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LOSING AND REGAINING SELF: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY
OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN IN THE UNITED STATES
EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE SOUTH

A Dissertation Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Lisa Vaughn Johnson

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face a hard task in the future, I will remember I am from the Cheryl
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To all of those who came before me in my family, I thank you for
paving the way. For all of those who will follow, remember who you are
and whose you are, and remember no matter what anyone else says, you
deserve to be successful.

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Abstract

This self-study uses narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000) to explore my autobiographical experiences and journey in education “through the telling of stories” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 11). Utilizing narrative forms of personal reflection and self-study helped me “to record [my] up-close experiences, to gain a better understanding of [my] own stories, and to shift from presumed knower to learner” (Pinnegar, Dulude, Bigham & Dulude, 2005, p. 57).

In particular, this self-study utilized Clandinin and Connelly’s (1994) notion of narrative cycles to reflect and bring forward the natural rhythm of my life experiences. This meant exploring past narrative cycles of my education, from my segregated primary education years, through the era of racial integration and into my pursuit of a doctoral degree. The critical events illuminated in the narratives represent multiple and varied contexts, at times revealing deep family connections, the processes of learning and/or the social political tensions at the time. The culminating context was at a Tier One University in the southwestern United States where I pursued my doctoral studies and confronted university program changes and system obstacles, as well as

personal challenges and tensions. More specifically, this narrative self-study centered on the following questions:

- What obstacles/challenges did I encounter in education from elementary school to obtaining my doctoral degree;
- How did family culture and changing familial situations impact/influence my education;
- In what ways have my experiences as a student been impacted by corresponding and/or competing trends in education and social/political change; and
- How has my attitude affected my sustainability and perseverance through this journey in education?

Through stories lived and told, and re-lived and re-told, this dissertation sheds light on the various aspects of my life, as an African-American woman, that put me at-risk of not completing school. Furthermore, the exemplars I presented serve to illuminate the complex challenges confronting minority female doctoral students as they navigate the system of higher education. My stories of experience for this dissertation were chosen from a variety of field texts, including reflective journals, family stories, a curriculum of life (annals and chronicles) (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) and historical documents. The selected stories represent critical moments in my life history as they relate to education. These personal narratives highlighted the experiential ways in which I framed my world as a student and as an educator (Mertova,

2009). Key to this process was the concept of expressing my own narrative authority (Olson, 1995; Olson & Craig, 2001) as I retold my stories of experience in education, which also revealed how I choose to author my life as I interact with others (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002).

My work is grounded in Dewey's (1938/1997) writing on education as experience that is situational, interactive (personal and social), and temporal (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "this set of terms creates a metaphorical *three-dimensional narrative inquiry space* (italics in original), with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third" (p. 50). In this narrative inquiry I attended to this three dimensional space by examining the context in which my experiences occurred, the social/relational elements of those experiences, and how they were lived out over time.

Keywords: self-study, narrative inquiry, African-American, American education system

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Lasting awareness is gradual; it takes months, sometimes years, to fully grasp some content. Sometimes we resist believing that things are as they are. We look for ways of explaining phenomena because we just can't accept that situations are as bad as they really are (Porter, 1997, p. iv).

As intelligent, emotional, and moral beings, we are constantly trying to make sense of our experiences. Often, as suggested by Porter (1997), it takes time and reflection to come to the most plausible conclusions, react to our situations, and appropriately move forward. One such occurrence, in which I came to realize the detriment to me and my education, caused me to change my course of study and my life's direction. I was confronted with a choice about my future. The incident made me think about not only my life, but also of the lives of my children and how I could best help to steer them to make better choices about their educational progress.

Setting the Context

As a way of establishing the context of this inquiry into the narrative cycles of my experiences in education, I begin with a critical moment in the pursuit of my doctorate. The year was 2005 and I was nearing the end of my doctoral studies at a local university. On this particular day, I had been asked to meet with my advisor regarding the program. Little did I know then that our conversation would

dramatically impact my outlook on education by creating an obstacle almost too difficult to overcome.

The first three years of my doctoral studies were uneventful. During that time period, I met with my advisor, Dr. Gray, in the Health Education/ Administration program only once. Dr. Gray told me to “go, find some classes, and take them.” I promptly signed up for a research class and two health education classes. As I continued in the program, I looked at the degree plan every semester, saw what could be taken, and continued to work through the process. Over the three years, I had little to no contact with the professors in the program or my advisor unless I took classes directly related to health education. It was not until I took a residency class in which the instructor required me to fill out a degree plan that I had no choice but to seek and speak with Dr. Gray. At the same time, I realized that I needed to keep a log for the residency class, I had no idea what was to be placed on the log. Relying on the knowledge of my classmates, I compiled the required residency log and filled out my official degree plan. When I met with Dr. Gray to review the degree plan, I was informed that I “needed to hurry up and finish the program” due to changes that were forthcoming and, to my surprise and disbelief, that the Health Education/Administration program was about to close. Before the semester was over I received an official letter from the “director of graduate studies” saying that the program was closed and that I had eight months to complete it. My application, however, said that

I had until 2011 to finish the program. I was pressured to complete or leave. So I left.

Before I left, Dr. Gray advised me that there was no record of my being in the residency class, so I would need to repeat it. At the same time, Dr. Gray informed me that I needed to write my candidacy paper and start the proposal process. I was then put on an academic contract because, according to Dr. Gray, I was not where I should have been at that point in the program. I was shocked and disappointed. I felt discouraged and disillusioned. My meeting with my advisor represented one more obstacle in a long line of obstacles that challenged my progress through the education system. The conversation immediately took me back to when I was a child in the second grade and a teacher told me that I was “bad because my brother was bad.” The implication then, as now with my advisor, was that I would not succeed in education.

However, after investing so much time, energy, and money, I had no option but to somehow move forward. Of course, because the residency class that I had already taken would not suffice, I had to find another one. Remembering a professor that taught my qualitative research class in 2005, I asked to take her residency class the following semester. My advisor agreed, and with that I left the health program and joined the Curriculum and Instruction Department.

Retelling and reflecting on this critical moment made me realize that there have been numerous crucial situations, obstacles, and challenges throughout my education. In an effort to understand my personal experiences, to construct new meaning, and to share my story with others, I decided to conduct a self-study focused on my story in education from elementary school through to doctoral program studies. This narrative self-study will explore those experiences, utilizing Clandinin and Connelly's (1994) notion of narrative cycles to highlight influential and critical events.

Introducing the Research Context

This narrative self-study will examine past narrative cycles of my education as an African-American child and woman, from my segregated primary education years, through integration and into my pursuit of a doctoral degree. As such, the critical events brought forward in storied experiences will represent multiple and varied individual contexts of school and life. The culminating context, and the one in which this research takes place, is at a Tier One University in the mid-southwestern United States. The overarching context is my life story.

Growing up in Washington, D.C. and North Carolina, gave me both a northern and southern perspective of segregation. Although the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* had found that separate but equal school facilities for whites and students of color is inherently unequal (Russo, 1994), school districts across America ignored the

Court's call to desegregate public schools "with all deliberate speed" (p. 297). As a result, I started my education in segregated schools, taught by African-American teachers and surrounded by other African-American children. It was an environment in which I felt culturally and personally comfortable and at ease.

As a teenager in 1973, nineteen years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, I became one of those kids bused from a culturally familiar neighborhood school to a predominantly white school—one with white teachers, white students, in a white neighborhood, amid a dominant white culture. The challenges in this situation were numerous and immense. For the first time I began to feel a sense of otherness. Looking back from the perspective of time, I can see that others faced challenges as well, and that some of those challenges affected my attitudes toward learning and toward education. Apart from individual prejudices, I realize now that my teachers were not prepared to teach students who had learning styles different from those of the white children they were used to teaching (Gay, 2000; Gallavan, 2006). Nor were they prepared to teach children from a culture outside of the mainstream, let alone value the culture of me and my family, and other children of color.

Continuing my education as an adult, I faced multiple challenges, some similar to those I faced growing up and some due to personal circumstances. Other challenges were brought about by the institutions

I attended and my reactions to the obstacles put in my way. By the time I entered college I was a single mother struggling to make ends meet. After several starts and stops, I eventually completed my bachelor's and master's degrees. Both have aided me in my career as a respiratory therapy trainer. As I now strive to complete my doctorate, I find myself in the elite, but small, company of other African-American women.

Situating the Researcher in Context

I was born in our nation's capital, Washington, D.C., in 1961 in the middle of the African-American Civil Rights Movement. It was six years after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the colored section of a bus to a white passenger and just one year after the non-violent sit-ins at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina (McWhorter, 2008). Both events were in protest of segregation and marked as notable events in the Civil Rights Movement. The era in which I was born would later impact my experiences in education and subsequently my attitudes towards school and learning.

Although I was born up north, to me and my family, home was in the south—namely Rocky Mount, North Carolina. It was the birthplace of my parents and where both my paternal and maternal grandparents lived. Up until the time that I started school, I moved back and forth between D.C. and Rocky Mount, where my brother and I stayed with Mama Laura and Daddy Elijah, our father's parents. After raising five of their own children, plus two nephews, Mama Laura and Daddy Elijah

still lived on their rural tobacco farm 60 miles east of Raleigh. By the time I was a toddler, Daddy Elijah had died and Mama Laura was on her own. I remember her as a strong, independent, resourceful, and loving person—the real matriarch of the family on whom family, as well as friends, relied. If she had an opinion about something, she let you know. One very strong opinion she held was that the big city of D.C. was not a safe place to raise children, and she let everyone know. I am sure that her views on city life were part of the reason that, for my first 11 years, Mama Laura's place was the summer home for me, my siblings, and three cousins. Looking back, I recognize that my grandmother taking us eased my parents' financial burdens; but Mama Laura's influence as matriarch of the family was probably a key factor in my parents' decisions.

I attended the first grade in Rocky Mount, where I was surrounded by family and friends. Mama Laura, who was well known in the community, worked at my elementary school which made me feel very comfortable attending school. Rocky Mount was and still is a rural community, so neighbors were like family. My family worked in the tobacco fields as did most of the community. By the second grade, I had moved back to Washington DC, where I attended Catholic school for years. Then I attended public school until halfway through the seventh grade, when my parents separated and eventually divorced. I moved back to North Carolina while my mother pursued her nursing degree in

Miami, Florida, and my sister remained with our father in DC. When my mother received her degree after two years, I joined her in Miami. Later, her hospital transferred her to Houston, Texas, where I graduated from high school.

Currently, I am a doctoral candidate attending school part-time as I work full time as a respiratory therapy trainer and care for my family at home. I have been attempting to finish my doctoral degree for several years. In fact, I believe I have completed enough courses to have two doctoral degrees. I started in the Health Education/Administration program and I am now in the Curriculum and Instruction program. This is not my first time at the Tier One University, however. I started my post-secondary education at the Tier One University (T1U) satellite location in 1979-80, as a pre-med major. After three years in pre-med, I decided I did not want to be a doctor. I had no other plan, however, so I was lost for a while. I stopped attending school and went to work full time at a department store.

Working at a department store was an adventure. I love working with people, and also enjoyed helping customers decide on their purchases. I was very knowledgeable about products we sold and my customers seemed to love to talk to me. Through our casual conversations, I learned a lot about the lives of my customers. Some told me of things that were going on with them and their families, and some

talked about going to school. One, I remember, was an exotic dancer. She told me that she was a mother and that she made great tips. I was fascinated with her. I have been overweight for some time and I could not imagine stripping, not for moral reasons, but for aesthetic reasons.

After talking to the exotic dancer and hearing her story, I started to think that I needed to do something different with my life. Since stripping was out of the question, I knew that I needed to do something that would allow me to take care of me and my son who had been born during my fifth year of college. The retail business is great for a college student who does not have to support herself, but it does not come close to meeting the needs of a single mother. At the time, I was making \$2.75 an hour, which allowed me to take home about \$200.00 a week. Since my son and I were living with my mother, she gave me the electric bill to pay as a way of sharing in the household expenses. In those days the electric bill was less than \$100 per month, yet it gave me responsibility and a sense of ownership. I knew however, that I needed more.

Although I had some college credits in pre-med, I realized that pre-med was not a marketable degree by itself. So, I decided to go back to school and obtain a marketable degree. The medical field was all that I knew because my mother was a nurse. I thought that she was rich, I had all of the money I need to live and some in my savings account. It seemed that we always had whatever we needed.

One day I was reading an ad in the newspaper about a Respiratory Therapy program at City College (CC). Since my mother is a nurse, I sought her advice and asked what a respiratory therapist did. My mother, however, did not like that career as a choice for me. She explained that the work was hard, the hours long, and the work unrewarding. Of course, I did not listen. Instead, I immediately enrolled in the program and after two years started my career as a therapist at the local Veteran's Administration (VA) Hospital.

What an adventure. I learned all that I ever needed to know about the inside of one's throat and lungs. Moreover, I was good at it too. I quickly moved through the department from staff therapist to manager of the Home Oxygen Clinic and eventually to Program Specialist in the Quality Management Section of the hospital. In addition, I became a leader at the VA Hospital. I was able to learn quickly and even teach any new information to others. As the epitome of the hospital's train-the-trainer campaign, I was even given the title of Chair of the Education Committee. It was my responsibility to teach the respiratory staff, nurses, medical doctors, and even surgeons. Physicians had to come through my ventilator class before they were allowed to change the settings on ventilators in the intensive care units (ICU). Yet I needed something more, and I thought that teaching was the answer. I knew that teaching in the K-12 classroom setting was not for me, but I thought that I would be good at teaching adults.

It was at this point that I decided to go back to school and finish my bachelor degree at Texas Southern University. I was surprised at how quickly I graduated from the program. The courses that I took at CC and the courses that I took at T1U satellite were accepted so I only had to complete about 30 hours of study. I found that I liked school, not just going to school, but the whole process. I liked learning, and especially liked teaching what I had learned to others. In addition, I liked being in a classroom and the social structure of the classroom. My enjoyment of school and the learning process were deciding factors in my decision to continue on to graduate school and get my Master degree.

