

The Education of African-American Students: Voicing the Debates, Controversies, and Solutions

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TELLING MY STORY

In her October 2006 keynote address given at the Watson Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, Ruth Behar said, "Tell the story that is yours to tell." In what follows, I tell a story about the education of African-American children which I feel as an African-American is a story that is mine to tell, and a story that I want to tell. My story is rooted in my own experience of growing up black in America before and after school desegregation. I personally experienced what Ryan (1976) described as social engineers thinking up "ways of strengthening the Negro family, rather than methods of eradicating racism" (p. 38). Growing up, I often wondered why blacks were so disliked and especially why all of the books I was required to read in school failed to depict my culture and heritage. I am disappointed that educators, parents, politicians, researchers, and representatives from conservative watch groups and business interests prevented the inclusion of multicultural literature when I was a student. Unfortunately, the practice still continues. Caughlan's (2007) article, "Competing Cultural Models of Literature in State Content Standards," reported that state standards in Minnesota and Wisconsin reveal a conflict between reading literature as a way to understand ourselves and others versus literature as a repository of a cultural heritage that has largely excluded those not in the dominant race, culture, and class.

My story is an insider's voice of what it took for me to successfully navigate the educational system and become the professional I am today. I argue that researchers have offered many ideas, which often conflict in regards to how African-American children should be taught or educated. Ironically, researchers have often failed to consider the insiders' voices, which present opposing views of what it takes to educate African-American children. Oftentimes these insiders' voices deeply capture the need to be *double-conscious*, which means the adoption of the behaviors, discourses, and values of the dominant culture. While some in the research community feel such double-consciousness may represent conformity, assimilation, or accommodation, insiders realize that adaptation to the dominant culture is a way to succeed.

As a member of the second group of black students to transfer to Albany High School—an all-white high school during the turbulent 1960s—I know firsthand that the education of African-American students has been filled with victories, setbacks, tensions, overt acts of racism, and hypocrisy (McMillon, 2001).

It is through the lens of both history and my own experiences that I discuss four major debates/controversies surrounding the education of African-American students: (a) the fight for access to literacy, (b) supports and roadblocks to "success," (c) best practices, theories, and perspectives on teaching African-American students, and (d) the role of African-American families in the literacy lives of their children.

THE FIGHT FOR ACCESS TO LITERACY

History has shown that blacks have had to fight to become literate in this country and many blacks feel, including me, that our fight continues. Henry Louis Gates (as cited in McMillon, 2001) stated that the eighth wonder of the world is that Blacks—after being enslaved for more than 200 years have—become a “literate race.”

Figure 1. Mr. George Dawson
(www.readin.dcccd.edu)



Mr. George Dawson, who learned to read at 98 years old, is a living example of the eighth wonder to which Henry Louis Gates referred. A grandson of slaves, Dawson was born 1898 in a three-room log cabin on a farm near Marshall, Texas, the home of Wiley College—the college highlighted in the 2007 movie directed by Denzel Washington, “The Great Debaters.” He started work at age 4, earning \$1.15 or so a week, which helped feed his parents and four younger brothers and sisters. His siblings went to school though Dawson could not because he was working to support his family. In 1996, a literacy volunteer knocked on Dawson’s door

and told him that adult education courses were being taught a few blocks away. Dawson responded eagerly, “Wait, I’ll get my coat.” He refused to remain intellectually enslaved. In fact, Dawson collaborated with a Washington State schoolteacher to write a book about his life, entitled *Life Is So Good* (Dawson & Glaubman, 2000).

In his award-winning text, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, James Anderson (1988) helps us develop a better understanding of the issues that Dawson and other African-Americans had to address in their fight for early access to literacy. Anderson stated that:

It is crucial for an understanding of American educational history, however, to recognize that within American democracy there have been classes of oppressed people and that there have been essential relationships between popular education and the politics of oppression. Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education. (p. 1)

Anderson also believes the “standard story” of public education that one may be accustomed to reading in history textbooks has different versions depending on who is telling the story. In the next few paragraphs, I provide more details on African-Americans’ fight for early access to literacy using the periodic method.

