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By  
Andrea Marie Barela

August 2019

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE: HOW AGENCY AND PRAXIS CAN CULTIVATE  
STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

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

Andrea Marie Barela, M.Ed.

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“A tree has roots in the soil yet reaches to the sky. It tells us that in order to aspire we need to be grounded and that no matter how high we go it is from our roots that we draw sustenance. It is a reminder to all of us who have had success that we cannot forget where we came from. It signifies that no matter how powerful we become in government or how many awards we receive, our power and strength and our ability to reach our goals depend on the people, those whose work remain unseen, who are the soil out of which we grow, the shoulders on which we stand.”

~ Wangari Maathai ~

I am forever in debt to the amazing people on whose shoulders I stand upon, on whose sustenance has sustained me in growing through and finally completing this doctoral process.

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## Abstract

Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2009) wrote that if failure to provide quality education continues, it will not be because we lack the know-how to effectively educate all children, it is because we lack the resolve to do it. As a steadfast leader of teaching and collaborating with children, Duncan-Andrade mentors hope in students and teachers alike. This resolve, to effectively educate all children, acknowledges how difficult ‘know-how’ is actually then translated into a hopeful, realistic process. New information from political, economic, geographic, cultural, and social influences constantly disrupts how elementary students are taught and learn. This constant tension between what a quality education offers a child versus what a child offers their education plagues the social and interactive process that can measure quality educative growth. A strategic plan of action that emphasizes positive self-identity, hope, and a sense of purpose is fundamental to academic achievement (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

This study closely examines the intentional practices of this teacher researcher and the predominant lived experiences of her past students’ parents to realize a quality education for their children. It explores how this teacher researcher interacts and responds to her time and place within her personal and professional identities, as well as the influence of time and place on students based on long-term observations and interpretations their parents watched them go through. Public school education, especially for low-socioeconomic elementary children, has pedagogically been approached as a banking system of knowledge (Freire, 1970). It fails to develop the cultural capital of low-socioeconomic elementary children. This study investigated the incipient insights and perspectives of this teacher researcher and the longitudinal effects of an after-school program using the empowering AGENTS framework. AGENTS – Awareness of issues, **G**athering knowledge, **E**mpowering others, **N**avigating and **N**egotiating pathways for

change, Taking action, and Speaking out (Rock & Stepanian, 2010) – was created and developed by this teacher researcher so that elementary students had a safe place to explore their cultural capital. AGENTS offered to foster interest and competence in community involvement and the formalities of social engagement in pre-adolescent elementary students. Critical pedagogical perspectives are central to nurturing these elementary students’ agency, which is informed by social justice praxis (Shor, 1992). This study seeks to answer the questions: What are parents’ perspectives on the impact of AGENTS for elementary students? How can a teacher(s) support and develop a sense of ownership within a students’ evolving awareness of self? How do these interpretations inform future views and practices in upper grade level environments?

The main methods of research were narrative inquiry and critical ethnography in a qualitative case study, allowing this teacher researcher to investigate the AGENTS framework and four parent participants’ stories related to their observations of their children within their educational career. This teacher researcher chronicled her experiences in a written journal. Designed as a reflection of the researcher’s understanding of the experiences and issues presented throughout the year-long work with students, observations of students’ behavior and comprehension of their community interaction choices were recorded. Parent participants were recruited from the Humble/Atascocita area in Texas, with a recruitment email sent to this teacher researcher’s former students’ parents asking them to volunteer for the study. Participants were self-identified and based on self-determination of the inclusion criteria that they spoke English or English as a second language, were at least 30 years of age, and gave parental permission to their child to participate in this teacher researcher's after school organization one to nine years ago. In all, five parents responded with an interest to be a potential participant, but only four parents were able to meet face-to-face for interviews. Two parent participants identified as white, one

identified as Hispanic, and one identified as Asian. Data collection consisted of digitally recorded individual parental participant interviews. This teacher researcher conducted two interview sessions with each parent participant. Sessions were structured into one 30-minute individual interview and one 90-minute whole group interview, four weeks apart. This teacher researcher reviewed the previous interview session to ensure questions were still pertinent for the next session. The second session was also an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the stories and experiences shared and add any other information that they weren't aware of during the first interview. Interviews were conducted with parent participants, both individually and in a group, to gain insight into their perceptions (i.e. feelings, values, attitudes, motivations) of their child, from elementary school to their current grade level, and the benefits, issues, and impact of participating in AGENTS at a pre-adolescent age. Parent participants also reflected on their student's subsequent educational opportunities, experiences, decisions, and choices on their child's development within their educational career using designated prompts. After a thorough transcription, all data was numbered, color-coded, and interpreted to reveal major themes. Broadening was used to determine that the context of the study was an authentic part to developing pre-adolescent students' values. Tracing and restoring was used to highlight and make connections among particular stories, values, and experiences over time.

AGENTS was an important connection to the broader educational landscape of acknowledging pre-adolescent students' capabilities and talents. Major themes to emerge from the data were the character development of pre-adolescents, exercising humanity towards others, and bolstering a multi-dimensional parenting presence. The transition from elementary school to middle school had a major impact on pre-adolescent self-perception and capabilities. A desire to maintain and forge strong bonds with a leadership figure, such as a teacher, was highly valued.

Information gained through this research informs individual practice, teacher/student action programs, and other elementary empowerment programs on how to better foster agency and ownership within school environments.

AGENTS had something more to offer pre-adolescents in their educational career than typical after-school elementary clubs. It provided a unique perspective where their ideas were championed and their ability to make a change based on their choices alone. Within a world of ever-changing challenges, the auspicious ideas and actions of pre-adolescent students could be a game changer for the future of elementary education.

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## Chapter One – Introduction

There are two kinds of intelligence: One acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences as well as from the new sciences.

There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved inside you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the center of the chest. This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid, and it doesn't move from outside to inside through the conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.

-Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (2004, p. 178)

Intelligence, from an early age, can define the outcome of a child's educational career. If a child is able to acquire facts and concepts in school, as Rūmī (2004) describes, they will do well in their educational career. They will collect information for over twelve years. But what if a child is not as adept at acquiring facts and concepts? What if their fountainhead, as Rūmī (2004) identifies it, leads them in and out of collecting information towards interpreting and utilizing information? What if a child's intelligence cannot be contained within a school setting or puts a child's educational career in jeopardy?

Theories and pedagogies about educating elementary students were broken down to more specific knowledge and information over the last century (Boers, 2007). As an initial 'information foundation' for elementary children became socially accepted and expected, new information from political, economic, geographic, cultural, and social influences constantly informs how elementary students are taught, learn, and what one consider intelligence. This constant tension between what education offers a child versus what a child offers their education plagues every generation of educators (Neito, 2003). Dewey (1997) understood this tension as a

vital juncture to learning “the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth” (p. 207). Educating elementary students to acquire information has been so fine-tuned that the actual fountainhead within a student is lost until they move on to middle or high school. For elementary education to be a social and interactive process that can measure educative growth, it must focus on a student empowering education that “approaches individual growth as an active, cooperative, and social process, because the self and society are created together” (Shor, 1992, p. 15).

Consequently, when elementary education provides both information and a safe space to nurture their fountainhead of “personal empowerment, the cultivation of intellect, and the larger pursuit of social justice” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 25), teachers and students alike can create society together. This teacher researcher believes that a person’s personal growth in developing this fountainhead of personal empowerment, intellect, and social justice is the most important responsibility of a teacher. I believe that continually fostering these skills and habits within my elementary students and myself, together, benefits our community and our quality of life in general.

The purpose of this qualitative case study research is a critical exploration of the ways in which one teacher’s after-school meetings, over a nine year period, with elementary students, informs the student’s current actions and choices. Critical pedagogy, social justice, and participatory action research intertwine reflexively between teacher and students to cultivate the processes and practices needed to yield knowledge, inquiry, skills, and agency. Providing an environment for elementary students to exercise empowering personal actions through these learning theories is integral to the praxis of moving a student’s fountainhead outward (Shor, 1992).

This research explores the lived experiences and interactions of this teacher researcher with pre-adolescent students and the effects of an after school empowering framework on those former students. As such, I am qualitatively piecing together a multitude of “complex interpretive practices” as a bricoleur, or quilt maker (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 4). In stitching, editing, and putting slices of different voices and perspectives together, I am constructing a give-and-take of the psychological and emotional unity that our interpretive experiences have formed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Moreover, qualitative research consists of studying things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of the “routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 4). Using this interactive process of storytelling one’s personal narrative and those of the people it was studied with, this research seeks to explore the dialectical and hermeneutic relationships between the experiences of this teacher researcher’s former students once they had been through an after school empowering initiative (Simons, 2009). For this reason, I am beginning my research with these basic questions: What are parents’ perspectives on how AGENTS impacted their students as they have grown up? How can a teacher support and develop a sense of ownership within a students’ evolving awareness of self? How do these interpretations inform future views and practices in upper level environments?

### *My Journey*

A question and an idea. It is that simple. I was constantly asking myself why when I first started teaching. Why isn't there more student work posted around the school? Why don't students have more opportunities to be a part of their school? Why doesn't it feel like anyone has

pride in the school they go to? Why doesn't anyone know about our school within the community? Why does this school feel so different from the one I grew up in?

These different questions swirled around in my head for the first four years of my teaching career. I just could not shake the feeling that there had to be more ownership for these students within the school I taught at than what was being provided at that time. These questions plagued the back of my mind until they culminated in the most important question, I have ever challenged myself to answer: how can I help improve my school community and empower students to feel a similar sense of purpose and responsibility?

Thus, with my ultimate question before me, I was ready to figure out how I could answer it. I poured over ideas of how to best tackle this question. Then, with motivation from service learning and social action, I finally settled on an idea I thought could have the most lasting and significant impact for these students and myself.

Before I can further explain the idea, I decided upon, some background must be shed on my own personal experiences that led me to ask such a question and formulate such an idea. In reflecting on my lived experiences, the notion of time and place in the stories of my teacher autobiography command great attention for how I have approached my own purpose and responsibility in teaching (Conle, 1999; Nieto, 2003; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Grumet, 1988).

Nieto (2003) believes that a teacher's autobiography is one of the greatest tools one has to work with to become a great teacher and sustain themselves as such. Upon my own reflection of how my autobiography led me to be the kind of teacher I am today, I realized that there have been several significant experiences that have shaped the kind of thinker, learner, activist, and teacher I want to be. It was not until college that I began to understand how fortunate, and yet

how far behind, I had been growing up in the schools I attended. It was also in college that I realized how other's beliefs and values could be so detrimental and hypocritical towards other people. However, it was my first job as an educator that helped me resolve my purpose for why I wanted to teach and define how I could sustain myself as a teacher.

### *The Wonder Years*

The schools I grew up in consisted of low, middle, and high socio-economic family circumstances. My elementary, middle, and high school were all Title I schools, which means the majority of students that I attended school with were predominantly from low socio-economic backgrounds (San Felipe, 2011). Luckily, although these were Title I schools, they were situated near the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). With such close proximity to an institute of higher learning, I ultimately also attended schools with many children whose parents worked at UTEP as professors, researchers, etc.

Consequently, since I tested into the gifted and talented program at the elementary level, the majority of my classmates ended up being from more affluent families, many of whose parents had some sort of connection to UTEP. From fourth grade on, I began to notice that where I misunderstood or misinterpreted directions or concepts, others seemed to grasp concepts with ease. It felt as if I was always playing catch-up to them, always trying to discover what they seemed to already know, always wondering why I could never seem to learn as fast. Although I often got frustrated, my classmates were my friends. They never hesitated to help me understand what we were learning. They were always encouraging, always prepared to review what we were learning with me, always willing to look over my work and give me feedback. They always made me feel like I had the potential to do more. I thought I just had to work harder to be as knowledgeable as they were. I never considered that having friends whose

parents had a wide variety and scope of jobs (such as working at a university), or that their experiences and travels to other places around the country and the world, would be crucial to my education or my upbringing. Yet, when I left my small community in El Paso to attend one of the best schools of education (“Best Education Schools,” n.d.) in the country at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, I realized how fortunate I had been to learn about the world through the art, food, and daily cultural habits these families brought back with them from their travels to richly inform and broaden my childhood.

### *Growing Pains*

At Vanderbilt, I was once again attending an economically diverse school, but now the cultural and sociological characteristics at play were staggeringly apparent from student to student as well. Moving to a new state, a new school, a new home, and immersed in many new people, I became much more aware of how small my scope of the world was – and just how unknowledgeable I really had been thus far. My new classmates seemed to have so many more different ways of thinking, responding, and acting that I felt unprepared and left behind from every vantage point in my education. I didn’t understand why the transition to college could be so easy for some and such a struggle for others.

When it came to going to college, it didn’t matter how much money it cost, my parents found a way to support me, as long as I worked hard and earned my way there. What I didn’t realize was the effect the student body and being so far away from home would have on me. I felt more comfortable around the full-time cafeteria workers at my part-time job than I did around my classmates. I didn’t have designer-label clothes, I couldn’t go out to eat off-campus every day, I didn’t take road trips on the weekends and alternate whose car was taken. I was just grateful to be getting an education at Vanderbilt. These certain types of “soft skills” McGrath

(2013) outlined that disadvantaged students have to learn once they get to an elite college were all too familiar, and learning to navigate that new environment and those new mentalities were always challenging. I had finally reached my ultimate purpose and goals for higher education, whereas attending Vanderbilt seemed like a mere steppingstone for others.

That concept on its own was difficult to deal with, but the array of perspectives on race and economics were just as perplexing for me to fathom as I transitioned to college as well. I felt as if I was merely an anomaly, not a classmate, and that because I ‘looked’ so different I had nothing of value to provide or that there was nothing to gain by knowing me. Likewise, some of my education courses were some of the most disappointing reality checks. Hearing other students remark that they just “didn’t understand how others could be poor” when the majority of students they would one day teach could most likely be less financially stable than themselves was unnerving. I was baffled that a person who had a desire to teach might have students that they could not have the empathy or courtesy to comprehend falling on hard times or even existing. How can a person be a teacher if they are not willing to identify with the students they hope to teach? Why would they want to do that to children?

Furthermore, the way in which the issues of economics and education were presented in a math and science course left me suppressing feelings of aggravation and distress. In order for my math/science teaching practicum course to begin at one of the most economically disadvantaged elementary schools in Nashville, my professors prepared a whole ‘crash course’ on the student population other pre-service student teachers and I would come in contact with. They were the first population of practicum elementary students I felt most comfortable around, that I could relate to and really challenge me to figure out the best way to meet their needs. These students reminded me of some of the kids I grew up with, and to some degree they

reminded me of myself. Yet they were presented as a remote and foreign student population, raising feelings of where they were from and what their ethnicity was deemed more important than what their names were or what ideas they had.

Although presented with good intentions, this new approach to practicum experience angered me because it felt like these children were being targeted even more for who they were and where they came from. As if they didn't have enough obstacles to overcome, my professors made me feel that the children we were to work with should be handled with caution and concern. I didn't understand. Why did there need to be this 'population introduction' for this school and neighborhood, but not any of the other schools and neighborhoods we worked in? Why were they singled out and ostracized from all our other practicum sites? I found myself constantly asking myself why. When I shared these thoughts in our end-of-course reflections, my professors appreciated the feedback and urged me to share these concerns sooner rather than later from then on.

Having already witnessed the background experience and knowledge many other students already came to Vanderbilt with, I was afraid this individual population study would feed into the idea that as pre-service teachers we could help 'rescue' students that we felt were less fortunate than us. In isolating this population study to this one practicum, an unintentional deficit perspective was planted before we had even visited the school or met the children (Gorski, 2010). Coming from such a status of privilege to be earning a college degree from a private university, I realized what made me most upset was that there was no course on the economics and neighborhood characteristics of the diversity of children that would one day become our students, from the most disenfranchised to the most privileged. By inundating one class with so much emphasis on one school and population, I felt more harm than good was

done. It inadvertently pushed the mentality that there was something different (or wrong) with those children and that we, as teachers, could ‘fix this problem.’ The lack of emphasis on how economics and neighborhood characteristics play crucial roles in every child’s life – the underlying characteristics that help shape and mold them for adulthood – left a larger burden on me of trying to figure out how to help and support any student I had in the future, and why it would be so important to do so (Lareau, 2011; Gorski, 2011).

### *The Facts of Life*

Once I graduated from college, my relocation to Houston, Texas was yet another period of adjustment for me. I found a job teaching first grade in the Humble Independent School District. The principal of North Belt Elementary (NBE) clearly stated that working at this school would be extremely challenging but would also be extremely rewarding. She wanted to make sure I was prepared for what I would face in my first year of teaching, especially at a school like NBE. I figured how different could this school be from the ones I grew up in when there seemed to be so many similarities: the racial diversity, socioeconomics, history of the school, and its Title I status all seemed to be pretty familiar. But with time, the strained reactions other school district elementary teachers gave me when I told them I was from NBE, or the confused expression of never having heard of NBE, or comments that “I used to work there a long time ago,” started making me suspicious. Indeed, the longer I worked at NBE, the more I felt like NBE students were receiving the complete opposite of what I had experienced growing up in my own Title I school. There was no community. There was no pride. There was no sense of purpose or responsibility for NBE to be the anchor of the surrounding neighborhoods from which to prosper from. As a teacher there, even I was starting to feel discouraged and unwelcome at my own school.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the first questions I had about the school I taught at was why did it feel so different from the elementary school I grew up in? On the surface, both the school I attended and the one I taught at were very similar. They are both over forty years old. They both have predominantly Hispanic and low-socioeconomic student populations. But if one looks more closely at each school, the established history of various programs and community involvement is not evident at the school I taught at. Additionally, the academic achievement and school district support in both schools are completely opposite of each other. So, having such fond memories of all the various activities I got to do when I was in elementary school, I found it odd and uninviting that the elementary school I was now working at did not have a similar history of opportunity for their students.

Additionally, there were some unique circumstances about my elementary school that provided me with the opportunity to be exposed to a wider spectrum of possibilities than when I was younger. Yet, it was not until I began teaching that I realized just how unique this personal practical knowledge was to developing me as a person, and how that could lead me to ask such questions as a teacher.

I found that as I reflected upon my own time and place in elementary school that I could no longer ignore the current state of my students' elementary school (Conle, 1999). I was unable to find a solid connecting metaphor from my own elementary school history within this new school I worked at, which created a divide between what I knew from my personal practical knowledge as a student and what I wanted to provide as a teacher for my own students' personal practical knowledge (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). I found that my time and place from when I grew up in school to now shaping how others were growing up in school was deeply fractured. Hence, I made my personal history a "legitimate ground from which to proceed" in my inquiry

for school connection, and thus embarked on my own journey of discovering how “theory and life are connected” (Conle, 1999, p.12). If my memories of elementary school are so deeply cherished, how does that then translate to presenting a time and place for similar memories to organically occur for my present students?

### *Life Goes On*

At the start of my second year of teaching, I was elected to the Site-Based Decision Making (SBDM) committee at North Belt Elementary (NBE). The SBDM committee assists with planning the mission, goals, and policies for NBE. I thought the SBDM committee was my opportunity to expand my range and reach as a teacher at NBE. Unfortunately, it was from those SBDM meetings that I realized that if I was going to do more for NBE and its students I would (1) have to do it on my own and (2) find a way to get others involved so that those on the SBDM committee could not ignore the impact student oriented initiatives could have on the goals and mission of NBE.

The more I began looking critically at what I could and can do as a teacher and what NBE could and can do as a school for its students, the more frustrated I became. Instead of working towards aligning the goals and mission of NBE with its student population, it seemed to grow further and further away from them with each year I taught there.

There was no incentive to do well, succeed, or achieve for these students outside of being verbally acknowledged for their hard work and effort. There were no positive reasons for students to have a personal investment in the education they could get or deserve at NBE. There was nothing being done to encourage them to be proud of being a part of NBE, want to come to NBE, or have goals that were broader than what NBE and the SBDM committee would outline for them in their mission. That is why a school of over 700 students could barely entice two

parents to be active members of the parent/teacher organization and the state mandated test scores vary so erratically from year to year (TEA, 2014).

So what else could I do? I realized that if I could get the students to be the ones that were proposing the initiatives for their school, and they were the ones that took the time to bring these proposals to the attention of the kinds of people that could help them, then it would be a lot more difficult for the SBDM committee or anyone else at NBE to ignore them.

I thought that if I could not expand my range and reach as a teacher with my own ideas at NBE, then perhaps my alternative could be to guide NBE students to realize that their own ideas could transform their school instead. In turn, I hoped this would finally give NBE students the broader tangible goals and challenges that they could use for lifelong learning and achievement that seemed to be lacking from North Belt's mission.

With this idea in mind, I tried to think of how I could provide students with an opportunity to gain more ownership of their school, develop leadership, flexible critical thinking, and communication skills, and get others at NBE to notice what students are capable of when given an opportunity to flourish. I also wanted to give students an opportunity to expand what they feel they are capable of while preparing them to become familiar with various roles which they may take on throughout their middle and high school careers. I eventually decided to create an organization of AGENTS (Always Getting Everyone Nicely Together Significantly) to find out what they thought they could do to make their school better and how they could do it for the betterment of the school and community, and not just their personal gain.

Conle (1999) proposes that research is influenced by the individual and communal living of the researcher, as does Green (1994) with theoretical knowledge and women's experiences. Both as a woman and a researcher, my experiences growing up in uniquely diverse educational

settings, coupled with the circumstances of where I began my teaching career, led me to an overwhelming desire to learn why the opportunities and experiences for students are so stratified and how I can help develop strategies for overcoming this stratification to empower students to initiate their own justice. Simply put, I am a product of my place and time. My research is driven by how I am attempting to connect my past place and time to my current place and time.

In attempting to provide a space for students to actively engage in acting out their ideas and sharing their experiences with others, I hope to shift their life stories to include positive celebrations of Socratic and audacious hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Conle, 1999).

By studying other historical leaders and finding the common ground these students share with them, I hope to “organize and reorganize” how they shape their perspective of themselves in order to “make sense of (their lives) that (they) have not been aware of before” (Conle, 1999, p.15).

### *A Different World*

The “personal practical knowledge” I continue to gain from my time and place in teacher learning has significantly impacted the notions of leadership and empowerment that influence my thinking (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985). What does leadership/empowerment look like? How does one develop leadership/empowerment qualities? Are there any particular set of patterns for what successful leadership/empowerment looks like? How do they lead/empower others to do the same? Conle (1999) is quick to remind me, my “perception of present events is always tinged by past baggage and by intentions about the future” (p.29). Therefore, I now realize that the ideas of leadership and empowerment have intrigued me since I was little.

Since elementary school, I have consistently been preoccupied with the subtle differences in the knowledge and experiences of others, and of how particular students are treated. Even

though I tested into my school district's gifted and talented (GT) program, I still struggled to keep up with the pace of the program while it seemed many of my friends worked through it with ease. Likewise, because of the 'status' of this GT program, it seemed like certain privileges were afforded this group of students that others were not granted, such as the teachers we had access to and the special projects only we got to experience. These issues continued to stratify through middle and high school. All the varied differences in the relationships I have built with others throughout my life dominate how I approach new interactions for the future. So adapting to how economics and social class played a large role within the greater social structure of my college education deeply affected me.

Then, immersing myself into a new community in a position of possibility as a teacher for other generations of social strata finally forced me to recognize what Gandhi would identify as my "true morality" (as cited in Ajgaonkar, 1995, p.39). The more I make my knowledge conscious, tacit, personal and contextual from my autobiography, the more I am uncovering my intentionalities and "avoid loss of self" (Conle, 1999, p.13; Grumet 1988). In fact, my constructivist view has so deeply intertwined myself and my life with theory formation that I can only be an attached, subjective teacher researcher who advances theory from life and vice versa (Conle, 1999). The time and place of everything I've observed, heard, experienced, and learned is consciously leading me to find out the true path I can fearlessly follow to be moral to myself as an example for others. My hermeneutical experience has shown me that I want young students to feel empowered to do the same (Kincheloe, 2005); such that they have access to options and avenues of thinking and experience that I myself am barely learning to tap into, and that they are able to actively improve upon their own abilities and agency to become thoughtful, informed young citizens of the world.