I started the process at the T1U main campus, taking two courses the first semester and one courses the second semester. I made an A, a B and a D. Feeling discouraged and somewhat disconnected from what I considered a predominantly white school, I gathered my belongings and re-enrolled at Historically Black College / University (HBCU), a historically black school. At HBCU, I quickly finished the Master degree in 18 months. I did not pay attention to the period; I just knew that I felt supported and happy while in the program. Each semester I tool three or four courses, and even attended school in the summer. The director of the program was a nurse and the courses focused on medical issues, making the program hospital friendly. This made the information that I was picking up transferrable to my job. Completion of the Master degree allowed me to get a raise at the VA Hospital and helped me to move to

the hospital's Quality Management area. I finished that degree so quickly that it was almost a given that I would go on to pursue a doctoral degree.

This takes us back to the critical event in my opening story. It was that event that inspired me to examine my stories of experience in education as a way to construct new meaning of those experiences, to restory them, and to share my stories with others.

Need for the Inquiry

The need for this study exists on several levels, including the personal and the social. As a self-study, this narrative inquiry will allow me to reflect upon specific experiences in my education, to construct new meaning, and to restory my experiences from new perspectives.

Examining narratives of personal reflection alongside family stories and historical accounts will enable me to “gain a better understanding of [my] own stories, and shift from presumed knower to learner (Pinnegar, et al, 2005, p. 57).

Examining and reflecting upon my experiences will allow me to restory my narrative cycles, and to pass new learning on to my children and grandchildren. Handing down stories from generation to generation, as is often associated with oral societies, contributes to cultural literacy in society (Mertova, 2009). Even John Dewey, one of the most respected

men in education, associated storytelling or narrative with levels of consciousness and literacy (McEwan & Egan, 1995). Sharing my stories with family members will help to enlighten my children's understanding of cultural norms.

Considering the broader implications of the study, this study will offer a first-hand account of one woman's experiences as she navigated the education system. Through the stories told, it will shed light on the various aspects of children's lives that put them at-risk of not completing school. It will also highlight the challenges that confront adults as they negotiate the higher education system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this proposed narrative self-study is to examine autobiographical stories representative of narrative cycles in my path through education in order gain insight into the challenges confronted by people of color, and specifically African-Americans, as they negotiate the educative system. It centers on the following questions:

- What obstacles/challenges did I encounter in education from elementary school to obtaining my doctoral degree;
- How did family culture and changing familial situations impact/influence my education;

- In what ways have my experiences as a student been impacted by corresponding and/or competing trends in education and social/political change; and
- How has my attitude affected my sustainability and perseverance through this journey in education?

Coming to the Study

In order to tell my stories I will use the help of some of the authority figures in education, African-American culture past and American History. bell hooks, one of the people whom I have come to admire and respect, seems to be concerned with the well-being of students to the point that she feels that there must be dialogue between students and teachers in order for the student to feel accepted and a part of the educational process a concept that she no doubt developed while reading one of her mentors Paulo Freire. I agree with that type of student and teacher interaction, and it makes me feel comfortable in school (Smith, 2002).

Freire, the Brazilian educationalist was known for his discussion on informal education, as he emphasized dialogue and concern for the oppressed. He insisted that dialogue involve respect. bell hook's pedagogy is one that is responsive to the specific situation of each particular group of students and she sees education as taking place not only in the classroom but also wherever people are. I too, believe that

education should be specific to the group addressed. Although she criticizes the educational world and the educationalist and what Freire refers to as the banking concept of education (Burke, 2004), she is aware that much of the ideology of modern society arises from mass media. hooks is particularly scathing about the power and the effect of television on the American public. “No one, no matter how intelligent and skillful at critical thinking, is protected against the subliminal suggestions that imprint themselves on our unconscious brain if we are watching hours and hours of television” (Burke, 2004).

Uniqueness of the Study

The uniqueness and significance of this study lies in its focus on individual experience—namely my unique story. Although others have traveled similar pathways in their lives, no one has walked exactly the same pathway as me. No one has had the exact set of circumstances, the exact family, and so on.

At the same time, my story is not unique in that others have walked the hallowed halls of academia before me and alongside of me. This means, that as I share my journey in education—the highs and lows, the challenges and triumphs—my story will echo themes found in the stories of others.

Summary

We do not tell stories in order to suggest lessons or information; the stories are themselves the knowledge carried forward and the lessons

learned. Telling my story will allow me to restory my personal experiences in education. It will also allow me to teach those that come behind me that there is a way to get through the hard times and to get past the obstacles to reach their goals. This proposed narrative self-study will follow the challenges encountered in my journey through education in narrative cycles from childhood to adulthood and into the doctoral program. Collectively the narrative cycles will tell a story of determination, perseverance and hope in the face of adversity.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Related Literature

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious [wo]manhood (sic), to merge [her] (sic)double self into a better and truer self (Du Bois, 2003/1903, p. 54.)

Frederick Douglass said (1866/2011) “slavery, like all other great systems of wrong, founded in the depths of human selfishness, and existing for ages, has not neglected its own conservation.” Existing as an African-American woman in the hallowed halls of education has taken many turns, but through it all I have developed modes of self-preservation and conservation. I have been able to attend college, work full time, manage a family, and take care of an aging parent and eventually a disabled husband. I have been able to do this with all of the evil assessments assigned to the African-American woman. There are times that what I do is indeed evil to me. I have gotten this far in education but sometimes I have neglected my studies in order to provide for my family, and to maintain my personal sanity and physical health. I have created what we call in the hospital “work-arounds” that help to conserve my energy and to preserve the “me” that I have come to be.

This review is a look at how I accomplished what I have and how I help others do the same. It aims to lay the contextual framework for my experiences in education and explores the tensions created between

public and private lives are demarcated revealing a sort of psychological protection (Ransby, 2005).

The purpose of the literature review is to situate this research within the socio-political time period in which it occurred, as well as around the educational trends over the course of that period. Following the time frame of my education, I have chosen to spotlight the literature examining major social and political changes in education and in America that occurred in the late 20th century and early 21st century.

My story is not entirely unique, for many have come this way. Men and women have taken this journey through the hallowed halls of academia. The road has not always been easy or smooth, but I have had some company and that has made the journey more tolerable. Some of the company includes those that traveled before me and left signs of their existence. Some have walked a ways with me and left me to find my way. Still others send messages from behind me calling and asking me to leave guiding symbols that will help them find their way.

Situating the Study in the African-American Community

Paving the path – African-American pioneers

Frederick Douglass (1866/2011)” said, “knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom.” Douglas escaped from slavery and became a leader of the abolitionist movement and was known as a dazzling orator and antislavery writer. He was considered to be the living quintessence of

an intellectual former slave (Douglas, 1866/2011). Douglass believed in the equality of all people—he supported blacks, women, immigrants and Native Americans.

Others included in the group that came before me are the African-Americans that were a part of slavery and those who became key figures in American history post slavery. These “instructors” left signs to prove that the road was indeed there to be traveled. One of those was Booker T Washington, who began his journey after having served time as a slave. Mr. Washington (1902) said that he was born in either 1858 or 1859, a year of which there being no definite record. He studied at Hampton University with Dr. Samuel Armstrong (Washington, 1902) and then went on to build a university, the Tuskegee Institute. Washington and his students physically built Tuskegee and used the surrounding land to grow food and the classes to do machinery. He believed that students needed education and a trade in order to survive and be productive. Booker T. Washington subsequently went on to sit on the board of Howard University.

Another member of that group that went before me was William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (W.E.B. Du Bois) (1868-1963). Born in Massachusetts and educated at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin, Dubois was an intellectual, historian, sociologist, novelist, and

activist (Holley, 2012). As I came to know of Du Bois, he was associated most often with his phrase the

“Talented Tenth”, a moniker bestowed on the cadre of college-educated African-Americans whom he charged with providing leadership for the African-American community during the post Reconstruction era (Battle & Wright II, 2000, p. 645).

Dr. Du Bois was an educator who fought for the African-American citizen, sometimes to the point of excluding them from society. He was attempting to place the leadership of the Negro in the hands of the Talented Tenth (Battle & Wright II, 2000). Du Bois felt that the Talented Tenth was obligated to help the community from which they originated and to sacrifice their own interests in order to lead others in ways that would improve the political, social and economic conditions (Du Bois, 1948/1965). During his lifetime, Du Bois was also one of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) is another who walked this road before me. Born to former slaves, she began her early life in the picking cotton in the cotton field. Bethune obtained a scholarship to Scotia Seminary in North Carolina in 1888 and became one of the most distinguished educators in the African-American community (Bethune, 2012). She founded the Daytona National and Industrial Institute, which is now Bethune-Cookman College, in Daytona Beach, Florida. These and

many more have opened doors for me and those that come with me and those that come after me.

Finally, there was Ella Baker (1903-1986). Born in Virginia, Baker's adult life was spent as a civil rights and human rights activist. In all of her work, she spoke out for oppressed people, promoting her message was that, whatever a person's level of education, all have the ability to see the world as it is and to transform it. Her life connects to a long tradition of African-American resistance to oppression in the United States.

Walking alongside me – Contemporary role models

Growing up in the late 20th century has meant living through tremendous socio-political change in education and society in the United States. Living through that time has afforded me the opportunity to witness many changes in the political, social and education landscapes as an American and as an African-American woman in particular. My personal experiences as they relate to my education have taken me from segregation to desegregation and through several transitions along the way.

To accompany me on the way, there have been a number of pioneering women—Anita Hill, Oprah Winfrey, Gwen Ifil, and Donna Brazile. Hill, an African-American law professor, gained public attention

when she brought sexual harassment allegations against Clarence Thomas during his confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court Justice appointment. Despite the allegations, Thomas was appointed to take the bench, filling the position left empty after the death of America's first black Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall. Hill, in turn, was berated by American public for implicating Thomas, but demonstrated great courage as an African-American woman standing up against an influential and powerful African-American man.

Oprah Winfrey, the star of daytime talk shows, is another trailblazer who is close enough in age to be my sister. Through her platform on television, she is helped to place the current President in the public eye, helping him to get elected. Journalists and political analysts Gwen Ifil and Donna Brazile are also in this group. During the 2008 presidential election, their work caused America to take notice of African-American women and to see them as serious productive members of our society. As these women and I walk through the current times addressing the changing landscape in politics and in education, we set the tone for those who come behind us.

Following my journey – Children and grandchildren behind

My sons and my granddaughter will follow us through this labyrinth of life to a world different from my own but in many ways they will experience many of the same issues. The journey that I will share in this dissertation will start in the middle of the civil rights movement and

continue through possibly the second election of the first black president of these United States of America. It will take me from elementary school starting in the 1960s and continue until the doctoral program in the 2010s.

Situating the study in the midst of Racial Unrest

In 1951, Willie McGee, a black man in Laurel Mississippi was accused of raping a white woman and electrocuted for the crime (Heard, 2010). There was no conclusive proof that the woman was raped; however, because she was white and he was black—he was punished. Author Alex Heard's (2010) research revealed that McGee claimed that his sexual encounter with the woman was not a rape but an act of consensual sex, part of a long-standing love affair that she had instigated. This line of defense was never seriously pursued by police or defense attorneys. As McGee's case gained public attention, even the First Lady of the United States was asked to comment on the matter. Mrs. Roosevelt stated that she was very familiar with the facts of the saga,

“It is quite true that all of us oppose a law which is applied differently to white and colored and that happens to still be in effect in some southern states. . . In the case of this man, while I regret there should be this discrimination in the law, I have to add that he was a bad character and so was the white woman, so there was very little that one could feel personally about” (Heard, 2010, p. 1).

The civil rights movement was a catalyst for improving conditions for African-Americans; not only in voting rights, housing rights, and employment opportunity, but also in education. My parents were born in 1939 and were involved in the civil rights movement before I came. The education that my parents received directly affected me and how I receive and process information. My education therefore begins with their era. Rojas (2007) says that most believe that the civil rights movement begins with the Kennedy years, but suggests that the movement actually started during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency and his expansion of the FBI.

By 1938 the FBI included a special Negro Question category as part of its regular Communist infiltration investigations. A year later, in 1939, President Roosevelt expanded the FBI's civil and criminal jurisdiction to include, in theory if rarely in practice, the investigation of almost every type of civil rights case - from voter registration and jury exclusion to police brutality and lynching. (Rojas, 1998, p. 230)

The movement was not contained within the borders of the United States. Gains (2007) informs us that, "Until quite recently, U.S. historians were accustomed to thinking of the civil rights movement within a domestic U.S.-based framework. But in its time, the movement had global dimensions that were abundantly clear to many contemporaries, including Sparrow, King, and many others" (p. 1). However, Gains contends:

That our understanding of the movement should emphasize a domestic U.S. narrative is not surprising. The violence that confronted civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Selma, Mississippi and other battlegrounds jolted the conscience of many throughout the nation (p. 1).

Gains (2007) further asserts the Kennedys were not immediate in their interest in the civil rights movement and that they had uncertainty about how to enter the movement. Rather, President John F. Kennedy was concerned that a direct assault on Jim Crow might distance southern congressmen and therefore jeopardize the tax bill and other New Frontier reforms. If the administration pushed civil rights too hard, the solid South might revolt. Attorney General Robert Kennedy saw these conclusions too, and in the beginning tried to dodge the issue as best he could. He admitted that he did lose much sleep worrying about the “Negro problem.” They did not launch a frontal assault on the caste system until the summer of 1963, when the civil rights movement forced them to do it. In the meantime, the FBI was busy collecting information on individuals active in the civil rights movement, such as the Freedom Riders in the spring and early summer of 1961 (Gains, 2007).

African-Americans were running for elected offices, schools were beginning to address the "all deliberate speed" mandate, and school desegregation was beginning to advance. There was the possibility for advancement in the air, more opportunities to vote, better funding for schools, and more

Why did the air go out of the balloon during the early 1990s and how do we recapture it for contemporary students so that we can continue to narrow the gap? That is the challenge we face today.

Writing from Virginia in that year, John Pory said that "our principal wealth consist in servants (Paige, 2010)."

The evidence is irrefutable. It's an undeniable truth that we have a serious educational problem in America (Paige, 2010).