From 1630-1739, literacy spread among African-Americans. During this period, education was based on three main principles: (a) to educate slaves for Bible reading, to make them Christian; (b) to abolish slavery and provide equal access to education; and (c) to allow slaves to take their rightful place among the other citizens because the country emerged from a concept of individual freedom. However, “rightful place” did not necessarily mean “equal status.”

From 1740-1867, blacks had to endure more than a century of continuous dehumanization. There were many anti-slavery movements shaped by several different philosophical beliefs about slavery. Some abolitionists believed that slavery diminished America’s national character. However, most states refused to recognize African-Americans as citizens, and failed to provide an education for black children. From 1869-1899, as newly freed slaves, blacks commonly wanted to learn to read so that they could read the Bible. At that time, blacks preferred black teachers (which is a request of some of today’s black parents). When given a choice, blacks often selected black schools over white ones (another request of some of today’s black parents) because they felt that whites lowered the standards for teachers who taught black students. The feeling today among many blacks and whites is that the most competent teachers are not teaching in urban settings where many African-American students reside.

In the fight for access to literacy debate, we blacks were also debating among ourselves. W. E. B. DuBois believed in “cultivating the brain,” (p. 1) and Booker T. Washington advocated that African-Americans should “rejoice in skill in hand and cultivate the land” (p. 1) (as cited in Randall, 1972). Marcus Garvey (see Rogers, 1955) argued that since we were being prevented from gaining civil rights in this country, perhaps we should return to Africa. Garvey was an important proponent of the Back-to-Africa movement.

Even though we were in this country, we had to struggle to become citizens. The *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) decision ruled that people of African descent, whether or not they were slaves, could never be citizens of the United States. Septima Poinsette Clark’s (2008) work for equal access to education and civil rights for African-Americans several decades before the rise of the national awareness of racial inequality led her to be known as the “Queen Mother” or “Grandmother of the Civil Rights Movement” in the United States. She also helped to establish “Citizen Schools” which taught reading to adults throughout the Deep South. Rhea Lathan (2006) documented a major African-American literacy crusade in the South Carolina Sea Islands known as the Citizenship School (1957-1962). Participants in Lathan’s study provided materials for researching the relationship between literacy and economic, political, and social changes from the perspective of the people living through those changes.

The fight for access continued with the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). The Supreme Court combined four cases (those from Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and the District of Columbia) under the heading *Brown v. Board of Education*. Reverend Oliver Brown objected to his daughter, Linda Brown, having to pass an all-white school in her neighborhood to attend a distant, all-black school. We recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, but the words of W. E. B. DuBois from more than 100 years ago still ring true: “The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line” (as cited in McMillon, 2001, p. 26). This issue is also addressed by Cornell West (1993) and Derrick Bell (1983, 1993) when they argue that “race matters.”

The fight for access continued after integration. Books by Andrew Hacker (1992)—*Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*—and Jonathan Kozol (1991)—*Savage Inequalities: Children in American’s Schools*—are “must reads” in discussions of African-American children’s fight for access after integration. The policy called *integration* eroded much cultural strength among African-American communities. While the stated goal of integration was equity in

education, segregation of the highest order and inequities have been maintained through integration policies. At the same time, these integration policies resulted in African-Americans losing community control and cultural maintenance. This has occurred because the policy of integration never took on the true cause of inequity as measured in our institutions and our history as a nation: racism. In their books, Hacker and Kozol discuss in detail the racism that still divides blacks and whites, even today. Hacker contends that African-Americans remain a subordinate class because "being black in America bears the mark of slavery. Even after emancipation...blacks continued to be seen as an inferior species, not only unsuited for equality but not even meriting a chance to show their worth" (p. 14). Hacker believes that these convictions persist today and are the basis for the existence of two nations within the United States—nations that are separate, hostile, and unequal. Kozol describes the effects of poverty and inadequate funding on education. He eloquently argues that the American educational system is still separate and unequal 50 years after the historic desegregation decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Over the years, our government has attempted to level the playing field for children of color in this country. However, one of the most politicized fights for access is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Because of NCLB, closing the achievement gap is now a national priority. Schools are now held specifically accountable for the annual progress of African-American students.

