consequence (p.33)." Children were never praised at the expense of another child and children who were stronger academically were expected to support those who were not. Noblit's experience in Pam's class caused him to redefine his beliefs about caring and power. He concludes that Pam used her power as "moral authority." She exercised her power in the moral service of others, which was contrary to Noblit's original, patriarchal view that power is synonymous with oppression. Although Pam's class was what might be termed teacher-centered, rather than child-centered, Noblit decided that these terms oversimplify and mislead.

Henry (1996) in her study of five Black teachers who critique child-centered pedagogy, notes, similarly, that child-centered often is seen as code for: most suitable for white, middle-class children who come to school with cultural capital which privileges them to adapt most easily to this type of teaching. John Dewey is often credited with beginning the progressive movement in education by introducing ideas of active, experience-based learning, and freedom to play, explore, and express opinions in an attempt to develop a truly democratic society. But, as Alridge (1999) points out, Dewey failed to address how race permeated all aspects of American life and impeded a true American democracy. W.E. B. DuBois agreed with the pragmatics of Dewey's approach but placed race at the center of his emancipatory educational strategy. While the teachers in Henry's study are not entirely opposed to the notion of child-centered practices, they, like Du Bois, call attention to the urgent need for more relevant and liberatory classroom practices for Black children. For example, strategies implemented by Anna Julia Cooper to instill a sense of democracy through teaching included: 1) individual conferencing with students; 2)

accepting and utilizing the student's "voice," opinions, and experiences; 3) student evaluation of their own and other student's work; 4) students creating their own exams; and 4) better students helping others (Johnson, 2000).

The idea of nurturance and mothering as integral to teaching stands in sharp contrast to the views of white women teachers in Casey's (1993) phenomenological study of the narratives of Jewish, Catholic, and African American teachers. Her research revealed that while white Jewish and Catholic teachers saw the mother ideal as oppressive because it defined their work in terms related to patriarchy, the African American women viewed mothering as a communal responsibility; a political act. Because African Americans have had to rely upon an ethic of interdependence for their very existence, the maternal is seen (by Black teachers in this study) as profoundly linked to the survival and well-being of African American children and Black people in general. This finding is consistent with Collins' (1991) notion that:

The unpaid and paid work that Black women perform, the types of communities in which they live, and the kinds of relationships they have with others suggest that African American women, as a group, experience a different world than those who are not Black and female (p.747).

*Caring as political activism* Teaching and caring as political acts have been a central component of race uplift. Johnson (2000) explains that Black feminist research reveals that uplifting the race through women's participation in the education of children was a central theme amongst educated Black women. Anna Julia Cooper (1988) argued:

Let us insist....special encouragement for the education of our women and special care in their training... Teach them that there is a race with special needs which they and only they can help.

The notion of caring as activism is further investigated by Beauboef-Lafontant (1999, 2002, 2005). This author contends that the relational abilities of African American “teacher-mothers” are “vitaly connected to another dimension – their identity as political beings who make constant parallels between schooling and society, school practices and social reality” (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2002, p. 77). Furthermore, she suggests that womanist, or Black feminist, teachers are likely to not glorify children with empty praise, but offer realistic criticism in an attempt to make children aware of difficulties surrounding getting an education as a member of an oppressed group. Teachers without this political clarity may believe that

being truthful with minority children will demoralize them and further seal their fate. Yet from the perspective of these African-American teacher-mothers, to withhold knowledge *is* to disempower those children [emphasis in original] (p.79).

Although caring within education has been studied and encouraged by several researchers over the past 20 years (Grumet, 1988; Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999), the issue of race has not been specifically addressed by these authors, despite the fact that a number of the caring teachers described in these studies are Black women. Collins (2000) argues that although white women also may value a tradition of emotion and caring, few Eurocentric institutions except the family validate this way of knowing. Black women on the other hand, Collins explains, have always had the support of the Black church, an institution with African roots and a philosophy that accepts the importance of emotional expression and caring.

Drawing upon the work of Delpit (1995), Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) reviewed autobiographical and ethnographic studies and concluded that a vital component of good schools for African American children was not simply the cultural similarity of the teachers and children, but the political clarity of the teachers. These teachers recognized the oppression in the children's lives and used their social, personal, and professional power to change it. Several examples of this kind of political clarity are evident in Case (1997):

Daily you will face someone who feels the color of your skin is more important than who you are. So just look them in the eye and say, 'I deserve to be here' (p. 35)

and in Foster (1997):

I've seen white teachers let black kids misbehave and then when I ask them they say, 'I thought that was part of his culture.' I say, 'Listen, these children have to be taught what's right, what's acceptable, and what's not acceptable. I don't care what color they are. And what you saw them doing is not acceptable (p.61)

When I interview teachers, what's important is their energy level and their acceptance of children. No matter what their other qualifications, I don't want them if they can't accept children and form relationships with them. I want teachers who believe in kids that the society has given up on (p.80).

The Black teachers in these studies are demonstrating that an effective teacher child relationship involving a Black child must include aspects of racial uplift and liberation. Siddle Walker (1993) in her ethnography of a rural school in North Carolina, found that teachers felt it was important

‘not to sit high and look down on the children’ and how they wanted to ‘make children believe that they were somebody’... This caring that students perceived to be at the root of their interactions with the teachers and principal made them feel they could relate to the teachers, made them want to be like their teachers, and made them believe what the teachers told them about their success potential (p.66, 72).

In a later article, Beauboef-Lafontant (2005) summarizes this conceptual idea of caring as activism:

In expanding the role of teacher beyond purveyor of knowledge, these women demonstrated a concern for students’ well-being that was tied to concrete action and not simply sentiment. In this way, their caring was a form of activism that challenged the subordinate social position of their students (p. 442).

A final element of teacher-child interactions of Black women teachers is described by Beauboef-Lafontant (2002, 2005) as an existential view of teaching as a “calling.” Several teachers in her study mentioned “having a purpose,” or “manifest[ing] the divinity within you.” This connection between teaching and spirituality helped these Black teachers to overcome the limitations of negative societal views of themselves and of Black children and to focus instead on possibilities and responsibilities, and to enhance the quality of their nurturing of the children.

Both Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs, a student of Cooper's who also later became an educator, expressed their view of teaching as a spiritual calling. Burroughs writes:

..I have done it for God. He has chosen to use my life to build something for humanity, a place where women and girls of my race can come and learn some sense, about how to live to the glory of God (Johnson, 2000, p. 105)

Cooper states, "Teaching always seems to me to be the noblest of callings (p. 105)."

Mary McLeod Bethune, who began a school for Black girls in Daytona, Florida in 1904 in a small shanty on land that was formerly a garbage dump, believed that the school clearly represented the power of faith in action. With no sponsorship or financial support from any institution, she contented that she and God, as allies, had raised the school from a trash heap (Newsome, 1992). The school later became Bethune-Cookman College, one of today's premier historically Black colleges.

### *The impact of teacher-child relationships*

All of the findings cited above have been derived, at least in part through the use of narrative data collected directly from the teachers themselves. They represent a significant shift in the canonical views of what constitutes research and how knowledge is defined, by uplifting the lived experiences of the study participants themselves to a position of value. There is a strong need, as suggested by Ladson-Billings (1995) to replicate these types of studies again and again in order to delve even deeper and continue the dialogue. There is also a necessity to seek the same kind of input from teachers of even younger children. The initial school setting for many children is the child care center or preschool. The voices of the teachers in these schools ought to

be included in the literature. Because children are so young when they are enrolled in child care centers and preschools, researchers have used constructs from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) related to parent-child attachment, to conceptualize the differences in quality of teacher-child relationships for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Howes and her colleagues have completed an extensive body of work in the nature of teacher-child relationships in toddlers and preschool children (Howes & Hamilton, 1992a, 199b; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994). Their work establishes a framework within which to conceptualize the teacher-child relationships that develop in the early years before kindergarten. Their studies include input from teachers, mothers, and the children themselves through interviews, deepening the meaning of the research findings. There are three categories of relationships described by these researchers.

Children in *Secure* relationships with their teachers spontaneously “check-in” with teachers, expect teachers to be responsive, and do not easily get angry with teachers. The child being unaware of the teacher’s location, having no physical contact with the teacher, and expecting the teacher to be unresponsive, characterize *Avoidant* relationships. Finally, children with *Ambivalent* relationships are demanding and impatient, show “distressed social interaction,” and cry often (Howes & Hamilton, 1992a). They conclude that children with the most secure relationships with teachers were the most socially competent and academically successful. The findings of their study suggest that relationships between child care teachers and children have three distinct aspects: security, dependence, and socialization. Children whose experience with their teachers included more emotional security and socialization were more competent with peers and exhibited less maladaptive behaviors. These authors contend that “emotional security with a first teacher provides that child with a positive orientation to the world of peer

relationships...” (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b, p. 261) However, these studies were either conducted on racially homogeneous groups of children or race was not examined as a factor, so they do not contribute to an understanding of how the racial congruence of teacher and child impacts school success.