The New Yorker magazine of July 21, 2008 — showed that then Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, as a Muslim jihadist and his wife, Michelle, as a gun-toting, Afro-wearing black militant, but Early (2008) believes that the popular magazine missed the mark; he says that that should have been a picture that was depicting the militancy of his day a time that was about 10-15 years before the Obamas.

More recently, in September 2011, a Black man in Georgia was put to death for killing a white off-duty police officer. The problem in this case is that the man was believed to be innocent of the murder. The execution outraged hundreds of thousands of people who said they feared an innocent man was being put to death, based on his defense attorneys' assertion that witnesses who had identified the man in court as a killer two decades ago had tried years later to take it all back (Bynum, 2011). These two cases help tell the story of the Black man's plight with society and the law. That plight I found unsettling. The occasion infrequently arises for a taken-for-granted topic to be addressed in a purposive fashion (Craig, 2007). From 1950 to 1953, the New York

NAACP branch office received nearly no complaints about instances of police violence against Blacks in the city.

Situating the work in the midst of the Social / Political Change

Some proclaim that African-Americans live life in boundaries that have been lifted, but have they? Although African-Americans came to this country in 1619, they existed in a state of enslavement until 1865 (Paige, 2010).

America has a shameful history regarding African-American women. We were subjected to being sold as slaves, exploited sexually, and forced to labor in the fields alongside Black men as though we were their physical equal. No other group has been called on to endure such indignities, or to produce more despite them (Thurston, 2001 p. 32).

The exploration of me takes me to varied places, some difficult and some enlightening. The trip however, necessary so that I can understand me and help those behind me to arrive at a place that is beyond boundaries. I have seen my sons struggle to find their place in this society. To find a place that is in some ways far more advanced than the world that I grew up in and in some way far behind. The road blocks put in place during the fight to keep America separate still exist today; they simply appear in different forms. There are some who would love for Blacks to remain in servitude to the dominant culture even after all the hard work of the past fifty years.

As the leaders of this country pushed toward a more inclusive country in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, some were content to continue

in the segregated spaces in which the country existed. Harris and Russo (1994) said that, forty-six years after the Supreme Court overturned the separate but equal legislation education was still separate and unequal. Today eighteen years after that report we struggle with the same issues. It was once mandated that students attend schools that were segregated by race. Today it is accomplished by requiring students to attend the schools zoned (mandated) to their neighborhoods.

My parents graduated high school in 1957 for the local colored high school in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. There was little to no interaction with white children at that time. They were from an agrarian background and attended school around the farming schedule. Acting on their belief that education, so long denied them, provided the path to mental freedom, former slaves of every age flocked into schools and exhibited a fervent appetite for learning (Paige, 2010).

When you help a man decide what to think you do not have to worry yourself about what he will do. If you make him feel that he is less than you, you do not have to force him to accept the lesser status, he will find it himself (Paige, 2010). Paige asserts:

This is central to our understanding of the present black-white achievement gap. It is a historical fact that many (perhaps even most) slaveholders deliberately imposed ignorance as an enslavement tool and,

as such, vigorously enforced tactics designed to prevent slaves from learning to read and write (Paige, 2010 p. 1186).

No matter what changes have taken place in the United States, “America still has a long way to go before Black people achieve economic parity and, in some cases, possess even the most basic of human needs, like housing, food, and transportation” (Nelson, 2011, p. 48). Hooks (2003) considered “segregated schools a constant reminder of the way in which the white majority culture saw us as intellectually inferior (p. 83).”

I would like for my sons and my granddaughter to know that they sometimes have to persist in the face of adversity, (Hill, 2011), “rather than retreat, we must reassess and reimagine our goals and how to achieve them, understanding that the route to equality is a winding path that ends at a yet-to-be-determined place of refuge from prejudice and violence. The granting of rights will guide—but alone, will not assure—our arrival” (p 37).

Situating the work in the world of the learner

If I were to examine my life through lenses big and small (Green, 2005) I would see the experiences that have brought me to the place where I now reside; a place of understanding, a place of peace. It has taken me a while to get here and this paper will help others see where my education has taken me and some of the things that I have been afforded and denied on the way.

hooks (2003) suggests that during the period of racial segregation in our nation, when the vast majority of Black folks were involved in a politics of racial uplift, segregated schools were the locations where Black students were encouraged to embrace education as the necessary path to freedom, (p. 83). Rod Paige the former superintendent for the Houston Independent School District speaks of patterns that developed in tests that were taken by the students during his tenure. He was upset to see that almost all the schools with better than 180 schools in the distribution had only one African-American school in the top quartile (Paige, 2010).

To place African-American women in context it is necessary to give a background to the treatment and classification of these women. Davis (1983) explains that women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women. The findings show that there is a great disconnect between the students and parity. But, as mentioned previously, when this issue is raised, it is dismissed with “Get over it,” or “Black people need to help themselves.” Part of the challenge, however, is not that America at large does not want to have this discussion but that many Black folks simply do not want to acknowledge or talk about what slavery truly did to our history and our families. This is clear baggage that we carry as Black women and as black people (Nelson, 2011p. 48).

It should come as a surprise to no one that the most pressing issue of mutual concern to HBCUs and ETS in 1983 was the fact that African-American students as a group, especially graduates of the HBCUs, were scoring well below white students on the ETS-developed, owned, and managed National Teacher Examination (NTE), and too few were passing. Both declare that there is not much evidence of a link between race and intellect, and what little there is fails to support the genetic hypothesis (Paige, 2010).

Situating the Work in the Context of African-American Women

The most enduring and damning legacy of slavery is that it changed the natural order of Black male and female relationships from the way they were originally formed in Africa (Nelson, 2011, p.45).

We are the women who carry it all, do it all, handle it all, and have to be it all for everyone all the time. Unfortunately, when we are in need, or when we ache, there is rarely a shoulder to cry on unless we are still blessed enough to have our mothers, aunts, or grandmothers with us. Sophia Nelson (2011) put in the context of my feelings as they relate to me as an African-American woman trying to complete my education. She said, “The curse, however, is that we have become so conditioned to being strong all the time that we have forgotten how to turn it off and be rested, still, loving, well-loved, gentle, compassionate, life-giving souls that speak life into one another and into ourselves (p. 44)”.

Examining the attitudes of African-American women and the attitudes of the community towards them, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) stress that: “black women regularly receive the message that they are inferior to other people. Many African-American

women find that they must routinely struggle to disprove this untruth, often going to great lengths simply to demonstrate that they are as intelligent, competent, trustworthy, and reliable as their non-Black friends, associates, and coworkers” (p. 11).

In order to survive we must redefine who we are at least in our own eyes. I had to learn to see me as a real woman, not a savior, or a know-it-all, but a woman with limitation. Collins (1990) offered:

Black women's survival is at stake, and creating self-definitions reflecting an independent Afrocentric feminist consciousness is an essential part of that survival. Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definition and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself. Persistence is a fundamental requirement of this journey from silence to language to action (p. 112).

The redefining is similar to a recovery. We may not recognize it or believe it but there has been damage. Women have been invisible but necessary members of our society, but education is the key to getting better and moving forward. Speaking about her own experiences, bell hook (1994) said that “of my self-recovery, the expression of my awakening to critical consciousness, I was compelled to confront Black women's reality, our denied and buried history, our present circumstances” (p. 30). She claims that the treatment began with a chauvinistic understanding of who women are as people and individuals.

Furthermore, hooks (1981) feels that feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates our culture on various levels - sex, race, and class, for example and a commitment to reorganizing.

As we consider redefining ourselves, we must investigate the possible actions that will allow us to change who we are or at least who we feel that we are. I feel that we change via education. It was Freire (2000) who said:

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination - denies that we are abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from us (p. 52).

Knowing that education is the key, why is it that some are able to succeed and others are not? What do African-American women do to persevere that African-American men do not? Hooks says:

Education as the practice of freedom has never been available to any significant body of Black folks. Learning how to be a conscious critical thinker places any individual in an outsider position in a culture of domination that rewards conformity. In the contemporary world Black identities are diverse and complex; consequently we need a variety of educational settings to make education for critical consciousness the norm. If Black folks want to be free, they must want to be educated. Without freedom of mind there can be no true and lasting freedom, (pp. 92-93)

Summary

African-Americans have been long considered lesser human beings (Davis, 2011). We have been monitored and investigated since before

the civil rights movement. This has sometimes caused me to think less of myself. I would like to create new norms for African-Americans. I would like to start with my children and spread the counter cultural identifiers throughout. I will re-story my experiences to gain knowledge about whom I am and who I think the world believes me to be so that I can help to create the new norms. The self-facing will be difficult at times and it is a tedious task but through it all I will change who the world sees me to be.

CHAPTER THREE

Inquiry Method

This proposed research will utilize narrative inquiry as the method to delve into my personal, autobiographical experiences in education. As a self-study aimed at examining my experiences and the factors that influenced those experiences, this research will center on the following questions: What role do education trends and social changes play in the schooling and education experiences of African-American students? What obstacles prohibit these children from successfully navigating the U. S. education system? How do changing family situations impact or influence the schooling of African-American students? How has my attitude affected my personal sustainability and perseverance in education?

Narrative Inquiry is set in human stories of experience. It provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world as depicted through their stories (Wallace & Mertova, 2007). Connelly and Clandinin (2000) assert that “life—as we come to it and it comes to others—is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (p. 17). Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to “capture the situated complexities” (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002, p. 15) of life that are “often

messy, uncertain, and unpredictable.” Utilizing narrative forms of personal reflection in self-studies helps researchers to “gain a better understanding of their own stories, and shift from presumed knower to learner (Pinnegar, Delude Lay, Bigham, & Lay, 2005, p. 57; see also Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Paley, 1999).

This study will draw on Connelly and Clandinin’s (2006) concepts about the study of experience. As they explain, “the study of experience as story is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study (p. 477).”

Theoretical Framework of the inquiry

This study is grounded in Dewey’s (1939/1997) writing on education as experience that is situational, interactive (personal and social), and temporal (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Dewey also considered experience to exhibit continuity, in that “experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). These understandings of experience are the underpinning of narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly explained that the notions of context, interaction, and temporality create “a metaphorical *three-dimensional narrative inquiry space* (italics in original), with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the

social along a second dimension, and place along a third” (p. 50). This means that, throughout the inquiry, the narrative researcher continuously considers the commonplaces (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006), as further described below.

- Interaction – “Points toward the simultaneous concern with both personal and social conditions” (Clandinin, Pushor, Murray Orr, 2007, p. 69).
- Place – “Draws attention to the centrality of place...to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 69).
- Temporality – “Events, people, and objective under study are in temporal transition and narrative inquirers describe them with a past a present and a future” (p. 69).

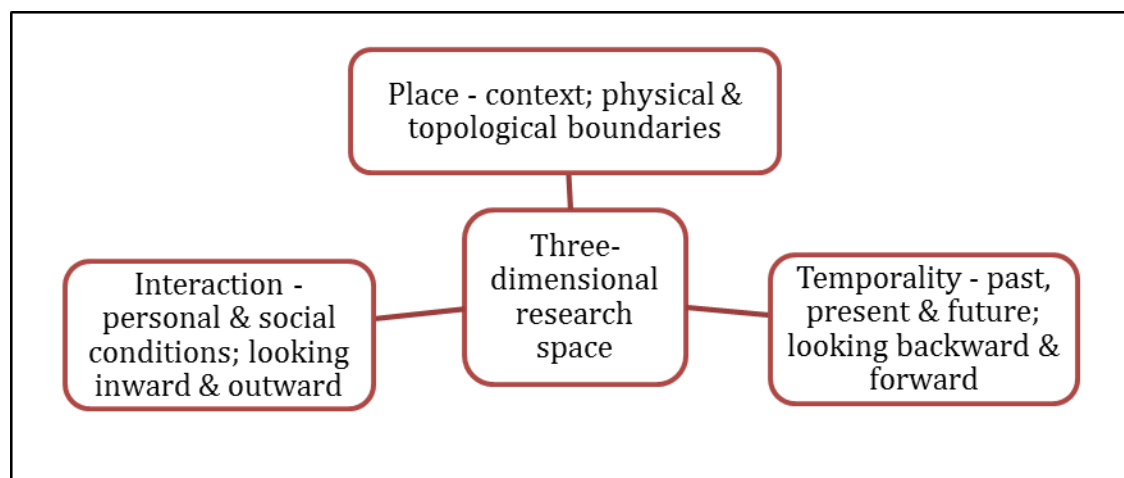


Figure 1 - Three-dimensional research space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)

Situating the Researcher in the Inquiry

As an African-American woman living in the southern United States, my pathway through higher education has been a long journey. It is one that began in 1961, but was influenced by events and situations that occurred long before. I was born in the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., in 1961 in the middle of the American Civil Rights movement. Up until the time that I started school, I, along with numerous cousins, moved back and forth between where my parents lived in D.C. and what I considered home—Mama Laura's house in North Carolina. Mama Laura and Daddy Elijah had raised five of their children, plus two nephews, on their rural tobacco farm in Rocky Mount, sixty miles east of Raleigh. By the time I was a toddler, Daddy Elijah had died and Mama Laura was on her own. She was a strong, independent, resourceful, and loving person—the real matriarch of the family on whom family, as well as friends, relied. For my first eleven years Mama Laura's place was the summer home for me, my siblings, and three cousins.

When I was eleven and my parents divorced, my mother moved on to Miami, Florida, to complete her nursing degree, leaving us children to live in North Carolina for two years; this time with my maternal grandmother, Mama Temp. My mother was thirty-four years old when she completed her degree and my sister and I joined her in Miami. Later,

in 1975, my mother's employer transferred her to Houston, Texas, where my sister and I completed our high school years.

I was thirty-five when I completed my bachelor's degree at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU); just one year older than my mother had been when she obtained her first degree. Like my mother, I too chose to pursue a career in the health-care profession, and my undergraduate studies had taken me to several different colleges and universities. And, just as my mother had done with her mother, I depended on my mother emotionally and financially while obtaining my degree. After being a single mother for many years, I was newly married, raising two kids, and working full time as a registered respiratory therapist. My career interests and aspirations led me to complete a master's degree in health education and to later pursue a doctorate in the same field of study. After ten years in the doctoral program, and navigating a required change in my field of study, the end of a goal is in sight.