The struggle continues even in the new millennium. Woodson (1933) asserted over 70 years ago that the process of mis-education had impeded the progress of African-Americans. He argued that the majority of "educated" blacks were all but worthless in the liberation of their people in that their education was too basic and technical and had not prepared them to critique their own condition. Almost 75 years later, Craig Saddler (2005) argued that African-American youth are not only mis-educated but actually "de-educated." The term de-educated is used to shed light on the fact that as a whole, African-American youth are being systematically excluded from the education system and/or being systematically destroyed within that system.

In conclusion, history tells us that we have moved from no access, to limited access, to segregation, to desegregation/integration, to mis-education, to de-education. The struggle continues for African-Americans, even though it takes different shapes and forms. Despite the seemingly never-ending struggles "we can't and won't give up" our fight for recognition of continued inequality and denigration in education. Our fight is crucial for the education of African-American students.

SUPPORTS AND ROADBLOCKS TO "SUCCESS"

Irvine and Irvine (1983) used three units of analysis to examine the factors affecting success of African-American children after desegregation within the broader sociocultural context: the interpersonal, institutional, and community levels. At the interpersonal level, the disappearance of African-American teachers and administrators negatively affected the self-esteem and self-awareness of African-American children. At the institutional level, the African-American school was a "security blanket" for African-American children and families, and it was a place where African-American principals and teachers were in control. Irvine and Irvine argue that "these schools represented and

took on uniquely stylized characteristics reflective of their members—patterns of communications, cultural preferences, and normatively diffused modes of behavior" (pp. 415-416).

The African-American community was also an institution to which parents and children looked for strength, hope, and security. More importantly, the African-American community set the floor and ceiling on achievement and educational attainment for its members. Billingsley (1968) conceives of the black community in this respect. He stated:

In every aspect of the child's life a trusted elder, neighbor, Sunday school teacher, schools, or other community member might instruct, discipline, assist, or otherwise guide the young of a given family. Second, as role models, community members show an example to and interest in the young people. Third, as advocates they actively intercede with major segments of society (a responsibility assumed by professional educators) to help young members of particular families find opportunities which might otherwise be closed to them. Fourth, as supportive figures, they simply inquire about the progress of the young, take a special interest in them. Fifth, in the formal roles of teacher, leader, elder, they serve youth generally as part of the general role or occupation. (p. 99)

Unfortunately, as African-Americans, we witnessed an erosion in our community at all three levels after desegregation.

From first through tenth grade, I attended all-black schools in the Deep South. I had great teachers who related with me inside and outside of school. In fact, many of my teachers attended my church. Gwen McMillon's (2001) research highlights the literacy experiences of African-American students who are successful in the African-American church environment, but considered "at-risk" in their classrooms at school. Differences in discourse patterns, participation structures, response to mistakes, disciplinary strategies, and beliefs about relationship building and teacher expectations were found to influence African-American students' level of success.

I agree with Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996, 2001), Adam Fairclough (2007), Michelle Foster (1997), and Arlette Willis (2002) that even though teachers in the segregated South worked in dismal, unfair, and discriminatory situations, they did not allow themselves to become victims of their environments. Rather, they viewed themselves as trained professionals who embraced a series of ideas about how to teach African-American children. Black teachers also demanded more of their students and did not focus on extrinsic rewards for themselves. After school segregation, the schooling experience for African-American students drastically changed and many black students witnessed high rates of school failure. For example, Irvine (1990) believes that black student failure occurred because of a lack of cultural synchronization and a lack of cultural responsiveness. Lack of cultural synchronization is a situation in which teachers do not share a common understanding of verbal and nonverbal language, manner of personal presentation, and ways of processing information and knowledge. The lack of cultural responsiveness results in negative expectations by teacher and by the students themselves, as well as in a pattern of differential teacher-student interactions in the classroom. The obvious outcome for black students is school failure.

Many black students were also tracked after school desegregation. Research has documented the inequitable effects of tracking, yet the practice persists. Oakes (1985) notes that tracking entrenches structure inequality in schools. Further, as she and others have documented, group placements are neither fair nor accurate (see Braddock & Slavin, 1993). Tracking assumes that

students' abilities—typically as assessed by standardized tests—are static. In fact, what children learn depends largely on the opportunities schools provide for their learning. Yet tracking assures that students placed at lower levels experience instruction and curriculum that allows for only slow progress in learning the most basic skills. Compared to students in higher-level classes, students in lower tracks move at a slower pace, spend more time reviewing basic skills through worksheet-based instruction, and have less opportunity to produce work that has meaning to audiences outside the classroom. Consequently, Jeannie Oakes argues that permanent assignment to groups within classes, mis-assignment to special education, and grade retention contribute to and institutionalize unequal opportunities to learn. These practices harm all children, but they particularly hurt low-income students and students of color. I believe that tracking is an issue that school districts must and should consistently monitor.