Also using attachment theory, Pianta (2001) developed the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS), which defines teacher-child relationships according to three dimensions: closeness, dependency, and conflict. Studies which have used this scale demonstrate that children who had a high degree of dependence and conflict with their teachers were the most likely to experience school difficulties and problems with social interaction at school, whereas the children with warm relationships with teachers did better on academic tests and were more self directed (Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998). Studies have also shown that conflict and dependency in early teacher-child relationships lead to persistent declines in prosocial behavior and academic performance through upper grades (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Pianta et al., 1995; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; La Paro, Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Ethnic differences do play a part in the teacher-child relationship, as has been evidenced by a number of studies. Pigott and Cowen (2000) discovered that African American teachers rated *all* children to have fewer behavior problem and better chances for future academic success than did white teachers. The authors conclude that even though there was no significant impact of racial congruence between teacher and child, African American teachers seemed more sensitized to children’s need for teacher support.

Other studies, however, have demonstrated that an ethnic match between teacher and child may lead to less negative judgments of the child by the teacher. Many scholars’ work

supports the notion that Black teachers make highly effective teachers of Black children in public schools (kindergarten and older). Siddle Walker (2000) and Irvine and Irvine (1983) describe the African American school as an extension of the community, which facilitated its success despite inequitable resources when compared to white schools. Dee (2001) and Irvine (1990) found that African American teachers were more likely to have African American children achieve academically in their classrooms. Serwatka, Deerin and Grant (1995) documented that Black teachers were least likely to make special education referrals for Black children, and less likely than white teachers to view the behavior of Black children as deviant. A variety of work by Morris (1999, 2002, 2004) suggests that the “communally bonded “ characteristics between children, their teachers, and their families and communities play a very significant role in the success of African American children in public schools. The work of Ladson-Billings (1994) similarly affirms the idea that teachers need to value the cultural and ethnic identity of the children in their classrooms in order for children to thrive. She concluded that when “fluid and humanely equitable” teacher-child relationships are prevalent in the classroom, all children thrive. These scholars bring to light the need for examining further the ways in which teacher’s own biases and value systems impact the nature of their relationship with the children in their classrooms. Researchers and educators must begin to scrutinize the process of teacher-child relationships and how to support healthy interaction that leads to positive outcomes for all children.

Few of these studies sought the perspective of the children, leaving open the question of what children believe about their relationships with teachers, and their academic skills. However, they do emphasize the critical impact of the relationships children develop with teachers from infancy through kindergarten on future academic success and social competence of children. The

voices of the children themselves in the teacher education literature have been nearly silent, especially children younger than kindergarten. Although the impact of these relationships on children's academic and social success is emerging as highly significant, researchers have yet to ask young children for their views.

A presiding belief may be that very young children cannot provide reliable data, because of their young developmental age. However, several studies have been successful in gaining reliable data from children (Dubow & Ulman, 1989; Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003; Rey et al, 2007). This study will follow the lead of these researchers in widening the lens through which researchers view what happens between teachers and children in the classroom.

### *Theoretical framework*

Traditional methods of collecting data and doing research have relied upon western ideals about what constitutes knowledge and what is legitimate, valid research. Ladson-Billings explains that the process through which she collected and analyzed the research findings is reflective of Asante's notion of Afrocentricity (1987) and Collin's Afrocentric feminist epistemology (1991). These types of scholarly inquiry are "consistent with the ways in which people of African descent see and experience the world (p.146)." The significance of communication, discourse, and the drive toward harmony and spirituality in the search for the resolution of cultural and human problems are key factors in Asante's theory. These ideals undergird the In Ladson-Billings' study, African American parents were asked to suggest exemplary teachers to participate in the study and a research collective of teachers was formed in order to interpret results together. An ethic of valuing concrete experiences, dialogue, caring, and personal accountability are key features of the study methodologies used. This study used a

similar process of community nomination by requesting the names of exemplary teacher of African American teachers from center directors, regional directors, and professors.

This study attempted to embody these Afrocentric theories with the study participants because I was seeking to understand, not critique, the study participants, learning alongside them. The methodology of narrative inquiry lent itself to the collaborative learning process of the researcher and the participants being studied. I did not attempt to offer a scientific explanation; rather I sought instead to interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of these African American educators, as a documenter of their words and participant observer in their classrooms. The critical pedagogy of Paulo Friere (1970), as well as more recent work by hooks (1994), Delpit (1995), and Beauboeuf-LaFontant (1999) also guided this study. These theorists have challenged the complicity within current educational practices and have set a framework for more emancipatory approaches to teaching and learning.

This study is also undergirded by the Attachment Theory of Bowlby (1969). Bowlby theorized that the attachments infants develop with their primary caregivers create internal working models for the child about what all relationships should be like. Children use these internal working models as a referent for all future relationships. Attachment relationships are a key component in the early childhood classroom, as described by Bredecamp & Copple (1997):

Teachers establish positive, personal relationships with children to foster the child's development and keep informed about the child's needs and potentials. Teachers listen to children and adapt their responses to children's differing needs, interests, styles, and abilities. (p.17)

Relationships in classrooms

develop over time and are based on a history of interactions, include emotional content and expectations produced by this history and provide an experiential context that both supports and constrains the behavior of individuals who are in them (Eickler, 1997, p.5).

Historical research on the legacy of Black women educators has much to offer this exploration of teacher-child relationships. The long standing practices among Black woman of caring within the teaching-learning relationship are essential to the success of African American children in school. This study also relied on the history of Black education in the United States to frame its structure.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### *Collaborative Research Team*

I sought the support of four African American teacher educators in this process. These women were college teachers with Masters Degrees or higher in Early Childhood Education or Child Development. With their guidance, I hoped to gain a clearer perspective on my own biases that emerged as the study progressed. This team met periodically or was consulted by phone as I interpreted the data. They pointed out for me questionable interpretations and helped me to clarify my position. I also used a bracketing interview technique suggested by Pollio et al., (1997) and deMarrais (2004). This process involved the research team reviewing with me the questions planned for the teacher interviews in an effort to bring to the surface my assumptions and beliefs and to rework questions if necessary. Finally, each study participant was given a copy of the interview transcript and was asked to clarify what was said and comment on the appropriateness of my interpretation.

#### *Narrative Inquiry*

Because I was seeking to understand, rather than to formulate a scientific explanation, narrative inquiry was used as a research method. This method uses the stories of the characters involved to determine the meaning of particular experiences. Narrative inquiry

is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time,  
in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus.

An inquirer enters this matrix and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social . Simply stated [...] narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20)

Bruner (1991) explains that stories are a culturally transmitted means of articulating experience. They are a guide in the search for meaning among possible multiple meanings. The story, in a narrative inquiry approach to research, is a way of knowing (Kramp, 2004). A story reflects the perspective of the narrator, who determines the plot, the characters, the context and the goal of the experience. According to Kramp (2004), the narrator “not only ‘tells’ the story from a particular point of view, but also situates it in particular social, cultural, and political context (p.109).” The context set up by the narrator allows the researcher to interpret and understand the meaning of the experience. In keeping with the theoretical framework of Afrocentrism, (Asante, 1998), narrative inquiry allowed the construction of meaning to come from the concrete experiences of the study participants themselves, and will seek their collaboration in the analysis of the data.

Because the study specifically examined race as one of the factors involved in the practice of exemplary teachers of African American preschool children, I recognize the need to counter the race of interviewer effects. Davis (1997, 2003) discovered that African American participants were likely to acquiesce and conceal their true beliefs when interviewed by a white surveyor, especially if those beliefs were not compatible with the dominant group. When interviewed by an African American, this appeasing position did not occur.

In addition, I am mindful that many characteristics, not only race, influence the researcher and the participant throughout the interview. For example, Johnson-Bailey (1999) calls attention to the researcher's need to be keenly aware of positionality while interviewing participants and collecting data. Despite the fact that she is a Black woman who interviewed Black women, her social class still entered the interaction as a means of difference between herself and her participants. Because I am a teacher educator interviewing teachers, the issue of my positionality could be seen as another limitation of the study, in addition to our racial differences. I propose that the research design and methodology chosen for my study decreased some of these limitations.