Over the course of my education, numerous obstacles and challenges have confronted me—segregation, desegregation, family situations, institutional cultures. Interwoven throughout these mixed experiences were imposed limitations, cultural norms, and often a sense of otherness. Reflecting on the numerous challenges that I encountered along the way—from grade school to the doctoral program—inspired me to

focus on my stories of education in this dissertation as a way to inform and perhaps to help others.

In an effort to better understand my personal experiences in education, and to share my story with others, this inquiry will examine these and other aspects of my experiences in education that have brought me to this point in my life. Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly's (1994) concept of narrative cycles I will explore the critical moments throughout my education.

The Context

As previously mentioned, I was born in 1961, in the middle of the civil rights movement—six years after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the colored section of a bus to a white passenger and just one year after the non-violent sit-ins at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina (McWhorter, 2008). Now, in 2012, I complete my doctorate in the midst of a Presidential election where American's first African-American President is re-elected.

My personal story takes place in the second half of the 20th Century and beginning of the 21st. The context will shift backward and forward in time as I explore storied experiences. At the same time, some of my personal stories were impacted by earlier events which will require that the context stretch back beyond my memory of things, to earlier

times captured through family stories, historical events, or historical accounts. An example of this is the consideration of segregation and desegregation in schools.

When living in North Carolina in 1973, I was bused from my neighborhood school to a predominantly white school as part of school integration. Exploring my story of desegregation, however, requires looking further back in time to examine the Supreme Court rulings in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), both of which were landmark cases. In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of state laws requiring “separate-but-equal” racially segregated public facilities, including public schools. In 1954 the Supreme Court overturned the early ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, stating that separate but equal school facilities for whites and students of color is inherently unequal (Russo, 1994). Even though the Court called for immediate desegregation in 1954, twenty years later states and school districts still had not unanimously complied to the ruling. As this example shows, looking back at my story will require stretching the context beyond my life to areas and eras that impacted my story.

Inquiry Procedures

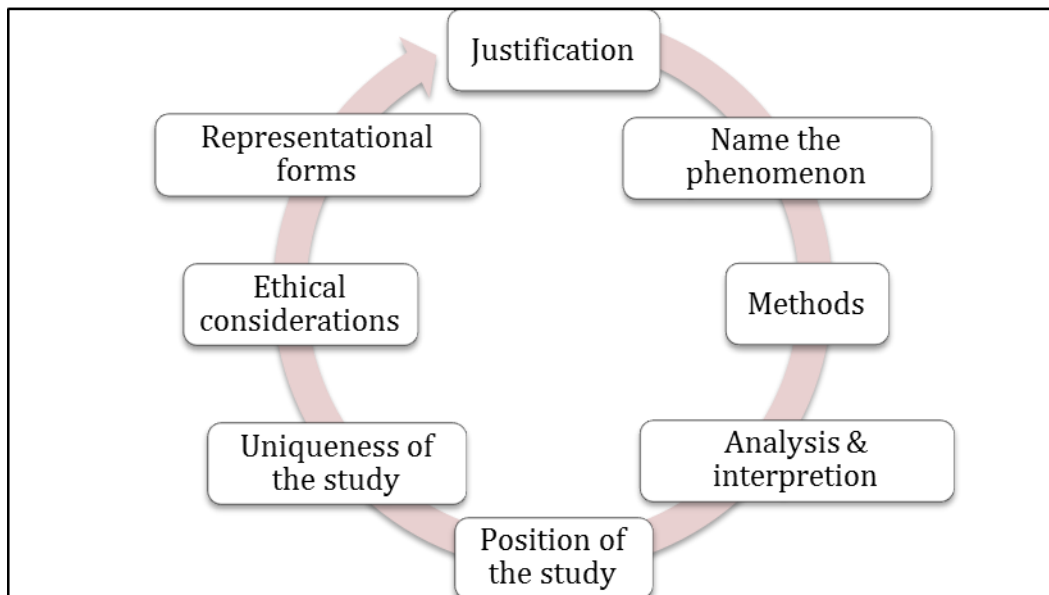


Figure 2 – Common elements in narrative inquiry (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007; see also Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

Through my personal narrative stories I will investigate the experiential ways in which I framed my world as a student and as an educator (Mertova, 2009). Key to this process is the concept of expressing my own narrative authority (Olson, 1995; Olson & Craig, 2001) as I retell my stories of experience in education. Narrative authority as conceptualized by Olson (1995) has been explained by Craig and Olson in Lyons and LaBoskey (2002) as follows:

Narrative authority emerges from the implicit narrative knowledge individuals develop through experience and shapes the way we choose to author our lives in relation to others. As we explain to

our students, it involves both living and telling stories in response to the social contexts in which we find ourselves (p. 116).

During this self-study, I will draw on the common elements of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007) to design and carry out the research.

Field Texts

My stories of experience for this dissertation will be selected from the following field texts: reflective journals, family stories, a curriculum of life, and historical documents.

- **Reflection Journals** - In preparation for this dissertation, I began to write about my experiences in education, and particularly the challenges that I have confronted and worked through on my path to completing my doctoral degree. I also began re-reading older journals that contained stories of my years as an African-American girl and woman in school. These reflective journals capture not only the experiences, but also the emotions that I carry forward from those events. Writing and then reflecting upon my stories, is a way to find out who I am by making sense of my experiences (Clandinin, & Connelly, 1994). For this reason, both sources will serve as reflective tools in this narrative inquiry self-study. Stories will be analyzed and selected as

for their potential to help me understand the events that helped to shape me as a student and as an educator.

- **Family stories** – Another form of field text will be created by compiling family stories. Family stories that have been handed down from generation to generation will be used to bring in another perspective alongside my personal perspective. Through family stories, “people learn self-identity,” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 420), connecting one family member with another, and one generation with another. While these stories may center on the family, they also reveal “its relation to the world” (Stone, 1988, p. 7; as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In this dissertation, family stories will serve as field text, reflective tool, and will also be used as an axis to frame time and space (Tsai, 2006).
- **Curriculum of life** – During a previous class, I constructed a curriculum of life that highlighted numerous life events. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) suggest that annals “allow individuals to represent visually something of the topography of their life experiences, the highs and lows, the rhythms they construct around their life cycles” (p. 420). I will use the annals and chronicles as a field text, review the stories recalled, and expand upon them to create a picture of my life as an African-American student in the United States in the

south and the mid-southwest.

- **Historical Accounts** – The accounts of others as found in biographies and historical texts will be used to create parallel stories (Craig, 1999). I will search histories and biographies to identify historical accounts that ran/run parallel to my own narrative and use them to connect my story to the broader context of education in American history and culture. These historical accounts will provide a different perspective on education and also act as a reflective tool in analyzing my personal stories.

The field texts described above will be utilized to create narrative cycles of personal experience (see example below).

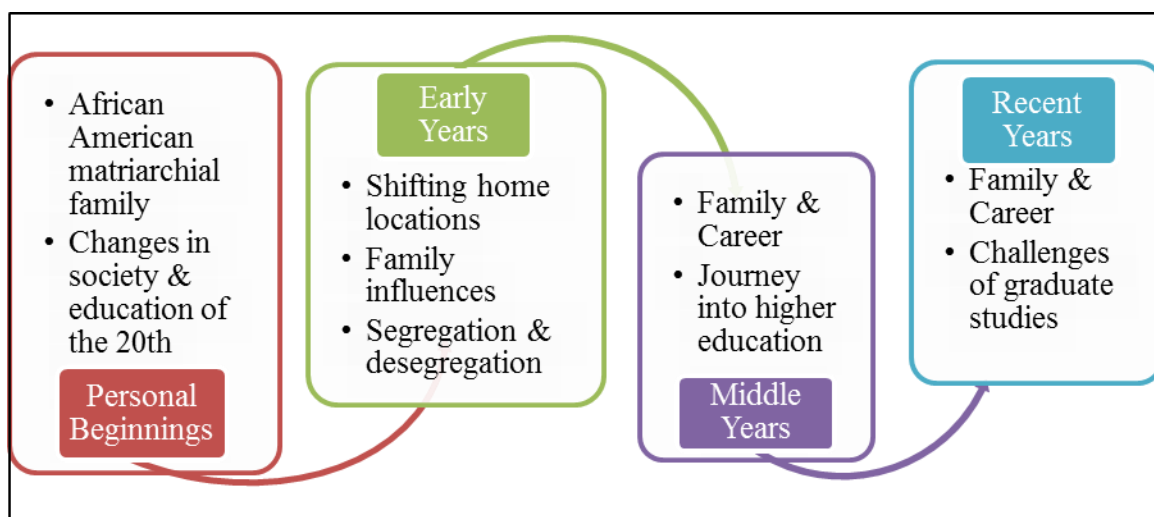


Figure 3 - Narrative cycles (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994)

Analysis and Interpretation

Analytical Tools

A combination of strategies will be used to analyze the field texts described above. The tools used to analyze will include broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying, fictionalization.

- **Broadening**—Broadening will be used to connect my stories to what was happening in education in regards to segregation, desegregation and re-segregation. For example, this will include an exploration of the civil rights movement as it paralleled the events in my life story. Connections to culturally relevant stories will help to inform the cognitive learning domain, the knowledge, and intellectual skill development. This will allow me to point to something larger than myself (Kramer, 2007) and help me to identify possible strategies to support my sons in their education efforts.
- **Burrowing**—Burrowing will be used to examine the deeper meaning behind the stories shared. This will include an examination of the affective learning domain, especially the emotional, moral, and aesthetic aspects education.
- **Storying and Restorying** - Storying and restorying will be utilized to bring forward the temporal, contextual, and social elements of my experiences. This will illuminate how my

understandings of events and my personal identity have changed over time and across different landscapes.

- **Fictionalization**—Fictionalization will be employed to change elements of the story in order to protect the identity of persons and/or places that could easily be identified in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Interpretive Tools

The stories selected will represent critical moments in my life history as they relate to education. To aid in interpreting these critical moments, I will draw on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) notion of narrative cycles. Their work pointed to the idea that over time experiences and stories reflect a certain rhythm or cycle (p. 74). Examining my stories for narrative cycles will help to organize the sequence of stories to best reflect the critical moments in my life history.

I will also use Maxine Greene's (1995) notion of seeing big and seeing small to gain different perspectives. As Greene explained:

To see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviors from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness of everyday life. To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere

objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. . . . When applied to schooling, the vision that sees things big brings us in close contact with details and with particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable (Greene, 1995, p.10).

CHAPTER FOUR

Narrative Cycles: Storied Experiences

Of Losing and Regaining Self

Introduction

In order to tell my story of losing and regaining self, I start with what brought me to this narrative self-study. I have been attempting to finish my doctoral degree for a decade; however, my journey has been interrupted several times due to situations that were beyond my control and, at times, to reactions and actions on my part that were within my control. It began with my enrollment in a Health Education/Administration Program (HEAP) at a local Tier-1 university that I will call City University (CU). I began the doctoral program as an extension of my earlier studies in health that have supported my career as a respiratory therapist and trainer at our city's Veteran's Administration (VA) hospital. As I pursued my doctoral studies, I have been working full-time in my chosen profession while simultaneously caring for family and home.

As I entered into my fourth year in the doctoral program I was advised that the program would be closing at the end of the semester. I was presented with two options—complete the remaining course work within one semester or drop out of the doctoral program. Needless to say, I was shocked, disturbed, and felt perplexed about what to do. I was so

overwhelmed that I simply just shut down. Neither option was acceptable to me. I had counted on being able to finish my course of studies, had put in a tremendous amount of time and energy (not to mention money), and it did not seem fair that the university had elected to close the program. The time frame that I was given to finish my studies was unreasonable, especially since I had to continue working full-time in order to support my family. I felt lost, and ended up retreating into myself. After a while, however, my urge to complete my degree overcame the upset I felt, and I determined to find a way to carry on. This led to me transferring to curriculum and instruction studies and eventually to this self-study.

The dilemma that I faced in obtaining my doctoral degree forced me to re-examine my life experiences and the various factors that have contributed to varying degrees to my current situation. The aim of this self-study is to develop a deep understanding of my personal experiences, and therefore, of myself as I move forward. This narrative self-study centers on the following questions:

- What obstacles/challenges did I encounter in education from elementary school to obtaining my doctoral degree?
- How did family culture and changing familial situations impact/influence my education?

- In what ways have my experiences as a student been impacted by corresponding and/or competing trends in education and social/political change?
- How has my attitude affected my sustainability and perseverance through this journey in education?

The following three segments contain stories of my family heritage and culture, school stories of my elementary and secondary experiences, and my higher education journey to obtaining a doctoral degree in education. Utilizing Clandinin and Connelly's (1994) notion of narrative cycles as a way to represent the natural rhythms of life-events, I pull together key events from my past experiences that have significantly influenced my current mindset (Dweck, 2006), motivations, and responses. The series of stories in each section is followed by a reflective response in which I unpack the related experiences by looking backward and forward, inward and outward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Pushor, Murray Orr, 2011). All of the stories gathered here as narrative cycles represent past happenings, yet speak to the present and influence my future. To gain a better understanding of their impact on who I am today, I turn inward to reflect on my feelings and emotions at the time and their impact on my person as an adult. I also look outward at the social/political contexts of those stories to examine them from a more informed current perspective. In the process I adopt different lenses, sometimes "seeing big" (Greene, 1995, p. 10) by moving up close

to examine details, and sometimes “seeing small” by moving back to see how my stories were and are situated within the larger context of family, school, and society.