Ronald Ferguson (2002) is one of the leading researchers who has examined school achievement among minority students. In particular, he analyzed the data collected by the Minority Student Achievement Network, formed by 15 middle- and upper-middle income districts throughout the nation, to better understand the experiences of different racial and economic group students that affect their academic achievement and academic engagement. Survey findings in Ferguson's report point to three components for narrowing the achievement gap in middle- and upper-income suburban schools: (1) reducing skill deficits; (2) increasing home resource supports; and (3) supporting professional development programs that equally emphasize content, pedagogy, and teacher-student relationships.

Ford (1996) is another researcher interested in the achievement of African-American students. Her ultimate goal is to end underachievement among gifted black students and to increase the multicultural and multiracial representation of youth in gifted education. Ford reported three factors contributing to underachievement: (a) sociopsychological factors, (b) family-related factors, and (c) school-related factors. Teachers and parents feel confusion, frustration, and disappointment when gifted black students fail to work to their potential. Gifted underachieving minority students perform poorly in school for many of the reasons that any student might. Also, minority students may face additional barriers which is another matter that school districts must and should address.

In addition to experiencing high rates of school failure and tracking, black students encountered several other roadblocks to success. In Ogbu's (1978) discussion of voluntary and involuntary minorities, he argued that "involuntary minorities" often adopted an "oppositional identity" to the mainstream culture because of the glass ceiling placed by white society on the job-success of their parents and others in their communities. Therefore, he reasoned, non-whites "failed to observe the link between educational achievement and access to jobs" (p. 27).

In 1986, Fordham and Ogbu co-authored a study that concluded African-American students in a Washington, D.C. high school did not live up to their academic potential because of the fear of being accused of "acting white." Though the study's conclusions gained a popular foothold and have been espoused by figures such as Bill Cosby, a later study obtained different results. In 2005, Tyson, a sociologist; Darity, an economist; and Castellino, a research scientist, directed an 18-month study at 11 North Carolinian schools. The study found that white and black students have essentially the

same attitudes about scholastic achievement. Students in both groups want to succeed in school, and both groups show higher levels of self-esteem when they do better in school. A 2005 study titled *An Empirical Analysis of "Acting White"* by Roland Fryer and Paul Torelli suggested that the phenomenon of "acting white" has a significant effect on black student achievement, especially in schools with high interracial contact among high-achieving students.

Ogbu (1978) demonstrates that the problems black students encounter in school are much more pervasive than the literature and prevailing wisdom suggest and that class-based analysis is insufficient to account for them. The fear of being accused of "acting white" is also echoed in Ogbu's 2003 book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. He concluded that the black students' own cultural attitudes hindered academic achievement and that these attitudes are too often neglected.

Dorinda Carter (in press, 2005) argues that teachers must think about when it is helpful or harmful in the classroom to spotlight black students as black students and when it is helpful or harmful to ignore black students as black students. She uses the terms *racial spotlighting* to describe how black students are positioned as racially hypervisible by whites when they do not seek to be and the term *racial ignoring* to describe how black students are positioned as racially invisible by whites they desire to be visible.

Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) place students' social identity as African-Americans at the very center of the discussion. They argue that the unique social and cultural position black students occupy, in a society which often devalues and stereotypes African-American identity, fundamentally shapes students' experience of school and sets up unique obstacles. Claude Steele (as cited in Perry, Steele and Hilliard, 2003) reports empirical psychological evidence that when black students believe they are being judged as members of a stereotyped group rather than as individuals, they do worse on tests. In a recent study by Dorinda Carter (in press, 2005), she reported that black students perceived that they had to "prove wrong" negative stereotypes about their intellectual ability and racial group cultural patterns as a way to resist racism of their school context. The "prove them wrong" phenomenon has been found to be common among some black students in predominately white colleges and universities. The message of "prove them wrong" was certainly a message I received from my parents, neighbors, and friends. While I was a student at Albany High School and throughout my life journey, I have constantly heard, even in the preparation of my NRC presidential address, "Pat, make us proud."