My intention is to better prepare and develop students who can be transformative, democratic individuals in society. I aim to provide a space for students to begin their paradigm shift to the discourses and ideologies that will set them free. This research is deeply rooted in my ontological knowledge as I transform and shift my discourse and ideologies about my teacher persona. Therefore, I aim to determine how I, as a teacher, can support my students' evolving awareness of self. Just as I work alongside my students through this journey, I must determine what benefits and issues are incurred when participating in an after-school organization named AGENTS, and thus determine the impact AGENTS can have on their discourses and ideologies. Additionally, I want to know what parents' perspectives are in regards to the impact of AGENTS on elementary students so that I can find out how these interpretations inform future views and practices in upper grade level environments.

### *AGENTS Evolution*

AGENTS began as a desire to provide more for the students who attended my older, low socio-economic elementary school. It was meant to be an opportunity where older students could feel like they had some 'ownership' over their school. That is, they were welcome to hang out at school and enjoy being together and working on something that was important to them, that was not for a grade or what an adult wanted, but what they cared about and wanted to explore further. Freedom to walk around their school and an expectation that they could be trusted to do so in a caring manner were also important aspects of inviting students to be a part of AGENTS.

As a result, I initially hatched the name AGENTS as a way for students to (hopefully) think being an 'AGENT' was cool. So with a cool title in front of their names, it would have to actually represent what their purpose in getting to hang out after school represented. Hence,

Always Getting Everyone Nicely Together Secretively was presented to my principal and assistant principal as an after-school club that worked to boost the morale of other students. I would be the one responsible for it, running every meeting, providing all the materials, ensuring every student got home safely after each meeting, etc. The club would not interfere with class time, would provide purposeful literacy and writing practice, and would not cost the school any money. My administrators tentatively granted AGENTS a greenlight. Now armed with a cool name for my group, I asked every third and fourth grade teacher to nominate the kids they thought worked hard, were kind, fairly responsible, etc.... basically, who they thought 1. Might come up to the school during the summer on two Saturday mornings and 2. Could be trusted to walk around the building without having to be supervised as they worked or delivered/retrieved specific requests.

If these AGENTS were going to buy into the idea that they had ownership of their school, I thought getting to *come* to school before everyone else AND seeing their hard work up around the school when everyone else arrived the first day was the best way to start. Every year for the first five years of AGENTS, every nominated third and fourth grader was handed a nominee congratulations permission slip. If they returned this slip to me, I called them three weeks before school started and invited them to come to school for two consecutive Saturdays before school started to make welcome posters and letters for the teachers. It was our little secret that they got to enter their school two weeks early and make nice posters and letters for all the other students and teachers returning to school. It was secretly a nice way to set an example and start using the power of their written words and thoughts to show others how much they could care. Thus began a rag-tag, loosely structured, inconsistent after school organization!

After beginning with posters and letters, I would announce if we were meeting after school on a week-to-week basis. Every student that had been nominated from the year before, the new year's fourth and fifth graders, would be invited to hang out after school and work on something that set some sort of example and could lift others' spirits and just generally make our school community a better environment to walk into every day. They were expected to think of how they could make their school or community better, improve it in some way, and ask teachers if there was a student that they might write a letter of encouragement to secretly give them later. The whole point was guiding these fourth and fifth graders to make their school what they wanted through their efforts to attempt actually doing it.

At the beginning of those first five years, at least forty kids were interested and would show up the first few weeks. Then, as the school year dragged on, attendance would get spotty, and eventually fall off to about twenty regulars who came almost every single time I would tell them they could stay after school. We worked on learning and reviewing how to write a persuasive letter. We learned how to navigate our school district's website to find the people we needed to persuade about what we wanted to make better or improve. We made posters of encouragement and quotes for our fellow students throughout the year.

Then I came across several books, an article, and a couple middle and high school school partnerships that changed the whole trajectory of what I thought was possible for a bunch of kids and a teacher to do after school. First, *The Complete Guide to Service Learning* by Cathryn Berger Kaye (2010) and *The Kid's Guide to Social Action* by Barbara A. Lewis (1998) helped provide me with more purpose and tangible examples of how to guide these students to making a real impact with their written words and hard work that they put in. Then an article entitled *We Are the Future, We Are the Agents of Change* in the periodical *Social Studies and the Young*

Learner (2010) and a chapter called Writing Wrongs by Katharine Johnson (2012) in the book Rethinking Elementary Education gave me a clear view of how to utilize the past to set the stage for the future. AGENTS was not just always getting everyone nicely together secretly anymore. AGENTS were getting everyone together *significantly* to become Aware of an issue of their choice, Gain knowledge of this issue, Empower others about it while Navigating and Negotiating pathways for change with this issue, and finally Taking action and Speaking out to address this issue that they had chosen. To add to our growing depth of ownership and leadership, first a high school connection and then a middle school connection, each with a strong Student Council presence, was willing to volunteer their time to set an example. They modeled how to research information to gain knowledge. They helped craft, edit, and revise written persuasive letters to negotiate pathways for change. To top it all off, the middle school Student Council invited us to take action with them in their neighborhood-wide clean up, which they then returned the favor of when we put together a school-wide clean-up. We were able to build relationships and take what we learned from them to develop, plan, and produce our own Saturday initiative of taking care of our school and keeping the grounds clean.

Each year, AGENTS gained more momentum. The more structure and resources I adapted into our meetings, the more consistency was needed. Once a weekly meeting was firmly established, a tailored agenda for each meeting streamlined what we could accomplish over a whole year. Then, AGENTS was offered an opportunity to partner with a high school Student Council and adopt a member of the H2JoJo partnership in South Africa. AGENTS organized a toiletries and clothing drive for this project, designing flyers, developing daily advertisements, and curating every item over a specific timeline. It was their first team effort for creating change outside of their comfort zone. This catapulted AGENTS from studying historical leaders and

identifying their characteristics to being the leaders that were utilizing these characteristics for positive change. Following through with an entire initiative and getting feedback from high school students, as well as pictures of what their efforts provided for another student halfway across the world, made anything seem legitimately possible. Then, the middle school Student Council connection helped fast-track one major idea our elementary school began to annually implement to make our community better. The Campus Clean-Up AGENTS sponsored became our grand finale of the year -- the culmination of all the hard work AGENTS put into learning about leaders, becoming leaders, and taking ownership of their elementary school over an entire year. This event became not only something they believed in, but something my administration believed in because of them. With the administration's desire to encourage their leadership and ownership, AGENTS was able to take a weekend field trip across the city to a Baker-Ripley Community Center. Our elementary school funded a trip for these AGENTS to see how others utilized their desire to improve their community, starting from one small idea and action to the thriving community centers and services Baker-Ripley now provides. All of these positive changes were happening at our school because these AGENTS were willing to come to school when they didn't have to, and they were willing to put in the work to make their school their own.

So, once the main idea of AGENTS was established, it was interesting to see how this concept has continuously evolved on a new campus, under a new climate of campus culture. At this newer, larger, much more diverse, elementary school, AGENTS no longer needed an invitation to build ownership. These students are hungry for the opportunity and time for it. At an initial interest meeting, over 100 fifth grade students showed up. Obviously, there would need to be some adjustments to how AGENTS ran its course when so many students from one

grade were ready to tackle the challenge. Another fifth-grade teacher was kind enough to volunteer to take on this process and, together, we determined that due to resources, space, and safety, an election process needed to be implemented. If AGENTS was going to be successful in making our school a better place, the students needed to experience what it would be like to come to school when they didn't have to and really put in the work to represent *their* school. Following the initial interest meeting, students were invited to take a thirty-five-question exam over their elementary school constitution. If they had a seventy-five percent passing rate, it was then their responsibility to pick up a teacher recommendation form and ask a teacher on campus to fill it out and return it to us. If the recommendation form was turned in on time, the potential AGENT was provided with forty-five minutes to create a 'campaign' poster with materials that were only revealed at the start time. Finally, a constructive feedback practice helped potential AGENTS ensure they could stand up in front of their peers for no more than one minute to persuade the entire fifth grade why they should be voted into our elementary school's AGENTS organization. Out of the potential AGENTS that make it that far, the top twenty vote getters are invited to our first meeting the next week. Even after all of this, it is clearly stated in the school constitution that if grades or behavior become an issue, they will be prioritized over staying in AGENTS. Since interest is still so high amongst these students, if we have to ask one AGENT to leave, the twenty-first vote getter is then invited to be a representative of our school instead.

With such an intense process to get AGENTS started for the year at this new elementary school, a leadership mindset is already fast-tracked into their thought process. Additionally, there are a lot more parents that are a lot more involved in AGENTS as well. Due to the established Parent/Teacher Organization (PTO) at this new school, many students immediately expected that any ideas they had for change could be implemented through them. There have

been a lot of great ideas, but not a lot of consideration as to how these ideas are put into action outside of the limits of what our PTO can do. These AGENTS already have an awareness of issues and gathering knowledge about these issues. Rather, they begin the year stuck on how to empower others to navigate and negotiate pathways for change. There is more emphasis placed on thinking broadly, outside of school support, to discover what other people, organizations, leaders, etc. can assist with in making their ideas to improve their community a reality. Students also have a tendency to want immediate, positive results. Many of them are learning that even when hard work and planning go into taking action, the results are not always what is expected. Without high school or middle school mentors guiding their progress, or PTO funds available to purchase their ideas, they are learning it takes multiple points of communication, follow-up, and flat out rejection from outside sources before they gain traction with their ideas. Individual AGENTS' parents have even been more involved, driving AGENTS to off-campus delivery sites, bringing AGENTS back to school during non-school hours, and volunteering to present a mini-lesson on strategies for persuading others to invest in their ideas. We no longer use connections I bring in and present to them as an option for creating change. These AGENTS have the gumption to reach out and make the initial connection to take action. As a result, they have reached out to a high school welding class to build a buddy bench, a middle school woodworking class to build a Free Little Library, a local hardware store to donate gardening tools and birdhouses, the City of Houston for street lights along a dark street, and participated in the Humble Area Assistance Ministries Canned Food Drive, the Texas Children's Hospital Jolly Jammie Drive, the Operation Gratitude care package initiative, and the Ronald McDonald House Pop Tab Collection Drive. Luckily, our PTO has also been able to support our ideas for more murals, mirrors, and a playground shade structure based on the arguments AGENTS presented at

various monthly PTO meetings. The past two years we have also gotten to welcome back three former AGENTS, as they have attended several of our meetings to empower the current AGENTS in moving forward with their ideas.

The difference between the two schools and make-up of each year's group of AGENTS is always a work-in-progress. Initially driven by my motivation, there is now a solid year's worth of planning in place for what AGENTS can hang out after school and enjoy working together on. However, there is one trend in AGENTS over the years that has increasingly concerned me. In the beginning, when invited, all kinds of students would show up. Then as the year progressed and students' attendance would start to dip, it was the girls who had the most consistent attendance throughout the year. Even after implementing elections, the first couple of years of AGENTS was the most diverse, with the past three years yielding a stark majority of girls to boys. There are multiple reasons for this to occur, but I consider the maturity level, involvement in other extra-curricular activities (especially sports), and the appeal, both of individual students and of being part of AGENTS, as the most likely factors influencing this phenomenon.

## Chapter Two – Review of the Literature

We need to understand lives and indeed to *live* lives differently if we are to avoid further fragmentation, isolation, and disconnection from each other.

-Mark Freeman (1998, p. 466)

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this research is to explore and analyze how providing an after school emancipatory framework, grounded in critical pedagogy, social justice, and participatory action research and service learning, informs the agency and praxis pre-adolescent students develop through middle and high school. As a result, this research seeks to discover the ways in which pre-adolescent students' evolving awareness of self emerges not only over the course of a year-long AGENTS framework, but how this awareness has matured as they have grown. The reciprocal effects of opportunities, challenges, pleasures, resources, and conflicts in the daily lives of children and their parents on each other over time and place are greatly divided by social class (Lareau, 2011). Accordingly, much research has been done on the factors economically disadvantaged children face in order to survive and thrive in their lifetimes. From race, class, culture, health and nutrition, to geography, economics, education, and other subtle social factors, a plethora of various studies have concluded and suggested what should and can be done to close various inequality gaps and create more opportunity (Leonhardt, 2013; Achievement Gap, 2011; Bronfenbrenner, McClelland, Ceci, Moen, & Wethington, 1996). Yet, if economic mobility has been stable for the last twenty years (Leonhardt, 2013), even with minimum wage providing less and less security and means for inflation-adjusted value (Mishel, 2014; Noguchi, 2013), then what exactly are the most compelling mobility factors that influence economically disadvantage children when closing inequality gaps? As some gaps have stagnated and others have fluctuated over time, what could still drive such large inequalities to exist and survive? When one

considers the upbringing and guidance of a child in and of itself – through parental involvement and engagement, neighborhood/community influence, and quality teacher interaction – research has found that these characteristics can and do most effectively facilitate the narrow avenues of social and economic strata children will navigate through in their lifetimes (Lareau, 2011; Kingston, 2000; Bronfenbrenner et al., 1996).

Neighborhoods with high poverty rates are producing less prepared students than their wealthier counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Nelson, Palonsky, & McCarthy, 2009). This gap in learning and achievement has created a huge inequality in the learning opportunities, available resources, and attainment students in underserved neighborhoods can realize (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2013; Ravitch, 2010).

Currently, low socio-economic status neighborhood children begin school less academically prepared than children from higher socioeconomic status neighborhoods (Ravitch, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Additionally, low income students have less academic opportunities, key institutions, and social supports both within and outside of their neighborhood schools (Nelson, et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Coupled with inconsistent access to high-quality teachers, this gap in student learning and experience only widens from year to year, resulting in lower test scores in high school, especially among minority students (Nelson, et al., 2009; Ravitch, 2013; Ravitch, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

From the onset, the majority of low-income elementary children have little experience in educational settings, which compounds each year as they struggle with inconsistent educational attainment. This gap in learning and achievement has created a huge inequality in the learning opportunities and attainment students in various neighborhoods can realize (Ravitch, 2010; Berliner, 2006). How can these students overcome these obstacles within the current educational

context? Or is this even possible? By providing tangible experiences of how ideas and thoughts can be translated into purposeful discursive unpacking and community engagement (or real action), a student's mentality and expectations can overcome their environmental circumstances.

According to Berliner (2006), students only spend about 16% of their waking hours in school, compared to about 83% spent in their neighborhood. By exploring the larger context of critical pedagogy, social justice, and participatory action service-learning research in public education, teachers and neighborhood schools will be able to better develop and scaffold curriculum to be student-centered and culturally relevant to their daily lived experiences (Ravitch, 2013; Galletta & Jones, 2010; Cowhey, 2006). If students are going to have personal investments in their education, schools must offer them an opportunity to continuously develop leadership, flexible critical thinking, dialogical skills, and work towards gaining ownership of their education. They must also be given an opportunity to participate in group and individual leadership roles where they can develop their agency and enact critical praxis for their school and community environments.

It is important that schools and their surrounding communities give students the seeds with which to plant their ideas and help nourish them to grow. If not, students may never find a place or person that will provide these opportunities, and as they get older, may face more disparity in larger secondary student body populations. Schools must focus more on fostering critical thinking mindsets that sustain problem-solving skills that are "capable of transforming society in radically necessary ways" rather than merely setting goals to meet high-stakes standards (Kahn, 2009, p. 529).

Thus, I created an organization of AGENTS (Always Getting Everyone Nicely Together Significantly) at the Title I elementary school I taught at to develop emancipatory curriculum

practices for fourth and fifth graders. I sought to stretch these students' current and future directions of leadership and social impact by providing opportunities for critical inquiry and activism concerning their school and neighborhood communities. The value of this line of inquiry for the field of education is a modeled approach and curriculum that provides more opportunities for underserved students to articulate and formalize their agency at a young age.

Within this emancipatory curriculum, student ownership, and the potential for subsequent leadership, is introduced, practiced, and strengthened by exercising dialogical skills with a broad community of peers and adults. I hope it is a small step in bridging the gaps low-socioeconomic students must dissect and alter as they build the cultural capital for individual agency and praxis (Bourdieu, 1984). It is from this intersectionality of theory and practice that four themes have become deeply rooted in providing and utilizing the means necessary to transform these students and their world. Critical pedagogy is the practice and transformation of democratic principles and social action for "the interest of oppressed communities" (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 2). In terms of education, it explores social justice issues that affect students' daily lives and struggles (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). Social justice is the foundation for building a democratic society and education (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009). Consequently, participatory action research (PAR) and service learning can facilitate students' journeys in critical pedagogy and social justice through new experiences, ideas, and emotions within their school and their neighborhood communities. PAR and service-learning aim to engage in research and practice for inquiry that can develop an initiative for action and public engagement (Galletta & Jones, 2010). Finally, by learning to empower action for change in their environment, students can view themselves as 'agents of social change,' where they are creating the means for participatory democracy to thrive in their education (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick,

2010, p. 30). Translating those that have been underserved by their education to now have the tools to articulate themselves with awareness, confidence, dignity, and hope to change their lived conditions is the ultimate intention of these endeavors.

### *Critical Pedagogy*

As my introduction to this chapter implies, gaps abound throughout childhood. Particularly for the gaps of social class status, especially in terms of time and place, children carry the brunt of this burden (Leonhardt, 2013; Lareau, 2011; Ravitch, 2013). As the gap continues to widen, both in present time and over future opportunities within the “standards and expectations of key institutions in society,” teachers must be better prepared to provide students with the knowledge and tools that best fit their mobility needs and empowerment (Lareau, 2011, p. 311).

What has been severely ignored and oppressed within American schools to address these gaps is an overarching operational theory for life-long education and learning. Critical pedagogy provides for this life-long education and learning by providing students with an opportunity to exercise their ideas in a critical and practical manner where their efforts in learning can result in an authentic transformation of themselves and their communities. It is a philosophy grounded in dialogue that advances the process of learning and knowing to caring, critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

A cognizance for lived experiences in learning must be revived in education (Freire, 2008). Learning, Saltman (2010) argues, has become a commodity of education reform that undermines the true learning possibilities students can possess and teachers can extract. Education, especially elementary education, has targeted the individualism of test scores so much that they have produced a crisis in the homogenization and monetization of how teachers teach

and how their students learn (Kahn, 2009). When teachers are held accountable with high-stakes standardized testing and evaluation, their role as a teacher consists of how much information they can get their students to remember and regurgitate on tests (Ravitch, 2010). The consequence of this kind of accountability is a banking system of education. Freire (1970) cautioned this will leave teachers merely depositing information into ‘receptacle’ students. This vanquishes hope that students will ever interact within the education they deserve and dispossesses them of their dialogue and expressiveness for emancipatory learning (Freire, 1970). Accordingly, Ravitch’s (2010) theory of measurement and punishment is swiftly enforced, as every lesson teachers teach, and every concept every student learn is scripted to raise test scores to certain acceptable benchmark rating expectations.

Critical pedagogy allows for a theoretical framework to converge what Macedo describes as an understanding of class as a factor in “multiple forms of oppression” while being scrupulously mindful of the distance it can dissolve, create, or transform between classes (as cited in Freire, 1970, p. 14). As such, teachers and students alike engage in the core principles of this theory for what N.F.S. Grundtvig identifies as “application in everyday life” where students are invited to identify their personal concerns, opinions, and conflicts to, in essence, be identifying the type of learning that they would gain the most ownership from (as cited in Westerman, 2009, p. 543). In working over several months on identifying personal types of learning, and reflecting on its advantages or needed improvements, students can gain a better understanding of how reality is considered based on perspectives richly influenced by values and interests (Shor, 2009). Value-oriented learning then leads to individually sustained interest and commitment to its application (Westerman, 2009).

There is no room for discourse when teachers and students alike are being alienated out of discovering their classroom and school communities. Nieto (2003) laments on this same struggle in her own realization that there is no level playing field in education for students and teachers and how Freire helped contour her political awareness of education. Boggled down by the anatomy of inequality gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2010), education – and the teachers challenged with providing it – seem to grow further away from aligning the goals, mission, and purpose of educating hopeful students. It is within this alienation that Freire has accurately summarized the kind of community many teachers and students now encompass: they must continually move out on their own, reinventing themselves and what they deem democratic within the cultural and historical contexts of their education (as cited in Kahn, 2009). This kind of alienated community deserves to be fought for and continued to be transformed daily in order to stabilize hope in changing the differential advantages and inequality gaps in education and society.

Within their education, students are not being exposed to the “social critique and change they need in order to be productive citizens” (Giroux, 2009, p. 444). This situation is staggering due to the lack of transformational experiences students encounter. Giroux (2009) has proposed that civic courage must be fostered in students in order to develop an interest in tangible social change. By discussing and reflecting on school purposes and missions, and determining how they can change and improve these realities, Giroux asserts that “the social, political and economic forces that weigh so heavily upon their lives” can be challenged and student passions and intellects will be stimulated (as cited in Peterson, 2009, p. 317).

Teachers must guide students towards “generative themes to read the word and the world and the process of problem posing” to synergize their own learning with such concepts as justice,

equality, compassion, marginalization, and power (Kincheloe, 2008, p.15). Therefore, individual students' personal learning must be transformed to cultivate active social and democratic participants. Shor (2009) accurately sums up our plight with his belief that our students have lost touch with the purpose in speaking or writing and have in turn found it difficult to "mobilize their inherent language competencies" (p. 286). The more school practices have deviated from the interests of students themselves, the less motivation students have to invest in what schools are offering them. That is where the hope of provoking their ability to articulate themselves stems from. Jim Berlin proposes that with writing "we are teaching a version of the world and the students' places in it" (as cited in Shor, 2009, p. 295). Students need to feel that their words are powerful and important enough in their schools. That their voice, their concern, and their questioning are not only valid but vital to their success in whatever they do.

In this way, teachers and students must always be willing to weave through social constructs, constantly demystifying the practices of academic experiences, key institutions, and social supports in society and re-constructing them through their own voices to work as participatory, democratic, cultural praxis. This is the very basis of Freire's (1970) own lifetime of work, his "ontological vocation" that others will dialogically join in action to humanize their present and future realities (p. 32). The teacher/student framework, especially within low-socioeconomic schools, is ripe with opportunities for various age groups to interact between homes, schools, and communities. Teachers can cultivate students' emerging senses of self by guiding them to engage with other students, other adults, and key institutions that impact their daily lives, providing a concerted opportunity to transmit "differential advantages" of freedom that could be a catalyst for changing their world (Lareau, 2011, p. 5; Freire, 1970). This is where critical pedagogy, and its concerted cultivation, are so crucial. Within areas where high

inequality rates occur, Freire (1970) pinpoints these gaps as ones of (de)humanization that are barraged and “thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors” (p. 44). In working to draw connections between their own lives, communities, and environments, these students are able to, as Peterson (2009) states:

reflect upon why they think the way they do; to discover that knowledge is socially constructed, that truth is relative not only to time and place but to class, race, and gender interests as well (p. 315)

to augment their awareness of their own power and responsibilities within these cultures. Therefore, from an early age, teachers must work *with* young students – not *for* them – over time to exercise evolving levels of reflection about humanization. The more often this reflection occurs, the more cultural capital and “recognition of the necessity to fight for it” develops, and the more liberation becomes tangible (Freire, 1970, p.45; Bourdieu, 1984).

Hope to build a new sense of community and culture begins with students and the relationships they form and grow with teachers. A distinct philosophy for growth and depth in learning through problem-posing, resolutions, and cultivation of empowerment will then plausibly transform the development of passionate cultural participants. It is Freire’s (1970) critical model of hope that within the context of this establishing culture, these students will come to “understand and critique social reality” for the rest of their lives (p. 83). By using academic opportunities, key institutions, and social supports, these students are actively motivated to engage their struggle for empowerment to represent fairness and recognize injustice within their own education (Cowhey, 2006).

This cyclical nature of questioning, discussing, reflecting, and challenging pushes students to be “transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, 2009, p. 439). In working from the

‘bottom up’ by starting with students, critical pedagogy can be experienced and practiced through dialogic discourse for empowering purposes. Consequently, “the making of self in society” students experience throughout their academic career can be gained through critical agency through a problem-posing pedagogy (Giroux, 2009, p. 439). Peterson (2009), Kahn (2009), and Cowhey (2006) describe this critical problem-posing pedagogy as an opportunity for students to pose questions for themselves that stimulate meaningful dialog, investigation, reflection, and perspective. They need the opportunity to reflect upon their environment and determine how they can help themselves contribute to it.