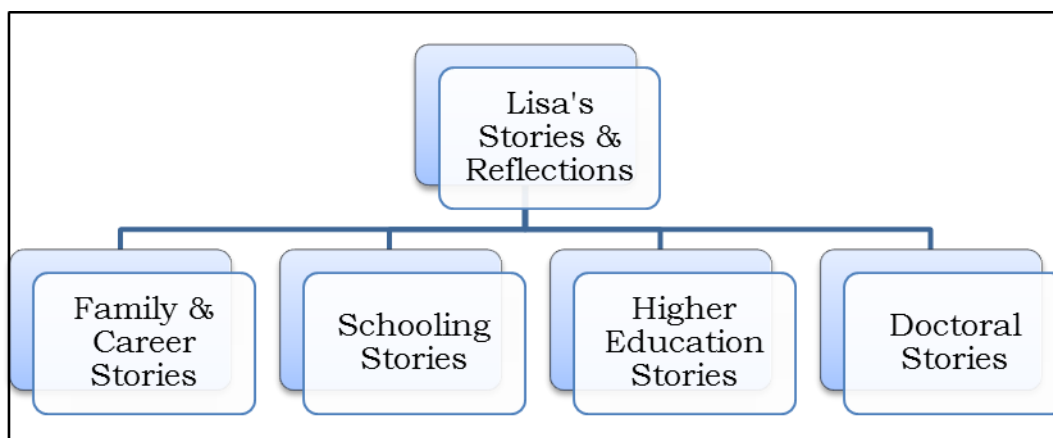


Figure 4 - Overview of stories in the self-study

My Family Story

When I set out on this self-study I imagined that the stories brought forward in narrative cycles would center wholly on my experiences in school. As I began to reflect on my schooling, however, I quickly realized that family situations and even family culture played a role in my schooling experiences. For this reason, I begin my narrative cycles with stories of family; stories that ground me as a person and speak to the heart of who I am as an African-American woman. Like most family stories, mine is one of complexity and constantly changing conditions and situations. Unlike many stories of African-Americans, my family story is not one of poverty, but is probably more aligned with what

is considered middle-class America. That said my goal in exploring family stories is not centered on the impact of economics or class, but rather the influences of my familial and African-American roots. My reflective response in unpacking the family stories examines family influences, illuminating the grounding qualities of family and the impact of changing family situations on the stories about schooling and higher education that follow.

My North Carolina Roots

My parents and grandparents were born in North Carolina. My father was born and raised in Rocky Mount, a mid-sized town of almost 60,000 situated on the coastal plains of North Carolina and about an hour from Raleigh the capital. Rocky Mount is also the birth place of some notable African-American figures: Negro League Baseball Hall of Famer, Walter “Buck” Leonard, the legendary jazz pianist Thelonious Monk, and NBA great Phil Ford, who dated my second cousin at one time. My mother was born and raised in Battleboro, North Carolina, a small country town about five miles north of Rocky Mount. My parents attended elementary school together and graduated high school from the same class. My mother was the student council secretary; my father was the president. They dated in high school and were married shortly after graduation. My father came from a family of landowners; my mother, like many of the African-American families in North Carolina (Levenstein,

2009) came from a family of sharecroppers. My father was raised in a home in which the father and mother were married and stayed married until my grandfather died. My grandfather in-fact suffered a stroke and due to residual problems from the stroke was resigned to a wheelchair. He was a strong forceful man according, to my father, and the children feared his wrath. My father's mother was a kind loving strong woman who managed the home and the children so that my grandfather did not have to.

My mother and her siblings lived with my great-grandparents. The description of my great-grandparents is similar to that of my paternal grandparents. My great-grandmother was the family matriarch and she managed the children and their house. I have been told that she wanted to be a teacher but circumstances did not allow her to pursue that goal. Just two generations out of slavery she was relegated to work in the fields beside my great grandfather. Again, that was common to the African-American families in North Carolina (Levenstein, 2009) and there was no financial assistance for her to attend school. In the south African-American women were considered profitable labor during slavery, rendering them almost genderless (Davis, 1981), and the climate just after slavery had not changed much. She did, however, ensure that my maternal grandmother attend Fayetteville Normal School and become a nurse. Though my father's family was considered wealthier than my maternal grandmother's family by North Carolina standards, it was my

mother's family that pursued education with great vigor. My mother's father's family was from Houston, Texas and was known to have wealth also. In fact, one of the streets in the Gulfgate area was named after my great grandfather and an elementary school in Houston was named after one of my great uncles. My mother did not meet her father until she was nineteen years old and I met this part of my family when I was in high school. They therefore had little to no influence on my formative years or on my family's financial situation.

My father was offered a four- year scholarship to attend North Carolina Agricultural & Technical Institute to study agriculture and turned it down. My mother, on the other hand, worked full time and attended school part-time during the first part of her adult life. She ultimately earned her bachelor's degree in nursing and moved from a vocational nurse position to a being a registered nurse. Mama then went on to get a master's degree in divinities studies. My maternal grandmother, Mama Temp, was also a registered nurse. In contrast, my paternal grandmother, Mama Laura, graduated high school and pursued what some might consider a less professional career as a teacher's aide and then as a secretary at a cousin's funeral home.

My parents were a part of African-American migration from the southern states to the north during the mid-twentieth century. My parents moved to Washington DC in the late 1950's in search of better

incomes. My father worked for a magazine company and my mother worked as a nursing assistant and then as a licensed practical nurse. My father spoke of wanting to do better than his parents and wanting to have greater control of his life. My father wanted to be as far away from farming as possible, probably because farming in the south was so closely tied to the institution of slavery (Davis, 1981). My father spoke often of his abhorrence of slavery and the treatment of African-Americans that followed. He wanted to see the big city and move to a place where African-Americans were treated as equal citizens and where they had a chance to live the American dream. My mother wanted to improve her life also and be close to my father. While they were in DC finding themselves and in the process of losing their relationship, the children were left in North Carolina with my paternal grandmother and her mother. We were with my grandmother who made me feel that I was special and that when I was with her I was at home and loved.

Both of my grandmothers were strong independent women who made their own opportunities. My paternal grandmother, Mama Laura, was the family matriarch and a landowner. Her word was law in the family. She was smart and kind. Mama Laura adapted to the agrarian life with what appeared to be ease, but at the same time was able to work in the school system and in the business world with equal ease. When we were very young, she lived in a great white framed house that had been built by my paternal great-grandparents. When I was still a child,

she moved down the road a piece into a brick home. One of the family stories that continue to be told is that Mama Laura owned the first brick house in her neighborhood. She was also one of the first in her area to have indoor plumbing. Mama Laura was known to be intolerant of disrespect of any kind and kept both a gun, that the children called Jimmy John, and a shotgun close-by at all times. We used to make sure to never touched Jimmy John when making my grandmother's bed because it was kept under Mama Laura's pillow. When I think about it, it is a wonder that we were never hurt while sleeping in her bed. Mama Laura was so accustomed to having a gun at her side that once when I was a teenager, she took me to the airport and was stopped at the gate because she forgot to leave her gun in the car.

My maternal grandmother, Mama Temp, was a registered nurse at a time when African-American women were not expected to attempt higher education. Mama Temp left her birth state of North Carolina in the 1930s after marrying my grandfather. They moved to Texas where they lived until Mama Temp was pregnant with my mother. My grandfather wanted her to stay in Texas to have the baby but she wanted to be with her mother for the delivery. After several failed attempts to keep her in Texas, my grandmother got her way. Seven months pregnant and two toddlers in tow, she left my grandfather and returned to North Carolina. Not long after my mother was born, Mama Temp left her children with her parents in North Carolina, and ventured to Washington

DC alone. There she worked at George Washington University Hospital in the neonatal nursery. Mama Temp was smart, funny and fearless—she also carried a gun.

I come from a long line of strong women who believed that life was to be lived to the fullest. They taught me to be independent, strong, caring and to not wait for anyone to help me. Sometimes that last lesson has been lost, but for the most part I have taken their lessons to heart and done what I could to continue their legacy.

Reflective Responses – Unpacking my Family Story

As I reflect on my parents and grandmothers I realize that who I am is a reflection of who they are/were. My grandmothers gave me a sense of independence. My paternal grandmother gave me a sense of family and a need to take care of that family. She put the children first and then took care of the adults in the family. She eventually took care two of my father's first cousins when my grandfather, his brother and his sister-in-law died, separately. Mama Laura was a family leader who did not allow the pressures of society to cause her to neglect her children, their children, or her aging mother.

My maternal grandmother, Mama Temp, was a professional when being a professional African-American woman was difficult. She allowed me to see that I had the ability and the right to be educated. She did not

allow anything to get in the way of her studies or her profession—even to the point of leaving two husbands who tried to stand in her way. My parents taught me to work hard, and stay focused. They taught me that we do not always find what we seek easily, but that I can find what I'm looking for if I keep trying. I did not feel abandoned when my parents left to pursue a better life. I felt secure with my grandmother. It taught me that dreams can be chased and life is not always fair; but no matter what is going on I must take care of the family above all. I also learned that while taking care of family I must remember to keep the dream in sight and continue to work on it.

I have adhered to that philosophy of not expecting help but I have found help often through this process. I have met with opposition but I have also met individuals that have been enlightening and caring. They have instructed me and explained processes and they have pushed when I needed it. I know that I could not have made it this far without them.

My Professional Career

The influence of my family—the notions of working hard and pursuing your dreams—are reflected in my professional career. Like my maternal grandmother and my mother, I am in nursing healthcare field. It took me a number of years, but I finally found respiratory therapy as my calling. Being a respiratory therapist puts me in a position to work with people, something that I always loved doing. The expertise I have

gained through continued education, training, and experience has enabled me to move into different areas of the field and to take on more responsibility. As a result, I have obtained a significant measure of professional success and personal satisfaction.

Over the course of 15 years I moved through the Respiratory Therapy department from staff therapist to manager of the Home Oxygen Clinic. I was a leader at VA, I was able to learn quickly and even teach new information to others. I was a part of a new initiative called Train the Trainer. This campaign was developed to help improve performance at the point of service delivery in the hospital. The process worked by teaching a small group of employees new ideas and new machine operations and then sending those employees to train their peers. For instance, when we got new ventilators with different updated features I would learn the new features and then teach them to my coworkers.

I appreciated this job because it gave me a chance to help preserve life. Many times I gave patients breathing assistance during cardiac arrest that allowed them to live longer because I was there. I saw a poster once that said if you have helped someone breathe easier, your living has been worthwhile. I also loved that I was able to advance my career and learn and do more than I ever expected. I work with doctors and nurses and pharmacists and therapist and Veterans and families of

the Veterans and instructors. I feel that I matter after having worked as a Respiratory Therapist.

My Elementary and Secondary School Story

The stories in this section are drawn from my experiences in elementary and secondary school. They traverse the time period from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. While I am sure that each year held incredible experiences, the stories selected here were chosen to highlight recurring themes that continue to echo in my mind and heart, influencing my reactions, decisions, and actions as an adult. Interwoven throughout are the continued themes of family influences, a recurring sense of otherness and self-seclusion, and overcoming challenges. I follow this collection of school stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; 1996) with a reflective response in which I unpack my earlier years, examining them from a more mature, educated, and aware perspective.

The Early Years

My schooling began in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where I lived with my paternal grandmother (Mama Laura), my great grandmother, my older brother, and my first cousin. At the time, my mother and father were living and working in Washington, D.C., trying to better themselves.

In Rocky Mount, I started first grade at the local elementary school where my Mama Laura worked as a teacher's aide. Since Rocky Mount

was such a small community, I was surrounded by people that I knew from the community and people who knew my family. In fact, my first grade teacher's mother even dated one of my uncles. Although I was not cognizant of the distinction at the time, I was also in a school environment that was all black—the students looked like me, the staff looked like me, the teachers looked like. What is more is that they seemed to reflect the same rural culture and sensibilities of my grandmother, and therefore, my family.

In my first year at school I loved school. I was eager to attend school and wanted to go to school every day. One reason was because my grandmother worked at the school as a teacher's aide. Since grandmother worked at the school people were nice to me and they helped me feel comfortable. It reflected the rural North Carolina community in which there was a lot of respect and love. Having my grandmother around allowed me to think of school of an extension of home. The teachers, the principal and the staff visited my grandmother's home. We attended the same church or we visited each other's church because church was held on one Sunday a month and the preachers moved from one church to the other in the area. There were many occasions for socialization and the members of the community took advantage of them.

Then in the second grade I moved to my place of origin, Washington, D.C. My mother had finished her first step toward becoming a registered nurse and had become a licensed practical nurse. My sister was born in February of 1966 and my parents had secured adequate housing and felt that they were financially stable enough to take care of all of us. I attended a private Catholic school; and since the school was private, it was not segregated. That was my first encounter with people of another race or nationality in school. It was not long before I became aware that I was not in North Carolina anymore. The teachers were different from the ones back home. They were sharp with me, speaking in loud, clipped voices rather than the soft, smooth North Carolina accent that I was accustomed to. Their demeanor made it seem that they did not care what happened to me.

I remember not doing well on a spelling test in the 2nd grade and being sent to the principal's office where I was met by a tall nun with a stern voice who was dressed in a traditional black and white habit. While I was used to seeing nuns in class, this situation gave me a perspective of nuns that was different from the teachers that I was used to. I was told that I had better not get another bad grade or else I would be paddled and my mother would be asked to take me out of the school. I was also told that my big brother was bad and that I was starting to act just like him. I can remember being confused and wondering what my brother had done to make the nuns so mad—so mad in fact that they

were not only mad at him, they were also mad at me. It was at that moment that I decided that I did not like school anymore.

We did not return to that school the next year; we attended the local public school. I was once again in a segregated school. I am not sure if that was mandated in Washington DC in 1968, but it was the case. I did alright in the 4th grade; I was in the school play and the talent show, I was once again among friends, all was well. It was an interesting year, however one day I went out during recess and fell and scraped my knee. I did not think much of the fall but my teacher saw the scar that resulted and cleaned it up and put a band aid on it. She seemed to be genuinely concerned that I was hurt. Later that year my teacher fell in the door of the classroom and died due to a cerebral aneurysm. The students in the classroom were not really aware of what was happening to my teacher. We were told to sit quietly while someone came and got my teacher off the floor in what I now know was a stretcher. I remember being taken to my teacher's funeral and having to sit out in the lobby with the rest of the student because the adults felt that we were too young to process what had happened and would not be able to handle seeing my teacher in a coffin.