In sum, it is safe to say that success in the African-American community has been defined and examined in many ways. There seem to be numerous obstacles set up to impede the progress of African-American students; they have to choose to make it "in spite of." If they achieve academically, some consider that they are "acting white." If they adopt Ogbu's (1978) "oppositional identity" and refuse to participate in the rigorous "contests," they are considered "at-risk," lazy, or put in special education. The answer seems to be to help African-Americans to develop a double-consciousness, but many teachers and researchers do not understand how to teach and research on this level.

THEORIES, PERSPECTIVES, AND BEST PRACTICES ON TEACHING AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

Trent and Artiles (1995) expressed some concerns in teaching African-American students in integrated schools. In particular they reported that:

When Black children entered integrated schools, they were met generally by White administrators and teachers who were unprepared to deal with their cognitive styles, social values, beliefs, customs, and traditions. Because of the discontinuity that developed overnight between home and school cultures, these personnel began teaching Black children with preconceived notions and stereotypical views about how they functioned. (p. 29)

In response, P. D. Pearson (1996) offered a word of wisdom for teaching all children. He correctly noted that:

Children are who they are. They know what they know. They bring what they bring. Our job is not to wish that students knew more or knew differently. Our job is to turn each student's knowledge and diversity of knowledge we encounter into a curricular strength rather than an instructional inconvenience. We can do that only if we hold high expectations for all students, and convey great respect for the knowledge and culture they bring to the classroom, and offer lots of support in helping them achieve those expectations. (p. 272)

Despite Pearson's words of wisdom, several debates and controversies have surfaced over the years regarding the education of African-American students. In the next few paragraphs, I highlight some of the continuing debates and controversies.

Jean Anyon (1981), Kenneth Clark (1965), Ray Rist (1973), and Jere Brophy (1983) are major voices in discussions about race, social class, and teacher expectations. In Anyon's widely cited article, "Social Class and School Knowledge," she reveals that even in an elementary school context, where there is a fairly "standardized" curriculum, social stratification of knowledge is possible. The differences that were identified among the schools suggest as well that rather than being simply conserving or "reproductive," school knowledge embodies contradictions that have profound implications for social change. In Rist's seminal article, "Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education," he shows how a kindergarten teacher placed the children in reading groups which reflected the social class composition of the class, and how these groups persisted throughout the first several years of elementary school. However, it is interesting to note that although Clark identified low teacher expectations as one cause of the low achievement of students in ghetto schools, it was not until publication of Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) *Pygmalion in the Classroom* that the topic of teacher expectations "arrived" on the educational scene. In Brophy's review of the literature on teacher expectations, he reported that it is difficult to predict the effects of teacher expectations, even with knowledge of their accuracy and the degree of rigidity with which they are held, because expectations interact with beliefs about learning and instruction to determine teacher behavior (so that similar expectations may lead to different behavior), and because students will differ in their interpretation of and response to teacher behavior (so that similar behavior may produce different student outcomes).

Many blacks believe that the discussion about race and teacher expectations closely relates to the emotional feelings aroused by the Black English and Ebonics movement. Black speech is a dialect that is often misconstrued in our society (Dillard, 1972; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Sims, 1982; Smitherman, 1986). One can note this accusation by the many terms that are used as labels to define this speech, such as "Black English," "African-American Vernacular," "broken, inner-city English," and "Ebonics," just to name a few. The "Ebonics Debate" has created much more heat than light for most of the country. For teachers trying to determine what implications there might be for classroom practice, enlightenment has been a completely non-existent commodity. Most teachers of those African-American children who have been least well-served by educational systems believe that their students' life chances will be further hampered if they do not learn Standard English. In the stratified society in which we live, they are absolutely correct. While having access to the politically mandated language form will not by any means guarantee economic success, not having access will almost certainly guarantee failure.