Narrative Inquiry also allows personal involvement of the researcher. In fact, it assumes that this personal involvement is what has made the research possible. The informal discourse that takes place between persons who are known to one another lends itself to the telling of stories. Because I was a participant in the classroom visiting once or twice per week for three to four hours, a level of trust and camaraderie was developed between the teachers, the children and me. Narrative Inquiry assumes that the personal involvement between researcher and participant is what has made the research possible. I spent a great deal of time with the participants, observing them in their classrooms, establishing trusting collaborative relationships upon which to build an investigation. The surveyors and respondents in the Davis (1997, 2003) studies were strangers to one another. There was no emotional investment upon which to build trust, allowing a participant to safely reveal their own truth, and to trust in the researcher's intent. I hypothesized that over time, personal engagement and caring interaction between me and the participants would reduce the need to "don a mask," as Davis suggests.

There are several examples of research design which I emulated. Noblit (1993) completed an ethnographic study of a multicultural first grade classroom with an African American teacher. As a white man, he positioned himself as a participant and learner in the classroom, and was enlightened regarding many of his own deeply held beliefs about power and caring. Because the teacher accepted him as a sincere learner, their collegial relationship led to a greater depth of research data.

Phillion (2002), also a white researcher, studied a Black Caribbean teacher using narrative inquiry and also found that her own theories about multiculturalism were called into question. Phillion talks of being “in the midst” and “making meaning” of her relationship with the teacher she studied, expanding her own understanding much further than it could have gone had she held to her original theories. I am inspired by these white researchers who placed themselves as learners in the research paradigm, demonstrating humility and a deep respect for the teachers they studied.

Narrative methodology has been used extensively by many authors, such as Bell-Scott (1994), Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey (1999), Bruner (1990, 1991), Case (1997), Casey (1993), Connelly & Clandinin (1987, 1988, 1990), Foster (1995, 1997), Henry (1996), Johnson-Bailey (2000), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Phillion (2002). These studies are particularly noteworthy because they examine race specifically as a salient factor in the identity and life history of the women they studied using narrative.

### *Participant Observation*

Participant observation was used as a part of this study to investigate the dynamics of the classrooms in which these women teach. Participant observation, a component of ethnographic

research, is defined by Preissle and Grant (2004) as “research requiring some extent of social participation to document or record the course of ongoing events. The researcher observes through participating in events (p.163).” Detailed field notes were completed during each classroom visit, where I was also engaged in the discussion and activities with the children. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004), a quantitative scale developed to assess classroom quality in terms of social and emotional climate and instructional support was used during classroom observation. The use of this instrument was not intended to evaluate or quantify the teachers’ skills, but was instead intended to focus my observations specifically on teacher-child interactions and to use a construct already in place in the research literature. The CLASS contains three broad areas: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Each of these areas contains scales for more specific dimensions. The scales that pertain to emotional support are: positive climate (enthusiasm, enjoyment, respect in interactions between teachers and children and among children themselves), negative climate (displays of anger, aggression, or harshness), teacher sensitivity (teacher-provided comfort and encouragement), and regard for students perspectives (teachers place an emphasis on children’s motivations and points of view). Within the area of classroom organization, scales measure: behavior management (successful methods of preventing and redirecting children’s misbehavior), productivity (how the teacher manages time and routines to maximize children’s progress), and instructional learning format (teacher’s use of activities, materials, grouping, and methods to keep children engaged). Finally within the area of instructional support, individual dimensions measured are: concept development (how effective the teacher is at promoting children’s higher order thinking skills, creativity and problem solving), quality of feedback (the quality of verbal evaluation provided to children about their

work and their ideas), language modeling (the extent to which teachers facilitate and encourage children's language). Each of these scales is rated using a scale from one (indicating the classroom is low on that dimension) to seven (classroom is high on that dimension).

Following the classroom visits, study participants were asked to review field notes collected by the researchers and provide comments and feedback. Through these follow up discussions, the teachers identified two children per classroom to be interviewed.

### *Selection of Participants, Data Collection and Analysis*

Because there is wide variation of teacher credentialing requirements in early childhood settings, the present study was limited to teachers who have at least an Associates Degree in Early Childhood Education or Child Development. They were nominated as exemplary through leaders in the African America early childhood community in Atlanta, Georgia. 10 children, ages 3 and 4 years old, were selected collaboratively (2 children per classroom) by the researcher and the teachers. Prominent African American leaders in the early childhood community were asked to suggest study participants whom they believed were exemplary teachers of African American children. These leaders were directors of programs, regional directors of a variety of programs, or teacher educators. None of the participants were former students or graduates of the college where I teach. Following the identification of potential children, parental permission was sought.

After the classroom observations were complete, each teacher was interviewed using a semi-structured interview style, where the researcher asks a leading open ended question, such as, "Tell me about your philosophy of teaching." Many of the questions were adapted from Ladsen Billings (1994). Interviews were recorded and transcribed by me and then distributed to

the interviewees requesting that they make corrections, clarifications and comments. Transcripts were then analyzed noting specific themes and categories that emerged. The analysis techniques of Labov (1972) were used to structure transcript, numbering each line of text. Labov's technique allowed for the examination of linear structure within a narrative as the narrator describes events. It is most commonly used to interpret the classic structure of narratives. Gee's technique, on the other hand, looks more closely at the meaning of the narrative and how the structure relates to the meaning of what is being told. This kind of dialogic analysis utilizes the interactional history between the narrator and the listener. Using Gee's technique, the researcher can better interpret why this narrator is telling this particular story to this listener in this way. Because I am a white researcher working with African American teachers and children, it is important to examine these aspects of the narratives collected.

### *Children's narrative*

Children were interviewed using the Young Children's Appraisals of Teacher Support (Y-CATS) (Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003) which asked children to evaluate their relationships with teachers according to dimensions of warmth, conflict, and autonomy. The assessment includes statements written on cards which are read aloud to children. The children are asked to place the card in a mailbox if the statement is true, or to place it in a trashcan if it is false. Although this is a quantitative measure, the exercise of evaluating one's teacher in this way will hopefully lead the child to share more qualitative data regarding his or her relationship with the teacher, as it did in the original study (Neuharth-Pritchett, personal communication, 2007). This instrument is scored by averaging the items in each factor. A score of 1.0 was the highest possible score in each factor, indicating the highest degree of that factor

Interviews with children were videotaped, so that children's verbal responses, as well as their non-verbal communication could be recorded. The data collected was analyzed to determine specific themes, in consultation with the collaborative research group. The work of Champion (1998) and Bloome et al (2003) examines specifically the multiple structures used by African American children. Cultural differences exist in the ways that children construct narratives (Gee, 1991; Heath, 1992; Michaels, 1981). Champion found that African American children use complex and sophisticated narrative structures, as well as the classic narrative structure which includes the abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, and coda (Labov, 1972). The children in Champion's study often used alternative narrative structures and were influenced by several factors, including the setting, the prompting task, and their culture. Narrative data collected from children in this study was intended to be analyzed using Labov's (1972) classic structures, as well as the alternate analyses suggested by Champion, which examine how children's narrative created a social and communicative event. However, children did not share any information in the form of a story. They generally provided a brief one or two sentence comment after a Y-CATS card which sparked their thoughts. Although these comments were scant, they were helpful and provided insight into the children's classroom experience.

Once all interview and analyses were complete, patterns and themes were sought to answer the original inquiry questions about the teacher's pedagogical beliefs and the children's perceptions about their relationships with their teachers.

## *Implications*

This study attempted to welcome teachers of the youngest American children into the ongoing discussion of culturally relevant teaching. Because the bulk of the research in this area is relevant to elementary, middle, and high school teachers, the teachers of infant, toddlers and preschoolers are left to extrapolate what they can and improvise when something “doesn’t fit” for younger children. The quality of education in infant, toddler and preschool programs varies widely across the states as do the required qualifications for teachers of these age groups. This has led to a devaluation of the work that these teachers do, and as a result their voices have been left out of the discourse in the empirical literature. Yet “school” for many children does not begin at kindergarten; it begins much earlier; for some, as early as 2 months old. This study presents the voices of African American teachers who specialize in these younger age groups. The findings reached collaboratively by the participants and the researcher may lead to the emerging understanding of how Black women help Black children (and all children) begin a successful educational journey from the earliest moments of their lives. The study introduces the ways in which these women exercise pedagogies as they relate to preschoolers. Additionally, the study will attempt to present the perspectives of the youngest American learners. Children who are influenced at very early ages by the relationships they form with their first teachers can potentially shed light on what teacher educators ought to know about these relationships.

Because I am white and attempting to identify my own biases through establishing collaborative relationships with the participants, the findings collected may lend insight into the relationships that women form around educational issues that transcend race. The conclusions may contribute to the new dialogue regarding “womanist” teaching and begin to grapple with how white teacher educators might develop knowledge in the area of Afrocentric feminist

epistemology. The ethic of caring, emotional expression, and empathy embedded in this way of knowing can be invaluable to *all* teachers serving African American children so that their education can truly become democratic and the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994).