A few months later we got a new teacher. She was younger than the teacher that we lost and she was not as nice. I remember on one occasion she invited a few of the girls in the class to spend the weekend

with her. Some of us were not invited because, as she said to one of the other teachers that was visiting her classroom, some students she would not invite to her house under any circumstance. Another time we were invited to attend camp WAMAVA, by a philanthropist in the city. The criterion was one of first come first served and I was the first student to get my application in. My new teacher said to a peer, "I wish that I could have done something different. I would never have allowed her (me) to go." As I think of it now, I am taken back to that place of hurt and I wonder why she did not like me. I remember being a quiet child who feared confrontation and abhorred embarrassment.

I started junior high school in Washington, D.C. As I remember, that was a nightmare. I was bussed to a school a few miles away because the closer school was overcrowded. The junior high school was in a different neighborhood and I did not know most of my classmates. I was bullied and teased daily because I wore glasses, my hair was not long, I was little (believe it or not), I was too quiet, I was not from the neighborhood, I spoke like a white girl, I was not athletic enough, I was not a fighter (physical) or whatever the story was on any given day. One day I ran into a girl that I went to first grade with in North Carolina and I thought that we would still be friends. I made the mistake of saying that we were friends in the first grade and that started the biggest fight. In fact, if I had returned after the Christmas break I would have had to fight her in the school play yard...it was all planned out. I started to skip

school and one of my teachers called my mother and expressed concern. She said that I was a good student but that I was showing signs of stress. She told my mother that I was skipping classes and that I needed help because she was afraid that with my temperament I would be lost if I did get help soon. Luckily for me, my parents were in the throes of divorce by then and I left D.C. for North Carolina during the Christmas holiday.

I began the second half of junior high school back in North Carolina. I was finally going home. I was going to be with Mama Laura and I would be around people who liked me. However, to my surprise I was not to live with Mama Laura this time around. This time I lived with my maternal grandmother, Mama Temp. She was not the mothering sort. She was a professional woman and taking care of children was a stretch. She did the best she could, but I definitely knew that this was not the North Carolina that I remembered. In her defense, several things had changed.

Because the role of African-American women in the northern cities was marred with visions of poverty, susceptibility to domestic violence and a vulnerability to health problems (Levenstein, 2009) my grandmother had learned to protect herself and survive under those circumstances. Also, because her mother raised her children, she was not required to be mothering and therefore she did not act according to

those standards.

Returning to North Carolina brought about several new circumstances. In the country we were in the middle of desegregating the school system and we were bussed to school. For a second time, I was in the middle of a hostile environment, but this time the situation was mandated by the federal government. Neither the blacks nor the whites involved in the bussing wanted the change. I was a little less upset about the mixing because I had been in the Catholic school that was integrated before. One incident that year stands out in my memory—I was verbally assaulted by a white student that called me a nigger. We had an argument about something and she called me a nigger as her last and most insulting retort. I was not quite sure how I was supposed to act. I had never been called nigger before and I really was not angry about it. The black children in the school were enraged for me. Although they thought I was tough for having the argument with one of the members of the richest white families in Rocky Mount, they thought I was soft for not fighting her after the N word. The white children thought that I was weak for letting the girl call me a nigger and not fighting, so at that point I was ostracized by both groups. Latter Glynn (not her real name) and I became friends again and continued with the relationship that we started before the fight.

While attending school in North Carolina for the second time

during mandated bussing neither side was happy about being bussed or having others bussed into their neighborhoods. For the most part the races remained separated. Black students existed in groups that were separate from those of white children. The situation that allowed Glynn and me to be friends was not the usual circumstance. Glynn was from a rich family and no one questioned what she did. I was not from the area and I did not know anyone so she was as good as anyone to talk to. The Black students were no more eager to befriend me than the white students.

After completing the eighth grade my mother once again came for us and we moved to Miami, Florida. I again attended a Catholic school. This school was integrated also, this time with Cuban, Black and white girls. This was a pleasant situation and I enjoyed being in Miami. While in Miami I was fortunate enough to go to Europe on a school trip. I visited Toledo and Madrid, Spain and Paris, France. This exposure was surprising. For the first time in Spain, I saw children begging on the street for food. As a 15-year-old I was not sure how to process that information. There was also tear gas dispersed on the street to get people off of the street for the 7pm curfew. The Louvre Museum was closed for updates in Paris, but I did get to see Notre Dame, which by the way was the name of the high school that I attended in Miami.

While at Notre Dame Academy I had many friends of different races and nationalities. One of my best friends was the granddaughter of the former president of Haiti. Her mother used to pay her tuition with one check at the beginning of the year. I saw girls of varying hues from Cuba who did not seem to care about the color of their skin. There were girls as dark as me and those as white as any white person who claimed to be family members or lifelong friends and there seemed to be no difference in them than in friends that were the same color. The tension between the American (Black and whites) students was palpable. We were not as quick to be friends. The groups were quickly identified by newcomers. We did not fight each other but we had an understanding of how far to go with each other. We did not try to sit together at lunch time and we did not visit each other's homes. I did have white friends but it took more effort on both our parts for the relationships to be successful. It was much easier for me to have Cuban or Haitian friends than white American friends. I considered myself friends with all eight of the Black American girls in the school.

Reflective Responses – Unpacking my School Story

Looking back on my experiences in elementary and secondary education, gives me new insights into how changing family situations directly impacted my school experiences. It also made me examine how I coped personally with those changing situations and the resulting school

contexts. At the same time, when I step back and look at the broader social/political events that occurred during this time frame (from the mid-1960s to late 1970s), I gain a new appreciation for how the events arising out of the Civil Rights Movement impacted what was happening in schools I attended.

My first-grade experience stands out in my memories because of the surroundings. I was in a familiar place, a place like home with teachers that looked like me, but also who actually knew my family. They visited our home and our church. Our traditions were the same. We were taught to love family and to love friends as family. We were taught to care about our neighbors. It was and is still home to me. It is where I go to get inspired and to offer inspiration to others. It is where my family rest and it is where I find peace.

When I reflect on my beginning school experiences, I feel interrupted. I feel a great deal of change. I remember sensing for the first time that I was an “other.” Prior to my D.C. experience, I did not know that others existed. Nor had I ever felt that sense of “otherness” before. The changes caused me to have to start over several times. Each time I started trying to find my place and waiting to be accepted by those that were already in place. When I was shunned or, in my opinion mistreated, I turned inward, clearly not who I am. I became less accessible to others. I allowed my insecurities to cause me to not

participate in whatever going on. I skipped school; I retreated and did not participate when I was at school. I feared the repercussions of what would happen. I also see that eventually I returned to complete what I started. I returned to the friendships, I did enough to finish the class and I always hoped that things would be better at some point.

Another explanation for my feelings after leaving North Carolina may be explained by something that Geneva Gay says; she says that by the time children enter school they have already internalized rules and procedures for obtaining information (Gay, 2000). I already had developed manners of showing my skills as a learner by the time I arrived in Washington and when that model was challenged I was taken out of my level of comfort. Gay (2000) says:

Cognitive processing protocols are learned from [my] cultural socialization. They may be refined and elaborated over time, even superseded on occasion for the performance of certain tasks. But the core of these culturally influenced rules and procedures continues to anchor how [I] process intellectual challenges for the rest of [my] life (p. 150).

Growing up in a time of such change as the Civil Rights movement and in the face of continuous change in my family and my home was difficult. I was often the new person in school or the neighborhood. I was an African-American girl child, I was small, quiet and scared, but I survived and I completed most of the things that I started. I have learned to succeed in the face of difficulty and I know that I can help others do the same. It is my mission to make sure that I help others that

cross my path to accomplish the same. In high school I believe that I started to change and become more of the person that I am today. According to Myers Briggs I am an ENTJ extrovert intuitive thinking judger (we took the test at work). I have taken that test about five times and it comes out the same every time, giving it validity. I am not sure what allowed me to become an extrovert unless it was the strong female role models that raised me. Even when I perceived the world to be unkind I had a loving family and some encouraging teachers to push and help me.

My Higher Education Story

My higher education story will probably resonate with many adults who, like me, were not certain of their career pathway when they graduated from high school or changed their minds once they were exposed to concentrated studies in the field that had originally captured their interest or who listen to the negative council that gave them permission to not succeed at their hearts' desires. The experiences shared here illustrate how it took time for me to find something that I was truly interested in; and how once I did find it, that interest motivated me to continue on with my studies. It also reveals the importance of finding a university that not only matched my career goals, but also was one in which I felt comfortable and supported. This portion of my journey also shows that, as a single mother I juggled school with caring for a son and

working full-time. I relied on my family for continued support, emotionally and financially. I also helped my single mother care for my sister and take care of the four of us financially as much as I could, and encouraged my sister to become a registered nurse like my mother.

Obtaining my Bachelor's and Master's Degrees

I started my post-secondary education at the TMU Downtown in 1979-80, as a pre-med major. I worked on that degree for about three years and then decided that as much as I love medicine—being a medical doctor was not the place for me. I had no other plan, however, so I was lost for a while. I stopped school and went to work full-time at a department store where I worked for ten years.

Working at a department store was an adventure. I loved working with people and helping them to decide on purchases. Also, I was knowledgeable about my products and my customers responded to me with positive affirmation, letting me know that they appreciated the way that I helped them. Through our casual conversations, I learned a lot about the lives of my customers. Some told me of their life experiences and their families, and some talked about going to school. One memorable customer was a stripper. She told me that she was a mother and that she had to strip to make a living. She said that she made great tips, and that she felt safe because of the bouncers at the club. I was fascinated with her because she was doing something bold with her life.

Talking to the stripper started me thinking that I needed to do something bold in my life. I could not imagine stripping, not for moral reasons, but for aesthetic reasons. I have been overweight for most of my adult life and I would never have the courage to strip my cloths in front of an audience. However, after talking to the stripper I began to realize that I needed to do something more with my life.

The retail business is great for a college student who does not have to support herself, but it is not good for a single mother. I was making \$2.75 per hour which allowed me to bring home about \$100.00 a week and my mother expected me to pay the electric bill. In those days, the early 1980s, the electric bill was reasonable. Yet it gave me responsibility and a sense of ownership. I knew, however, that I needed more. The problem was that I had some college course requirements completed in the area of pre-med. Since I was no longer interested in continuing in pre-med, I felt that continuing with pre-med courses would not increase my marketability. So, I decided to go back to college and obtain a marketable degree. The medical field was all that I really knew in the professional arena since my mother and her mother (Mama Temp) were both nurses. When I considered my mother's situation, I thought that she was rich because she had been able to send my sister and me to private high school. It seemed that we always had what we needed in life.

One day I was reading an ad in the newspaper that suggested that I go to Community College (CC) and obtain an associate degree in Respiratory Therapy. When I asked my mother about the responsibilities of a Respiratory Therapist, she did not like that as a career choice for me. She explained that the work was hard, the hours were long, and the work was unrewarded professionally and financially. Of course I did not listen, but instead immediately enrolled in the program. After two years I had learned all that I ever needed to know about the inside of one's throat and lungs, and quickly started my career as a therapist at the VA Hospital. I was once again able to work in a customer-centered field. While working at the hospital I completed my bachelor's degree.

I quickly moved through the respiratory department from staff therapist to managing the Home Oxygen Clinic. Eventually, I became a leader in the department and in the Train the Trainer program. I was eventually given the title of Chair of the Education Committee, responsible for teaching the respiratory staff, nurses, doctors, even surgeons what I learned from vendors, and other educators. In fact, physicians have to come through my ventilator class before they were allowed to change the settings on ventilators in the intensive care units (ICU). Yet, I was not satisfied, I needed something more, and I thought that teaching was the answer. I knew that classroom teaching in a public or private school setting was not for me, but realized that I enjoyed my job that entailed training others, and thought that I would

enjoy learning more about how to teach adults in the workplace environment. That is when I decided to continue my higher education at one of the community's predominantly African-American universities that I will call Historically Black College, or HBC for short. The earlier courses that I had taken at CC and TMU were accepted by HBC, leaving me only about 30 hours of study to complete my degree. Making the change from CC to HBC seemed to be a good fit. I found that I liked school—not just going to school, but the whole process. I liked learning, and then teaching what I'd learned to others. Also, I liked being in a classroom and, in particular, the social structure of the classroom.

The time it took me to complete my 30 hours went by very quickly, even though I was still working full time and caring for my family and home. This experience had rekindled my love of learning. As a result, I decided to continue on with my Master's degree the following year. That next school year, I started the process at a well-known university close to the city's downtown area, a university I will call Tier One University (T1U). In my first three classes I made an A, a B and a D, with the D coming from a professor who had a reputation for failing students and proudly telling students that they would fail. Discouraged, I gathered my belongings and re-enrolled the community's predominantly African-American university, HBC. Over the next eighteen months I took three to four classes per semester, and even attended classes in the summer. The director of the program was a nurse and the program was hospital

friendly. The classes were about medical issues and the information that I was picking up was transferrable to my job.

Completion of the Master's degree allowed me to get a raise and helped me to move to the Quality Management area. Thinking back, I do not think that I was cognizant of the rapid time frame in which I completed my Master's degree. I was, however, very aware that I felt supported and happy while in the program. Once that goal had been obtained, it was almost a given fact, or at least an assumed expectation of family, friends, and co-workers, that I would continue on to obtain my doctoral degree.

Reflective Responses – Unpacking my Higher Education Story

As I look back over the events that allowed me to complete my bachelor's and then master's degree I realize that being at the HBC was comfortable to me. I once again felt that I was with people that looked like me and shared the same cultural norms that I was used to. I felt accepted and valued by the people at HBC. The instructors gave examples that were familiar to me. When an instructor said that they had pig's feet for Christmas dinner I understood that that was a custom that most African-Americans followed. I did not eat pig's feet but it did not seem foreign to me. When a professor scolded me for not getting my assignment correct I knew that it meant that the professor cared whether or not I failed. I realize that at some point students have to take the

responsibility for their educations themselves, but I feel a sense of nurturing in HBC that, for me, did not exist at T1U.