As Peterson (2009) notes, in “questioning why things are the way they are and identifying actions, no matter how small, to begin to address them,” students can learn how to work together to collectively seek solutions to their queries (p. 312). Students need to be given a chance to challenge the existing social structure that is set in place (Westerman, 2009). If a school’s educational model transferred their primary goals to student action and questioning, a more “inclusive, communicative process could guide a consummate social metamorphosis of our entire school community” (Westerman, 2009, p. 541). In asking students to look critically at their school and how they want to go about changing it, each student can utilize their unique experience, culture, language, and discourse to empower themselves. Therefore, they have the power to determine what is important to them and create a stronger social environment to meet their needs. In turn, this provides the opportunity to begin looking more critically at larger social issues and why people think and act the way they do (Peterson, 2009).

The challenge for continuing to encourage this type of pedagogy is creating the literacy stimulation, flexibility, and dialogue students need to exercise increasing levels of power. From the very beginning of a student’s education, the need for critical pedagogy, especially in low-

socioeconomic neighborhoods, can be the catalyst for what Lareau (2011) has identified as ‘concerted cultivation.’ In cultivating a problem-posing pedagogy for students, teachers develop the cultural, social, and individual resources and informal knowledge students need to legitimize the skills and opportunities they can create and transform as they continue to come into more direct contact with their community and the forces that influence it. In opposition to mastering basic skills in specific content areas, students must learn to practice their ability to think for themselves and critically and thoughtfully write about their ideas so that they can apply their learning knowledge to “linguistic techniques in the service of self-understanding and socioeconomic liberation” (Westerman, 2009, p. 556; Giroux, 2009). By increasing their language learning and how they build their social identity, Shor (2009) asserts that students will “speak and act critically to change themselves and the world” (p. 294). Peterson (2009) suggests that these “transitory models and activities” (p. 311) can show students how to be more responsible. Then, once students have these necessary linguistic tools in place, they will be better able to critique and engage their surroundings to develop “a practical vision for a healthier transformative society where all groups are welcome” (Shor, 2009, p. 298).

This civic courage to give these students more ownership has taken form through Giroux’s (2009) definition of a democratic public sphere as well. It is the hope of education that students should learn how to be socially responsible by demonstrating how to be democratizing and humanizing within their educational setting. From within their school setting, teachers must seek ways to show students how to learn the knowledge and skills to be self- and socially-empowered for a critical democracy out in their community and environment (Giroux, 2009, p. 445).

Teachers should provide students with a forum for learning that values investigation and debate of the information and knowledge from their lived experiences. As their awareness and understanding of their experiences grow, so too can their basis for youth action (Saltman, 2010; Freire, 2008). If teachers hope to guide students to viewing themselves as ‘agents of social change,’ then they must create the means for participatory democracy to thrive in their education (Boyles, Carusi, Attick, 2010, p. 30).

If the teaching and learning that occur in today’s current educational climate are to have any lasting impact, students must be able to pose questions for themselves that stimulate meaningful dialog, investigation, reflection, and perspective (Freire, 2008; Cowhey, 2006). Currently, there is a loss of personal learning for individual students. Education’s purpose and mission needs to focus on the transformation of its students to be social and democratic organizers. As organizers, students develop a unity in their cooperation for a shared effort (Freire, 2008). Then, they can organize themselves with a greater population of students, both within and outside their school and community, to fulfill tasks that “experience true authority and freedom, which they then seek to establish in society by transforming the reality which mediates them” (Freire, 1970, p. 178-179).

This emphasis will only evolve if the educational perspective of what students are capable of transforms into a more democratic view. If students are listened to more often, social accountability for working collaboratively and a critical diligence in progressing thinking and reflection through personal life experiences could sustain students with the cultural capital they will need to continue their liberation after elementary school (Kahn, 2009, p. 535).

Education should provide a unique “joint space” for teachers and students to work towards participatory and inclusive inquiry (Boyles, Carusi, Attick, 2010, p. 34). Education

should hope to create a culture of learning for problem solving and action. In Saltman's (2010) theoretical perspective, teachers teach to make meaning for themselves by dialogically exchanging with students (p. 3). This, in turn, can produce a culture of ongoing inquiry into real issues to inform social practices that actively work for social change (Boyles, Carusi, Attick, 2010, p. 34-35). Students' dialogue and actions then define, and give direction to, their teachers' own pedagogy for humanization as a teacher (Dewey, 1916/1997).

The most important concepts elementary teachers should hope to send these students into secondary education with is a feeling of empowerment via budding multiple literacies. The issue at hand is not whether students can learn certain, expected "right" answers or behaviors, but to be thoughtful, engaged thinkers and communicators for their world. Peterson (2009) writes about the damage society does to children by giving them so few rights. student rights are so few that the responsibility being developed is immature and superficial. Schools are so adult- and curriculum-driven that students are being prevented from "developing the responsibility and self-discipline necessary to be independent thinkers and actors in our society" (Peterson, 2009, p. 310). Indeed, this transition to empower our students is, as Peterson (2009) states, "an enormous struggle" (p. 310), especially as students get older (Mameli, Molinari, & Passini, 2019; Goodman & Eren, 2013).

### *Social Justice*

It is critical that a broad perspective of social investments be considered in education in order to decrease any sort of inequality gaps that exist between students. Ladson-Billings (2006) outlines the "historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions" (p. 5) that have not only undermined these gaps, but will be key revision strategies for supporting educational attainment for generations of students to come instead. The concept of social justice within schools should

prepare students for these revision strategies within an education that participates in developing life-long citizens of equitable stability. Schools need social justice to instill a deep understanding of trust, hope, and purpose between students in order to prepare them for the social realities they will face in the future. Additionally, a “profound sense of caring” and “self-identity are prerequisites for academic achievement” (Cammarota & Romero, 2009, p. 467; Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 451).

The emphasis on “intergenerational effects of education” is crucial for job attainment, work stability, and higher earnings, as the more educational attainment and higher education that is pursued provides more stability, functionality, and economic equity for a student over a long-term basis (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5; Education Attainment, 2009; Barefoot, 2004). Schools, communities, and key institutions need to incorporate a sector of academic opportunities, social supports, and resources and skills that promote higher educational, emancipatory attainment in order to reverse the social stigmas and stratification that encourage inequality gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nelson, et al., 2009; Education Attainment, 2009).

If caring relationships between teachers and students are built within schools to address these social stigmas, it follows that the transition to negotiating the “school-education dialectic” could distribute a “greater equality in production and exchange of knowledge” (Yang, 2009, p. 457; Cammarota & Romero, 2009, p. 466). Some forms of values have, and will always be, taught in school, as Shor (1992) explains that “all forms of education are political because they can enable or inhibit the questioning habits of students” (p.12). Therefore, in terms of schooling and daily functions, it is the responsibility of the teacher to understand students’ multiple perspectives and then represent these perspectives back to them in a respectable manner so that students can determine the kind of limits and values that can empower them.

More emphasis must be placed on strong academic opportunities and social supports both within the home and within key institutions, such that the discrepancies between students and inequality gaps in general could have the potential to decrease and coalesce into desired learning and empowerment (Winerip, 2011; Webley, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nelson, et al., 2009). Put simply, by positively influencing the home and community milieu for problem-posing education and learning, predictors of empowerment aim to be justified and fulfilled. If inequality gaps are ever going to be fully addressed, then it is the responsibility of every community member, from students and parents to schools and politicians, to create the types of social characteristics, conditions, persistence, and consciousness that will provide for a liberated life and community (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Barefoot, 2004; Nelson, et al., 2009).

In this unique social reality, an arranged philosophy of ethics does not give students the tools they need to critically investigate their own response and interpretations to them. Thus, it is not morality or self-indulgence that should be preached within schools, but self-transformation for critical thinking (Nelson, et al., 2009; Shor, 1992). If one not only learns how to critically analyze and reflect on their learning for themselves, but how to consider the perspectives of others' as well, that's when emancipatory education is at its most meaningful and essential form (Nelson, et al., 2009).

The hierarchical structures and contextual norms that permeate most schools must undergo an enduring social change for purposeful relationships between students and teachers. This develops students to be cooperative, compassionate, and conscious youth who pose questions as the basis of their learning to create enduring social change within their communities (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Yang, 2009). With the integration of new media and critical

literacies, social justice could also provide critical academics with a “revolutionary process to be predicted and shaped” to empower their students (Yang, 2009, p. 458).

The school-education dialectic must address the need to integrate students into the curriculum to recognize and honor the knowledge they hold about their community. This student-driven and community-based education necessitates a strong commitment to using students’ home culture as the basis for the students’ educational experience. If teachers and schools provide a quality education to students, especially in low-socioeconomic communities, they must resolve to retain student cultural identities within their social, economic, and political experiences (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Cammarota & Romero, 2009). Fundamentally, if education is “a socializing experience that helps make the people who make society” (Shor, 1992, p. 15) it is the social norms and culture that mark which values will end up emerging in schools.

Student knowledge and experience offers a “culturally relevant pedagogy to influence how social contexts affect educational outcomes” in order to support their communities in obtaining social justice, especially for low-socioeconomic communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 451). Besides societal influences, students must have a lateral stake in determining which values they grow and learn from. Initially, if students are engaged in conversations and problem-posing prompts that “address conditions of urban life and develop a sense of agency among students for altering those conditions” then authentic intellectual abilities and academic achievement can be addressed (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 451). The most student-driven forms of problem-posing education support their growing awareness and knowledge of their society and then challenge students to analyze the ideologies, discourse, and experiences that will refine their developing agency (Shor, 1992; Nelson, et al., 2009). Then, potential complexities and

tensions among students, the school-education dialectic, and within the community can be triangulated to empower and demonstrate to students how they may tackle social complexities to make equitable solutions.

Ultimately, social justice within educational settings aims to prepare students to confront conditions of inequality within their daily lives and provide relevant academic skills to improve and renew a “sense of purpose with regard to school and social, economic, and political revitalization” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 450). In prioritizing school emphasis from mandates and testing to an uplifting analysis of identity and community to cultivate leadership, teachers can facilitate the development of a critical consciousness within their students that can reap life-long social justice benefits for their students and the students’ communities.

### *Participatory Action Research & Service Learning*

Participatory action research (PAR) and service learning are engaging approaches for application with young children because of the age range at which they can be employed. In providing opportunities from an elementary age, children can shift their thinking to a more progressive, experiential role as “participants in decision-making processes” (O’Brien & Moules, 2007, p. 385). As children engage in the development of their own meaning-making processes, they are better able to qualitatively reflect on their learning throughout their education. In turn, this can better influence community interest and support of their work as they learn to articulate and disseminate their learning for broader social implications (Galletta & Jones, 2010; O’Brien & Moules, 2007). This access to broader meaning-making processes can steadily increase the occurrence of meaningful student learning and fulfillment for the future (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Furthermore, it can increase self-worth and self-efficacy within students, shaping the outcomes that dictate the impact these processes can have on students (Shumer, 2014; Billig,

2000). However, youth PAR and service learning must be prefaced and guided with caution for elementary students to carefully monitor how they identify and understand the shift in thinking they are genuinely making. Contexts for learning must be scaffolded as new skills are acquired in new situations so as to avoid operationalizing these meaning-making processes (Shumer, 2014; Billig, 2000; Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012). It is important that these approaches monitor communication and power issues to protect the rights and values each elementary student contributes to PAR and service learning as well (O'Brien & Moules, 2007).

With these principles in place, youth PAR and service learning can feature a diverse mix of alluring elements for elementary students to engage in. Inquiry, youth development, knowledge production (socially emotionally, etc.), and activism – through planning, observing, reflecting, and re-planning – are all incorporated in youth PAR (Galletta & Jones, 2010; O'Brien & Moules, 2007). Likewise, responsibility, autonomy, choice, and constructive change – through “questioning, dialogue, planning, reflection and action should all be framed by the purpose of achieving meaningful reform” – are all incorporated in critically pedagogic service learning (Billig, 2000; Claus & Ogden, 1999, p. 73). Ideally, youth PAR and service-learning lean towards a justice-oriented approach that relies on the lived experiences and knowledge of students to build the fundamental theoretical, ethical, and methodological principles and practices (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012). This epistemological method lends itself to multiple intersections of social identities, collective questioning, and transformative engagement through experience, research, and action (Torre, 2009). By using “a process of systematic reflective inquiry,” students are able to fully collaborate in how youth PAR and service learning are developed, implemented, and reflected upon based on “where in the community the questions were to be asked” (O'Brien & Moules, 2007, p. 388).

Youth PAR and service learning are particularly effective for young students due to the cyclical nature of thinking and learning application it embeds within their education. This practical “cycle of reflection, dialogue, action, and learning” gives students time to learn about themselves in comparison to others, design and manage their own inquiry and research, as well as become more aware of how to navigate social systems, especially when conducted over a long period of time (Goodnough, 2008, p. 433; O’Brien & Moules, 2007; Shumer, 2014).

The cycles of youth PAR and service learning provide the opportunity to constantly evolve the relationship development and intensity between theory and practice for engaging young students within the curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, practices, and contexts they are presented with in school (Goodnough, 2008; Shumer, 2014). Students are considered “partners in investigating” the mission and purpose of their education when they engage in the processes of youth PAR (Galletta & Jones, 2010, p. 341; Torre, 2009). Over time, students are expected to:

- Develop flexible, open-ended research questions pertaining to their learning and/or community
- Engage in activities that develop and refine these questions through inquiry
- Adopt methods for sharing their inquiry process “through public engagement around the key topics of study”
- Design, propose, and implement an action plan to explore, articulate, and respond to research questions and inquiries

(Galletta & Jones, 2010, p. 351; Goodnough, 2008)

Service learning, when practiced from a critical pedagogy perspective, advances “beyond socially isolated projects into a zone of empowerment in the lives of students” with flexibility

and sensitivity to student knowledge (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012, p. 55; Shumer, 2014). Thus, youth PAR and service learning create a space for “practical, collaborative, critical, emancipatory, and reflexive” student practices (Goodnough, 2008, p. 433).

Since students are considered partners in investigating the knowledge they learn in school, the very nature of youth PAR and service learning “poses an epistemological challenge to traditional research” in that young students can keenly identify social and educational issues that impact their lives (Galletta & Jones, 2010, p. 341). Incorporating students into the research inquires that actually focus on them and their situations provides new possibilities for social perspectives and solutions (Galletta & Jones, 2010; O’Brien & Moules, 2007). Youth PAR and service learning places students’ diversity of views at the forefront of its learning cycle for the freedom to prioritize issues that are most significant to them.

This consideration of various youth dimensions within research and inquiry reveals unique nuances in how young people think and act and what can be gained from their insight and social connection. In keeping youth PAR and service learning student-centered, they are able to frame “research questions, design, data analysis, interpretation, and creation of meaningful products and action” with a genuine sense of agency and social and intellectual development specifically centered on young students (Torre, 2009, p. 112; Galletta & Jones, 2010). Youth PAR and service learning allow students to gain control by setting their own boundaries for framing their identities and connections to them as well. By traveling between various layers of social participation, students are able to engage “within multiple and varying relationships to power and privilege” to co-create knowledge from various perspectives (Torre, 2009, p. 112; O’Brien & Moules, 2007; Shumer, 2014). This equal participation between adults and young students allows differences in identities to recognize the various relationships, roles, power and

privilege each individual has in contributing to the social dynamics of PAR and service learning (Torre, 2009).

The diffusion of social dynamics with regards to power and privilege are critical aspects of the journey youth PAR and service learning can cultivate. Much can be offered to communities and schools with youth PAR and service learning, but reflexive social and intellectual interactions must be respected as students, teachers, and the community work to develop research inquiries and solutions “for collaboration and transformative change” (Galletta & Jones, 2010, p. 355; Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012). Consequently, each phase within the cycle of youth PAR and service learning must be thoughtfully followed through with patience and consideration, as disorder, concern, and ambiguity are all fundamental elements in developing, engaging, adopting, and constructing significant youth PAR and service learning practices (Goodnough, 2008).

### *Conclusion*

Robert Arno (1986) believed “we can only say we have learned something when we are capable of applying [knowledge] to transform little by little our reality” (as cited in Westerman, 2009, p. 549). I want to examine how education can (or should) motivate and empower its students for life experience, rather than for improving test scores for state minimum expectations. This desire to gain what Freire (1970) defines as praxis about the dialect of theory, practice, and reflection in educating students about their social realities is the very essence of practicing critical pedagogy.

Students must be provided with the opportunity to socially, emotionally, and cognitively process their learning and development throughout their education. With social justice, participatory action, and critical hope, students have a broader opportunity for emancipatory

curriculum and social opportunities that are sufficient to capture “aspects including processing abilities, affect, and beliefs” (Nelson, et al., 2009, p. 134) to develop democratic citizens.

The most promising solutions for eradicating the apathetic students that standards-based reform and accountability have bred should be focused on young families and the earliest opportunities for education for their children, especially with consideration to socio-economic status (Darling Hammond, 2010; Hickok & Ladner, 2007; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011). As stated in Nelson (2009), “individuals who know more...are more successful in school” (p. 120). Therefore, the more accountable we are to our youngest and neediest children, the more opportunity they will have to know more, which affords extended time to understand more, and thus provides more cultural capital and liberation in school from a younger age.

Teachers must take a social perspective-taking look at how they are both the oppressor and the oppressed as a teacher, and what kind of change they can make to their teaching to make it more equitable for students (Hall, 2010, p. 48). Teachers must make an effort to grasp the structure of their knowledge within social realities to become a ‘co-investigator’ in the critical model that drives students to do the same (Freire, 2008; Cowhey, 2006). It is necessary to continue this investigation in order to explore the power of our capabilities; it is necessary in order to compel “an opportunity to remake the entire system” of education (Westerman, 2009, p. 559). If we want to succeed at revolutionizing our educational community, we must be able to continuously evaluate the significant power we have over our reality and consistently employ multiple literacies to fulfill our democratic rights.

## Chapter Three – Methodology

Anthropology that does not break your heart is not worth doing.

-Ruth Behar (as quoted in Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002, p. 283)

This is a metaphor for breaking the mold. In our minds this mold is the traditional way of seeing life, people, and culture. In short, we propose that when the observed becomes part of the process of observing, the reality and story of people, cultures, and communities will be told in a very different way, with different vigor, indeed, with a different voice. This in turn surfaces and creates a different power dynamic.

-Miguel Guajardo & Francisco Guajardo (2002, p. 284)

### Introduction

All elementary students should be empowered in order to have a positive impact on their community. The educational opportunities that are presented to them can provide the greatest opportunity in preparing them to achieve that positive impact. Are the opportunities for low-socioeconomic elementary students giving them the most beneficial experience for cultivating an impactful and action-driven mindset for their future and for their community? Is there a better way to provide them with the means to feel empowered to influence their community? What messages about their choices and actions are they taking with them from elementary school as they continue to grow and develop throughout middle and high school? There is much research published on the most effective methods for determining how to support adolescent youth in developing a positive impact on their community (Travis and Leech, 2013; Schwartz and Suyemoto, 2013; Connor, 2011; Delgado, 2008; Lewis, 1998). Yet, in contrast, for pre-adolescent elementary youth, there is very little published on the most effective methods for even developing a positive mindset, as well as the social capital, to successfully impact their community.

Therefore, there is not much background on the implications educational opportunities in elementary school could have on cultivating an impactful and action-driven mindset for their future and for their community. Employing critical pedagogy, social justice, and participatory action research and service learning are all endeavors that have created opportunities for adolescent youth to study issues that are important to their lives for knowledge production and to take action toward change (Galletta & Jones, 2010). Programs targeted for middle and high school adolescents have yielded great strides in skills and knowledge development, civic engagement, empowerment, and positive self-concept (Schwartz and Suyemoto, 2013). Accordingly, what budding activism looks like and develops into from a younger age must be strongly considered. Programs that have been organized for adolescents need to be further dissected into simple components to better suit the needs of pre-adolescents' knowledge production and developmental comprehension. More benefits could lie within the introduction to practicing critical pedagogy and participatory action research at a young age if a simplified cyclical process of theory, practice and reflection were implemented within elementary school to greatly impact future learning opportunities. If pre-adolescent youth are involved in increasingly complex roles and leadership opportunities with sufficient adult mentoring in elementary school, what kind of strides could then be made in middle and high school? The exploration of conflict to facilitate learning, the obstacles and disappointments young pre-adolescents stumble through, and drawing on social networks to link youth with individuals centrally involved with the target of study also need more deliberate weight (Torre, 2009). Critical to pursuing this endeavor at a younger age is to foster transformative change at the individual level among pre-adolescent elementary students themselves.

By shifting the focus to younger children and the effects such opportunities for transformative change could offer, I aimed to investigate how an after-school elementary agency framework impacted the motivation and approach of these preadolescent students throughout their education. I wanted to know how the lived experience of both teacher and students influenced the ways in which critical consciousness as agents of change could be developed. With a periscope of mounting responsibility my students face over the seven plus years of their ever-changing educational landscape, as well as to build a central core for this research interest, the following research question was proposed:

What are parents' perspectives on the impact of AGENTS on pre-adolescent students?

Accordingly, the questions that arise from such a research interest encompass:

- How can a teacher(s) support and develop a sense of ownership within a students' evolving awareness of self?
- How do these interpretations inform future views and practices in upper grade level environments?

The needs of such questions could only be met through multiple data sources and procedures. As young students, the nature and depth of their perspective was analyzed with careful consideration to their social and emotional influences. The precarious nature of this age range requires that data was collected through an interactive approach. In order to better understand the complexities of both this practicing teacher researcher and my young students in our examination and internalization as agents of change, I communicatively structured critical qualitative research based on similar perspectives of various social constructs and issues. I used my personal narrative to explore how I supported the development of young students' ability to

understand, engage, and take action from and within their own narratives. Consequently, how their elementary critical inquiry influenced their narrative experiences over the last two to nine years was crucial in determining if empowering agency and praxis for critical consciousness exists. This strong relationship I have with these young students is built upon layers of shared connections and experiences that are constantly managed by the times in which they took place.

### *Critical Qualitative Research*

Critical qualitative research was communicatively structured based on a shared, reliable perception of social structures, power, culture and human agency issues. Its growing presence within a bricolage setting provided for an enriched and flexible dimension of research possibilities. Highlighting multiple perspectives, theories, and methodological approaches, qualitative bricolage research allowed varied constructions of knowledge through participatory action and service learning that, in turn, yielded alternate interpretations and diversified actions.

Initially fashioned within anthropology by the structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss (1966), bricolage research focuses on meaning-making within the contours of language communication. Specifically, Levi-Strauss emphasized the meaning-making of trends in human thought, interaction and culture to be flexible, such that past experiences fluidly combine with cultural contexts to construct knowledge production. As a result of this dependent amalgamation, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln grounded the breadth of their meaning-making of research over various paradigm disciplines. In tracking how qualitative research has matured and evolved throughout the last century, Denzin and Lincoln were able to contextualize how shifting interpretations and paradigms coalesced into bricolage research. The more flexible and engaging theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and disciplines fluidly combined, the more complex the meaning-making of knowledge production. Developing problem-posing pedagogies through

participatory action and service learning produced the labyrinth of knowledge that made meaning-making so privileged. Hence, Denzin and Lincoln posited that this variety of qualitative bricolage research produces interpretive, methodological, theoretical, political, and narrative bricoleurs. The expanse and variety of bricoleurs each brought a perspective to research that was both necessary and pertinent to advancing meaning-making and knowledge production for this study. Both individually and within supporting the stamina of one another, they drove the research process forward towards consistent improvement.

An interpretive bricoleur approaches the research process with a personal context, such that “research is an interactive process, shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999, p. 6). This inquiry is privileged to subjective positioning and interpretation that the bricoleur had to reflexively analyze through multiple vantage points and actions to determine how it affected the research process’ contexts, connections, and relationships.

The methodological bricoleur utilizes creativity to inform what tools are needed to analyze and navigate research perspectives. These “contextual contingencies” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999, p. 5) greatly influenced which methods were used and when, and how data was gathered to make meaning of these various methods. If the methodological bricoleur began with one methodological approach that, upon further examination, needed to adopt an expanded scope of technical tools or analysis to better advance and augment the finesse of the research process, those adoptions were made.