## Chapter 4

### Teachers' Stories

*The first day of school was rather trying. Most of my children are rather small and consequently restless. But after some days of positive, though not severe treatment, order was brought out of chaos. I never before saw children so eager to learn.*

*Charlotte Forten (1864)*

*Nicole's<sup>2</sup> Pre K classroom*

Nicole is a woman in her thirties who grew up in the South. She came to the teaching profession in high school, where she was required to take a course for the completion of graduation credits. She did not have any expectations before beginning her high school experience working with children; she just knew she needed to graduate. The class required that she visit local child care programs and spend time observing and interacting with the children. She was surprised to discover that she was enjoyed herself. That led to her decision, after graduation to attend a two year college and earn an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education. I observed her prekindergarten class at a privately operated early childhood center serving children from two months to five years of age in a small community just outside Atlanta, Georgia. This center, accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which means that classrooms must meet stringent standards, significantly more restrictive than the State of Georgia child care licensing standards, in all areas, including staff qualifications, classroom materials and equipment, and parent partnership, to name only a few. The center offers a wide variety of support services to strengthen families in the

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<sup>2</sup>All teachers' and children's names are pseudonyms. Each teacher and child chose his/her own pseudonym.

community, including financial scholarships. Nicole has been the prekindergarten teacher there for two years. The prekindergarten program is funded by the state lottery, with no cost to the families. The classroom includes 20 children, the majority of whom are African American, except for two children who are from Africa, and two children whose families are from Europe.

I came to know of her teaching because she has supervised early childhood education interns from the college where I teach. She demonstrated a great deal of patience and concerned support for one of our student interns who is disabled. The student was able to succeed under Nicole's direction and has continued in the early childhood program at the college. Nicole was also highly recommended by the center's director who explained that the parents of the children in Nicole's class are very satisfied with her teaching and interactions with their children.

The children in Nicole's class are active and fully engaged in the day's activities. All of the children's faces convey a sense of deep satisfaction with their classroom. During free choice time the children are all engaged in productive play in carefully designed and fully equipped learning centers. The center uses a modified High Scope curriculum. Children are given many opportunities to make decisions and solve their own challenges. Nicole asks each child where they are going to play today and then reviews with them what they played after playtime is over. Each day follows a similar routine, where small group time (a structured time where each teacher sits at a table with a group of six or seven children and guides them through a specific task, such as building with lego blocks) follows a morning greeting, then circle time with songs, dancing and movement activities, discussion of the day's activities, and the calendar. Afterwards, the children play freely in the learning centers, then outdoor play. Story time (which involves the children listening to a book on tape while the teacher turns the pages) is usually just before lunch. Naptime ends the morning. There is a great deal of the children's work displayed on the

walls and in the hallway surrounding the class. There are photos of the children and their family members in the classroom, which gives the visitor a warm sense about the children who “live” there.

Nicole is a calm presence in the classroom. She is often smiling and touching a child, holding hands, hugging, or embracing a shoulder. Physical affection is given intentionally and abundantly in the classroom, which Nicole commented on at the start of our interview when I asked about how she helped children to feel secure.

...just let ‘em know I’m here for ‘em, you know, if they need hugs.

Oh my goodness, they love hugs. So, you know, don’t...

So when they come to you, don’t push ‘em off. Just be there for ‘em to listen and give ‘em that big hug they need.

(Lines 35 -38, interview transcript)

Nicole later shared that as a child, being raised by her grandparents, she was “pushed away a lot.” She emphasizes with the parents of the children in her class that the children need attention and physical affection and that this will not “spoil a child.”

You know how African Americans say, ‘Oh, don’t spoil him’?

I think more African Americans need to be spoiled...I don’t think you can spoil a child like that. They just need that love...They need that. (Lines 385 -391, interview transcript)

If I see a parent say, ‘Boy, go over there and sit down,’ You know if they’re trying to hug or sit in the parent’s lap....

Let ‘em know there’s nothing wrong with givin’ a hug, you know, ...Or receiving a hug. (Lines 400 -409, interview transcript)

This emphasis on physical affection and emotional expression is consistent with the findings of Asante (1998), Collins (1991), and Hale (2001), who emphasized that emotional display is accepted and used often among Black people, particularly in the African American church.

Nicole's score on the CLASS in the emotional support dimension was in the High range (6.45), and the children in her class who completed the Y-CATS, Bruce and Klea, both reported a high degree of warmth, as evidenced by their Y-CATS scores in this factor (both at .90). It is also particularly noteworthy that both of these children also reported a low degree of conflict with their teacher (Bruce at 0.20, and Klea at 0). Bruce was selected as one of the study participants by Nicole, in discussion with me, because of the enormous challenge he presented to her at the start of the school year. Nicole reported that he was kicking her and other children and throwing toys around in the classroom. I did not witness any inappropriate behavior at all from Bruce during my six weeks in the classroom. When I asked Nicole how she helped Bruce to regulate his behavior, she simply said, "I refused to give up on him." During my visits, Klea was removed from the circle time meeting once for misbehavior. It was not clear to me what her infraction was, but I assumed it was due to lack of attention or disrupting the group. At another time, Klea was asked to "move her frog" to yellow on the behavior chart (indicating a warning) because she was asked twice to stop waving her arms at the lunch table and did not comply. Klea's score on the Y-CATS in the factor of conflict was 0.

Despite the shared history of what one might label "conflict" with their teacher, both children perceived a very low level of conflict with Nicole, a high degree of warmth with her, and a high degree of autonomy (both at .83). This led me to speculate that the extensive degree of warmth created an emotional insulation for the children so that when they were reprimanded

for misbehavior, there were no long term ill effects or damage to their perceptions of their teacher as their supporter and their advocate.

In the six weeks I spent observing Nicole, I never witnessed her raising her voice in anger. There were several incidents when other children were not attentive during circle time. She asked them firmly twice to stop touching the blocks on the nearby shelves, and when they did not stop, she firmly asked them to leave the circle. If the child resisted, she carefully lifted him or her into her arms and handed him or her to the teacher assistant who would take the child to a cushioned area of the room for the remainder of the circle time. The child may or may not have cried during this process but quickly recovered and was invited back for the next activity. When I asked Nicole about this, she responded by emphasizing the need to prepare the children for kindergarten.

And I want them to know, ok, when it's circle time, it's circle time.

We listen to our teacher. And when it's play time, it's play time.

So, you know, I want them to have that structure so they can be ready for kindergarten, especially at this age group.

...And I just feel that they need that. And I have had positive feedback from, like, kindergarten teachers, saying when they come from this...they know how to sit and listen to a story when it's story time. They know how to sit and listen when the teacher is talking. So you know, I try, I want them to be ready.

(Lines 98 – 111, interview transcript)

Nicole speaks rather softly to the children. In fact, I missed some of the individual conversations she had with the children because in order to hear her, I would have had to get so

close; my presence would have been intrusive. The issue of speaking softly arose during our interview in a surprising way. Nicole explained that she believed that African American children needed a firm voice from their teachers.

I feel Black children, African American children...It's like we need more, we need more direct teaching. Not saying we have to be hard, hard, hard on 'em all the time But it's like that gets their attention or something. (Lines 223-227, interview transcript)

Because the way I learn, I seen, that's the way I teach...By being taught by Black and white teachers-and my white teachers, which they was great teachers- but their voices were soft....

...Or the other children that probably was for behavior (had behavior problems), you know they couldn't learn in her class because she was more softer, you know. You know what I'm saying? Compared to a more firmer. Now I've had a white strong minded teacher so I'm not sayin' it was a Black-white thing.

But in my experience, I just feel like African Americans, um, They need some firmness....or they would take it as a joke.

(Lines 233 – 245, interview transcript)

Nicole's intuitive sense about this issue was consistent with the research of Lisa Delpit (2006) who writes that, "Black children expect an authority to act with authority. When the teacher instead acts as a 'chum,' the message sent is that this adult has no authority and the children act accordingly" (p. 35). This was curious because it appeared to me that Nicole herself used a soft tone in the class. When I questioned her about this, she agreed that she is not loud.

Linda: Except what's interesting about this is when I see you teach, you're very mild and soft.

Nicole: That's what my director says. He say, 'Why do I every time I walk past your classroom, they are so well behaved and I don't ever hear you raise your voice?'

Linda: You know, I hear you talking about teachers being soft and quiet and I would put you in that category

Nicole: Really?