Similarly, many blacks feel whether or not it is substantiated that whole language learning fails to provide many positive outcomes for a large number of black children. Most of us are very familiar with the educational and political battle between proponents of a phonics emphasis in reading and a whole language emphasis. P. David Pearson (2004) and Kenneth Goodman (1998) are major voices in the reading wars debate. Proponents of phonics point to the declining reading test scores that they see as a result of whole language instruction and scientific studies that indicate phonics instruction produces better reading scores than other methods. Whole language advocates point to other reasons to explain those instances of declining reading scores and to ethnographic studies of students in classrooms to support their position. We all know that the teaching of reading arouses passionate debates in newspaper editorial pages, in state legislatures, in congress, and among researchers.

Two critical books in the reading wars debate are *Broken Promises: Reading Instruction in Twentieth-Century America* (1989) and *The Struggle to Continue: Progressive Reading Instruction in the United States* (1990) by Patrick Shannon. Dorothy Strickland is a prominent African-American scholar who is widely cited in this debate. In "Educating African-American Learners at Risk: Finding a Better Way," Strickland (1994) states that: (a) "As the definition of what it means to be literate in our society becomes more demanding and more complex, the constraints of (skills-based) teaching become increasingly evident. Teaching to low-level, basic skills apparently places an unintended ceiling on learning" (p. 331); (b) "African-American children deserve literacy programs that stress the construction of meaning right from the start" (p. 331); and (c) "African-American children deserve literacy programs that build on and expand their language and culture with a view toward helping them understand and value their heritage and respect the heritage of others" (p. 333).

Another leading African-American educator in the reading wars debate is Lisa Delpit. She also wrote a widely cited article, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" (1982) and a book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (1995). In these two resources, Delpit complained about the lack of a display of power and authority in process-oriented classrooms: "The teacher has denied them access to herself as the source of knowledge necessary to learn the forms they need to succeed" (p. 288).

In addition to the aforementioned debates and controversies, there are a number of theories and perspectives for teaching African-American children as well as other children of color. They include: (a) Afrocentric Schools (Shujaa, 1994); (b) Multicultural Education (Banks, 2001; Grant, 1992; Sleeter, 2007); (c) Multicultural Literature (Bishop, 2007; Harris, 1990); (d) African-Centered Pedagogy (Murrell, 2002); (5) Critical Multiculturalism (Apple, 1993; May, 1999); (e) Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); and (f) Critical Pedagogy (Giroux, 1988). In the next section, I provide a brief description of each of these theories and perspectives.

Afrocentric Schools

Shujaa (1994) uses Asante's (1980) Afrocentric transformation model as a justification for Afrocentric schools. Asante's (1980) levels of Afrocentric transformation are outlined below:

- (1) Skin recognition—awareness of skin color and heritage as characteristics that distinguish one as a person of African descent; (2) Environment recognition—awareness of discrimination and abuse within the environment attributed to one's skin color and heritage; (3) Personality awareness—recognition of individual preferences related to one's heritage; (4) Interest-concern—demonstration of interest in and concern about the issues of people of African descent; and (5) Afrocentricity—awareness of a collective and conscious will, and constant struggle to interpret reality from an African-centered perspective. (pp. 55-56)

Afrocentricity, Asante (1987) argued, "is above all the total use of method to effect psychological, political, social, cultural and economic change" (p. 125). It is a quality achieved "when the person becomes totally changed to a conscious level of involvement in the struggle for his or her own mind liberation" (Asante, 1982, p. 56). Two key terms to consider in Asante's (1987) conception are "consciousness" and "struggle." Afrocentric consciousness implies a state of awareness in which one understands the need to evaluate symbolic reality as a social product that is never neutral. That is, symbolic reality always reflects a cultural point of view. The question Afrocentricity demands one address is whether that point of view reflects a reality grounded in the experiences of African people. Afrocentric consciousness enables individuals to recognize incongruities in their perceptions of reality and to reinterpret situations and phenomena in a manner that is consistent with collective interests of African people.

The use of the term "struggle" implies that achievement through Afrocentricity is a continual process in which individuals constantly interpret new social situations. The individual involved in Afrocentric transformation struggles to define social reality with Africa at the center of his or her consciousness. For African-Americans this becomes an internal conflict in which Afrocentric consciousness is in constant conflict with Eurocentric hegemony.

Multicultural Education

James Banks (2001), Carl Grant (1992), and Christine Sleeter (2007) are major voices in the multicultural education movement. They highlighted that little attention in professional preparation programs is focused on preparing teachers for pluralistic classrooms.