Theoretical bricoleurs serve the purpose of taking into account multiple paradigms and perspectives to consider how intricate a phenomenon grows. The depths to which a theory or

interpretive paradigm could stem greatly affected the whole process of meaning-making for a given phenomena and lent to its motley array of influential knowledge factors.

The connection between knowledge and power is investigated by political bricoleurs. When knowledge is gained, an implicit value was given to this knowledge as to whether it could obtain a position of power or control. Therefore, a political bricoleur worked to produce (justice) knowledge from investigating oppositional forms of inquiry that did not marginalize social constructs.

Conclusively, narrative bricoleurs take the knowledge that is studied as a means to better comprehend how ideologies and discourses influence the research process in general. They emphasize present circumstances as various stories with meaning, utilizing segments of lived experience to postulate not only how knowledge was produced, but derived from multiple methods representations.

To fully comprehend the magnitude of what bricolage qualitative research offered, Kincheloe (2005) expands the complexity of the theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and disciplines incorporated in this meaning-making process. He extends the rationale for these epistemologies to an emancipatory endeavor of connected “objects-in-the-world” (Kincheloe, 2005, p.346). His intersection of divergent perspectives relates how this new process intertwines through various discourses and dimensions. Accordingly, bricolage qualitative research cannot conform to one linear process or sequence – it ebbs and flows to encompass the various options knowledge generates. This multi-logical research considers subjects as “objects-in-the-world” connected to their socio-historical circumstances and relationships, especially in regards to hermeneutic and power dynamics.

### *Narrative Inquiry*

I attempted to use my knowledge of my interactions with school settings to figure out what makes them enjoyable, empowering places to exist in. As such, I used my narrative to explore how I could support the development of how young students were able to understand, engage, and take action from their own narratives. Accordingly, my methodology must be a hybrid of both narrative inquiry and critical ethnography. As evidenced from my first chapter, my own personal narrative has had a huge influence on my perspective of what I want for my students and how I could offer it to them. But ultimately, it is not my narrative that I want to continue learning about. It is whether or not my narrative was able to provide for the development of my students' narratives. I will not be able to fully comprehend my students' narratives unless I probe for deeper subtleties into the events that have been reframed and reshaped by the meanings and experiences collaboratively explored and constructed in narrative inquiry (Conle, 1999; Bochner & Riggs, 2014). Especially at their young ages of nine to eleven years old, if I did not observe them as well as interview others close to them about their narratives, I might not have gotten a clear picture of their ways of thinking since their neurons for contextual perspectives within their narratives are still developing (Jetha & Segalowitz, 2012; Casey & Jones, 2010; Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). Therefore, I utilized my narrative to inform the narratives of young students, which I then accessed by way of critical ethnography.

As a teacher researcher, I have existed in a unique professional environment. Who I am, what I do, and the choices I have made have had immediate and lasting consequential influence for myself and the young minds that I have served. In other words, my professional has been dependent on the personal in teaching, and when consciously aware, my personal has in turn been cultivated by the professional. This intimate relationship was built upon layers of multiple shared connections and experiences that were constantly managed by the times in which they

took place. Therefore, the more cognizant I was of my own histories, realities, and personal practical knowledge, the better prepared and able I was to develop, support, and sustain the critical student relationships that distinguish who my students are and what they do (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985).

Conle (1999) has found that when personally unsatisfied, the professional side struggles to find meaning as well. That is why my personal experience must be shared, such that the consequences and lessons of reflecting upon them can additionally bolster my work professionally. Otherwise, without the context of time and place, my habits would stagnate and there would be no need for a narrative once a particular time and place had been passed through.

As a qualitative researcher, new comprehension for previous time and place helped incorporate how the world and the self were not separate. This shift is what Carspecken (1996) would identify as “simply being aware to being aware that you are aware” (p.13). One must always be aware of the possibility of losing their purpose and diluting themselves to minute actions, behavior, and being. Hence, narrative inquiry was vital both to myself and my students, so as to combat lost purpose and foster connections to theory through their lives. The development of “conscious but also tacit knowledge... personal but also contextual knowledge” (Conle, 1999, p.12) that resonates from my autobiography enabled me to develop a constructivist view of the multiple realities I considered as a teacher. This opportunity to utilize narrative inquiry to become a qualitative researcher of my students helped me understand that “all inquiry reaches into life, life advances theory, and theory shapes life” (Conle, 1999, p.13). I was constantly under a narrative construction, living and interacting with my students to fluidly negotiate a multi-layered identity (Bochner & Riggs, 2014).

However, I had to keep caution against the risk perspective and contextualization that could incur when I used narrative inquiry. The constructivist nature of narrative inquiry greatly influenced the complexity and reality of the “now-perspective” for each narrative telling and the story and reality vantage points that could be perceived. I had to balance a variety of coping mechanisms in order to find the “subtleties and complexities of life” (Conle, 1999, p.16) that informed my narrative inquiry, so that temporal understanding was not simplified, suppressed, or limited. Likewise, if my narrative story became hard or I “begin to serve agendas” (Conle, 1999, p.17), my purpose becomes counterproductive. Therefore, I threaded my narratives through personal and professional connections that intertwine “who I am becoming as a person... with who I am becoming as a teacher” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 131). Clandinin et al. (2006) refer to this as “identity scaffolding” (p.132) in the sense that as I resonated new experiences in my life and “restory” (p.132) my knowledge of myself and my teaching, I shifted and evolved within my life. As a result, Clandinin et al. (2006) propose that relational threads composed of encounters and relationships scaffold the shifting changing stories teachers must learn to live by in order to relate to their students. Since narratives “change with every telling” (Conle, 1999, p.18) I had to be careful not to generalize or be manipulated to serve my own purpose or research as I continued to restory relationships with my students. It was also important that I kept time and place in perspective so that my narrative did not become a print portrait for general conditions, canons that served as ultimate stories, or became dominated and overruled by theory.

Ultimately, the fusion of experiences with intellect was what make time and place accessible. The more time spent focused on connecting meaningful experiences, the more intertwined my history and surroundings became such that time balanced out the opportunity for “being.” As a result, time developed the self (or being), the self-moved and worked through and

within time, which then permitted time to flow through my narrative inquiry as I interpreted my acts for understanding myself. Through narrative inquiry, I facilitated my existence with time, history, and place to utilize myself “as a point of departure and as sustenance throughout” (Conle, 1999, p.28) the everyday act of blending stories and histories for the essential “being” existence as a person and as a teacher.

Shifting stories guided and influenced the ways in which I thought about and work with my students. As the “importance of the contextual, temporal quality of human life” (Conle, 1999, p.8), my shifting stories to live by acted as both antecedent and consequence to how I conducted my life both personally and professionally. The philosophical duality of my lived experiences was connected to my history of myself with the history of what was being experienced to explain my present modes of narration. My narrative thread through time and place analyzed what affected and shaped my understandings of teaching and learning. This then facilitated how I understood my thinking and ways of “being” within “landscapes past and present in which she lives and works” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p.112).

Within my lived and narrated stories of teaching, access seemed to be a dominant factor when noticing spaces of tension in various school experiences. My childhood, school and teacher education experiences, early teaching experiences, and moments lived during the actual narrative inquiry process were taken into consideration for analyzing how my story has shifted. This narrative identity helped me focus on “what I have inherited and experienced from the past and what I anticipate and can become in the future” (Ricoeur, 1981, p.180). Just as Clandinin et al. (2006) postulated, my narrative story has shifted from my past so that I may better attend to my students’ stories for pulling forward strengths, engaging in successful activities, and honoring their diversity as their teacher in the present and future.

I faintly became aware of my reactions to a specific time and place. I slowly shifted my mentalities of how I thought I should teach and reconsidered the ways in which I taught. As a result, these shifting stories acted as a temporal vessel that transformed the kind of personal and professional lives I live as a teacher. Bochner and Riggs (2014) would call this “a longing to make sense of the plural unity of time -- past, present, and, future -- in order to recover the past and stretch what we make of it across the trajectory of our lives” (p. 216). Through these times and places in context, my shifting knowledge is a commodity, for without it, I would never be able to become more aware of “the complex ways teachers’ personal practical knowledge is shaped and reshaped” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p.134) to fluidly evolve the threads of my stories over time and place.

### *Critical Ethnography*

Critical ethnography was epistemologically appropriate for investigating how human agency develops in pre-adolescence. At the cusp of maturity (Jetha & Segalowitz, 2012; Casey & Jones, 2010; Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), pre-adolescents are ripe for studying how ideas of self relate to ideas of society and the roles in which they might have the opportunity or possibility of playing within society as they grow up. This unique evolution had significant implications for how pre-adolescents interpreted, created, and/or reproduced culture, power, and ways of thinking. Described as “emancipatory intent” by Habermas (1971) or “catalytic validity” by Lather (1991), critical ethnography illuminated how pre-adolescent students began to symbolically represent their reality, their power within it, and the power of influences over it to begin clarifying where (oppression) works.

Moving forward, if “new power hierarchies and distinctive identities will follow educational, socioeconomic and technological lines” as Trueba and Zou (2002, pg. 5) posit, then

it was even more imperative that students had a school setting where they had the freedom to engage in dialectical situations that challenged and expanded their social, political, and economic awareness. Critical ethnography had the distinct advantage of utilizing the vantage points of both my students' and my teacher researcher's narratives to develop the theoretical and methodological tools that could further develop it.

This very nature of how they thought of themselves and their role within society were exactly what helped them stand out as they began to cultivate this clarity. The more freedom my students and this teacher researcher had to build a local cultural pedagogy, the more credit and authenticity we could bring to this clarity as well. Based on Pierre Bourdieu's conception of field structures and the jurisdiction of resources and interests within a given field, the cultural field was ripe for utilizing both my students' and my teacher researcher's personal experience and cultural capital to approach ideas and develop our perspectives (see Bourdieu 1977, 1993). In other words, my students and I, as the teacher researcher, needed to use what we knew to build a sound foundation for future mobility. In building upon the knowledge we brought, an applicable education could evolve from the relevant skills we utilized in daily life (Giroux, 1996). In turn, this "radical contextualization" of what we could presently offer based on the historical context of the complex relationships we have built across any field (social, economic, political, educational, cultural, etc.) of what we know provided new sources of academic capital that were more enriched and diverse (Trueba and Zou, 2002).

The radical contextualization for this particular method of studying pre-adolescent students was derived from a philosophical ontology that concerted cultivation must be developed in all children; they must be exposed to it at a young age in order to grow comfortable interacting confidently within such societal norms. Therefore, the presupposed social ontology for this

research was that these students may not get this concerted cultivation elsewhere. Based on their life experiences and current living situations, their greatest opportunity for engaging in this cultivation came from the space to practice it at school.

To that end, critical ethnography, when practiced by this teacher researcher in an elementary school setting, produced an ideal situation to cultivate knowledge capable of altering a student's agency. In spurring and facilitating the confrontation of what one knows, observes, and experiences, there was a critical intent to authenticate how pre-adolescent students network their expanding capacity of the technical, practical, and emancipatory paradigms of the world and the ways in which they act within it (Habermas, 1971). Real issues could naturally materialize from the interactions and exchanges this teacher researcher and pre-adolescents established within the field context of which we worked.

Building an understanding of the social and cultural development of pre-adolescent students enlightened how power, oppression, and justice construct social systems by means of various dynamics embedded within how they have grown up. For over sixty years, the emphasis on consumer capitalistic culture and competition has alienated and stratified the growth and development of pre-adolescent students (see Henry, 1969). The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory was one of the initial institutions of critical examination for how contextual factors have influenced society. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse's work in analyzing the dynamic of emancipatory action in mediating the link between cultural superstructures and everyday life exemplifies the social inquiry needed within schools. Their dialectical framework through theory and practice of *what is* and *what should be* demonstrated how schools should "provide the opportunity to both critique and elaborate its insights beyond the constraints and historical conditions under which they were first generated" (Giroux, 2009).

With the dawn of new technologies, critical ethnography evolved and expanded to include an anthropological awareness of inequality and the political intent to change oppressed communities' consciousness. Friere's (1970) critical pedagogy, Kincheloe's (2005) bricolage, and Hall's (1978) broad class theory for encoding and decoding culture all exemplified how a critical ethnographer needs to include an interpretive and narrative practice of systematic fieldwork rooted in participant observation, key informants work, and extensive interviews. This historical and cultural ethnography produced a reflexivity that was critical within a situated, socially constructed time and place of preadolescents in elementary school.

The more analogic and dialectic reflexivity this teacher researcher, students, and parents cyclically engaged in over time constructed genuinely conscientious stories. The longer this fieldwork was conducted by this familiar teacher researcher, the deeper the authentic relationships that built an ethnography worthy of making a difference became. Such a "tactical humanist narrative" (Abu-Lughod, 1991) interrupted the ideological practices that systematically inflict symbolic cruelty upon ordinary people to develop a new knowledge that expanded learning processes of that local community (Giroux, 1992). The narratives and local funds of knowledge that developed from preadolescents' daily lives became "the basis for a radical new pedagogy" that privileged a reflexive process where the community became the classroom (Moll, 1992).

Babcock (1980) says that methodologically, we were forced to explore the self-other relationships of fieldwork critically so that we could produce more discriminating defensible interpretations. For such interpretations to occur, Carspecken and Apple (1992) designed a cyclical stage methodology that assessed subjective experiences, determined the significance of actions and activities, and analyzed action through social systems, power, and inequality

relations. In utilizing my personal observations and stories, student work responses, and parent interviews, I reconstructed interaction patterns for coding meaning fields, role, power, critical discourse, and validity horizon analyses. For all viewpoints to be thoughtfully considered, several types of reflexivity were interpreted as well. Confessional reflexivity was a rational value-free objective universalizing voice that combined autobiographical material and personal encounters. Meaning fields and validity horizons were bolstered by the honesty of the backgrounded interpretations of these stories. Intertextual reflexivity called attention to this ethnographer's own practices and discourses and how that affected what and how I thought and wrote. This transparency aided the truth claims and facts that were discerned from this process. Theoretical reflexivity flowed between social scientific metalanguages, learned dispositions, and constraining historical/cultural contexts as people fostered culture out of what they had inherited. It aimed to disrupt and renovate ideological practices. In developing these reflexive processes, I studied and mapped how the time and place of my students developed their cultural practices (Hall, 1978). Therefore, to have engaged in such an extensive systematic process of experiencing, recording, and critically reflecting upon lived experiences over a nine-year period means to have merged theory and empirical fieldwork to produce articulated representations of cultural practices observed and adapted over time.

### *Case Study*

A case study can capture a particular humanistic phenomenon in educational programs that, when extensively studied, leads to new knowledge that can improve practice. Simons (2009) defines case study research as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project in a ‘real-life’ context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led” (p. 21). In an attempt to gain a broad

analysis for how AGENTS was implemented and what effects it had for students, case study supports generating evidence through triangulating and pattern matching case complexities, ambiguities, values, and interests (Simons, 2014; Yin, 2012).

I determined that the qualitative bricolage research that emerged as the best illustration of my desire to comprehend the impact AGENTS had on pre-adolescent students was a hybrid qualitative ethnographic narrative case study. I sought to understand the value AGENTS provided for these students and learned how it matured through my parent participants' perceptions, interpretations, and interactions (Kushner, 2000). Methodologically, I had to adapt evaluative case study to encompass my narrative inquiry into the relationships developed in AGENTS which, in turn, needed a critical ethnographic investigation of the consequences AGENTS had for these students (Simons, 2014). My close connection to how AGENTS was put into practice, combined with the depth to which the AGENTS phenomena was perceived with parent participants, drove an interpretive and theoretical improvement to my research process. In this particular instance, including aspects of narrative inquiry and critical ethnography together provided the evidence to inform a rich portrayal of the AGENTS framework (Simons, 2014). By including important aspects of each methodology, I was able to develop "the generative potential for meaningful insights that can dialectically catalyze new and deep understanding not possible with one methodological standpoint alone" (Green, 2012, p. 758). My perspective for conducting a mixed-methods qualitative case study falls within a constructivist, interpretivist conception. I was interested in how I and those in the case perceived, interpreted, and constructed understandings of AGENTS. Therefore, this suited my preferred phenomenological approach to conduct interviews to find out what has happened to my students since AGENTS (Simons, 2014).

The case study of AGENTS encompassed both this teacher researcher's narrative of how AGENTS has been conducted for the last ten years as well as parent participant interviews of the impact AGENTS had on their children. This provided an opportunity to explore the process of change AGENTS went through and explained how and why it occurred. In designing this case study, my parent participants' perceptions were what I valued most, so their interviews were the focal point of my data collection and reporting (Simons, 2014). If the impact of AGENTS was the case, the parent participants were the boundary, or contextual condition, that knew the greater context of what it offered from a historical context (Yin, 2012). Generating knowledge of the case was strengthened by the contribution of the parent participants' natural language in their interviews (Simons, 2014). By being engaged in the research process, these parent participants and I were able to "co-construct perceived reality through the relationships and joint understandings we created in the field" (Simons, 2009, p. 23). Since both my parent participants and I acted upon our subjectivity for this case, it provided "an intelligence that is essential to understanding and interpreting the experience of participants" (Simons, 2014, p. 459).

### *Data Collection*

This study utilized a concurrent critical mixed qualitative longitudinal design that employed narrative inquiry and critical ethnography in case study methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the framework, teacher researcher's role, and lived experiences of former AGENTS. Specifically, I investigated parents' stories for the impact of an AGENTS framework on their children within their educational career. With my research questions in place, my value orientations leaned toward finding a positive effect the AGENTS after-school framework had on these students as they grew up. I wanted to take what Carspecken and Apple (1992) outlined for qualitative research and

split it into two halves – both past and present social action within social sites – to determine what future significance they had as a connected whole. By working between several loosely associated stages of analysis, I assessed the epistemological significance of these experiences on power and inequality relations over time.

Due to my role as both teacher and researcher, I compiled the first stage of a primary record of monological data composed of elementary school student interactions and observations that ranged from one to nine years old. I made note of each student's current school and neighborhood locales as I reflected on my own narrative of how AGENTS evolved and adapted over time. This data informed the second stage of my preliminary reconstructive analysis as I analyzed patterns in roles, power relations, structures, and boundaries within past and present environments. I uncovered cultural themes and system factors that were, or currently are, bubbling just below the experiences of the past one to nine years. With this in mind, I generated the third stage of dialogical data by conducting two separate interview sessions with four different parents, one individual interview and one as a collective group interview. I examined the primary record and reconstructive analysis with these parents for the ways in which AGENTS influenced their child as they experienced new challenges and growth over the past few years. The inquiry examined the perceptions of parents related to their observations (i.e. feelings, values, attitudes, motivations) of their child, from elementary school to their current grade level, and the impact of interpretations of those experiences, decisions, and choices on their child's development within their educational career. As a result, I examined the relationship between the past social site of AGENTS in elementary school with the present social site of middle or high school to discover the fourth stage of system

relations. These system relations guided my level of inference as I explained my findings with the broadest system theories to contribute to advancing the effects of what the processes and impacts of an AGENTS after-school framework could offer.

### *Teacher Self-Narrative*

The researcher's narrative was designed as a reflection of my understandings of the experiences and issues presented throughout the year-long framework. Throughout each year of the AGENTS framework, notes on how the year went: what went well, what needed to be tweaked or improved, personal observations of students and their work, thinking, and engagement, personal misconceptions, frustrations, desires for student and AGENTS framework goals, and general concerns, anxieties, or successes were all recorded in my own personal notebook. With each new year, I compared and assessed how each group had been similar and different, what became more accessible or limited based on previous years' opportunities, and how my interactions, values, efforts, and challenges also changed and evolved the longer this framework has existed.

I analyzed my reflections for patterns and themes that emerged from one year to the next, or randomly developed, to determine how I was meeting the needs of the students I worked with. I also compared my narrative to the analysis of student reflections on leadership and their experience in AGENTS and reflexively dissected parents' reflections of their child's time in AGENTS and their current involvement with my own hopes for their children. This provided an opportunity to highlight the confessional, intertextual, and theoretical reflexivity of particular stories and experiences that illuminated how my personal perceptions and stories changed and developed over time.

*Parent Interviews*

Potential participants were recruited from the Humble/Atascocita area of the Humble Independent School District in Texas. Potential participants were self-identified and based on self-determination of the inclusion criteria that they spoke English or English as a second language, were at least 30 years of age, and gave parental permission to their child to participate in this teacher researcher's after-school organization one to nine years ago.

A recruitment email was sent to the researcher's former students' parents asking them to volunteer for the study. Since these parents gave parental permission to students to participate in the after-school organization the researcher served as the teacher for when they were in elementary school, phone numbers and email addresses of these parents were retrieved by the researcher through archived parent contact records. Five parents responded to the email with an interest to be a voluntary participant. An additional phone call was made by the researcher to the interested parent participants to explain the research topic, as well as the time requirements in advance, to assist in their decision making. It was conveyed that the researcher was acting as a graduate student conducting the study and that they could ask questions, address any potential concerns they had, or could leave at any time during the course of the study. Out of the five that were contacted, four parents were actually able to meet for face-to-face interviews. Although initially enthusiastic about participating in this study, an available time to meet with the fifth parent never materialized. Prior commitments and professional obligations stymied any sort of scheduling options, though this fifth parent was very proud that their child had been a part of AGENTS back in elementary school.

Digitally recorded individual parental participant interviews, as well as a group interview, were used as part of the research process. I conducted two semi-structured interview sessions. The four parent participants spent a total duration of four weeks in the study. Each subject was initially interviewed for 30 minutes. Four weeks later, all subjects were supposed to meet together for a final group interview of 90 minutes. This four-week time frame provided each session enough time for parents to answer at least 18 open-ended questions and tell their stories about their child, both in an individual and group context. While individual interviews provided a more detailed account of individual experiences, a group interview provided the possibility for dynamic understanding and meaning to be collaboratively developed among group members (Mason, 2002). The decision to conduct a group interview was based on several factors. Each parent had at least one child go through AGENTS at a different period of time over its ten-year existence. Observations of programming, relationships, and experiences that each of these children had gone through after being in AGENTS allowed these parents to develop an interactive and more flexible understanding of what their children experienced, which was best assessed by a group interview format. However, the possibility of individual follow-up interviews was considered if a parent participant was unable to meet with the majority of the group.

In addition, since each of the parent participants had children who participated in AGENTS during different school years, a variety of impressions of impacts and experiences for their children was captured in initial individual interviews. Then, after each parent had time to reflect on those impressions for four weeks, a group interview allowed sharing of those impacts and experiences to compare the experiences their children had as an AGENT together. In the

group interview, additional open-ended questions were asked and all parent participants were given the opportunity to respond and follow up on each other's responses. In addition, this teacher researcher actively made space for all voices to be heard and explicitly asked for different or negative experiences to be shared.

A series of open-ended questions regarding each parent's child and their child's behaviors and choices in school over the past nine years was utilized to guide the first session. The initial interview asked them to share their observations (i.e. feelings, values, attitudes, motivations) of their child and their child's educational experiences and opportunities after leaving elementary school. Parent participants were invited to share stories and specific incidences in their initial individual interview, and follow-up questions were asked to elicit further depth as needed. After reviewing the previous interview session to ensure questions were still pertinent to our next session, the second interview was a follow-up group discussion session.

Unfortunately, the schedules of four different parent participants could not align. Whether one was out of town or a morning emergency arose, only two parent participants were able to actually meet on the agreed upon date and time for the group interview. The other two parent participants completed their interviews either four days before the group interview or ten days after the group interview. Some discussion points were able to be brought up from the unintended individual interviews into the group interview to compare and synthesize reflections. In these fractured second interviews, parent participants reflected on the stories and experiences they shared previously, added additional information that they weren't aware of during the first interview, or discussed any questions or topics that were not covered during the initial interview, especially

concerning the experiences and impressions of how AGENTS affected their childrens' views of themselves. The participants were required to be interviewed and answer questions both at an initial session and a follow-up group session to clarify and confirm this researcher's suggested findings.

Questions for interviews with parents were open-ended with the intention of participants being able to freely share their experiences without having to stick to a rigid format. Interviews were designed to reflect and document how participants have interpreted their child's educational experiences from elementary school to the present and how these interpretations have informed their child's choices and actions within their education over time as they have transitioned to high school and beyond.