Linda: I don't see you as a firm leader in the classroom. Wait, I mean you are definitely a leader and the children know you are in charge but there's no raising your voice. There's no harsh tones.

Nicole: Yea

Linda: There's no mean looks.

Nicole: Yea, yea.

Linda: It's very, everybody likes each other and respects each other And they trust you. I just, I don't see...

Nicole: And that's how I am at home too. My husband, he's like, 'You don't even sound like fussin.' But my children, everybody tell me, 'Your children are so well behaved.' And I say thank you because I'm like, I don't see what I'm doin'. You know, talk to

‘em. I always try to make sure they’re lookin’ at me when I’m talkin’ to ‘em. You know, let them know, you know, I love ‘em. And just the children here, (meaning the children in her class) when they leave, ‘I love you. See you in the morning. ‘You know so like that. But they know when Nicole is serious. They know when it’s, it’s playtime.

(Lines 272 – 291, interview transcript)

This exchange nudged me to reconsider my understanding of Nicole’s use of the terms “soft” and “firm.” At the start of the conversation, I interpreted these words to mean loud, and perhaps even harsh. But after listening to Nicole explain, I recognized my error. Through her illustration of the guidance technique she uses both at home with her own children and in her classroom, it became clear that Nicole lets the children know with absolute certainty that her love for them is permanent, and therefore she is going to set limits on behavior to teach them and she expects them to comply. The lack of shouting in her classroom did not indicate an overly permissive environment. I suspect that the “soft” teachers Nicole had when she was in school probably did not create a classroom with boundaries, where clear behavioral expectations were expressed. Foster (1997) found this to be true in the classrooms portrayed by the Black teachers she interviewed. They described white teachers who would not set limits for Black students when they observed them doing something inappropriate because they believed it was “part of their culture.” This does a disservice to the children and leads to the teacher not being taken seriously by the children, as Nicole described.

My initial misinterpretation was reminiscent of Noblit (1993) whose observations of a Black first grade teacher provoked revision of his own view of power. He no longer understood power to be synonymous with oppression, but instead began to perceive power as “moral authority.” I believe that Nicole’s approach was one of moral authority. This authority does not require a loud voice or a withdrawal of respect for the children. In fact, it is integral to the respectful relationships Nicole shares with the children she teaches.

Nicole’s scores on the CLASS in the dimension of classroom organization was high (6.22), but in the dimension of instructional support, she scored in the middle range (5.21). There was not much unnecessary talk in the classroom. Most of what Nicole said was purposeful. She was having a conversation, giving a direction, offering encouragement. She rarely engaged in self talk or narration, and did not generally intervene in children’s free play, unless there was a conflict the children could not solve on their own. There was some open-ended questioning, but new vocabulary was introduced infrequently. I believe that the children were engaged in active learning through their play and through the planned activities that Nicole presented, but the language and concept development had room for improvement. In light of the framework posited by Lisa Delpit (2006) that African American children need to learn how and when to switch to the Standard English code in order to access the “culture of power” in America, it is absolutely essential that preschool classrooms, Nicole’s included, make language learning an integral and meaningful part of the everyday talk in the classroom. During story time, just before lunch every day, Nicole used a tape of a children’s book, while she held the book and turned the pages. The narrator of the story used a variety of voices to illustrate each character and there was a musical backdrop for each scene. While this approach seemed to entertain the children, there was a missed opportunity for Nicole, who generally spoke using Black English in the classroom, to use

standard ‘book’ English and talk about how books use another way of saying things. This might also have been an ideal time to use open-ended questioning to provoke the children’s thinking about how people may speak differently from how they might write a book. Nicole rarely spoke at all during story time. All the talk came from the unknown voice on the tape. Because Nicole shares such a powerful emotional connection with the children, this would have been an ideal way for her to support their language development.

*Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at de sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.*

*Zora Neale Hurston (1942)*

*Cynthia’s Head Start classroom*

Cynthia knew in the third grade that she wanted to become a teacher.

When the teacher always asked us what you wanna be when you grow up, I always used to say a teacher....

From, I know, from the third grade on up, you know. through high school, I just knew I wanted to be a teacher.(Lines 39 – 44, interview transcript)

Her writing teacher told her that she had excellent penmanship and that she paid attention well.

Ms Cynthia acknowledged that school was a place where she felt valued. She earned an Associate’s Degree in Early Childhood Education, and has been working as a teacher at this Head Start center for thirteen years. She is also currently enrolled in a Bachelors Degree program, working toward teacher certification in preschool through fifth grade. Cynthia’s 3-4 year old classroom reflects her affinity for school. The class is a bustling place where every child

is engaged and alert, and all are completely at ease in the room. Ms Cynthia is generally either seated at a table working individually with a single child or she is moving around the room playing briefly with a small group of children. She is very cheerful and enjoys herself in the classroom. The Head Start center where Cynthia is employed is an NAEYC accredited program. All of the children in Cynthia's class are African American.

Cynthia became part of this study somewhat accidentally. The Head Start Director originally recommended two other teachers. One of those teachers was currently working with infants. This meant that her children would not be able to participate in interviews, so she had to be disqualified. At that point, Cynthia was recommended. Because she was not a part of the initial informational meeting about the project, she had very little preliminary knowledge about the study, but welcomed me with open arms, literally. She hugged me each morning when I arrived and she commented on this during our interview:

You know teachers around here say, 'You don't even know her, you huggin' her!' I say it's just me...that's how I feel a person.

(Lines 260 -263, interview transcript)

As did Nicole, Cynthia used physical expression of affection quite often. Children were often seen holding her hand or hugging her leg. She also extended her warmth to the teacher assistant as well. Cynthia and her teacher assistant also greeted each other with a hug every morning. She commented, during our interview, on her belief that in doing this, she is modeling for the children how to get along with others.

You know we always let 'em know: 'Do you see Cynthia and Ms Wanda bein' rough with each other?' They say no.

I say, 'So be nice like Cynthia is nice to Ms. Wanda.

And Ms. Wanda is nice to Cynthia. That's what we want you to be' ....And we always hug each other early in the morning.

And they see these things. And we find them, you know, we see them doin' it... You know it keeps workin' because they find theyself learning more than being aggressive. You know, just from, you know, bein' nice.

This emphasis on the value of group membership and responsibility is consistent with Asante's theories of Afrocentricism and with the finding of Ballenger (1999), a European American woman, who found that the Haitian preschoolers she worked with did not respond to her attempts to get them to see the logical consequences of their behavior (e.g. "If you don't listen you won't know what to do"). Ballenger discovered that when a Haitian teacher spoke to the children and reinforced values such as not bringing shame to their families, children were much more likely to comply with her requests. Shade (1987) also found that African American children were much more sensitive to the social aspects for the classroom environment than "mainstream" children, and were more likely to spend time on academic tasks when they perceived the environment to generate acceptance and emotional closeness.

One morning the children were not able to go outside because of rain, so Cynthia and her assistant took the children to a large multi-purpose room and arranged the room for a game of musical chairs. There were several classes of three and four year old children gathered together in the same large room. When the music began, several children wanted to dance, rather than simply walking, around the chairs. Ms Cynthia and the other teachers affirmed and encouraged this choice and cheered on the dancers. Later in the game, when children began bumping into each other, Cynthia stopped the play momentarily and reviewed the rules about safety, and being

mindful of the wellbeing of the entire group. The children continued to dance but were more mindful of their movements and no longer accidentally collided with others. This game was joyful and spirited. The teachers genuinely enjoying the game as the children moved, and danced, and scrambled for seats when the music stopped. There was a palpable glee in the room, among the children and the adults. The play was also very loud and the room had no furniture, so there was a reverberating echo. This seemed to bother no one. There were no demands to “quiet down” or “use inside voices.” This noisy, emotionally energetic play event was not only tolerated but was valued and encouraged by Cynthia and the other teachers. It was not only an example of gross motor play and cooperative games with rules, but also was truly an example of how deeply Ms Cynthia took pleasure in the delight of the children and the strong emotional connection there is among them. It was also reflective of Asante’s notion of expressive style and “collective generative experience.” The dancing and cheering was a shared harmonious activity involving both children and adults.

The classroom uses both the Creative Curriculum and High Scope curricula. The room has at least six distinct play areas which children can choose. There is also a large white board on one wall, where Cynthia wrote several sentences each day and reviewed what they say at circle time. She also had a tally of how many boys are at school, how many girls, and how many are absent. This was written as a math equation which illustrated how mathematics is used in everyday calculations. One morning during my observation, Cynthia visited a pretend restaurant in the dramatic play area where children invited her to “eat.” She sat at a table, and read a menu (an authentic menu from Waffle House that Cynthia had intentionally placed in the dramatic play area to inspire this kind of play). When she placed her order, the children told her it would cost \$100. She explained that this was a very expensive restaurant and she would have to count her

money to see if she had \$100. She proceeded to count the play money using five dollar bills, as the children watched. During this play encounter, Ms Cynthia integrated advanced language and mathematical concepts into the children's make-believe.