The Multicultural Education approach began in the late 1960s and grew energetically during the 1970s. Three forces converged during the mid-1960s and gave birth to this educational approach. The civil rights movement matured, school textbooks were being critically analyzed, and

assumptions underlying the deficiency orientation as a way of thinking about diverse children were reassessed (Gay, 1983)¹. Schools were severely criticized by members of the civil rights movement, mainly because many schools perpetuated the deficiency orientation through institutional processes and teacher classroom practices. It also became apparent that many teachers knew very little about students of color and treated cultural differences (e.g., speech patterns, language differences, and ways of interacting socially) as deficiencies needing remediation. As Gay describes, "[this] new thinking about cultural differences, provided the stimulus for the multiethnic education programs" (1983, p. 561). The Multicultural Education approach became an educational concept that most teacher educators professed to understand a great deal (even if they knew little or nothing about it), because policy mandates required the inclusion of multicultural content in their courses (Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Even though the incongruence between pre-service teachers' cultural insularity and children's pluralism became more well known, relatively little attention in professional preparation programs focused on preparing teachers for pluralistic classrooms (Grant & Secada, 1990; Liston & Zeichner, 1991; Sleeter, 1985). The marginal treatment of such issues in teacher preparation programs continued to reinforce a significantly monocultural approach to the preparation of teachers (Goodlad, 1990; McDiarmid & Price, 1990).

Multicultural Literature

Rudine Sims Bishop (2007) and Violet Harris (1990) are strong proponents of African-American children's literature. They believe that when students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds see themselves reflected in texts, it fosters motivation and engagements in reading. However, Harris is quick to point out:

African-American children's literature has had a tumultuous past. That past included limited awareness among readers; school, and bookstores; and uninformed criticism. Several factors contribute to this state of affairs but one important factor is the existence of literary canons. (p. 540)

Needless to say, in today's ethnically diverse classrooms, it is essential that books reflect students' cultural backgrounds. It makes all the difference to have positive images of a child's heritage.

The following guidelines for material selection were developed by adopting recommendations from various language arts and multicultural educators: Beilke (1986), Harada (1995), Harris (1990) and Pang, Colvin, Tran, and Yang (1992). They recommend that multicultural literature contain: (a) Positive portrayals of characters with authentic and realistic behaviors, to avoid stereotypes of a particular cultural group; (b) Authentic illustrations to enhance the quality of the text, since illustrations can have a strong impact on children; (c) Pluralistic themes to foster belief in cultural diversity as a national asset as well as to reflect the changing nature of this country's population; (d) Contemporary as well as historical fiction that captures changing trends in the roles played by minority groups in America; (e) High literary quality, including strong plots and well-developed characterization; (f) Historical accuracy when appropriate; (g) Reflections of the cultural values of the characters; and (h) Settings in the United States that help readers build an accurate conception of the culturally diverse nature of this country and the legacy of various minority groups.

The guidelines above are by no means an exhaustive list. They are meant to provide a starting point from which teachers can explore the many aspects of multicultural children's literature. In

addition, teachers may wish to consult with colleagues, parents, and the local ethnic community, drawing upon their specialized knowledge and unique perspectives.

According to Murrell (2002), the focus of African-centered pedagogy is on teacher action, purposeful learning and developing goals for students, and student achievement. May (1999) and Apple (1993) reveal that critical multiculturalism brings together two movements—multiculturalism and anti-racism. It also addresses the crisis of representation: How does one represent the other? Students of color are not defined through a deficit model of instruction, but rather bring to the classroom their own “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). According to Ladson-Billings (1998) and Tate (1995), critical race theory is a way of looking at racial relations, particularly within the United States, in a broader context than the traditional civil rights approach. Lastly, Giroux states that critical pedagogy utilizes the classroom as a site for critical reflection of power and structures. Critical Pedagogy recognizes how the classroom is a microcosm of society and acts as a reproduction mechanism in replicating systems of dominance and oppression. In response to these critical theories, there are a number of approaches for teaching students of color. Some examples include: (a) culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001) and (2) culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; King, Hollins, & Hayman, 1997).