Interviews were numbered, color-coded, then broken down with first cycle elemental and affective coding methods. After close examination and comparison for common themes of attitudes, values, or experiences that manifested throughout each parent participant's reflections, these codes were reorganized and reconfigured for another round of second cycle pattern and longitudinal coding methods and names were changed to protect privacy. Interpretive tools, namely broadening, burrowing, tracing, restoring, and debriefing concepts helped weave my way through focusing each cycle of coding.

I examined the stories from each parent within their time and place to make a coherent reflection of the pervasive motives I identified. Upon further examination in categorizing these motives, I was able to determine common themes that emerged from these four parents. Recounting these parents' stories to share their meanings in a thick description "as they relate to one another, and as they affect or produce certain results and

outcomes within it” (Geertz, 1973, p. 198) is for the benefit of the reader to “reflect critically on their own experience, to expand their social capabilities, and to deepen their commitment to social justice and caring relationships with others” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 206). Since my interpretations shaped and directed these themes, I was obligated to clarify my biases and intentions. This is a modest sampling of the personal reflections that invited conversation about the impact of engaging pre-adolescents in an emancipatory framework and the potential for future possibilities.

My own narrative within AGENTS was integral to understanding the impact it has had on these students. As both a participant and an observer, I embodied what Allen & Hancock (2016) proposed as “a critical presence perspective that captures the ways in which the researcher impacts the internal epistemology and ontology of the research environment” (p. 121). Simply put, based on my work with AGENTS, I had to capture the nuanced layers of self within this research context (Allen & Hancock, 2016).

Comparatively, as a teacher, I have known some of these parents and AGENTS for over twelve years. This critical presence within a shared, common community has created a familial reciprocity between myself, the parents, and their children. Any sort of dialogical data that was gathered revealed more personal and profound knowledge due to the trusting relationship that was established over time (Lather, 1991).

### *Parent Reunions*

Insecurities of whether there had been anything that AGENTS had really done, or if there was even anything to make an impact with began to plague me as I prepared to start my interviews. The vulnerability of confirming hopes and aspirations from our shared past made me begin to feel very insignificant and silly that I might have aided in all the other great things these

students might have/are doing since leaving elementary school. I was a very small character in the grand story that they are living to tell. Even talking to these parents again in general, with such a shared pride between the two of us – like I got to be part of their “team” – being behind these kids for the past ten years working to keep them going, pushing them forward. It was also very overwhelming to think that they might have a similar pride and support for me; or that I want to finish my degree and do well in completing it for them so they are just as proud of me.

In revisiting these old relationships, with students that have grown from who I remember them being, and becoming more acquainted with these parents in the present, I became very aware of how much more I might know them than a stranger, but I have very little grasp of their realities now. It was very emotional and a very delicate issue to broach what their lives have been like since elementary school. I did not anticipate the fine line of knowing more about these students I care so deeply about. Listening to these parents that are partial to me and want to be a part of this research was a great advantage, but they also seemed to not want to share too much or expose the negative setbacks that their children, and they in turn, have endured. I became stuck in an awkward juxtaposition of wanting to know more to get to the root of their experiences to determine the antecedents and consequences of them as a researcher and to reestablish a connection to be a support as a teacher again.

Since I’ve known all of these parents at least six years, our one-on-one interviews were much more conversational, as opposed to a dry question and answer back and forth. I wanted to be personable with each of these parents because it is a relationship that has a mutual connection and affection for the topics being discussed. This clouds my objectivity, to an extent, but it also provides for a more calm, relatable, and deeper interaction of how we, the parent and teacher (in

this situation, the subject and researcher), can converse freely about topics that extend beyond surface information and clarify past memories.

### *Parent 1*

Parent 1 (P1) is a White, stay-at-home mom. She had her first two daughters (out of four) by her late teens/early twenties. As her daughters now near the same age she was when she had them, her perspectives on growing up in general are greatly affected by how she grew up compared to how her daughters have grown up. I have known (P1) since my first year of teaching, when her first daughter was in first grade. Although I did not have the oldest daughter in my class, I had positive interactions with her, and P1 on occasion, for four years before AGENTS was created. By the time P1's first daughter was invited to be an AGENT, there was a little sister in third grade that would also attend AGENTS meetings on a regular basis starting a year later.

It was more bittersweet and scary to meet with my first parent than I thought. P1 had two children that were a part of the first and second/third group of AGENTS. The bias I have for these girls and their family has only gotten harder to keep in check with so much time. When we finally got started, I was overwhelmed with the desire to know everything that has gone on in these two girls' lives since they left elementary school. Listening to P1 was incredible. To listen to not only what the girls have done but how P1 has also evolved was very powerful. The parental impact and support P1 provided made me wish I could have done more with this parent, and with the other parents that were already raising strong children. Having this more intimate dialogue with the parents now makes me wonder how helpful their involvement/input/participation within AGENTS back then could have been, or if it would have even been feasible. There were some points that got a little shaky and uneasy regarding opinions

and memories from both the viewpoint of the parent and my own memories of these girls. The personal connection is so strong that I wanted to know everything about their development (like boys/relationships) as well as the passions (like music). Since I have such a strong historical bond with this parent, it was hard to listen to how the girls have weathered struggles or what choices they have made or sacrificed. All this was shared while P1 balanced what I could be told without being too intrusive as to how everything has played out in their lives so far. The complexity of her describing a past experience with her older daughter in that “there was a lot of things that she did that we did not approve of, that she made some bad choices, and there were lots of consequences for those bad choices, and so... here we are. It’s hard to tell... that so could have gone either way... I don’t know... truthfully, if we hadn’t intervened, where it would have ended up” was mired in varied and conflicting emotions. On one hand, I wonder if it was easier to share certain aspects of stories with me that were a little more personal, but if there were still some other important pieces that were made more difficult because there is a fine line of learning about the highlights of their lives while not sharing too much of the distressing parts of their experiences.

Additionally, it was helpful to have that comparison of two siblings in AGENTS, as well as younger sisters with an age gap from the two older ones in the family. This allowed me to get a more specific concept of how the two I worked with have developed their character traits as compared to what others in the family act like. P1 is very cognizant of the more detailed nuances of the two oldest girls who were AGENTS because it is seen in tandem with the two younger girls that are similar in behavior, but still hold their own individual uniqueness. For example, P1 could describe the second child’s outgoingness with a more precise definition compared to the youngest child’s display of this same behavior. Likewise, P1 was able to

describe the oldest daughter thoroughly when reflecting on how similar they are in temperament and intention, but seemed overwhelmed attempting to describe the various facets that characterize her second daughter.

### *Parent 2*

Parent 2 (P2) is a Hispanic, bilingual food services manager. She has a daughter that was in my third and fourth groups of AGENTS. Starting out in the bilingual program in Kindergarten, she had shown enough progress in English to be transferred to an English-only speaking class by fourth grade. She was skillful enough in both languages that she exited the bilingual program early; a testament to the time and effort she puts into her learning. As a result, I was worried how AGENTS would come across to her and P2. I only had brief encounters with P2 when dismissal from AGENTS occurred, so unlike P1, my relationships with both student and parent were not at the same level of familiarity. I was unsure how that would now translate to a candid discussion about the past seven years and how much P2 would be willing to share.

However, the respect, insight, and ease with which P2 was willing to talk to me from was enthralling. How P2 spoke, reflecting thoughtfully on each aspect of every question, personified the ways in which the daughter had reflected on how to be an agent of change. There was a strong belief that if “you want others to treat you a certain way, you must first treat them in the way you desire to be treated.” P2 exuded the steadfast work ethic that was described for the daughter over and over again.

### *Parent 3*

Parent 3 (P3) is a White, stay-at-home mom. Out of all four parents, I have the closest parent/teacher relationship with her. This is due to the fact that I actually had her first son in my first second grade class at my new school. So, I had already had direct, personal contact with P3

for a whole school year. I even met the little sister when she started Kindergarten that same year. I was able to keep in touch easily since P3 was so involved with the Parent/Teacher Organization (PTO) and we saw each other monthly. Keeping up with how her son and daughter were doing was a natural part of our conversations.

As part of the revival of AGENTS at this new school, students can only participate for one year when they are in fifth grade. Both her son and daughter were one of twenty in my eighth and tenth groups of AGENTS, respectively. They have just started on their journeys beyond elementary school. However, over the past six years, I have witnessed the guidance and patience that she models for them, along with the preparation and autonomy that they are regarded with by P3. With six children at home, she has very much instilled a team family mentality where everyone has an important role to play, and they are all involved in ever growing and changing responsibilities. As a former teacher, P3 has played a huge part in developing a specific mindset and ethic of how to learn, extend, and utilize the school setting for her son's and daughter's growth and development.

#### *Parent 4*

Parent 4 (P4) is an Asian, trilingual nurse practitioner. Going into this interview with P4, I knew the dynamic between the two of us would be a little different. I have known the three parents I previously interviewed for at least five years. Their children were either AGENTS over eight years ago or I taught one of their children before having them as an AGENT three years later. But my connection with P4 is different. Yes, both sons use to be AGENTS. However, I never got to have either of them in class and they always walked home after AGENTS; no parent ever picked one of them up afterwards. Therefore, I was familiar with P4, yet had never really had a one-on-one conversation with her. I went into this interview completely unaware of any

personality traits or temperament. The comfort of past interactions and shared appreciation for her sons was not established.

I quickly realized that familiar repair was not easily established either, and there was very little opportunity to do so in a recorded interview setting. P4's answers were short and to the point. I was provided with the information that was asked and given very little detail or expansion into responses. Some answers were completed with a short laugh that faded at the end, interjecting this strategy into her discourse at least nineteen times in thirty minutes. It was an interesting "emotional performance that tell us about the discursive skills and rules of emotion they have acquired" (Eatough and Smith, 2006, p. 117) as if she had nothing else to say, her meaning was implied in what she had already stated, she did not want to share any more information on the subject, or she didn't feel further information was necessary. At times, the initial information P4 told me made me realize just how little I knew about these boys, especially when compared to how familiar I am with the other three parents' children. I am having a hard time reconciling why that is.

I did not have any of the first or second parents' children in my homeroom classes when they were younger, just like P4. There was no student/teacher/parent bond to create over parent/teacher conferences and communications, similar to my relationship with P1 and P2 and their children. P2 was not very involved in school activities, nor visited the school on a weekly basis, just like P4. Yet I still know the least about P4 and her children. Upon further reflection, part of this foreignness could be due to timing. Although I did not have P1's children in class, I built a relationship with the first child over four years before she was invited to become an AGENT. This parent also volunteered at our school, so not only did we see each other monthly, but I slowly built up a familiar relationship with P1 due to my relationship with the first, and

then second, child that went through first grade when I was teaching the same grade level. Similarly, P2 did not have their child in my class in first grade either. This parent also worked a lot, and so was unable to come to the elementary school during the day. P2 was only able to come to school functions that occurred in the evening. However, our presence year after year was so consistent that we were aware of each other and had been formally introduced on several occasions.

The situation with P4 and her sons was different. When I moved elementary schools, I not only moved up a grade, but everything was new all over again. P4's oldest child was already in third grade when I came to teach second grade and I hardly had any interaction with other second grade teachers' classes when P4's second child was in second grade. There was never a real opportunity to interact and engage with either of P4's children before they went to fifth grade. Since P4 works during the day as well, the only attendance occurred in the evening for school functions that never provided an opportunity to converse and build a relationship upon. Even when P4's children were AGENTS, I barely got to meet P4 on very few occasions. A polite greeting and compliment about the students was really the extent of our interactions when they were AGENTS in fifth grade.

### *Data Analysis*

All of my codes directly stem from what my parent participants talked about. They all shared personal perceptions of their children over time, but their individual value, attitude, and belief systems about their children varied greatly. Sometimes, as I delved for categories within the patterned coded data, I grouped certain reflections together both for their similarities or for their commonalities in their differences. Likewise, data "cannot always be precisely and discretely bounded" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 6), and some reflections had simultaneous codes in order

to be taken into consideration with other parent reflections. Though I coded these reflections with a researcher's analytic lens, my personal involvement as an active participant observer filtered how I perceived, documented, and ultimately coded my data (Adler & Adler, 1987). Since I have a predisposition of former teacher with a transparent subjectivity of investment in these parents and children, my findings "will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place" (Merriam, 1998, p. 48). Therefore, in an attempt to reduce my proclivity to the collected data, I split it into line-by-line coding so that my analysis might be more trustworthy (Charmaz, 2008).

Initially, I approached analyzing my data corpus with elemental and affective coding methods. This primary cycle of coding employed In Vivo Coding to honor my parent participants' voices. Through Emotions and Values Coding of my parent participants' feelings, values, attitudes, and belief systems, I was able to reconceptualize identifying the Versus Coding of power struggles they described. I then cycled back through this coding with multiple methods in order to cycle forward for a richer qualitative data analysis with eclectic coding for more purposeful methods (Saldaña, 2013).

Broadening was used to determine the context of the study and made connections to the broader educational landscape and existing related research. Burrowing was used to inquire into participants' sense-making of individual storied experiences. Tracing was used to highlight and make connections among particular stories and experiences. Restoring was used to illuminate how perceptions and stories changed and developed over time. Debriefing was used to promote representations that resonated with participants. As I interpreted the meaning of each code, I was able to integrate them into detecting patterns that could be categorized for my analytic process.

Tracing the values and patterns within repetitive perceptions and language and the use of quotations was useful in extracting these factors (Saldaña, 2013). For this research, names were changed and burrowing and tracing the language choices and stories of parents were probed and categorized, while quotations highlighted their patterns of thought. This was important in clarifying the lived experiences of each family (parent and AGENT) as a vanguard of this inquiry.

### *Summary*

I came to academia from the margins. As an experienced elementary teacher, I was committed to my school community by utilizing the “assets of young people and the philanthropic spirit of giving resources, time, ideas, and energy for supporting our neighbors and youth during times of need” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002, p. 298) as they learned to navigate an accessible time and place. Additionally, I developed and practiced a different method of critical ethnography as a teacher researcher. In order to reflect on the work I did and how I did it, critical race theorists’ argue that it's critical that I lived in the multiple worlds of where students and parents, their characteristics, and myself were not property to be commodified (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Holland, et al., 1998). My role as a teacher researcher was considered action research in that I worked to give voice to an urban underclass in the hopes of engaging them as community members with businesses, policymakers, and politicians to serve each other within local communities more than having them serve or cater to any class, gender, or race.

I reflexively developed my fieldwork, which reflected new postmodern concerns over representation, texts, and conceptual and epistemological issues that fed or disrupted hegemonic discourses and representations. My narrative highlighted both commonalities and differences

and helped disrupt or deconstruct common sense categories of these often stigmatized, stereotyped groups. My work was pedagogical such that I consciously began with the relational and put my students at the forefront of my efforts to understand the effects of a proactive, aggressive assets-based approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996).

In building these teacher researcher/student relationships, the power dynamic shifted to co-creating and sharing a different voice where the field work was created from their knowledge of their time and place. I interrogated the whole self/other process of power relationships and identification and misrecognition, to discover, explain, and provide a deep reading of my field experiences. However, I was careful with status/power issues undermining my attempts to address the hidden regimes of power at work in our school environment and reify them; my research was designed to pursue leads into an investigation of the wider social issues of power and oppression. Since I was so deeply embedded in the local relationships and politics of the school and the students' futures, I was consciously situating my representational practices among the representational practices of past and present researchers; such an interpretive move makes transparent the socially constructed nature and partiality of the truth claims I discovered.

## Chapter Four - Interpretations & Discussions

We tell stories because that's what we have to do. It's what we're all about. We care for one another with the stories we place in each other's memory; they are our food for thought, and life.

-Richard Zaner (as quoted in Bochner & Riggs, 2004, p. 195)

As part of the initial introduction into being AGENTS and cultivating a leadership mentality, students critically analyze various poems, song lyrics, and children's stories to help them gain a deeper understanding of what their potential can be when they use their words and actions. We look at examples of people in different times and places and how their circumstances help direct the choices they make in creating change in their community. They also dissect the lines of a poem or song lyrics to determine what the core understanding is that these writers are trying to convey through the word choice and imagery they have used within their work. In one of the first meetings after school at the beginning of the year one year, I presented the hook and third verse of Lupe Fiasco's song Words I Never Said (2011, track 2) for AGENTS to analyze:

[Hook]

It's so loud inside my head  
With words that I should have said  
As I drown in my regrets  
I can't take back the words I never said

[Verse 3]

I think that all the silence is worse than all the violence  
Fear is such a weak emotion, that's why I despise it  
We scared of almost everything, afraid to even tell the truth  
So scared of what you think of me, I'm scared of even telling you  
Sometimes I'm like the only person I feel safe to tell it to  
I'm locked inside a cell in me, I know that there's a jail in you  
Consider this your bailing out, so take a breath, inhale a few  
My screams is finally getting free, my thoughts is finally yelling through

[Hook]

It's so loud inside my head  
With words that I should have said

As I drown in my regrets  
I can't take back the words I never said

As they discussed what they thought Fiasco's message was, or why he even chose to write these particular lyrics, one of the AGENTS turned to her small group and said, "Guys, I think he's trying to say that even if we're scared... what we need to say... our words... they're still important. We still gotta say what we need to say, no matter what. We need to really get our words out there." In that moment, I thought to myself, '*YES*... she's getting it! This is what AGENTS is all about!'

By utilizing the lived experiences and interactions of this teacher researcher with pre-adolescent students, as well as the effects of an after school empowering framework on those former students, there is an intention to become more conscious of one's self agency and confidence to push past the margins of their current praxis. The focal point of this research is a critically qualitative case study exploration of parent's perspectives on the impact of the AGENTS framework on their children's actions and choices within their educational career. I was drawn to a "radical democratization of the research process—an intention to minimize the power differential between researchers and participants (subjects)—one that placed a greater emphasis on activism, social justice, and applied research" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 200) to represent the voices of my students and parents in a proactive commitment to personally making a difference. A particularly pressing element of this exploration is supporting these pre-adolescent students in developing the social capital and problem-solving strategies for future issues and applications within their community. The collective research on participatory action and service learning for pre-adolescent youth is predominantly narrowed within specific subjects or partnered with older students (Travis and Leech, 2013; Schwartz and Suyemoto, 2013;

Connor, 2011; O'Brien & Moules, 2007; Billig, 2000). If pre-adolescent students are given the freedom to critically exercise and engage with their personal lived experiences and knowledge, they could be more inclined to consciously act on behalf of themselves and their community.

This research works to discern how the lived experience of both this teacher researcher and my students influences the ways in which critical consciousness is developed. An attempt to discover how pre-adolescents' awareness of self, parent interpretations of their pre-adolescents growth over time, and the impact of being a part of an after school empowering framework all pertain to the decisions and actions that are made over time. My personal involvement as the teacher was integral to developing a learning environment where both pre-adolescent students and their parents trusted the value of being a part of an afterschool empowering framework. Serving as an active participant in this empowering framework to develop that trust "may be one of the most powerful factors that positively influence relationships ... of the young, contributing to their learning and scholastic achievement as well" (Rotter, 1973, p. 652). Throughout our year or two together, the expectation was impressed upon these pre-adolescent students that they can utilize and continue with what they learned and started in elementary school throughout the rest of their lives.

### *Teacher Reflections of AGENTS Evolution*

There was something about the elementary schools that I taught at which made me feel like something was lacking. Pride, recognition, and ownership within the parameters of the school building have either been lacking, or futile, at best. I attempt to amend this mind set by providing time and space for these pre-adolescents to find the possibilities that they may pursue to gain a broader awareness and confidence of who they are and what they can do with their lived experiences and potential.

Every year I teach, our students' perspectives are in jeopardy of getting lost in 'adult' agendas of standardization, conformity, and current vogue teaching strategies. However, I prefer learning about the opinions of our students: what they think of their school, what are or should be their own roles within our school, and what kind of impact our school has on them, both in the present and in the future. I also want to know if the work and topics we cover in AGENTS really does make any sort of impact to enable their views to grow and change, and in what ways.

As I reflected upon AGENTS' questionnaires from the past ten years, the questionnaires provided a time and space for all these AGENTS to explore the limits of their capabilities, and patterns of broad categories emerged year by year. Strong connections to how past experiences influence perceptions and references dominate these AGENTS' reflective process. Discerning and negotiating the quality of leadership actions and characteristics they perceive is equally as crucial. In particular, struggling to comprehend the ambiguity and insecurity of their consciousness when possible contradictions of how they view leadership occur can create a dissonance to this exposure as well.

In observing and analyzing AGENTS year to year, they are acutely aware of the interactions they experience on a daily basis. From friends and family to school assignments and extracurricular activities, they have seen, heard, and inferred how leadership emerges and evolves over time. Each year, every AGENT is asked the same eight questions about leadership at the beginning and end of the year. This collection of data provides a window into the impact AGENTS has had on these pre-adolescent students within that particular school year. I compare their answers from the beginning and end of the year to analyze the ways in which their thought process has changed or stayed the same, and in what manner. When asked on this leadership questionnaire if they know any leaders, a majority always write down at least one friend or

family member. Whether this leadership is observed literally in tangible actions or figuratively in how they perceive that person, they scrutinize these interactions for their expectations of desirable, personable characteristics they hope to learn from. Although they are gaining a broader definition of what a leader looks and sounds like, their comfort level at reciprocating between knowledge -- where they can actually identify quality characteristics of a leader versus identifying an actual person personifying characteristics in a negative or positive way -- and action of these characteristics is currently still very raw and intimidating for some to cope with.

### *Connections to Past Experience*

Many AGENTS clearly have a strong preference for their lived experiences when it comes to perceiving others and working within the social structures of their school. They generally utilized these connections to their past experiences to positively and negatively categorize leaders, characteristics of leaders, changes in leaders, and examples of leaders.

They use commonalities between themselves and others to gauge their likelihood of leadership and some sort of bond, like friendship. Often, they come to associate what they say and do with leadership and friendship. Several AGENTS chose to do research projects on specific leaders during their school assignments because they have interpreted certain actions as leadership qualities they want to learn more about. These additional connections to studying leaders have led AGENTS to positively categorize certain ‘famous’ people as leaders based on common goals.

As AGENTS grow more familiar and comfortable with others, be it with each other or with others they come into contact with as a result of AGENTS, interacting with them and emulating their choices has grown much easier. They identify how their families, teachers, or advisors make good choices and how helpful they always are to them. In addition, they

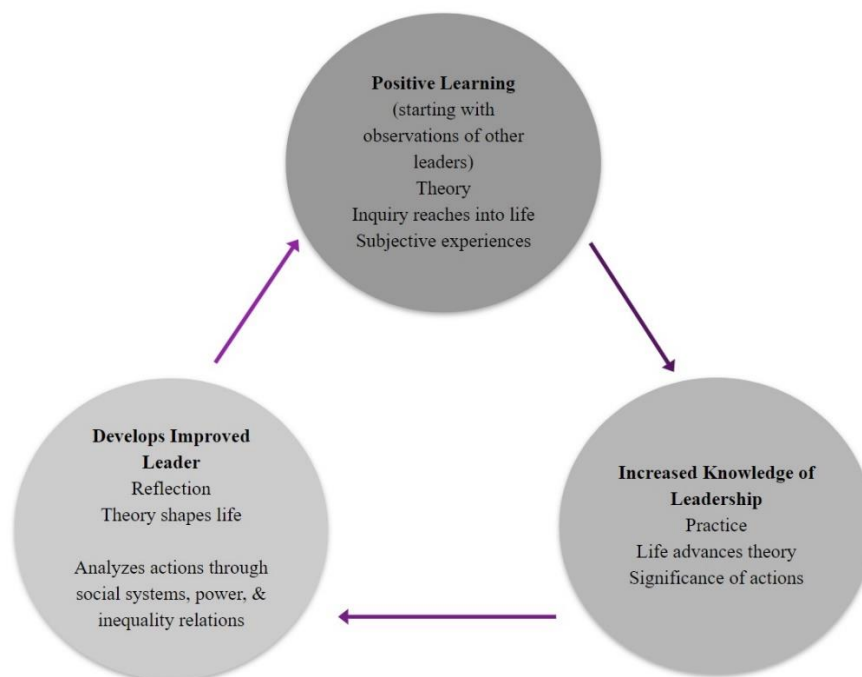
occasionally mention how some people they know change in terms of the actions and behaviors they have observed over their fifth-grade year.