These techniques led to a score on the CLASS of 7 in the domain of emotional support, 6.6 in classroom organization, and 5.86 in instructional support. Language was again an area of concern, although Cynthia did integrate new vocabulary into the classroom in meaningful ways, there was still very minimal attempts to help children, many of whom spoke Black English, to convert their speech into standard codes of English. Cynthia's classroom was a well-oiled machine that ran extremely smoothly, but the children had limited access to a variety of language codes which might serve to support their acceptance and success in the dominant culture

Another interesting point to consider regarding Cynthia's class is the Y-CATS scoring. The two children who were interviewed, T<sup>3</sup>, a boy, and Maleeka, a girl, both scored high in the factor of emotional support, .81 and .72, respectively. However, they both scored fairly high in the factor of conflict, .8 and .6 respectively. While T, hardly spoke at all during the interview, Maleeka shared quite a bit of insight into these scores as we talked. She reminded me that the scale to respond to the study in terms of using this qualitative measure rarely leaves room for sometimes, maybe, and it depends. For example, in response to the card which read, "My teacher gets angry with me," Maleeka said, "If we not doing the right thing!" It struck me that this is a perfectly legitimate reason for a teacher to be angry, and Maleeka had sorted out that a teacher being angry at her or her class for not "doing the right thing" was not necessarily damaging to their emotional connection. She placed this card in the mailbox, indicating that it was true, which

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<sup>3</sup> Each child was asked to choose a "pretend name" to be used as a pseudonym. This child, interestingly, chose "Teacher." In order to honor his request without making this document confusing, I have shortened his choice of name to "T."

in fact it was, but it may not indicate a high degree of conflict. In response to, “My teacher is mean,” Maleeka said, “No, she’s sweet.”

Maleeka also scored very low (.16) on the factor of autonomy, indicating how much choice the child perceives she had in the classroom. This was somewhat baffling, although Maleeka did indicate, more than once, that her teacher often does not answer her questions or listen to her because, “She always be talking to somebody else.” This may have also led to her perception that she does not get to choose the work she wants to do, because if the teacher is not listening to your requests, it can be difficult to get to your desired activity. I did not notice Cynthia ignoring children or disregarding their ideas, but I was not viewing the class dynamics with a child’s lens. It may also be that the CLASS, the measurement scale I was using to record my observations in the classroom, did not adequately address the dynamics of all aspects of the interactions which African American teachers and children share. T. scored fairly high in the domain of autonomy (.83), but also high in conflict, which may highlight the differences in quality between boys’ and girls’ relationships with female teachers, but also may indicate that teacher interaction may have become a function of behavior management in Nicole’s classroom. Children who do not act out in the classroom do not demand as much of the teacher’s attention and as a result find it difficult to obtain her attention at all.

A final note, it was clear that Cynthia was not entirely comfortable articulating her philosophy, during our interview. She giggled often and at seemed to be contemplating the issues I was raising for the first time. As I probed and reassured Cynthia I was attempting to learn from her, she talked a bit more but it was clear that she had not consciously recognized, in a way that I had expected, the critical importance of her role as an early childhood educator in the lives of the children, particularly the African American children she teaches. It may be that Cynthia simply

was not as ease sharing her political views with me, a white person, but I did notice a few classroom events that concerned me. One morning, while I played in the dress up area with the children, I noticed that there were three dolls in the dolls bed, two of which were white and one which was Black. Each of the white dolls was fully clothed and the Black doll was naked. When the children told me to pick up my baby, I chose the unclothed Black doll. The child grabbed the doll and told me, “You don’t want that one. She nappy.” She put the doll back in the doll bed and handed me a white doll. When I asked why the doll had no clothes, she told me that Cynthia had promised she would get clothes for the doll, but in the six weeks I was observing in this class, the Black doll was never clothed. I was troubled by the unspoken message this delivered to the children about their own self-worth, but it was very challenging to solicit any information from Cynthia regarding what she believed about this.

Additionally, Ms Cynthia noted during the interview that:

When the white kids come in, it’s like they already know these things. You know adding and subtracting. And, uh, I think it’s because the parents read to the children more than African American parents. (Lines 177 – 179, Interview transcript)

When I asked what she might do in her classroom to address this she stated:

I would, uh, put ‘em in groups. Like group so that the child that know these things already can help the child that that doesn’t know the things. So yea, bring ‘em up, you know.

While this approach might serve to advance the social responsibility and group cohesion in the class, it may not help the African American children to see themselves and their African American peers as capable learners, when a white child owns all the knowledge in the group. I

wondered why Cynthia was not more aware of the political implications of her work. When I questioned my research collaborative about this, they agreed that this might be because preschool teachers tend to be seen by the culture at large as the least important kind of teacher. Our culture places little value on the work of teachers who educate the youngest of our children, ages zero to five years old. They are seen as babysitters, for the most part, not “real” teachers. Add to this mix, being Black and female and it is easy to see why a Black, female, Head Start teacher might not be cognizant of her value as a contributor to race uplift and social change. Again, we wondered if a greater emphasis in teacher preparation needs to be placed on the political implications of teaching and how a teacher impacts significantly more than just the children’s academic learning. I believe this holds true for all early childhood student teachers, regardless of their race. When white students, as well as African Americans, become more aware of the political and global repercussions of their work, children reap the benefits

*Our faith in visions of fundamental change as mutual respect and understanding between our races comes in the path of spiritual awakening.*

*Mary McCleod Bethune (1939)*

*Gabrielle’s Head Start classroom*

Gabrielle is a young woman in her late twenties who was recently married and was in the last two months of her pregnancy. We managed to finish all observations and interviews on the last day before she began her maternity leave. Her classroom was also located in the NAEYC accredited Head Start center, the same as Cynthia. The children in her class are four and five years of age, and are all African American. She earned her Bachelor’s degree in Child

Development from a university in Louisiana and then moved to Atlanta. She has about three years teaching experience since graduation.

Gabrielle moved unhurried around the classroom, slowed somewhat by her pregnancy, but her general demeanor was also quite calm and unruffled. Only once I noticed her resolve a conflict between two children; the only behavioral challenge I ever witnessed in my six weeks in her classroom. She asked one of the two boys who were scuffling over a seat on a small couch to please come to her. He did not, so she walked over to them and said to him, “C’mon,” and put out her hand in a gesture inviting him to take it. He did and they walked back to where Gabrielle had been sitting and he sat with her, sharing her lap with the baby in her belly. Her tone was firm, but was not threatening, or disrespectful. The child did not appear angry and quickly adapted and joined in with what the children nearby were doing. Gabrielle talked about the need for structure and consistency in her class. When asked what she thought was the best way to help African American preschoolers succeed academically, she responded:

Structure and discipline. Not saying physical discipline or anything like that, but you know consistency basically. Just being real consistent, having a structure, having a routine. If you have a routine, kids will be more accepting of a routine. And you have that structure and they know this is what we have to do. This is what Gabrielle expects us to do. We have to do this every day. I think they really will. (Lines 157 – 167, interview transcript)

The stressing of routines in the classroom is consistent with Noblit (1993) who noted that the African American teacher he studied created a system of classroom rituals in an effort to

build unity and mutual responsibility among the children. The children in Gabrielle's class also developed their rules together democratically.

...they created their own classroom rules, started the first day of school...We just talked about safety in our classroom and what we can do to make sure our classroom is clean and safe. and how we can keep ourselves safe and our classmates safe. So they actually created their own classroom rules. (Lines 54 -59, interview transcript)

There was always a high degree of energy and excitement in Gabrielle's room, but she was extremely adept at monitoring each child's activity all around the room. She was able to address potential problem quickly and prevent any escalation of conflict. The children were so engaged in their school activities, they barely noticed that I was there, unless I asked specifically if I could play together with them. During one visit, two girls were playing with scarves and practicing dancing. They dressed up in fancy dresses and shoes, put CDs into the player, and danced in the open area of the room. Charmaine, a child who had been using the computer, wandered over to the "dance studio" briefly and danced for one song and then left and returned to the computer. Gabrielle walked over to where the dancers were playing and asked which of them owned this dance studio, and what its name was. There was a brief discussion among the girls and their teacher about what the studio should be called. Gabrielle then noted that Charmaine had been there and left. She told the girls she knew Charmaine's favorite song was on a CD that had been borrowed by Cynthia. Gabrielle went next door to Cynthia's class and returned with the CD, and placed it in the player. This immediately captured Charmaine's attention and she returned to dance, quite dramatically and joyfully. Gabrielle's sharp awareness

of and sensitivity to the children's interests were demonstrated in this encounter. She let the children know that their ideas were valuable and she would support their play and their learning. She also subtly implied that they could own a business when she questioned them about the "dance studio," a seemingly minor, but important implications for African American children to hear coming from their teacher when one considers that only about 5% of American businesses are owned by African Americans (National Poverty Center, 2008). In preparing the literature search for this project, I discovered that political clarity and race uplift were key components of the pedagogy of African American women educators. I wondered what political clarity might "look like" in a classroom of four year olds. This comment and brief discussion among Ms Gabrielle and the girls gave me one possible answer to this question. by affirming for children that she held high expectations for them and for their future success.