Since I started college at a school that was not a historically Black college/university and I was not successful at that school, it was easy to feel that succeeding at a school that was not predominantly African-American was out of my reach. I had a theory that at HBC the professors need to see the majority of students that look like me succeed in order to keep the doors open. Since African-Americans make up only about 10% of the T1U student population, I figured that if every African-American student at T1U failed the university could conceivably still show a 90% graduation rate and have a pretty good rating. That being my theory, I thought that returning to HBC offered me a better chance of success. Intellectually that does not make sense, but when things continue to happen and I feel that I am trying, it is easy to replace reason with emotion.

At the same time, changing schools after receiving a couple of low grades says something about students and school environments. It also speaks to my own responses when I do not immediately succeed. Students need to feel comfortable in their university surroundings, but most importantly they need to feel supported and cared for by their professors. When I reflect on the T1U professor who gave me a D, he definitely did not seem to be supportive or caring. Other students had

warned me against taking his class, explaining that he almost seemed to relish the idea of seeing how many students he could fail each semester. I had ignored their warnings, thinking that I could stay out the “stay out of the line of fire” so to speak and just get on with my studies. I was wrong. But at the same time, this particular professor made no attempts to build relationships with students; relationships that might have made it easier for me, and other students like me, to approach him for some type of intervention. At HBC the professors built those relationships so it was much easier for me as a student to approach my professor for assistance.

As I mentioned earlier, my higher education stories also say something about me as a person. Carol Dweck (2006), a psychologist who conceptualized the notion of mindset, proposes that people have either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. When faced with situations in which they do not immediately succeed, people with a fixed mindset tend to shut down and not get beyond their failure. Faced with the same situation, people with a growth mindset view failure as a challenge and opportunity to learn. The fact that shutting down and retreating has been a recurring theme in my school experiences makes me wonder if I have a fixed mindset. That may be the case. However, the fact that I have repeatedly returned to continue my education and obtained my degrees speaks to my personal motivation, determination, and to my

perseverance. It seems to reflect qualities that were instilled in me by my family.

My Doctoral Studies Story

My doctoral studies story is where I currently find myself situated. Due to a program change at the university I was forced to change directions midway through the doctoral program. Shortly thereafter, my husband suffered a debilitating stroke that left me as the major family wage earner and primary care taker for the family. As a result, there were many times when I wanted to shut down, retreat, and quit. In these stories of my doctoral studies, I share those challenges and my journey.

My Doctoral Studies

Interested in obtaining my doctorate, I researched local programs and found that Tier-One University (T1U) offered a Health Education/Administration doctoral degree. I applied for, and was accepted into, the program. The first three years were uneventful. I met my advisor one time and she told me to go and find some classes and take them. I signed up for a research class and two health education classes. I passed those three classes and the lowest grade was a B. I took classes for the next two years in much the same manner. I looked at the degree plan saw what could be taken and took those classes. I

had little to no contact with my advisor unless she happened to be teaching one of my classes. I wrote her and asked for direction, but there was no answer from her. It was not until I took a residency class and the instructor forced me to fill out a degree plan that I had no choice but to seek out and speak with my advisor. Simultaneously, I had no idea what was to be placed on the class log that was required for residency class. With the help of classmates, however, I did fill out the log during this class...causing the sleeping giant to awaken. My advisor then informed me that I needed to hurry and finish the program. She said that changes were coming and that the program was about to close. Before the semester was over, I received a letter from the “director of graduate studies” saying that the program was closed and that I had about eight months to finish the program. Even my application said that I had until 2011 to finish the program. I was pressured to complete or leave. So I left.

During the aforementioned conversation, my advisor said that she did not know of my being in the residency class and that I needed to repeat the residency while writing my candidacy paper and starting the proposal process. She then put me on an advisor designed contract, because I was not at the place where she believed I should be at that point in the program. Of course, the residency class that I had already taken would not suffice, so I had to find another one. Remembering a professor that taught the qualitative research class a year earlier, I asked

if it was okay to take her residency class. My advisor agreed and during that semester I left the Allied Health program and joined the Curriculum and Instruction program. After leaving my doctoral studies for a short period, the prospect of continuing my studies with this professor helped to bring me back to complete my degree.

There was another problem, however, that had crept in. I had lost my zeal. I no longer loved or even liked being in school. The only reason that I stayed was that I had invested so much money and time in the program that I felt that I deserved the degree. I had no idea how hard it would be to work in a program after I began to hate school again. I could not put my hands on what I did not like, but I knew that I did not like school. I did not want to read; I did not want to be in class; I did not even like studying with the friends that I made during the process of going to class.

While this was going on, my husband had a massive stroke and became disabled. He lost all of his field of vision on the left side and he had to walk with a cane. My 26-year old son was also out of work. He was employed at Circuit City and it closed. While he looked for work, but found none, I had to remember to encourage him. He decided to go back to college, which was excellent. He then found a job and school became the thing that he used to want to do. My younger son was in middle school by this time and was starting to participate in the jazz band. I

spent most of my free time with him at rehearsal. He played several instruments, the drums, bass guitar, and key board. We traveled all over the country while he played for local and national politicians. He played in New York, Florida, California and he even for Black Tie and Boots affair (the Texas Democratic Inaugural Ball) in Washington, D. C. during the inauguration of President Obama. I was busy and I used every excuse possible to keep from finishing my doctoral degree. I did however keep my focus on my sons. My most pressing challenge was and is helping sons to become productive self-supporting members of society.

This is no easy feat when African-Americans are thought to be the bane of our society. According to news reports, African-American males have a worst unemployment rate than the rate of unemployment during the “Great Depression”. Along with the financial problems, black males are also treated worse than most other groups when involved in crime. For black men at the very bottom of the education distribution, the penal system has become a pervasive presence (Western, Kleykamp, and Rosenfeld, 2003). These and other things convinced me that I needed to work hard to set a good example for my sons and their endangered futures.

I needed something that would help me to understand how to help my sons. I also needed a class to take so that I could stay in the Curriculum and Instruction program. I saw the class called Critical

Pedagogy and decided that it might help me to understand first what pedagogy was and how it related to me as a potential teacher and mother. The class was an eye opener for me. I learned that there is a whole group of people that see things the way I do. A group of progressives that understand that some students are unfairly treated because they find themselves in the subordinate group be it race, economics, or social status. This group works hard to improve the condition of the subordinate group and I find myself ready to take up the charge and work to improve the condition of those in conditions that leave people feeling otherness or less than the dominant culture.

Over the summer before taking this class I read a book, *Why Don't Students like School* (Willingham, 2009). This book mentioned that humans don't respond well to being treated badly. It addressed the presumption that humans do not like to learn, but we like to know. It says that anything that is not learned in a given amount of time is dropped from our interest; of course the amount of time is different from person to person. It alluded to the situation that as children are treated badly they also tend to not like school or learning. It explained the ways in which information is processed and learned and why it is lost (Willingham, 2009).

This made sense to me because I can remember losing my love for school in the elementary grades. I also remember that through the years

my interest in school has been rekindled, extinguished, and rekindled again. The desire to better my personal and professional life always seemed to outweigh the negative aspects of school and sent me back for more. I learned over time that no matter how bad the situation seemed continued steady progress allowed me to succeed.

When it came time to write my dissertation I met with my Curriculum and Instruction advisor about possible topics. After meeting with her, I decided to conduct a self-study on my journey through education. My goal was to write a paper that would help other African-American's pursue their dream of an education. In particular, I hoped that it would serve as an example for my sons to follow their dreams. Taking this journey has been at times difficult. I have awakened things in my memory that I thought was long forgotten. I relived the pain of some situations and remembered the joy of others. I saw through critical eyes that at times there were things that I could have done differently and I saw that at times I had no control over the actions of others. I remember being treated kindly and I remember being treated badly, but I also learned that I have a resolve that allowed me complete my missions in school and in life. Knowing this reminds me that I can help my sons and others fulfill their dreams. I can help pull others back to the situation that renders success. When I retreated often there was a hand that helped me return to my goal and complete it. I now know that I can be that hand for others. I also know that I got that determination and

help often from my family. My strong grandmothers, my mother, my father, my husband and my children have motivated me and I have used their energy to succeed this far.

Reflective Responses – Unpacking my Doctoral Studies Story

In the Critical Pedagogy class, we were given a primer and an anthology to read. The primer explained what Critical Pedagogy is and the anthology presented examples of how it is practiced. One of the readings was by an author named bell hooks. bell hooks, is an African-American woman who grew up in similar circumstances to me. She was born in the country to a working class family and eventually moved to a big city. We differ in that bell was able to become very successful and to help others through the process. The exciting thing about reading bell's piece was that she articulated very well what I was feeling. She talked about the feeling of being treated badly and about the way instructors treat students and may not even realize that the behavior is racist. She says many times that this is a "white male supremacist racist society." She explains that the way things are set up favors the white male and that even school is designed to support this group (Hooks, 2003). Reading her work allowed me to see where my feelings of inadequacy come from; and by doing that I can see how to move past those feeling. It has been said about hooks that:

“Her concern with the interlacing dynamics of 'race', gender, culture and class and her overall orientation to the whole person and to their well-being when connected with her ability to engage with educational practice in a direct way set her apart from the vast bulk of her contemporaries. Hers is a unique voice - and a hopeful one (Burke, 2004 p. 1).

bell hooks seems to be concerned about the well-being of students to the point that she feels that there must be dialogue between students and teachers in order for the student to feel accepted and a part of the educational process and concept that she no doubt developed while reading one of her mentors, Paulo Freire. That is the type of teacher that makes me feel comfortable in school.

Freire, the Brazilian educationalist, has left a significant mark on thinking about progressive practice. His *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2010) is currently one of the most quoted educational texts, especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Smith, 2002). He was known for his discussion on informal education, as he emphasized dialogue and concern for the oppressed. He insisted that dialogue involve respect.

bell hook's pedagogy is one that is responsive to the specific situation of each particular group of students and she sees education as taking place not only in the classroom but also wherever people are. I too believe that education should be specific to the group addressed. Although she criticizes the educational world and the educationalist and what Freire refers to as the “banking concept of education”, she is aware

that much of the ideology of modern society arises from the mass media. She is particularly scathing about the power and the effect of television on the American public. 'No one, no matter how intelligent and skillful at critical thinking, is protected against the subliminal suggestions that imprint themselves on our unconscious brain if we are watching hours and hours of television' (Burke, 2004 p. 2). (Shor, 1994) defines critical pedagogy as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse." (129)

Shor also spoke of critical pedagogy being student centered when he talked about his Utopian classroom (Shor, 1997) This might be of help to the African-American student because I tend to work better in close groups and in conversation rather than in lecture. Critical teaching begins with student generated themes and then invites unfamiliar reflection (Shor, 1996).

It allows one's story to unfold. Another critical thinker was John Dewey. I learned about Dewey from my new advisor. She aroused my interest when she told me that he was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). I was hooked; I wanted to know more about his philosophy of education.

Dewey asserted that complete democracy was to be obtained not just by extending voting rights but also by ensuring that there exists a fully-formed public opinion, accomplished by effective communication among citizens, experts, and politicians, with the latter being accountable for the policies they adopt (Dewey, 1905). Dewey also said, "What nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life. This education consists primarily in transmission through communication. Communication is a "process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession (Dewey, 1938, p. 13)."

While taking the Critical Pedagogy class I learned that Critical Pedagogy is a process by which the status quo is questioned and examined. In questioning the status quo I was able to find my voice and to read about others who had taken the same journey. I learned that I am capable of success and able to handle all that comes with success. Many others have taken the journey before me and more will come, not the least of who will be my sons. bell hooks (1994) says:

The academy is not paradise, but learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p.13).

I have noticed that boys especially black boys do not seem to want to be in school. Along the way, my quest was to find out why and to that

end, I interviewed member of my son's middle school band to find out how they feel about school and their potential to be successful as adults. I then interviewed a group of my co-workers and then one of the interviewees separately to see what they think about the school system and its potential for the success of our children in general. I chose this cohort because most of them are mothers of school aged children, or have been or, still are in the school system. Granted the ones that are still in are either teachers or graduate students, they still have some interest in our children and the school system. An overwhelming theme that was present when talked to this particular group is that they did not feel that today's teachers are prepared for today's students. They mentioned that school should be more like it was in the past. They don't feel that many of today's teachers are true nurtures. Several mentioned that many teachers in their children's schools are second career teachers, teachers that worked in professions other than teaching and then became teachers. They spoke several times of the need for more teacher agency in the classroom as opposed to test mandated teaching. They spoke of needing a better dialogue between teachers and parents and teachers and students. They also spoke of the need for parent involvement in the day to day process of school. These themes are not new. They have been repeated by many people including teachers, but the good news is that I see an emergence of a common thread that may allow students and parents and teachers to use the milieu of school to

save our students and to aid all of them in becoming success supportive members of this society that we call ours.

Completing my degree brings closure to my personal educational aspirations. I feel that I have beaten my naysayers and shown them that it can be done. I hope that it gives hope to others who want to complete studies and who want to help their/our children succeed. I am a descendent of slaves, and kings and queens and blue collar workers, and soldiers, and nurses, and teachers, and business owners. We have endured poverty, racism, hatred and humiliation. There is a line in a song that made my home church in North Carolina famous: "Yesterday is gone and tomorrow may never be found; Lord teach me to take each step that I take one day at a time." I may never become a classroom teacher but I would like to spend time helping our youth understand that all is truly possible if we set our minds and hearts to it.

CHAPTER V

Final Reflections

In order to complete this project I took a look at my life as a student in the United States and my life away from the school. By way of conclusion I made a mind map of myself.