### *Overt/Covert Leadership Discernment*

When AGENTS really dove into our character book studies, they learned that change could really go far, in that they could change what occurs around the world. The stories stayed with them throughout the year, as new names that AGENTS studied together were mentioned in their end of year questionnaire.

They observe leaders to learn how, or if, they “change their ways,” which reflected their hope to mimic similar actions or to change the way they work to be a leader by the end of the year. They continue to extend this notion beyond themselves and hope that others’ leadership will undergo the same transformation. Many AGENTS express a desire to change others’ leadership by their own example. Subsequently, this theory of cyclical leadership is described from year to year such that the more AGENTS positively learn from observations and other leaders’ changes, the more knowledge they gain, which allows them to be better leaders, and thus enables them to learn more (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Cyclical Leadership Process**



Persistence in leading and creating change reflect how AGENTS construct new perceptions of themselves and the people around them. They begin to grapple with a new awareness of how influential their leadership can be, as they communicate and work with unfamiliar people that help them make the changes they want to see. Likewise, AGENTS are not always fully aware of all the dynamic leadership characteristics they significantly value. Some of the leadership characteristics AGENTS have conveyed throughout the year, both explicitly and implicitly, range from fairness/honesty/trustworthiness, cool headedness (or holding your temper), good listening skills, gaining more knowledge, capable/able, steadfast in beliefs, hopeful/motivated/desires more, makes sacrifices/tough decisions, productive, independent, makes connections/ becomes more familiar, influential, and compassionate (or provides for others).

Interactions with other students has provided more abstract thinking and supportive details of what AGENTS think a leader should exemplify. In fact, the way in which AGENTS work, through their verbal and physical actions, provides a fragile glimpse into their developing theories of leadership and human interaction each year.

At times, there is a large gap between what they consider leadership characteristics for their peers compared to adults. They do not hold the same standards for adults as they do peers. Similarly, they do not hold the same kind of skepticism of leadership in adults or identified ‘famous leaders’ as they do in their peers. AGENTS also have high regard for their teachers as examples of leaders that they know. Most AGENTS have some sort of background and/or emerging perceptions of leadership, as they are flexible in their ability to articulate that leaders can and do change. Nevertheless, many AGENTS are in a leadership conundrum in that they consider leaders, or those who are in a leadership position such as a teacher, not at fault for making poor decisions. They see these leaders as merely reacting to poor situations or environments in the best way possible, instead of a flaw that could be worked on. It is those who are considered “not acting like leaders” that are at fault for acting upon and creating such negative environments and continuously perpetuating them. Yet, when it comes to their peers in a similar situation, they hold them to a higher standard where they consider their peers at fault for poor decision making. This gap in rationale could be a developmental precursor in the theory of mind for pre-adolescent students (Frye & Moore, 1991). It seems easier for these AGENTS to take on the perspectives of peers’ actions that they themselves might also currently act upon. Whereas the perspective of leaders’ actions who are older, like a teacher, are not considered actions they could see themselves currently acting upon but future actions when they too are older.

### *Torn Between Exhibiting and Avoiding Action*

There is a dissonance within how AGENTS view their individual leadership, as reflected through belief versus action as well. The obstacles and disappointments AGENTS need to stumble through to get the experience of learning to work through conflict or failure are very undesirable. At the first school, AGENTS learned more and more about leadership and its possibilities, yet rarely interacted with others based on these ideas outside of AGENTS. At the second school, there is an unsubstantiated expectation that when something is asked of someone else, such as from the PTO or a business, it is automatically fulfilled. Whether discussing concepts of leadership with friends or displaying leadership in an intense situation, they struggle to connect how these theories can or should be put into daily practice. At times, it is overwhelming to attempt how to go about changing these predicaments, all while encouraging friends or making tough decisions about people who are not responding in an expected way. In reference to the leadership cycle, they are not ready to implement the actual action of being a leader to learn more from those more difficult situations.

As fifth grade AGENTS, they often explain themselves in terms of one, two, or even three years ago. Their reflections upon experiences from the ages of seven to ten continues to support how they shape their views of leadership and the kind of people they aim to personify. These AGENTS utilize these past lived experiences to support their views of realistic goals and boundaries that they continue to set for themselves as fifth graders and for the future.

### *Parent Interview Analysis*

Over nine years after these students' AGENTS experience, their parents have witnessed their individual experiences and actions evolve and change with time. This nuanced outlook of how their child has cultivated their self-awareness is reinforced by their knowledge of what their

child was like before, during, and after participating in this afterschool empowering framework. Reflections both from myself and the parents of AGENTS revealed similar viewpoints. Still, upon further analysis, the motivation for how those viewpoints were established come from many aspects. Some aspects, when considered in a general facet, stem from similar influences, such as positive interactions or highly desirable interest. Other aspects were as diverse and unique as each AGENT. It became evident in analyzing these reflections that several generalizable conclusions are feasible, yet there are several other important aspects that will always need to be taken into consideration for these conclusions. A combination of factors that impact how AGENTS continue to grow over time.

### *Issue 1: Role of the Teacher*

AGENTS was created out of a concern that there was not enough teacher input or support for students where I taught. There was hardly any after school activities besides tutoring that went on at that first school. There were teachers that loved and cared for their students, but moral and dedication for their job and their school disintegrated on a daily basis. My second school has been the complete opposite. There are over ten before- or after-school clubs that meet on a weekly basis for almost the entire school year. Even if their moral is inconsistent, these teachers still give consistent time after school hours for students to be a part of their school and represent it in some way, all while providing additional opportunities for students to explore their interests.

When students leave elementary school, there is a natural expectation that they will get to “do more” in middle school because they have more fine arts and technology classes and team sports. If one elementary school offers more or less than another, it doesn’t really matter in a year or two because students will all have a level playing field of opportunities when they feed

into the middle schools. Even if students can't find exactly the right niche for them in three years of middle school, it's highly likely that the high schools will offer something that fits their interest or talents as they continue to grow.

All elementary teachers talk to their students about how middle school offers lots of new and different opportunities that they will get to experience. Moving on from elementary school is supposed to be this exciting and momentous journey of learning how to hone their interests and develop into young citizens of their school community and neighborhood. There is so much hype around what they will get to do and how they will mature, that little thought is given to who these people who are teaching and guiding these interests, talents, and maturity actually conduct themselves with them in middle and high school.

So when these four parents sat down to talk about their child's educational experiences and relationships since elementary school and being in AGENTS, a curious disappointment in how the relationships with teachers in middle school and high school have evolved was discouraging. When discussing an issue that arose with one teacher, P1 lamented that "I would never talk to my child that way." The reflections on teachers shared from the majority of parents contained a pattern code of maladaptive direction. The data included rules, causes, and explanations that suggest 'action taken with consequences' (Saldaña, 2013), occurring more often in a negative manner after these students left elementary school. Not every interaction that was mentioned was so stark, as there were a few instances that seem to have made a positive impression. P4 felt like Zach thrived with his fifth grade teacher because "she realized his potential and encouraged him; she tried to bring a lot out of him." Yet the frustration, confusion, and intensity with which certain relationships have played out have clearly left a deeper sense of conflict and concern for these parents to be aware of as their children continue in their education.

Their perspective on their children's interaction with elementary teachers as compared to their middle and high school teachers has also undergone a drastic status change. As the poorer the middle and high school teacher relationships become, the higher esteem the elementary school teacher relationships are held with regard.

*Maladaptive Teacher Direction.* When a student is learning how to exercise their critical consciousness in a school setting, it is up to the teacher to guide them through navigating these pathways for change. But there have come to be crucial moments in some of these students' lives where the situation switched to finding themselves pitted against the teacher. P1's younger daughter, Kelly, is not afraid of confrontation, she will address a problem exactly as it arises and stick up for herself. Her mother knows she has a strong personality and despite trying to let teachers know that she is very outspoken and might come off a little strong, one particular teacher did not want to be challenged. According to P1's recollections, this teacher:

threatened Kelly with not giving her a grade for her group project because she quote, unquote 'didn't see her doing the work' and therefore she wasn't going to get a grade. And Kelly told her 'I DID do the work, you can ask anybody in my group and if I... get a failing grade in this project, there's going to be a problem.'

Well, the teacher said she was threatening her.

According to P1, Kelly is going to challenge something that she doesn't think is right. She's going to stick up for herself and that's all she was doing. She was not trying to be disrespectful; she was trying to stick up for herself and the teacher didn't like it. As a result of this experience, the value Kelly had for that project, that group, that class, and that teacher were all diminished because of the stance the teacher took against her. Kelly was "mad. She's like, 'I don't even care anymore. It's fine. Mom, I meant like... it's just, whatever. I'm over it. I'm done. Just move on.'"

Instead of addressing the possibility of getting a failing grade or compromising on how to improve (or prove) what her grade should merit, the teacher chose to heighten the situation by saying Kelly was threatening her. This teacher's direction shattered Kelly's determination to stick up for herself, her passion for what she was learning, and her desire to believe in what she was arguing to achieve. She simply gave up on her work instead. In order to solve this problem, she called her mom and chose to go to her counselor. Any sort of negotiations or options between Kelly and her teacher were no longer viable. This teacher's role within Kelly's life has now been negated to a lost opportunity in working amicably through a problem. She failed to teach Kelly how to navigate through a difficult situation to find a more productive solution. Instead of empowering Kelly's independence within their relationship, she effectively ended any sort of positive influence that she could have nurtured with Kelly.

A similar situation occurred with P4's son, Will. Will was able to earn credit for 6th grade mathematics by examination for acceleration the summer before he started middle school. That means for the past three years of middle school, his math classes have always been in a grade higher than the rest of his other core subject courses. He has also been enrolled in a Kumon learning center math program for the past five years. As a result, Will practiced his mathematics work "without too many steps, with the Kumon, that's what they do. They don't list out the steps." But in one of his middle school math courses, P4 described that Will:

did have some issue with one of the... Will did with one of the Math teachers. But he got, we got, he got a change. We already talked and I think he said 'That's fine, Mom. It's fine.' But the grades never went you know... so we don't... But um, the... um, middle school, this teacher wanted the waaaaay the steps to be

done. The way she wanted or she explained and insisted upon it and that's the only way she graded.

This was another example of a teacher attempting to enforce their expectations on how a student was allowed to produce their thinking and be graded upon it. Will's teacher required that he show his mathematical thinking in the exact steps that were to her preference. But Will was not used to having to show every single step within his mathematical thinking because he has practiced, and successfully achieved by evidence of his grade level advancement, discovering and explaining his answers without them. Before a solution could even be ascertained, this situation was already problematic in that Will has already developed strategies that best fit his needs for getting his math work done. He has found a system that fits his thinking process and works best for him in solving math problems. When the teacher tried to impose her standards on how students needed to show their work to earn their grades, she took away Will's prerogative to apply his talents in mathematics in the best way he knew how. This became an issue with this teacher.

However, since P4 did not notice any changes in Will's grades, since his grades "never went down less than 90," she allowed Will to take care of this issue himself and decided to follow up on how it was resolved. When she brought up the situation a few weeks later, he simply told her he "got a change" and that everything was "fine, it's fine" and she left it at that. P4 mentioned that there was another teacher that had a different tactic "like, you know, she's always agreeing" but since she had left the situation up to Will she did not clarify where the teacher came from or in what way she was agreeing with Will. She just knew his grades had not suffered and according to Will, the situation had been handled, and that was enough.

The possibility of compromising with Will's teacher on what his grade should merit based on his work could have occurred. Or he might have been able to switch to a teacher who was more open to grading his work based on how he explains and shows his thinking. Or he decided to just show all the steps exactly how this teacher wanted so he could get the grade he deserved. He might have expressed his determination and desire or he might have just done what he needed to do to get the grades he wanted. It's not really clear how he solved this problem, it just mattered that it got resolved. This teacher's role within Will's life could have several possible outcomes. She either helped Will navigate and negotiate a way to solve this problem in a productive way, or he will remember that math teacher as someone who tried to stifle his abilities, or he could harbor resentment against that teacher for being unwilling to work with him in an effective manner (Wisch, et al., 2018; Percell, 2017). Any way this situation is analyzed, the majority of outcomes weigh heavily towards a negative conclusion, where Will's teacher ended up short changing his potential as both an academic student and a reflective problem solver.

*Quality Teacher Time.* Although I expected that these students would eventually have some sort of struggle with a middle or high school teacher, it was actually the struggle of creating strong bonds with teachers after elementary school that surprised me. Somehow, the sheer enormity of how instrumental a teacher relationship can be has gotten lost in the transition from elementary school to middle and high school. P1 stated, "that jump from fifth grade to sixth grade is definitely very hard on them. You're just kind of thrown in a fish bowl. And, to each their own." Since there is always so much emphasis on all the new things they will get to do in middle school, I never considered that that is exactly the reason why those teacher relationships might suffer. Losing that bond is a sacrifice for gaining that independence. P2

believes that “it all has to do with numbers. Because you go from being 80... to being 300, 400. Then you have to, you have to compete a lot to be top. And it's a lot of stress. That I know because she, like, it's a competition, with the numbers. You're going to have to stay afloat.” P2 basically explained that her daughter, Jessie, struggled not to drown in a sea of students while attempting to find a ‘life saver,’ preferably in the form of a teacher.

This imagery echoed what P3's son, Carlton, also experienced when he went to middle school two years ago: “It was a little disappointing to him when there was no acknowledgement of positive behavior or recognition. He knew not to expect that from teachers and so... his relationship, it's been more about doing what's asked.” But in only being able to do what is asked, instead of getting that feedback he thrived on, the energy and excitement he had for school has dwindled. All that effort into cultivating a unique voice in elementary school is apparently sinking within them during the first year of middle school. Carlton has instead realized that teachers in middle school often pay a lot more attention to students who conduct themselves in an opposite manner. Instead of building relationships with his teachers for his hard work and diligence, it was the lack of effort and indifference in others that now got more attention. P3 recalled,

That was off-putting that... he never needed to be lectured. But that's kind of where the teachers' energy was spent, on correcting people... and then... in the end, you feel like you're not getting as... you're not learning as much, or doing as much as you want because there's a lot of energy spent that way. Teachers patience levels... you know, it was like, you know... he would talk about certain classes in particular. Because there were certain students that would, might insite, you know, the need for correction. So I think it was a repetitiveness at that point

of, like, 'They're always... you know, the teacher is always doing this, always doing that because of these two students.' So that's when it came up. And then, at the end of the year... at the end of the year, I think he just kind of felt like, yeah... that it just... he kind of felt like nobody... ever really got to know him.

As his former teacher, this gives me pause to think that after everything he had worked hard to achieve to find his voice in elementary school, and prepare him for middle school, ended up being more of a constriction there because no one could find the time to listen.

On the other hand, it appears that if these students are able to connect with at least one teacher after leaving elementary school, then that could be the difference they need. After feeling like no one got to know him during his first year of middle school, P3 reported that Carlton "has had two teachers that he's done after school clubs with. And in both of them, I see how he enjoys the class, enjoys the teacher... Everything is so much more... has more depth to it just because of one day a week, you know. Then... the normal classroom setting with the other teachers there's not as... much awareness." It appears that if a teacher can spare even a small amount of time, they can help 'flip the script' of what some of these students experience in moving to middle school. Likewise, knowing that Jessie enjoys being at school with her teachers makes all the difference to P2:

She's always been very comfortable with the teachers she's had. She's always kind... Um, accommodated herself to teachers' personalities. So... She's always, like, any teacher that she's gotten, she's always built a good relationship with the teachers. And... Is very, it was very important for me to know that she had a good relationship with the teachers because of the fact that she was comfortable and she was happy to always go to school. She's never missed a day of school...

And I think that has a lot to do with the teachers. Because of the fact that, if a student is happy, they strive to be there. They respect the time of the teacher.

It is these small examples of how important a teacher's presence is within students' lives, no matter what grade, that can have an immense impact on the trajectory of their emotional, intellectual, and moral perspectives.

### *Issue 2: Multi-Dimensional Parenting Presence*

The impact AGENTS have had on these students would have been minimal to non-existent without these parents' support and willingness to let me spend so much time with their children outside of school hours. The delicate intricacies of the parent's roles within these reflections ended up becoming an indispensable thread through each student's life, weaving and fortifying the developmental experiences of each one of them. Their candor about their children was refreshing. Their patience and consistency, both with their children and from one interview to the next, revealed why it was imperative to interview them about the impact of AGENTS. These parents have exemplified the values they wish to impart to their children, balancing guidance, support, discipline, and freedom within their stories. They are the connecting impetus that has made AGENTS relevant.

*Intergenerational Cultural Transmission.* Each of these four parents come from very diverse backgrounds. Three of the four parents live with or near their own parents or in-laws. They are each raising two or more children. Their family bond is strong and has played an influential role in how they have chosen to raise their children. As P1 shared an increasingly personal memory about her oldest daughter, Lisa, making bad choices and serving "lots of consequences," it was as if she was transported back to her own childhood. She began to lament,

It's hard to tell. It's really hard to tell... And I guess really from where I grew up, and having the diversity in my own family, what I went through. What I saw...

You know... It's really hard to tell. That so could have gone either way. Looking at my sisters, and personality-wise, and how you allow people to influence you... and... So, I would like to think that they were just mistakes made, bad decisions made. But I don't know. I don't know... Truthfully, if we hadn't intervened, where it would have ended up. I have a feeling that it could have ended up a lot worse had we not stepped in when we did.

It was as if P1 could see what Lisa went through all over again, and what could have happened to Lisa without her intervention too. It took her back to what her own experiences have been like growing up with her sisters. In recollecting this unnerving memory, this gave her more cause for concern. This déjà vu of what occurred with her daughter strained her thought process about what could have happened. When history could have repeated itself in her family, she was the factor that thwarted it.

Using her past experiences of growing up, P1 developed her own methods and beliefs about the kind of parent she wanted to be to her own children. P1 shared another aspect of her own childhood that has had a major impact on how she views the roles of parents and children:

Growing up, I didn't have rules. From the time that I was her age -- when I was 17 years old -- I was going out of state with my boyfriend, you know, by myself. That's not ok. You know, there's nothing ok with that. But I didn't have parents to tell me different. They allowed me to do those things and I try to tell my kids, 'NO, you know... My life growing up was not... anything near the structure that I've giving y'all. I'll tell you anything you want to know, any -- I don't have

anything to hide. You know. But I am not going to parent y'all the same way I was parented... Because my parents failed at parenting me properly. And I made a lot of bad choices because of it. I didn't have the rules and guidelines that y'all have, and I said I wish someone had given them to me.' Listen, you know, instead I ended up with a baby at almost 19 years old, and, not that I would trade her for anything, my life could have been so different if parents had parented me. That didn't just give me free reign to do whatever I wanted to do. I was out of my parents' house by the time I was 17 years old.... I can't imagine that three years ago for Lisa. You know, I can't imagine that NOW for Kelly.

Her beliefs in what her responsibilities are to her children are directly informed by what she herself did not have as a child. As a parent, P1 is deeply driven by the experiences in her childhood and her dedicated resolve that she wants to provide a more structured, character-building childhood for her own children.

The value of personal experience was also a theme that came up a lot with P4. She would make comments such as "I send them to Kumon because in a school sometimes we think it doesn't give them enough to challenge them." This insinuates that from her own background, either through her own experience or from the influence of attitudes from others, she does not feel that the public education her children are receiving is enough. The angle from which to view this position implies that she feels her children's potential is not being met or that the school is not rigorous enough in what could be taught. With a little background knowledge about the Kumon learning center, it is touted as an 'academic advantage to compete in today's world.' With this knowledge, her decision to send them there could be viewed as an opportunity

to get her children ahead so that they might better position themselves to establish an edge over others in what they are involved in.

When asked about if she was happy with their experience in the middle school, her initial response was, “that’s the way the system is, right? I cannot change... like, I cannot say that they should just stick to one teacher...” Her use of the word system could imply that she was referring to the general school system from elementary to middle school or it could have implied that she is in a helpless, meager position to create change if she ever tried to come up against the behemoth of a school system. Additionally, P4 consistently mentioned how she “guesses they’re [her boys] are fine” if “they’re not bringing home anything less than a 90.” When I asked what might happen if they did, she told me:

We always tell them education is the first thing which we value, because without education... That’s how, as parents, because we came to, you know, we are not born here. They’re born here. So they, we had to struggle to get the education and come here, but they don’t have any struggles. They just have to study. They have nothing at home to be worried about right now.

A glimmer of P4’s own experiences growing up started to emerge. Perhaps her other comments had a broader, unsympathetic implication that an education can get you places, but the more methodical and demanding it is, the better the results. It’s important that they continue to get high grades because there could be the possibility of doing or having nothing without them. She also worked very hard to move to this country. Since she worked hard to provide a different, less worrisome, set of circumstances for her children, she expects that they work hard at studying instead. Her beliefs in what her children’s responsibilities should be are directly informed by what she herself experienced as a child. P4 values hard work and dedication to learning. She

provides an optimal environment for her children to be exposed to as much knowledge and skill for them to excel in their childhoods.

My other two parents did not refer to their own childhoods in such an overt fashion. They focused much more on the actions and abilities of their children and shared the strategies and discussions they conduct with their children to help them develop into successful adults. This doesn't mean that the ways in which they were brought up were not evident. The overtones of their childhoods are just covertly embedded within those strategies and discussions. P2 has taken a very thoughtful and rational approach to parenting by example. The manner in which she acts and conducts herself and seems to view people and the world in general, are the exact same characteristics that her daughter now embodies. P2 often speaks in metaphors, illustrating and upholding a very honorable ideal of how people should be treated, and what that earns you in return. Her daughter quietly exudes the same manner of respect, kindness, and work ethic. P2's quiet demeanor and disciplined logic have guided her own children's childhoods. P3 prefers a gradual release of independence through interdisciplinary teamwork. She calmly supports and encourages acknowledging each of her six children's emotions and the reasons they feel that way. Everyone in the family has an important role to play, and all eight of them meet together on a biweekly basis to address family issues and celebrations. She deliberately "shifts the dynamics at work" between her children because she sees it as an "influential way to change behavior" in giving them leadership roles "just because it innately makes you work through something differently." Self-value and self-reliance through experience have been the hallmark of her children's childhoods.

*Parent Action.* With these backgrounds in mind, each of these parents has provided a paradigm for the type of person their children can be when they grow up. The action they take

within their roles as parents has several different meanings. One action is that of being a part of the community. P1 has volunteered and been a part of every Parent/Teacher Organization at every school her children have attended. She is also one of their Girl Scout leaders. Likewise, P3 has volunteered and been a part of every Parent/Teacher Organization at every school her children have attended. She also holds a Young Women's presidency leadership position at her church. P4 occasionally takes her sons to work with her in nursing homes as well “to see the other side of life.” They have their own active roles within the community.

Another action is the approaches they take to parenting their children. Each of their styles can be categorized as either actively engaged parenting or forbearing discourse parenting. Both P1 and P3 are actively engaged parents. P1 keeps open communication with her children's teachers, even front loading them for Kelly's outspoken character and keeping up with getting explanations for how her children earned their grades. She intervenes when she feels her children are struggling, either helping them with homework, being more lenient on grades for harder coursework, contacting teachers when there's been a breakdown in communication, or providing “lots of stiff consequences” when bad choices are made. P3 is also very integrated in working with her children's teachers. They communicated for several weeks on attempting to find the root of the problem for Ashley's sour stomach and anxiety with coming to school. P3 also holds a family council on a bi-weekly basis to review the mechanics of how the eight of them all functioning together and to see how they can “stretch themselves and do a little bit more.” She creates leadership opportunities for them at home by having them delegate chores together and room with each sibling for various amounts of time.

On the other hand, P2 and P4 are forbearing discourse parents. P2 discusses the implications of her actions with her daughter on a daily basis. She exemplifies the advice she

gives her daughter by going to work even when she is in pain. She explains how to listen and treat others with respect so her daughter will receive it in return. She deliberates, questions, and guides her daughter to understand the positive role that she can play within any situation she experiences. P4 encourages her children to participate in everything they can and personifies the belief that you must work hard and share your abilities with others. As long as her children never complain or say anything about their activities and bring home good grades, she “guesses” everything is ok and she doesn’t interfere. She feels that if they tell her everything is fine or that she can leave an issue alone, then they are “handling things well by themselves” and she respects what they say, so she “doesn’t want to make it better or worse.”