Ms Gabrielle also articulated a fair degree of understanding of her work as involving race uplift and political change. When I asked what special provisions she might make in her class to help African American children, she noted the need for a sense of identity and pride in their culture.

...Sometimes...we have to...expose them to more things about the culture, about the African American culture that they may not know about. Just like they didn't know – like, Martin Luther King is on Monday and I have a Martin Luther King book I've been reading to them all week. Well, they thought it was Barack Obama.

So it's almost like if they see an African American male they automatically think it's Barack Obama. So you know, that comes,

wow! The exposure! You know, five years old and they don't know who Martin Luther King is. You know, it's just Martin Luther King's face! So I try to have a lot of African American literature, you know, children's literature in the classroom ...Because they need to know about themselves and they need to know about where they come from. We can learn about different cultures, you know different types of cultures and heritage, you know, but at the end of the day we still need to know about ourselves and where we come from. (Lines 87 – 123, interview transcript)

As Ladson-Billings (1994) determined was critical in the successful education of African American children, Gabrielle saw the value of the children's ethnicity and was very intentional about instilling a sense of self-worth and identity. Also noteworthy in this vignette from the interview transcript is her shift in what Gee (1991) calls psychological subject. Gabrielle was speaking mainly about the children's need to become familiar with their heritage and therefore their identity, which is evident in her continued use of the pronoun "they" at the start of the conversation. The psychological subject started out as the children. Near the end of her response, after she has discussed the topic a bit, she summarized with the pronoun, "we," altering the subject to include herself. I believe this may indicate her view of her work as uplifting not simply the children in the classroom, but the race itself, in which she herself shared membership. Race uplift, for centuries has been integral to the work of African American educators. Listening to Gabrielle explain, I recognized that this is still a fundamental mandate of teaching Black children, and it undeniably needs to be.

Gabrielle also was keenly aware of the need for African American children to be exposed to an environment rich with words and talking. Her classroom was participating in a state-funded research study to evaluate the impact of a specific literacy-focused curriculum. This study included a literacy coach who visited the classroom occasionally and worked with the teacher and the children to enhance the literacy instruction. Gabrielle commented during our interview:

I did learn with the research project that I'm working on...

They did research where they tape recorded a lower income African American family, a lower income Caucasian family, middle and higher...In every group of African American families word usage was so much lower than the Caucasian, all three income levels. (Lines 313- 315, interview transcript)

When I asked what she does in the classroom to respond to this information, she said:

Really, one of the simplest, most basic things you can do is conversation. You can build so much vocabulary just through conversation. If they hear you a certain way, they pick up that word usage and use it correctly. You know if you're talking to them any kinda way. You know, improper grammar, then they'll pick that. up. That's what they know. But just simple conversation, you know. How did you do today? How did you sleep last night? What did you do last weekend? What are you planning on doing? What's your favorite this? You know, just simple conversation. That's the simplest thing. (Lines 320 – 331, interview transcript)

It was evident in her classroom that Gabrielle put these ideas in to action. There were many conversations and opportunities for the children to engage in language events with their teacher. One morning, I observed Gabrielle visit a pretend beauty shop in the dress-up area of the classroom. Three girls had invited her to get her hair done. While the girls brushed and primped her hair, Gabrielle chatted with them about a variety of topics, just as one might do in an actual hair salon. This presented the children with many new words and ways of speaking through dramatic play with their teacher, and demonstrated the Afrocentric value of discourse, as suggested by Asante (1998).

These strategies led to scores on the CLASS of 7 in the domain of emotional support, 6.67 in classroom organization, and 5.33 in the area of instructional support. The lower score in instructional support resulted mainly from the periods of time when Gabrielle was out of the classroom for more than a few minutes at a time and her teacher assistant managed the class. I am not certain exactly why she was gone from the class for extended periods of time, but I suspect it was related to the upcoming maternity leave and the need to complete children's assessment reports and other administrative paperwork before her leave of absence.

The children in Gabrielle's class, Jay, a boy, and Lola, a girl, both reported a very high degree of warmth (.83 and .91, respectively), and a high degree of autonomy (both at .83). Although Lola reported a level of conflict at 0, Jay reported a level of conflict at .6. Jay was challenging to interview because he was highly distracted and it was not clear if he fully understood the task at hand. He was not the child I had originally chosen because I was not certain that he had the developmental skill to stay focused. But in an effort to get the permission forms signed as quickly as possible before her maternity leave, Gabrielle chose Jay because she knew it would be easiest to receive permission from his parent. But in fact Jay's scores in the

areas of emotional support and autonomy did validate what the CLASS confirmed about Gabrielle's style. Perhaps Jay did have a higher degree of conflict with his teacher because he does not easily focus and might present a more labor-intensive undertaking for the teacher. In the classroom however, I did not witness any conflicts between Jay and Gabrielle. Jay did say during the interview that he missed Gabrielle who had not been at work for two days when we conducted the interview. It was the start of her maternity leave. This led me to question if the higher degree of conflict could have, in some measure, been the result of the diminishing amount of time Jay was spending with Gabrielle, whom he seemed to love dearly.

*Even to attempt to respectfully encounter 'the other' is a sacred act, and leads to and through the labyrinth. To the river. Possibly to healing. A 'special effect' of the soul.*

*Alice Walker (1996)*

#### *Ana's Pre-K classroom*

Ana is a woman in her late twenties. After earning her Bachelor's degree and preschool through 5th grade teaching certificate from a university in Pennsylvania, she taught first and second grade in a public school in the northeastern United States. She taught for three years before relocating to Georgia and accepting a job as a pre-kindergarten teacher. The class she teaches is located within an employer-sponsored child care program operated by a large management firm which contracts with employers nationwide to provide child care services at the job site. Although the vast majority of the children Ana teaches have parents who work for the employer, the 4 year old pre-kindergarten class is state-funded, so there are spaces which are open to the general public. There are three children in the class who fall into this category. The class of twenty children includes predominantly white children with four African American

children, one girl and three boys. There is also one Indonesian child, and one child who is Latino and his family speaks exclusively Spanish at home. There is one teacher assistant who is also African American, a woman in her fifties. The school is located inside an office tower and was uniquely designed to fit the corporate space. Although the classroom is small, it does have unique features which make it aesthetically pleasing. There are sky lights which illuminate the room with beams of sunlight each morning. There are large plate glass windows that surround the room and provide an open, transparent feeling. Just outside the classroom is an open atrium which the children often use for physical games and more active play.

Ana's children were very welcoming and excited when I first arrived. Ana had prepared the children thoroughly for my visits, giving them accurate information about my doctoral dissertation and informing that they were part of an important project. The children were very kind to me, helping me to learn how things worked in their class, where I should sit, how to play with classroom materials, and the like. This class, more than any other, worked hard at helping me feel accepted and granting me temporary membership in their classroom "family." This openness and acceptance of others was noticeable on the very first day I arrived when the class sang a song about cookies and what ingredients they might have. The word potato was sung and I said, "Hmm, potato cookies?" Arrie turned to me and said, "Yea, I like them, They're good. I'm Jewish." I was struck by how matter-of-factly Arrie could affirm her identity as a Jewish person. It was clear to me that her classroom was a safe place to be yourself and like yourself. Ana also told me the story of Jussy's active campaigning in the classroom. Jussy, one of three African American boys in the class, became highly intrigued with the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency. He came to school with clipboards, surveyed the other children, and created tally sheets of votes. He had lengthy discussions with his classmates about why it was

important to elect the first Black man to the presidency. When another child told Jussy her mom was voting for John McCain, Jussy asked her why and ended a long discussion with, “Well, please tell you mom to just think about it.” Apart from his extensive verbal and intellectual skills, this anecdote again reiterates the deep sense of approval and competence children feel in Ana’s class. Jussy was completely at ease voicing his opinions and attempting to persuade his classmate to agree with his arguments.