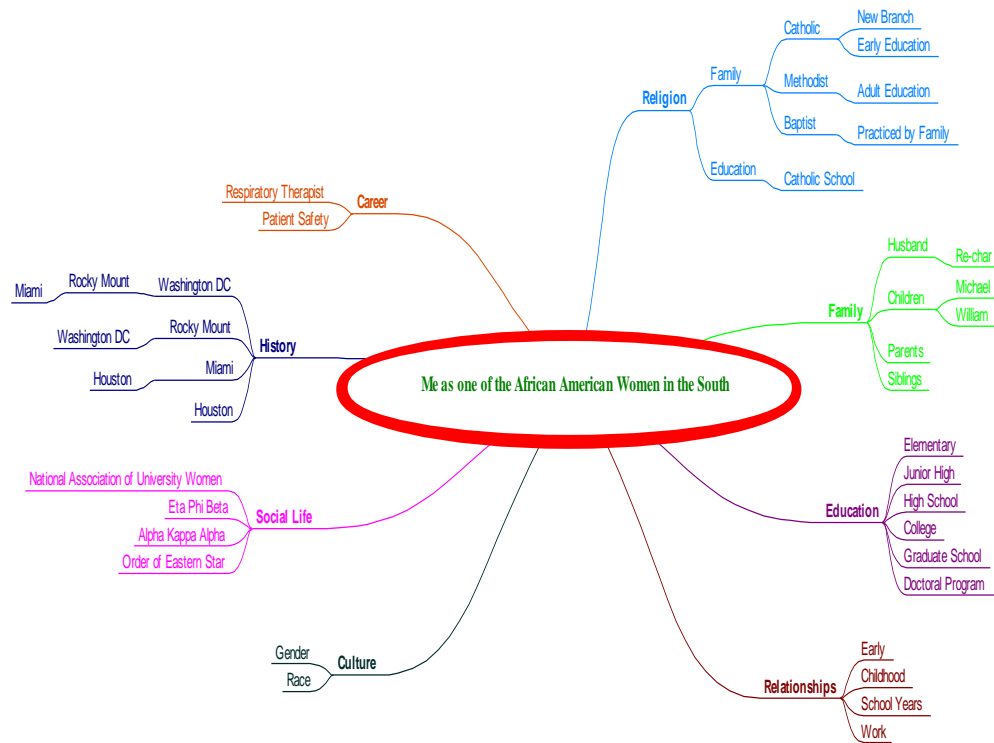


Figure 5 – Mind Map for examining of my life

I used this mind map to guide the direction my dissertation would take. I examined my responsibilities and my past so that I could see what stood out as the important moments and actions of my life. I then

considered the things that were going on during my academic life time to see how they played a role in my educational process.

During my lifetime I have experienced several changes that are reflective of African-American life. These things include the Civil Rights movement, a migration from the southern states to the northern states in search of the American Dream, and the rise and fall of the current education system. I have been directly involved and now my children and granddaughter are as well. It is my desire to improve the conditions of my family by encouraging my sons to complete college in order to be successful citizens of the United States.

My experiences include time spent in the southern United States as well as time in the northern states and the southwestern states. I attended predominately Black schools, mixed schools, and predominately Mexican American and Cuban schools. I was bussed into a white area in the south. I rode the city bus in low income neighborhoods in Washington DC and I drove to school in the southwest. I was once told that I was the student in class that was most unpredictable. My instructor said that I either received the worst grade in class or the best and he never knew which to expect on any given day/subject.

I used these personal stories of experience over time to show African-American children that success is a real possibility. There is no situation that renders one totally without options. Even in the direst

cases one can accomplish goals; however, one may need to take different pathways reach it.

In this dissertation research study, I gave examples of how I was presented with adversity and how I overcame it. I also provided instances where I gave up and later found that a change in circumstances may have allowed me to accomplish my goal.

The Civil Rights Movement

The American Civil Rights movement really started when the first slave ship took African citizens from their homes against their wills and made them servants in fields and in the homes of the dominant culture. We as a people were at that moment displaced and we in many ways remain displaced today. When most speak of the civil rights movement, they mention things like; the Dred Scott decision rendering all people of African descent non-citizens, or the 1863 decision by President Lincoln to free the slaves, or the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments freeing slaves, guaranteeing due process and ensuring the right to vote for all citizens, or the Brown vs. the Board of Education decisions reversing the Plessy decision making separate but equal accommodations inherently unequal, or perhaps the North Carolina sit-ins or maybe the bus boycotts. Some feel that we are still in the middle of the civil rights movement when Black students are sent to inferior schools and receive inferior education (Paige, 2011), or when we have citizens that are put to death even though

there is no conclusive proof of their guilt. The reality is that perhaps we are still in the movement. However, being in the movement did not stop our ancestors from progressing and hoping and it can't stop us now. We have to find ways to push pass the feelings of inadequacy and completing our goals of education and success.

Northern migration

My parents were a part of the movement north, searching for a better life. They were also surprised to find that racism was alive and well in the north as well. A part of the problem with the migration is that: "The presence of the migrants in such large numbers crushed and stagnated the progress of Negro life (Wilkerson, 2010/Mossell, 1921 p.216)." My father turned down a scholarship that may have helped to make his life a little easier. He did not have the right counseling but he made a choice that allowed him to remain hopeful. It also allowed him to see that education was the better way out. I intend to be that better counseling for my sons and any other youth that take a moment to listen.

There was some success however during the migration; Wilkerson (2010) asserts that a growing amount of research reveals that those that migrated were better educated than those that they left in the south and that some of them went on to lead the cities that they migrated to. I must say that my parents were also considered successful. My mother is a registered nurse with a master's degree, my father was a salesman for

a large book distributor who left my brother and sister and me in the position to purchase homes and have a good start in life and my grandmother a registered nurse working at George Washington University hospital in neonatal unit.

The Rise and Fall of the Education System

African-Americans were at one time denied the right to be educated. They were then separated from the dominant culture by separate but equal laws and then they participated in bussing in an effort to try and equalize the education process. We as a society have reverted back to the separate school by zoning. The school system is losing ground with our children. The Department of Education (2008-09) statistics shows that there is a persistent gap in the rates of drop out and graduation along the line of race. I chose to look at the states in which I was educated, but a look at the data from the Department of education will show that this is a chronic and perennial problem throughout the United States.

The problem with the separation of education by race, other than the fact that it is illegal is that there are disparities in earning power and therefore survival. Education must exist as an equal process that allows all citizens a chance to succeed and to allow education to help American citizens remain competitive with the rest of the world.

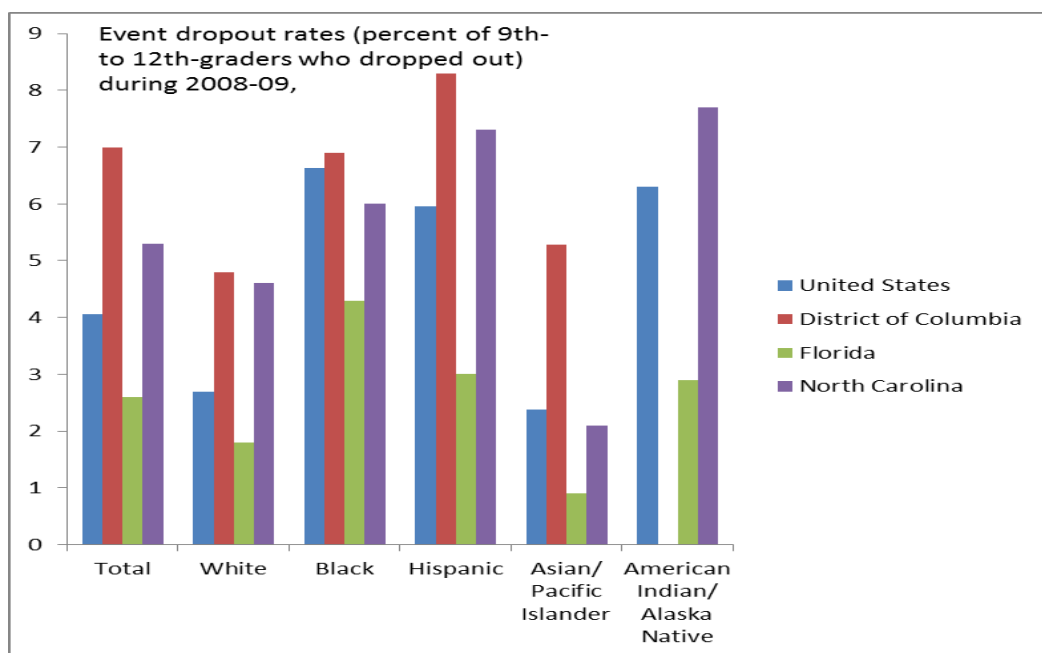


Figure -6 Public high school dropouts, by race/ethnicity and state or jurisdiction: 2008-09

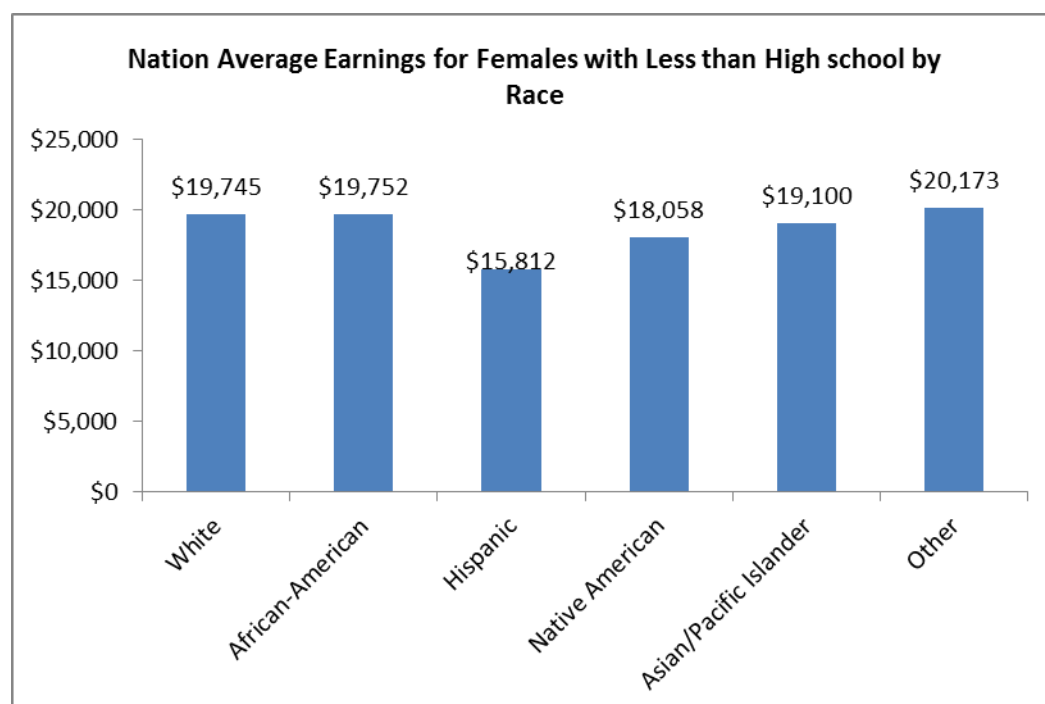


Figure – 7 States Average Wages Earned Attainment for 25-64 Year-Olds with Positive Wages Working 35+ Hours per Week. by Race, Gender, and Education from the Department of Labor Statistics

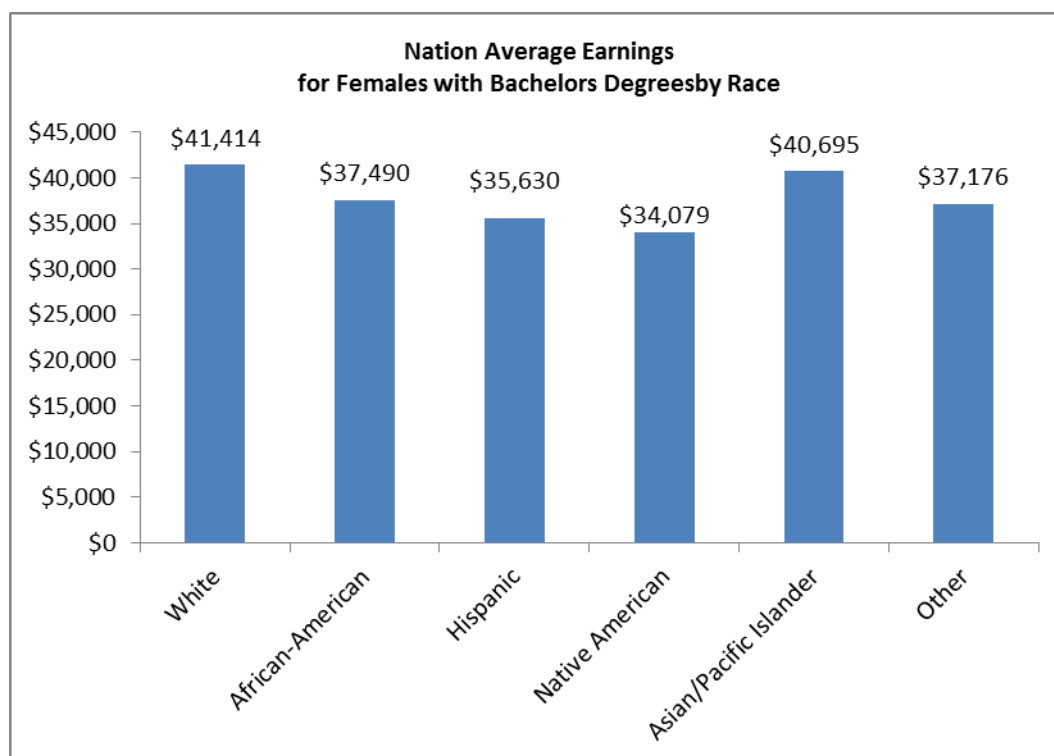


Figure 8-States Average Wages Earned by Race, Gender, and Education Attainment for 25-64 Year-Olds with Positive Wages Working 35+ Hours per Week. Department of Labor Statistics

This is one story of my life. I have grown and learned from the experience. I hope that I will help inspire and encourage someone else to complete their goal by seeing that I have done so.

Limitations

This study is limited by the fact that I am telling my story. An investigation of others in a cohort with me may have rendered a different picture of the life of an African-American woman growing up United States during the same time period. It is also limited by my not focusing

on poverty associated with African-Americans. I chose not to focus on poverty in an effort to show that African-Americans are more than the poor among us. We exist at all socio-economic levels (as my family story and legacy make clear) and it is an injustice to only associate us with abject poverty and widespread ignorance.

Suggestions for the Further Study

The study of how poverty affects the life of the African-American, however, is a valid study and needs attentions. A further study of what I do with my education may help to enlighten students on this path. A look at how student communities help African-American student matriculate may improve the graduation rate of these students.

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