*Expectations versus Realities.* Parents must constantly heed the changing landscape of parenting, from social influences to physical developments. Just when they think they know what to expect, their children remind them that they are still growing and learning. Throughout middle and high school, children were eager to explore their interests and strengthen their capabilities by participating in as many extra-curricular activities as possible. They are passionate about what they want to be involved with, yet underestimate how overwhelming a stacked schedule of activities can stretch a person too thin. When it comes to extra-curricular activities, P3 explains that:

we error... we error on the side of ‘less is more,’ just because we know if every child does everything then we literally won’t be at home together. So, before they choose something it’s like ‘Okay, well if you choose this... you might have to give up something else.’ So that we’re very... um, you know, we’re... we really structure it so that they have to really want it before we commit to something. So... If... I mean, I don’t know if maybe if I, we, weren’t so... like adamant, like

‘No, that’s too many things...’ Then they... may have done more. But it was already felt so... there was sooo much going on.

Indeed, “less is more” is a relevant tactic for these children in pacing the proficiency of their development. They have each been allowed to be fully committed to three extra-curricular activities. In this way, they were able to delve into the complex structures of their interests without sacrificing the quality of their health or their family time. Being able to immerse themselves in the depths of their interests has also intensified their familiarity with those structures in ways that they had never considered before. P2 described an instance when Jessie was an officer in an organization and had to figure out how to work with an unreliable President:

Jessie said, ‘She’s not doing anything, the president. She’s not doing anything! Nobody likes her...’ I said, ‘You know what? They don’t like the president, right? But how about whoever is under her, like the vice president, secretary, treasurer? What are y’all doing for the team? For the club?’ ‘Well, you know we can’t do anything without her.’ I said, ‘Well you know?’ What I said, ‘There’s a thing that’s called kick the president out and get a new one. But best of all, if you teach the president how you would like if you were the president -- how would you like, how would you want to succeed?’ So she started saying ‘okay.’ I remember her talking on the phone and saying, ‘So what are we going to do?’ and I thought ‘okay, so she is picking up on what I’m telling her’ and one day I just told her, straight out, ‘Sometimes you don’t like the people, but if it’s your job and it’s your boss, you have to learn to work with that person. You have to learn to work with difficulty because it’s not always going to be a happy world. It’s not always going to be a ‘no pain, no gain.’ So you always have to find a way of making

yourself feel comfortable in that area even if that person's not comfortable. But you'll be comfortable. There's always ways, you know, when people are going to notice if she's not doing anything, but only you are. You're still part of that team. She still representing you, now you represent her. And it's going to be, I'm not going to say it's an easy shot, but it's going to be good results at the end.

Jessie did not like how the President was "not doing anything." She wanted to write her off and be done with the situation. But P2 called her out on thinking so narrow-minded and brought Jessie and two other officers into the foreground of the situation. She acknowledged that an ineffective President is frustrating, but highlighted that taking other's point of view might be more helpful in finding a solution that creates progress. Working with others that are difficult to deal with is a reality of adulthood. It is the viewpoint with which you choose to approach situations like this that can change the whole atmosphere around it. In this way, the problem becomes a team effort that is manageable in producing "good results at the end," which is the goal of effort in the first place.

Another aspect of growing up that is on full display in middle and high school is that of social status and reputations. Blending so many students from different schools creates an opportunity to stand out or blend in. Every class, teacher, extra-curricular, etc. becomes another opportunity to assert yourself and let others know what kind of personality you're developing. P3 tried to prepare Carlton for these new interactions by front loading him: "You know, in middle school kids are often... you know, they're trying to be how they are, and they're very aware of their peers, and they want to act a certain way to get a reaction, and we talked about that and when he went he still was surprised by some of the behaviors." Sometimes the experience

has to occur to fully comprehend the magnitude of the reality. Having to watch Lisa experience this ‘reaction’ from her peers was almost too hard for P1 to do:

Looking at, personality wise, how you allow people to influence you... And, so, I would like to think that they were just mistakes made, bad decisions made. Um, but I don’t know. I don’t know... Truthfully, if we hadn’t intervened... where it would have ended up. I have a feeling that it could have ended up a lot worse had we not stepped in when we did and... More bad choices could have been made. By the... people that she was hanging out with. Or a couple of people that she was hanging out with. And we told her, she had some pretty stiff consequences.

Learning how to discern what type of influences should be ‘reacted’ to and in what ways are one of the most difficult life lessons to learn while growing up. P2 added that you have to just keep encouraging your child to “just, you know what, just relax. Sometimes you’ll have mistakes, but, you know, it’ll help you learn. I said next time you can just look at it as ‘I did it this way, this time... I’ll do it next... you know, differently next time. I said, ‘Just measure yourself.’” When it comes to influences and reputations, P2 feels that all she can do is coach Jessie in how to approach expressing her personality by relaxing and think of how to respond so it doesn’t feel so foreboding.

### *Issue 3: Developing Character Identity*

Adolescents is a huge growth period in a student’s life. Experiencing and comprehending new physical, social, emotional, and cognitive changes all shape how they perceive themselves and their role within the world. Especially with the pace at which the world now functions, the rate at which they must process what they are going through and experiencing is exponential. Now the pressures of dealing with identity, belonging, and purpose have been amplified by a

technologically interconnected world where privacy is non-existent. If growing up in the twenty-first century wasn't difficult enough, the population sizes of middle and high schools that students attend through this peregrination have not made it any easier.

How are all of these students expected to persevere? Seven years of middle and high school to consciously determine the direction of the rest of their lives is not enough. As the stage of adolescents continues to fluctuate and swell with pressures and temptations, pre-adolescence is emerging as recourse for nurturing the consciousness that can help them thrive as they get older.

*Adapting Responsibilities.* Learning to find confidence in “doing the right thing” is a wearisome undertaking. All four parents discussed how their children have looked for “guidance on a lot of things” and “rely on their examples” for support because they have no experience. P3 attributes the maturity in her children to the people who have given extra time to working with them to:

give them opportunities to lead. You know, they should be the one leading the meeting, they should be the one taking on assignments, they should be learning how to delegate. And I see that as soon as you, you start teaching them and training them, they rise to the occasion. The youth really do. And so I feel like our kids, because of those different dynamics where they had positive people leading them, they've just been able to increasingly do better.

P3 believes that allowing children to tackle more responsibilities has a positive effect on their ability to match, and possibly exceed, managing them. When done at a young age, attempting to rehearse such actions as leading or delegating have helped them flourish at carrying them out.

Conversely, some of these children have used this guidance to their advantage in initiating some of their own routines. That example has given them the spark they need to try practicing their own ideas of responsibility. According to P2, from a young age, Jessie:

was very responsible. She went to bed at the time that she knew it was time to go to bed. She would start getting herself ready for school, and either, either she would be like, walking around and see... You know, she had all her stuff done.... She would leave everything prepared the next day. So she was always like, getting herself ready. She has always been that kind of person that she knows.... She was probably in... Before she hit, uh, first grade. She was at first grade. That's when she started being her own self.

Likewise, it is this innate ability to pick up on effective habits and hard work that also propelled Zach to skip the sixth grade. As P4 describes him, "he went from curiosity, to kind of knowing it, to saying very much I'm trying to." He used his brother's example to prove to his parents that he could keep up with his academics while also participating in competitive league soccer. He is "constantly finding new things to pick up and learn" because he "desires to be different" and works so hard to "get things done so fast." He seems to appreciate when he can enjoy the work that he is doing and still bring a level of practicality to his enterprises.

This is the same kind of initiative that they have also refined in their work with others. Jessie is constantly "waiting... to, be needed," standing around and watching others to find a moment where she might be of service to them:

She'll watch and she'll say... She'll be standing there and she'll watch you. She lets you do it. If you can't do it, she'll show you -- 'this is,' you know, 'how

about you do it like this?’ So, to me her personality is um, more of... Of an older person. Like mature. Like a mature person.

Jessie not only prepares for herself; she actively seeks out opportunities to prepare others to try new suggestions for their work. All of these children like to be in roles where they can help others. They value “doing anything for anyone.” All of the parents spoke of how their children have started to rise to any occasion “without any hesitation.” The opportunity to be a student leader has made a huge difference in their comfort level for speaking up. P3’s daughter, Ashley, is the youngest of all the parents’ children. Over the course of this year, she has seen Ashley hone in on automatically thinking of how to solve a problem. “She immediately owns it” in that she sees it as her responsibility to solve. If she encounters a problem and attempts to find a solution, she does not pawn the work off on someone else, she has started to view it as “if anyone’s going to change it, it’s going to be me.”

*Transformative Priorities.* Just as students’ roles and responsibilities change as they get older, so too do their concerns for issues in their lives. The transition from childhood and preadolescent, to growing up through adolescence and into young adulthood, comes with a lot of shifting priorities. P1’s children, Lisa and Kelly, have now both graduated from high school and are going to college. P2’s daughter, Jessie, is about to be a senior in high school. P3’s children, Carlton and Ashley, will now both be in middle school together. P4’s son, Will, will be a freshman taking sophomore math classes, and her other son, Zach, will be an eighth grader after testing out of his original grade level. Learning to adjust to new roles is a natural part of getting older, and being able to find the right role that fits for them is imperative to figuring out what avenues they want to navigate in life. As P1 stated about Lisa and Kelly moving to college:

it's just part of learning how to... Life. It's just life. It's... You grow up and, you know... People start working and things start changing, and your life is changing, and you don't get to spend as much time together and, you know, you grow up, and your life changes.

From balancing the extracurricular activities that most interest them, to running for an office in a club, to tackling harder coursework or applying to specialized programs, to getting a job, they are all exercising new forms of leadership for the stage of development that they are going through. P2 explained this in terms of actions and personality. She feels her daughter is still the same as when she was in elementary school, but in a different way, in that “she learned to transition with her age and with what comes with her studies.” It seems Jessie’s priorities have grown because she struggles in wanting to get everything “right; if it doesn’t look good to her, it’s not... presentable.” Jessie places a high value on the effort she puts into creating her work just the way she envisions it. She places a high priority in turning in quality work because she believes that is how she earns better grades.

One priority that has emerged as all seven AGENTS have gotten older is this desire to keep “integrated, constant relationships” with their teachers. In elementary school they all felt like the teachers were aware of them, provided positive reinforcement, and were supportive of their “potentialities.” They miss that deeper connection where they were comfortable spending time engaging in activities with them. As a result, P3 has:

talked about how that could shift for the next year. Okay, if the teacher can't get to know you by the end of the year, what can you do to let them know who you are? How can you make yourself more vocal or assert yourself more so that they see... and can work in a way, just in general, like, if you have an idea -- bring it

up! Don't just sit back. I think it was a good learning curve for him because it propelled another conversation.

All of these children, especially Carlton, place a powerful value in having relationships with teachers. Now that they are in middle and high school, it is up to them to initiate establishing those connections if they want those bonds to continue as they get older.

*Extending Personality.* The last couple of years of elementary school are an exciting place and time in a child's life. It is their first foray into academically, socially, physically, emotionally, and cognitively more mature subjects. Old expectations give way to new freedoms, as new expectations challenge the limits of their complex identity (Madjar, Cohen & Shoval, 2018; Madjar & Chohat, 2017). These four parents have witnessed how these seven children have not only adapted to these broadening freedoms and expectations, but how they are growing into their own, self-assured individuals.

All of them were less comfortable speaking out or "intervening" on someone else's behalf when they were younger. However, they have "learned to come out of their shell" and are now more outgoing, willing to express themselves more, and voice their opinion. P3 explained that, "being a leader in fifth grade reinforced their confidence. It gave them an experience to feel like they could conduct themselves in any setting." With more leadership opportunities, they have been emancipated from the fears or constraints that they had about their abilities when they were younger. That newfound insight has helped all of them feel more empowered to move forward and explore different activities and organizations. Their participation is no longer relegated to observer, but is now elevated to an active contributor.

*Issue 4: Exercising Humanity Towards Others*

An original emphasis of AGENTS was to get students to get everyone together secretly. By randomly delivering a note of encouragement to a teacher or a student, AGENTS would uplift people within their community. They were taking the responsibility to show care and kindness to others within our school. It was a living example of goodwill that I hoped exemplified the movement AGENTS was attempting to establish. Then the ideas for how they wanted to make their community a better place, or continue to improve upon it, would begin. Their secret activism expanding into critical consciousness.

*In the Service of Others.* Once these students had been designated as AGENTS, P3 and P4 felt that the dynamic for learning to work with others, share their ideas, “taking a position,” and being active at organizing and helping others were “already set in motion.” P1 felt that they “thrived in those situations” of being in this smaller group where “everyone shows their own different focus.” AGENTS “allowed them to work more effectively, like socializing, in that way where there was a positive group of students and you were connected in a different way.” Each student was there because they all had a common ontological resolve to be a social force of change. “They were able to identify with other kids that were trying to do good. I think it was worth their time,” P3 stated.

Practicing this kind of “service” allowed these children to get a “deeper understanding of children’s needs, even in elementary school.” P1 expressed that:

my kids were more likely to stand up for kids that were being bullied, or when things weren’t right for the kids that were left out. My kids were more likely to befriend them and comfort them. I’m sure AGENTS helped to build better characteristics in children and it shows them more of the behind-the-scenes what

goes on and they learn more about being better people... kind of people doing for others.

As a result, P2 agreed that AGENTS “just opens doors for them to know that the potential is bigger than what they think it is.” She feels AGENTS has opened a “service area” for students to:

learn how to be humble. You learn how to be a person where someone needs help, you're there to help them. Not because you have to, but because you want to. Because you feel like you... like that's what you want to do. Not because you're being pressured to be there. And I guess that's how you teach people.

By being more open to helping others, it has made these students “more aware of the needs of her community and her surroundings.” In turn, working with others with a similar mindset has allowed them to “do things that are purposeful.”

*Unique Individuals.* Once children reach the fourth and fifth grade, their tendency to be egocentric has been altered to transform and combine ideas into logical thought and inductive reasoning for more mature thought processes (Piaget & Inhelder, 1967). The resulting impressions and actions these students are able to assume make them prime candidates for instilling a sense of critical participation within their community. For Carlton, he “thought it would be a neat opportunity to be a leader. It’s something that not everyone is a part of, but the people that really want to do it can lead the school.” There was an increase in his confidence from his experiences in AGENTS. He has come to feel more comfortable in his choices and actions, so his confidence level “in just little things... he knew that he could try something again and master it” in working toward improving his community. P3 viewed the “whole intention behind AGENTS is that they are the ones making the steps for change. They’re the ones making

the phone calls, stepping outside of their comfort zones. I think that's a really important life skill.” She appreciated that AGENTS were the active participants in creating the change they felt their community needed.

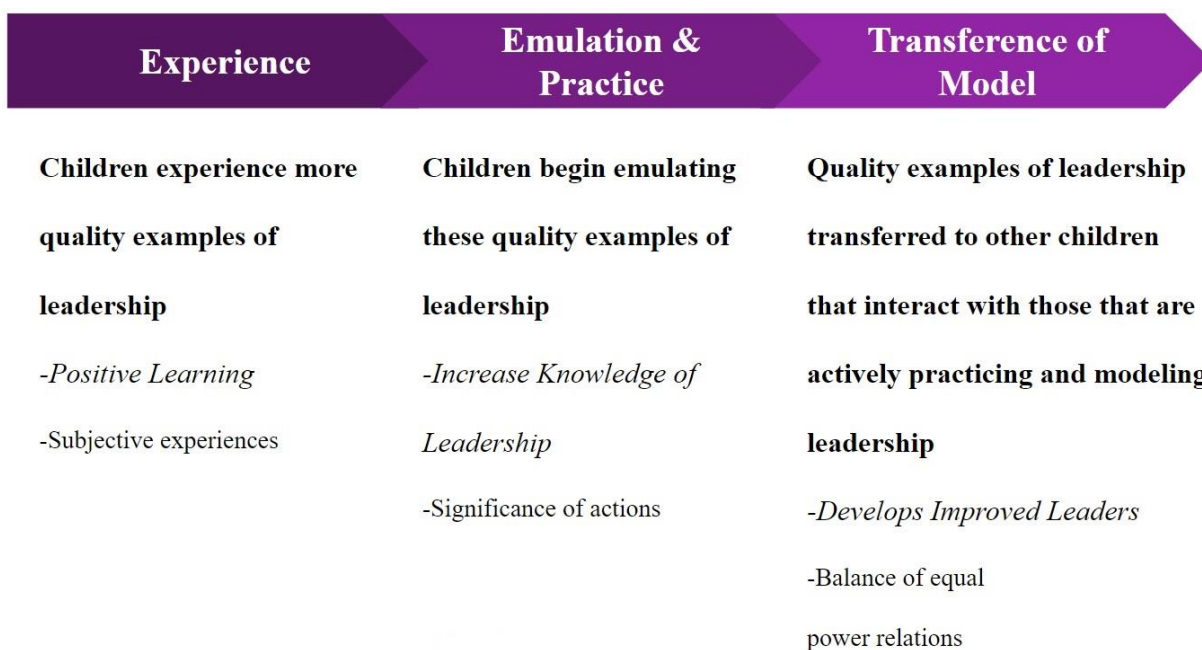
Jessie, on the other hand, would rather work behind-the-scenes “to help her leader succeed” because she feels that she is still learning how to be a leader and figuring out what steps to follow in order to “give it her all” to be successful. She feels like when her leader succeeds, she has succeeded. She would rather gather others together that she has seen succeed in order to build a team. For her, it is all about a “team effort” when “walking the talk – what you do rather than what you talk” helps develop a better community.

Instilling these mentalities allows children to be “more open to helping being kinder and thinking twice about something not nice... after they’ve done good things for people it makes you do a double take,” P1 explained on her childrens’ purpose and role within their community. P2 agreed that being a part of this community is “what matters... what matters is that you’re responsible enough since you said yes from the beginning. Regardless if there’s anyone else or not, if you’re the only one, you can just sit there and do what you got to do. But you have to continue until the end, so it opens the door to doing service and helping others.”

Another important aspect of community participation that parents identified in AGENTS is “the person that’s responsible, but up at the front.” If a person has “a good impact in their teaching, you get a great leader.” P2 felt that how the “teacher teaches is how that person is going to follow. So, I think that the best teacher is the one that has that great impact on the growth of that child. It has to do a lot with the teacher and the way that they present with attitudes and learning.” P1 echoed this sentiment and added more specificity to the teacher’s role within AGENTS. She thought AGENTS was a positive experience for her daughters because “I

think that it was the atmosphere and you [this teacher researcher]. I mean my children adore you. I think they liked it, but I know it had a lot to do with you. Having a good leader like that and loving you so much.” This teacher appeal was a pivotal aspect in these students’ choices to continue to keep coming back. In considering the perspective of a teacher they cared about, they not only appreciated the work they did with the teacher, but enjoyed fostering their unique abilities to think and act critically for their community as well.

*Quality Caring.* This notion that AGENTS is much more influential with their children when they care about the adult, or teacher, “leading it” matters. Half of the parent’s reflections dealt with the consequences of a teacher’s behaviors, both positive and negative. This transfer of positive moral compassion doesn’t end with the teacher though. Parents also felt that as a result of “giving the kids an opportunity to uplift other students and to be there and set a good example” their children created a “domino effect.” The more “those good, kind behaviors” are instilled at an earlier age, “it makes a world of difference and you see those good things continue with the receivers too.” Yet again, a theory of leadership emerges, this time as a linear chain. These parents reflected that when their children experienced more quality examples of leadership, they were able to begin emulating these quality examples, which, in turn, could be transferred to other children that their children actively practice leadership towards (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Linear Leadership Chain**

P2 recalled how Jessie has started becoming more aware of her leadership qualities among her peers:

I guess it's discovering that your potential is higher than what you think. It also opened her eyes to the idea that people are watching me. Because some of her fellow classmates, they always thought that she was 'up there' and she never thought about it like that. And I said, 'You're an example to them.' They always wanted to be with her and she never thought of herself as an example. But I told her, 'You have to be aware that people are looking at you and that you're being watched. Not just by students, but by teachers. So whatever you project, that's what's going to be... that's what you're going to leave behind. So what do you want to leave behind, you know? What do you want to be remembered as?

Being an AGENT has opened doors to other activities for all of these students because they feel empowered that they are capable of developing their ideas and talents. P3 also noted how she has watched both of her children grow in their leadership qualities:

I did see a distinct change. We talked about how you have to be willing to step out of your comfort zone to make that connection, even if you don't always necessarily want to. So, Carlton rose to the occasion and I saw him become comfortable. He really made an effort... and for Ashley, I didn't even know there had been an issue. For a while there was a student who was using foul language very quietly and she could hear, sitting next to them, she could hear them using foul language. So she asked them not to use it and would repeatedly bring it up. And I really don't think she would have been comfortable speaking up before this year. That is a very distinct difference, that she felt more comfortable speaking up and being a leader about that.

The consideration they put into modeling quality leadership actions is beginning to proliferate the opportunities they have to practice their agency with and for others.

### *Summary*

The purpose of this research was to explore the intersections between this teacher researcher's attempt to fill a void within an elementary school environment and the impact my efforts have had in shaping future characteristics, actions, and choices within those students. Specifically, it was to answer the question: what are parents' perspectives on the impact of an AGENTS framework on elementary students? I wanted to know how I can support and develop a sense of ownership within a student's evolving awareness of self and how those interpretations inform future values and practices in upper grade level environments. My own personal

narrative and parent participant interviews were examined in order to answer this question. All the pieces that must be blended together to answer such a question are extremely nuanced and subtle. From a student's personality, experiences, relationships, and influences way back when they were developing as nine- to eleven-year-olds to however old they currently are now, each plays a significant part in who they grow up to be. At times it was hard for parents to remember that far back into their children's lives, especially when there are other children to factor in and keep up with what is currently going on with all of them. However, parent interviews revealed multiple opportunities for their children to exercise their developing awareness of leadership, and how crucial it was that they had an opportunity to explicitly attempt that at such a young age in elementary school.

Furthermore, there is one nagging issue that still plagues the patterns I found with my interpretive lens. Each time I met with the parents that had initially been a part of AGENTS seven to ten years ago, it always felt like catching up with a familiar friend. There was warmth and thoughtfulness engaged within each discussion; a caring and natural desire for everyone involved. Although P1's girls, and P2's daughter are involved in many aspects that could lead to successful life ambitions, there was still a tension that something could jeopardize their journeys to achieving their life goals. It still didn't seem like a stable prospect that they are going to get to do what they are passionate about in life. I still felt like I, and AGENTS, was an important piece of a whole team that contributed to, and was rooting for, these students to conquer whatever they face in their life journey.

Whereas when I met with the parents that just recently finished being a part of AGENTS three years to a few months ago, it felt very formal and conventional. Our interviews were more a review of all the different conditions that are building up their intellectual, social, and moral

character. Both P3 and P4 are highly integrated within their community, purposely sharing their abilities and ideas with others. I didn't get the same personal uncertainty in their children's futures when I spoke with them, like I did with the first two parents. I felt like these parents were grateful that AGENTS was an experience their children got to be a part of, but now they must move on and participate in the next experience that will continue to build their social capital. It seems to be a very subtle privilege that I am having a hard time reconciling.

This research ultimately sought to discover how elementary students were impacted by an elementary leadership framework as they grew up. That is, after discussing, and thinking, and attempting to act as a leader did students reach further and feel more comfortable tackling leadership positions? As the teacher researcher, finding that fine line of exercising self-determination and leadership qualities is a constant process. Have these students demonstrated any actions that they were impacted by through AGENTS? I opted to get parents' perspectives of AGENTS in order to get a broader clarity of the full growth these students have had since leaving elementary school. When these students are in AGENTS, they are still highly influenced by the micro level environment that they exist within. Though these students are aware of the macro levels, they are not as quick to make those connections as to the role they can play with in them. Their parents, however, have a periscope perspective of not only what their children were like in the past but are also like in the present. They have also been able to see how they interact and engage in both familiar and unfamiliar environments, being in a position to better understand how our micro and macro environments have worked in tandem together.