The accepting climate in the classroom became a topic Ana and I explored during her interview.

I do enjoy reading about different cultures and how they celebrate, things of that nature. I don’t know if a lot of this is because my husband is Muslim. And so the way that things are done in his culture was a real eye-opener for me. So I think that anybody who is of a different nationality. I think they do deserve to be, you know, celebrated. And because I believe that so strongly, I believe it’s only fair to expose children to what I’ve been exposed to whether it be the Chinese New Year that we’ve been talking about or the child who is Muslim. So I just believe what I know and what I can explain to them, I think that’s the best way for them to learn. And it’s something they may never be exposed to again. (Line 457-463, interview transcript)

Ana also emphasized the great deal of communication that takes place in her classroom and how she views this interaction as essential to the secure relationships children experience in her class. When I questioned her about how she builds a sense of security in her classroom, Ana responded:

We talk a lot...I think because of the way we talk and the kind of respect have for each other, I think that alone is comforting. They know if they're really hurt, they can come to me and be consoled. If there's something they just want to get off their chest, you know, and talk about, then we can have a private conversation.

Ana also had a remarkable perspective on differences in the relationships she shares with the African American children and the European American children. While I expected her to describe the benefits to the African American children of having an African American teacher who is culturally and politically aware and sensitive, Ana elaborated instead on her role as an African American teacher of white children. She enlightened me about a different way to examine how social change might occur through early childhood teaching.

Simply because I think that the African American children they view me, they see...They see someone that's like my mom. Someone whose hair is like mine, someone whose, you know, eyes, who hugs just like my mom and dad. They know how it feels. They know that I am pretty much the same as they are. They don't see any difference. But now for a European American child, I think that it's a little different because no our eyes aren't the same, and no our hair's not the same. So, um, when I was really giving this some thought, your, um, your project. For me, my European American children are far more affectionate, and they need, they require, more love and they're more touchy. And my whole theory is because they don't know that my skin feels the same as theirs.

They don't, they're not used to, you know, they may not be used to being around African American people. I might be the only African American person they may know. So to feel how my hands feel, or to feel how my hair feels. or just to kinda see oh she's the same, you know, the same as I, the same as me, I just feel like maybe that's why they are so much more affectionate. (Lines 258 – 279, interview transcript).

My classroom observations did confirm that the African American children in Ana's class functioned much more independently of Ana than did the white children. The African American "checked in" occasionally with her, but several white children seemed clingier and more desirous of her close proximity and her physical touch. It is possible that the Black children were less able to access Ana's affection because the white children were more demanding, but this was not Ana's belief, and it appeared to me that the Black children were busily attending to the business of learning because they felt very secure and used Ana as a safe base for exploration. This presented, for me, a new angle on the impact early childhood teaching can have on racial understanding and cultural experiences among whites. I wondered if the white children in Ana's class, through their close, intimate contact and rich educational experiences with an African American teacher, might gain a more productive, realistic, and less stereotyped view of African American people in general, than they might have had without this early experience. The small percentage of African American teachers in comparison to white teachers in the United States is often examined for its damaging outcomes for African American children. While this is crucial and needs to be addressed, Ana helped me to see that white children, who are forming

beliefs that they may continue to hold as white adults, need access to African American teachers as well. It does no service to white children to perpetuate a homogeneous view of the world.

Ana's class was also exceedingly verbal and had mastered considerably more vocabulary than any of the other classrooms I visited. Some examples of words I heard spoken by 4 year old children in Ana's class:

Are these dry erase markers?

You need more than six slices to make the whole orange complete.

This is amazing.

You are delirious.

Children's command of language was not surprising after observing the kinds of language events that occurred with Ana. One morning at snack time, Henry pulled a package of peanut butter crackers out of his back pack. This happened at the peak of a national salmonella scare regarding peanut products, especially those that were pre-packaged. The crackers Henry was planning on eating were exactly those shown on numerous news programs in recent days and weeks. When Ana noticed this, she quickly swooped in and asked Henry if his mommy had given him these. He said she had and after conferring with me and the teacher assistant, Ana decided to not permit Henry to eat the potentially poisonous crackers. Henry was very disappointed and at first demanded his crackers back. After a brief negotiation period and offering Henry her own granola bar, Ana was able to get Henry to acquiesce. Other children were very concerned about what was happening, Ana explained that recently on the news there were reports that some peanuts contained dangerous bacteria called salmonella (she used all of these words). The children listened intently and began using these words themselves. It was easy

to see how Ana's deep love and concern for the children coupled with her belief in their intrinsic potential to comprehend complicated words and situations, led to verbally astute learners.

Ana also did not hesitate to directly teach the children, especially in the area of language arts. She did not drill them or demand that they memorize anything. She simply practiced sounds with them every day. There were long lists of words displayed in the class that the children had discussed. Ana would sit in the circle with the children and say, "Today's sound is -ot. Let's think of -ot words." The children would then call out, "Pot," or "Not" Ana would write these down on chart paper. She would then give each child a small dry erase board and marker and show them how to write "pot" and "not." Children happily copied the words and waited for the next one. This activity may seem to be a rote exercise which might be eschewed by constructivist educators because it does not place phonemic awareness and writing in a relevant context. However, after observing in Ana's class, I would argue that the activity is very meaningful and exciting for the children because of the relationship they shared with Ana. Ana made it fun; she was the one who was asking the questions and giving positive feedback and helping children feel decidedly competent. A close, personally fulfilling relationship with a teacher can make some basic skills tasks that are often frowned upon as developmentally inappropriate in preschool be quite interesting and enjoyable in addition to helping children move forward in their language ability. Lisa Delpit (2006) argues that children have a right to the basic skills instruction in school, particularly when the child has not learned these things at home. The linguistic conventions of middle class society are essential tools for success in American culture. Ana provided this kind of instruction in addition to a wide variety of other approaches including ample time for self-directed learning. The children's advanced language ability was evidence of her success. While it may be that the majority of the children's home life also contributed to their

superior verbal skill, Ana ensured that all of the children, regardless of the cultural capital they were armed with when they entered the class, participated in meaningful learning activities which expanded their means for success.

Ana scores on the CLASS were 6.83 in the domain of emotional support, 6.6 in classroom organization and 6.49 in instructional support. Jussy and Sarah both reported a high degree of warmth (.80 and 1 respectively) and low degree of conflict (both at .20). Sarah reported a high degree of autonomy (.83), but Jussy did not agree (.30). Ana did not allow the children to choose their own learning centers when it was time for free play. She directed them to where they would play. This was intended to guarantee that children who needed more support in certain curriculum areas spent more time in that learning center. However, it did occasionally seem challenging for some children to stay in the center Ana chose for them. Jussy found this particularly difficult and commented on it during our interview. In response to the cards, “My teacher tells me to stop work that I like doing,” and “ My teacher lets me do different activities with the class,” Jussy explained, “No, Ana always chooses.” I suspect that this was the reason for the lack of autonomy that Jussy felt. He was an extremely bright child, voluntarily practicing addition of three-digit numbers for fun, or actively campaigning for a presidential candidate. It is reasonable that he might have felt frustrated having to play only where he was directed each day. None of this had any bearing on the degree to which he liked Ana, however. In response to the card, “My teacher is mean,” Jussy responded with a loud emphatic tone, “NO!” and abruptly threw the card into the trash can.

*Instill the principles of love, of common brotherhood, in the nursery, in the social circle. Let these be the prayer of thy life.*

*Lucy Stanton (1850)*

*Sally, The studio teacher*

Sally is the studio teacher at a very large child care center serving employees and students of a large university, its affiliated hospitals, and other employers nearby. The center serves approximately 600 children in two locations. The term “studio teacher” is taken from the Italian word, “atelierista,” which is used to describe an artist-educator who works with classroom teachers to facilitate their integration of artistic media into classroom lessons and projects. Sally has studied the Italian Reggio Emilia Approach (see Edwards,1998) for a thorough exploration of this approach) for many years, and has travelled to Italy as a part of an early childhood education study tour. Sally described herself at the start of her college years as a “poli-sci junkie.” She not only majored in political science, she also worked for the Clinton presidential campaign in 1992. As a Muslim, she taught Islamic studies to refugee children in the masjid and was told by the elders that she was very good at it. She shared a story that was inspirational to her as she learned more about children.

When you pray in Islam you put your forehead to the ground. And during that period he [the prophet, Muhammed] was down for a very long time. And his companions asked him later, ‘Why were you down on your forehead for so long?’ And he said, ‘My grandsons were playing and we shouldn’t disturb their play. I don’t want to disturb their play.’ So earlier on that thinking kind of guided, just the importance and the level of respect. Here was, you know, this











































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