In considering the reflections of these parents, I have come to greatly respect not only the model they have provided for their children, but the deep faith and appreciation they have for others that they entrust to help mold their children into compassionate adults. Is having an

empowering framework like AGENTS useful in elementary school? I believe parent support and encouragement within these reflections suggest that it is. Such a framework is a good starting point for incubating their ability to problem-solve and venture into more uncomfortable situations where the outcome cannot always be predicted. I believe they continued to think about how they can impact their surrounding community and, if they are given the space to work through tough situations, their understanding of their importance within the community will grow.

## Chapter Five - Implications for Policy and Practice/Recommendations

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

-Mahatma Gandhi (as quoted in Ajgaonkar, 1995, p. 13)

Feeling like I was a part of my elementary school was a critical piece of my childhood. When I started teaching, I wanted my students to have that same love and fondness for where their educational journeys began. It is such a foreign concept to me that an elementary school could just be a building that a child is forced to be inside of, instead of like a second home where they feel special because of what they get to do inside and how they represent it outside. In my mind, elementary school is where the foundations of teacher inspiration, lifelong friendships and belonging, and blossoming potential enable students to be excited about what they will become, and what they are capable of doing. But how is an environment like this cultivated, and why doesn't it exist for every child in elementary school?

The longer I have taught, the more evident the inequalities and gaps in education have weighed on me. The role elementary school plays in a child's early years of life is pivotal to making or breaking their love of learning, curiosity, and eventual connection to civic life. There are many outside factors competing to dominate this narrative. The various systemic rules of a state, city, and school district, the ways in which communities are designed, the professional and social lives of parents, and the life experiences students themselves bring all leave their mark on how an elementary school is able to function and flourish. Schools need to reformulate how they perceive their relationship with their students and commit to a long-term solution for broader educational goals than just improved test scores. Though this transition to empower students is difficult, it is also vital to preparing equitable learning opportunities and attainment for knowledgeable, skillful, and resourceful citizens.

If educational outcomes are ever going to succeed in real change and reform, student needs and realities must be seized with purpose and value. Policy and practice must provide opportunities to engage in empowering praxis from a young age, especially for those students who have meager options available to them. This empowering praxis needs to begin by restoring a feeling of belonging to school and neighborhood communities so they can remember how to “learn themselves, establish kinship and connection... and know and acknowledge ancestors” (hooks, 2009, p. 155). As the process of restoration builds, the more students can be challenged to find thoughtful solutions to the everyday dilemmas that they face. In turn, they become more comfortable and secure in voicing their ideas and opinions on how to make change possible and productive.

### *AGENTS of Change*

As a broader inquiry into the practices of critical pedagogy, social justice, and participatory action research, I developed the organization AGENTS to “best position students as agents of change” (Galletta & Jones, 2010, p. 342). AGENTS has become an important tool for me to connect with fourth and fifth graders to show them how their educational objectives can be utilized for critical understanding, engaging experience, active critical citizenship, and humanistic and moral gain as opposed to standardization, competency, and narrowly defined performance skills that equal technical and economic gain from state agencies. Instead of assimilating to the dominant cultural norms, AGENTS are assisted in questioning and actively seeking out how they can improve their situation and environments with their own ideas, determination, research, and discursive power. AGENTS are moving beyond observation and understanding to infer the challenges and responsibilities their literacy empowers “to model such balance within their own life practices and relationships” (Kahn, 2009, p. 535). Putnam (1995)

would have to agree with the parents in the study that the quality of AGENTS' lives and the implementation of AGENTS as a group have been powerfully influenced by their work.

Care and concern are infused into the manner in which AGENTS meetings are conducted, as AGENTS offers a space for students to receive and give attention to the issues they are most concerned about. AGENTS are given the attention to explore, experiment, and develop their learning strengths and weaknesses, to progressively nurture an affection for their community, their school, the people they interact with, and above all, the learning that they are capable of internalizing. Drawing connections between their own lives, communities, and environment is vital if students are going to grow in their awareness of their own power and responsibility within these cultures. They need to have the opportunity to continue discovering, understanding, and reflecting how reality is based on perspectives of values and interests so that their truth reflects equality issues of their time and place (Peterson, 2009; Shor, 2009).

AGENTS think when they want to make their school or community better, or even make something happen, they must get involved. Being in AGENTS is important because they not only get to help people, but they get to make others and themselves feel like they are competent and that they are really cared for by others as well. Such opinions are the foundation of the educational relationship and dialogue that need to be assessed to merge theory, practice and reflection. Their active participation is vital to the preservation of AGENTS and reconstruction of school community. This "problem-posing education" (Cowhey, 2006) is our initial opportunity for AGENTS to expand their skills in giving serious consideration to how they can make changes to our framework so as to positively impact our own future. We can now nurture an "idea of dialogue... in the learning process" (Westerman, 2005, p. 553) through the "observation, interpretation, and analysis of their life circumstances" (Westerman, 2005, p. 549).

Parents were appreciative that their children were able to participate in a framework like AGENTS at a pre-adolescent elementary age. They all believed it had a positive impact on their children. In being able to come forward and share their abilities, they were able to set a good example while becoming conscious of their potential being more substantial than they thought possible, especially to affect change.

When these pre-adolescent youth were involved in increasingly complex roles and leadership opportunities in elementary school, they were willing to try new experiences with an optimistic mentality. Afterwards, they were not as fearful of failing, as they become much more receptive to perceiving issues as a problem that had yet to have a sustainable solution. They are deeply involved in their school and neighborhood communities, while pursuing challenging academic programs of study. They have weighed their options and interests when it comes to participating in activities so that they have a balance of what enriches both their minds and their hearts.

These former AGENTS are still learning from the exploration of conflict. Although gathering the courage to confront peers has increased, their capacity to work through conflict with an adult, especially a teacher, is still difficult for them. Their initial reaction to be “done with it” and make everything “fine” again is still a greater force over their ability to work effectively at compromising with someone who has power over them via a grading dispensary. This docile tactic is still their automatic response within a social structure of unequal status and power. Therefore, they have not yet been able to shift their thinking, and consequently participated in, a nonpartisan decision-making process (O’Brien & Moules, 2007).

They have also had to work through the concessions and compromises of family responsibilities, group dynamics, self-identity and reliance, and autonomy. They are willing to

sacrifice their time, work through the consequences of their actions, and uphold family morals more often. They are beginning to take initiative in finding pragmatic solutions to recurring issues within the organizations they participate in or within their household. They are establishing themselves as compelling collaborators at school, and gaining independence in making their own decisions. In combining the cultural contexts of their current experiences with their transformative perspectives they started to foster as pre-adolescent elementary students, they have been able to flexibly mitigate these obstacles and disappointments (Levi-Strauss, 1966).

### *The Need for Leadership by Administrative Example*

When I embarked on this adventure of AGENTS, I was so focused on students and providing them with time and space to nurture their ideas of leadership and ownership that I completely omitted those that actually hold titles of assumed leadership in a school. Initially, I assumed the principal of our school would be the one that encouraged, supported, and would guide AGENTS in the right direction if they proposed ways to make our school better. However, it wasn't until our school got a new principal, and then another new principal two years later, that I really started to understand how crucial a principal is to setting a school's cultural climate, as well as how much stock they put into their own student body and give them credit for the risks they are willing to take and the impact a framework like AGENTS can provide. So far, I have had seven different principals to learn about and observe leadership from while I have taught elementary school. The majority of them have largely been indifferent to AGENTS work, mostly likely because it occurs after school hours on a volunteer basis. As long as there are no complaints from parents, there will be no interference from the administration. But a small minority of principals have made an effort to endow AGENTS with their time and consideration.

*Apathetic Administrative Example*

The first principal I worked with retired after over thirty years in education. She was part of that SBDM committee that asked so many questions as to how to uplift the plight of our students but was not willing to set any actual change in motion. She was the first real 'boss' I had ever had and I ended up being sorely disappointed. From her, I learned the hard way why the significant factors of low-socioeconomic achievement gap schools occur. She was well organized in the financial business management of an elementary school, but lacked the social, hopeful foundation for improving our school. From the lack of drawing upon student strengths and promoting community involvement, to the rigidity of strictly following rules and inconsistent expectations (Ravitch, 2010), my first principal did everything educational researchers carefully caution against. As long as AGENTS didn't intrude on her schedule or become an issue she had to deal with, she had no interest in what AGENTS did.

My third principal was brand new to the job, and I hoped she would be able to bridge the best of the last two principals together to truly jumpstart empowering our students to improve our school community. She not only wanted to support the enrichment of our students' lives, but she actively worked with the school district and other business leaders to promote the social, economic, and academic equity of our school. She was deeply committed to the product of what our school could be, but struggled to find the right kind of process and appropriate content that can get students and teachers there. Unfortunately, she made time for AGENTS if they could be squeezed into her schedule. By the time she came to our school, AGENTS was an established group that was independent from the school day. Her priorities were focused on other aspects of our school and we did not fit within those expectations.

My fifth principal actually came out of retirement to lead again. However, instead of taking into consideration the time and place of her new school in a new decade of technological advances, she stuck to the old strategies she had been successful with in the past. She quickly ended up retiring all over again. Similarly, to the third principal, her priorities for our school laid elsewhere and we were left alone.

This seventh principal is the complete opposite of the one that preceded her. Communication, enthusiasm, approachability, and empowerment are all issues that teachers, parents, and students are struggling to re-establish with this new leadership style. With the pace at which learning and information have increased, an onslaught of pressure to lead and empower in a more transparent and fluid manner has become more challenging. Setting a vision of school community and welcome, and implementing the work it takes to positively nurture, seems to be the most influential and least often practiced method of leadership and empowerment. Our school has become yet another product that will look well-put together on the outside, but has no substance or culture to the process that fosters actual learning on the inside. She has come to AGENTS meetings to listen to ideas, but does not prefer AGENTS to take action and get in contact with others unless she has approved such an action. Similarly to the third and fifth principals, by the time she came to our school, AGENTS was an established group and her priorities are elsewhere.

#### *Benevolent Administrative Example*

My second principal was the complete opposite of my first. She was deeply concerned with how to reach our students by any means possible. She increased the amount of after school activities our school's families could attend, she pushed for a greater learning emphasis in the arts, and she encouraged teacher autonomy and experimentation. From her, I learned how

commitment and support can make small strides, and how the red tape of working for change can be very challenging. After only two years, she suddenly had to retire. She had been the first administrator to welcome and encourage AGENTS to grow. She fostered AGENTS' autonomy by attending several meetings, listening to their ideas, providing feedback, and following up on the projects they proposed to her. She invested in their work.

My fourth principal was another veteran of the job. Always in the background, she kept up with what her teachers were doing and how they did it, but gave them the time and space to be responsible and accountable to actually teach. Her 'lead by example' pyramid approach, and 'pay it forward' mentality were the most encouraging leadership style I had experienced thus far. She not only had high expectations, but she appreciated and acknowledges the work it takes to meet them. Unfortunately, she retired after my first year with her. She welcomed the concept of AGENTS at her school, but requested that it be blended into a student council structure since that club already had an established presence on campus.

The sixth principal was the closest to encompassing the best qualities the first five principals had. She was an astute school finance manager. She worked to support the health and happiness of both students and parents. She led by example in what she encouraged others to try doing, especially with technology. She strove to make her school a place people wanted to come, loved being at, and took care and pride in taking new risks. After only two years, she was suddenly promoted to a district level position. Yet another new principal to learn from was coming. This principal gave the most support to AGENTS out of all seven. She put money aside for AGENTS to take a trip during the school day to a leadership institute both years she was there. She would invite AGENTS into her office or conference room to discuss their ideas just like any other meeting she might have throughout the day. She gave them rational feedback

to support the progress of their projects and contacts within the community to put their plans into action.

I would love to learn more about this whole concept of principals and the way in which they choose to lead their schools. The choices they make to create “top-down support” with “emancipatory frameworks” for teachers and students to thrive within their school community could make all the difference in the depth AGENTS’ impact could have within their macro community (Furman, 2012; Shields, 2010; Tillman & Scheurich, 2013). I would like to study how principal leadership can impact how students, especially with a desire to lead themselves, might be persuaded or influenced by who they see as a leader within their micro level.

### *Hope for the Future*

In a world that is quickly growing dependent on the creativity of possibility rather than reproducing the same production of work and commodities, a new perspective of how to get children to think critically and engage meaningfully is necessary in order to prepare them to be the next innovators in the twenty-first century. More focus and critique of layered learning connections for such student produced material as journal writing entries of leadership characteristics, participant observations on field trips, and reflections on letter writing and action plans are useful in pursuing the broader questions of whether AGENTS can support students’ broader notions of engaged leadership and social change (Galletta & Jones, 2010; Shor, 2009). This inquiry is fundamental to the impact it could have on influencing the mandates and guidelines of educating children throughout their lives.

The hierarchical structure and contextual norms of education must give way to more lateral investigations into learning in order to provide the greatest investments for all participants involved, from students, to parents, to teachers and administrators, and to the community as well.

Learning and education no longer fit the mold of ‘what can we instill’ in children, but rather what children can instill into their community and future by being an active and effective participant within it.

When students are able to apply knowledge to transform reality, then they have really learned something invaluable (Westerman, 2009). I was curious and determined to understand how schools, especially teachers such as myself, motivate and empower their students for life experience, rather than for improving test scores for state minimum expectations. It is the growth and depth of the problems, answers, and cultivation of leadership I concentrated on with these students that plausibly transmitted the development of passionate cultural participants.

This focus on student rights and responsibilities is paramount in developing their sense of voice, identity, worth, and presence, especially for students in AGENTS at their elementary school and within their community (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013; Travis & Leech, 2014; Mameli et al., 2019). In asking elementary students to utilize their own experiences for objects of inquiry to change and improve their school, they are developing their own language and histories to produce their empowerment (Peterson, 2009). Ergo, if we are able to better develop their self-esteem by allowing them to take risks in how they think, use their words, and approach how they are able to contribute to their school community, our first step in transitioning to more empowered students could be realized.

### *Moving Forward*

I wanted to know more about pre-adolescent students and their ability to translate critically pedagogic social justice leadership methodologies from elementary school into their middle and high school years. This was an exploration to discover if developing a

certain mindset in children at a young age impacts their attitudes, beliefs, and life choices as they get older. This has also been an opportunity for me to judge if I am putting my time and effort into the right endeavors with these pre-adolescent youth. With countless hours of self-reflection and soul-searching to trace the journeys and life lessons of my former AGENTS, I am constantly gaining more than I expected, and more that I can draw on in the future (Cowhey, 2006). As Dewey would note, I wanted these students to have the power of experience as their critical learning (as cited in Giroux, 2005, p. 441).

Giroux, in turn, sums up my desire to give these diverse students a launching pad for better serving their interests “by enabling them to understand and gain control over the socio-political forces that influence their destinies” (Giroux, 2005, p. 441).

The parent stories and observations of subtle shifts in their children's behaviors revealed that these children are beginning to struggle with the complexities of their community, social structures, and their abilities to be an active, engaged player within it. They are exercising their boundaries of power and influence and how they maneuver working for change within their societal structure. They are starting to realize when they have identified a problem, and are starting to initiate their own procedures for endeavoring to solve them. They are beginning to own the solutions to problems in that, “if anyone's going to change it, it's going to be me.” They are starting to discover that sometimes their solutions will be a struggle, and uncomfortable to work through, but that they can achieve more than they thought possible. These findings have important implications for pre-adolescent youth frameworks as a whole, suggesting that the benefits these students obtain from an empowering framework can extend beyond a single

situation to conscious actions and understandings that can contribute to a sense of their own ability to effect change.

In terms of activating forms of transformative change at the system level, this must occur among elementary schools and other institutions serving youth, particularly low-income neighborhood schools (Galletta & Jones, 2010). It must now be determined if elementary AGENTS are a viable option in prompting the kind of processes needed to change how we educate children at any elementary school. Exploring if different material and social resources stimulate value for the participation in an afterschool framework such as AGENTS must also be considered. In particular, Galletta & Jones' (2010) attempt to capture the meaning of historical landmarks and locations for groups of middle, high school, and college age students on film has provided a new branch of leadership to consider: utilizing various age groups to analyze the impact local leaders, both past and present, have imprinted on the communities they live in today and what, if any, significance could these role models impress among young AGENTS to spur them into action or influence their future career possibilities.

In conducting this research, I was hoping to find out that my former AGENTS were thriving. I wanted to confirm that they were happy, adventurous in the risks they were willing to take in middle school and high school, and/or even unabashedly tenacious in going after different opportunities that improved their quality of life. I was also hoping to find out that they were not only doing great things for themselves and others, but that they had really expanded their horizons in what was possible for them to do within their community. I hope that they are leaving some sort of mark at their school or in their community in some way. Or, that they have been a part of an initiative or a movement that is important to them, be it locally, regionally, or within a broader community that they can make an impact on.

In the end, I found out that these seven former AGENTS really are sticking through what they have committed to, and once they've made up their mind, they are following through with whatever they attempt to do or be. Whether it's small acts such as speaking to others when they know something isn't right or putting themselves out there to develop a better working environment and relationship with teachers, or broader acts like thinking thoughtfully about the role that they fill within an organization, regardless of what their title is within it, to get the most accomplished in the most inclusive way possible or attempting to be an athlete in a rigorous and elite athletic club while also pursuing a rigorous and demanding academic agenda. These former AGENTS are doing great things within their day-today lives. They're getting out of their comfort zone and extending themselves to reach for more challenging goals.

But they haven't quite reached their potential within the context of the broader community. Their work is still very localized and focuses on daily problems in which implementing solutions or fixing a problem can occur within a relatively quick amount of time. They are not really thinking about larger issues that have an effect on their lives, both historically and in the subsequent years to come, like climate change or gun control. They haven't really seemed to consider global issues or challenges that don't have such an easy path to a solution but are still important aspects to the broader improvement of society that need to be addressed and attended to for an extended period of time.

In interviewing parents to find out their perspectives on the impact of AGENTS for their children, I got to find out exactly what it has been like for them to leave the elementary school that shepherded their social, emotional, and cognitive abilities and be herded into the more imposing environments of middle and high school. These parents reflected on the ways in which their children have adapted to their new social and academic settings and are finding their

footing in developing their personal identity characteristics. Although each parent concurred that AGENTS helped their children become aware of realistic capacities and capabilities that they could foster, I didn't quite find what I was hoping these students would start considering and acting upon as novice agents of change. I want them to see themselves as a citizen of the world that plays an active role in helping solve the greater issues that impact their lives and their futures. In the grand scheme of making an impact, AGENTS definitely gave these preadolescent students a stepping stone to thinking more critically about what actions they can take and how they can practice them. Nevertheless, my findings have shown me that my hopes of what they can accomplish have been a little too lofty to attempt achieving for the time being. With everything else that they have going on in their lives that they must attend to, be a part of, or contribute to, tackling global social and political issues is not a top priority at this time.

I am also fascinated with the concept of how my students from a lower socioeconomic school are doing compared to students who went to a much more culturally diverse school. I would love to find out how they each group fares as they get older. Lareau (2011) found that higher income children had a much more difficult time adjusting to the autonomy of adulthood than lower income children did. Lower income children were able to make adjustments and practice more flexibility in how they were able to meet their needs as an adult. Therefore, it would also be interesting to see how the students from the low socioeconomic elementary school have adapted to adulthood compared to their counterparts in a higher socioeconomic elementary school.

Furthermore, I gained a greater understanding of how significant the transition from elementary school to middle and high school can affect students and how imperative the parent involvement is to weathering these rough adjustments (Madjar,

Cohen & Shoval, 2018; Madjar & Chohat, 2017; Akos, 2002). Moving forward, I would like to get more input from parents during the school year so that we can all work together to ease those transitions. It would also be interesting to collect fathers' perspectives on the impact of AGENTS and compare their insights on their children to the mothers' perspectives. I think talking to fathers would improve my study because they could give a different outlook on their perspectives of their children and their orientations or desires for the types of goals they have for their children. It would be interesting to compare how each parent views their child, and what they want and hope for them as they grow up. Comparing those values, attitudes, and behaviors between parents could also provide insight on the input their child is receiving at home to influence the different types of life choices they end up making.

My research is unique in regards to other research such that it does not focus on one school academic subject and it does not depend on interacting with older students to generate their self-efficacy. AGENTS is all about these preadolescent students in their last years of elementary school. The main focus is on how *they* can develop their mindset and conduct a set of strategies that can help *them* understand and experience what it's like to actually solve a problem all by themselves. The AGENTS framework doesn't have to adhere to any rigid format or specific criteria or curriculum, nor is it confined within one subject. It is completely determined by what each individual student interprets their environment as and sees in the world as needing to be improved. They work completely based on their own ideas as individual nine- to eleven-year-olds in the ways in which they see the world. Being a part of AGENTS is also completely voluntary. These students are the ones that have decided to try this out and they are the ones that make the commitment to show up and put in their time and effort; they are the ones

exercising their right to be developing a conscientious and thoughtful environment where the rewards and reinforcement are based on their actions alone.

If I could change anything about AGENTS, there are several things I would want to experiment with and see what could happen as a result. The first option would be getting access to a larger, more active sector within the community. Having the ability to transport and work in different environments as a group would be an incredible bonding experience. They would get to see different types of opportunities that they might not get to be exposed to otherwise, such as learning how an area chamber of commerce is trying to solve the problem of flooding or developing a literacy campaign with our local libraries to engage families or visit and work with local organizations whose sole purpose is to create engagement and action within the community, similar to Project Row Houses (2019). If we had more time, the second option would be to renew our deeper study into historical figures that have impacted their community. In this way, they could get a clear picture of the types of simple acts they might try doing while thinking beyond the confines of what their school offers in how they are able to impact change. A third option I would also love is to have some sort of partner program in a different part of the world. American AGENTS and international AGENTS could interact and exchange ideas with other students their age and possibly create solutions to problems that they think of together, halfway across the world. It would be nice for both groups of AGENTS to work together to identify an issue and then work to solve it together. This would be my initial idea in attempting to help these AGENTS start thinking more globally about their presence and actions at an international level.

There was a growing awareness and increasing participation in these students' surrounding micro community systems, but nothing of their greater macro environment was

mentioned at all. The goal remains for AGENTS to better envisage the broader environmental, political, economic, geographical, and civic issues that shape and transform their lives, and begin to take small steps to address tackling them.

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## Appendix A

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### AGENTS Leader Notes

1. What does the word leader mean to you?
2. What are characteristics of a good leader?
3. What are characteristics of a bad leader?
4. Can you name any leaders you know of or like?
5. How do you think you can become a good leader?
6. What questions do you have about being a good leader?
7. What would be the hardest things to do as a leader?
8. What would be the easiest things to do as a leader?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **First Interview Questions**

1. Describe your child's personality.
2. Describe how your child's personality in elementary school compares to their personality in middle school and in high school.
3. Tell me about your child's educational experiences over the years:
  - a. With teacher-student relations
  - b. With other students
  - c. With extra-curricular activities
  - d. With any other situations
4. Describe the schools your child attended growing up.
5. Describe your child's interaction/relationship with the schools they attended.
6. Tell me about the relationships you saw between your child, schools, and/or community.
7. Tell me about different ways you have observed your child be involved at school and/or in the community.
8. What do you think most influences how your child interacts:
  - a. With teacher-student relations
  - b. With other students
  - c. With extra-curricular activities
  - d. With any other situations
9. Tell me about how you think your child should be involved in their education and/or community.
10. Tell me about any challenges that your child has struggled through.
11. To what extent do you think your perceptions have changed about your child over the last eight years?
12. Do you feel your child needs more knowledge or preparation to be a successful adult?

### **Second / Group Interview Questions**

1. Why were your children involved in extracurricular activities?
2. Can you describe if there was an increase in any behaviors in 5th grade as a result of these activities? Each year afterwards?
3. Can you explain if the choices your child made in elementary school shaped the choices of what they decided in middle school and high school?
4. Why did your child come, and then continue to keep coming, to AGENTS?
5. Can you explain if AGENTS was worth the time and effort? Please describe why or why not.
6. Can you explain the positives or negatives to being an AGENT?
  - a. Were there any “shifts” noticed in your child during or after AGENTS?