Culturally Relevant Teaching and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Ladson-Billings (1994, 2001) states that culturally relevant teaching is a theory of teaching that purposefully incorporates the cultural knowledge, experience, and frames of reference of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant for students whose cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and social class backgrounds differ from that of the majority. Geneva Gay (2000); Joyce King, Etta Hollins, and Warren Hayman (1997); and Jacqueline Irvine (2003) have broadened the research community's knowledge of educating teachers for diversity especially as it relates to culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2000) defines “culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strength of these students” (p. 29).

Within the category of culturally responsive teaching there are a number of “best practice” strategies which include: (a) teaching African-American males (Tatum, 2005); (b) hip hop (Morrell, 2004); (c) informational texts (Duke, 2000a, 2000b); (d) narratives (Juzwik, 2004, 2006a, 2006b); (e) cultural modeling (Lee, 2007); and (f) cognitive flexibility (Spiro, 1991).

African-American males. Tatum (2005) is one of the leading researchers on best practices for teaching African-American males. He recommends that teachers: (1) establish a broader definition of literacy instruction that guides the selection of text; (2) identify a core of “must-read” texts for African-American males; (3) discuss texts in culturally responsive ways; (4) identify texts that balance the out-of-school literacy overload; and (5) examine their disposition(s) toward using texts with African-American adolescent males.

Hip-Hop. Ernest Morrell (2004) uses hip-hop as a way of teaching African-American youth. He argues that as the ethnic backgrounds, languages, and socioeconomic status of students change, teachers must adapt their teaching techniques and approaches to meet each and every student's needs. The great James Baldwin once remarked, “it is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in

America has been able to tell his story” (as cited in Norwood, 2002, p. 2). James Baldwin also reminds us that music has always narrated the experiences of people of African descent in the United States.

In historical black musical genres such as the spiritual, gospel, blues, jazz, funk, and hip-hop, themes such as coping with the strife of social inequality and the constant presence of racism, political organization, self (re)definition, and subversion are commonplace.

Informational texts. In Duke's (2000a, 2000b) widely read articles, “3.6 Minutes per Day: The Scarcity of Informational Texts in First Grade,” and “For the Rich it's Richer: Print Experiences and Environments Offered to Children in Very Low- and Very High-Socioeconomic Status First-Grade Classrooms,” she did not look for explanations for SES differences in literacy achievement in low-SES children or homes and communities, but in the schools and other organizations that serve them. She examined the print environments and experiences offered to children in 20 first-grade classrooms—10 in very low-SES school districts and 10 in very high-SES school districts. She found that the socioeconomic differences in print environments and experiences run wide and deep.

Narratives. In her recent text, *The Rhetoric of Teaching: Understanding the Dynamics of Holocaust Narratives in an English Classroom*, Juzwik (2008) recommends using a rhetorical framework as a helpful model for understanding classroom talk about sensitive and difficult issues. Most of us would agree that the Holocaust is a sensitive and difficult issue, and so is slavery and discussions about race. Juzwik suggests that because of the potential power and the potential dangers of oral narrative discourse in classrooms, it can be productive for teachers to investigate their own classroom rhetorics through narrative discourse analysis.

Cultural modeling. Carol Lee (2007) defines cultural modeling as a way of designing instruction to make explicit connections between content and literacy goals and the knowledge and experiences students share with family, community, and peers. While the focus is on literacy and African-American students, the book examines the functions of culture in facilitating learning and offers principles for leveraging cultural knowledge in support of subject matter specific to academic learning.

Cognitive flexibility. Rand Spiro (1991) developed the Cognitive Flexibility Theory, which posits that no single perspective is adequate to the task of representing ill-structured problems and that a successful learner is one who can readily cast and recast knowledge on response to varying situational demands. To attain this flexibility, learners must understand problems in their full complexity and must “criss-cross” the landscape (problem space) in multiple passes in order to observe how shifts in variable and goals alter the space. The multiple perspectives, approaches, and voices represented in the culturally relative and responsive approaches discussed so far are representative of such an approach. Through these methods, students are encouraged to engage with academics, their cultural heritage, and see how the former two relate to their academic experience through a variety of practices.

Over the years, teacher educators have developed several strategies for preparing teachers to teach in diverse classrooms. Despite much rhetoric and research, a fundamental question in preservice teacher education continues to elicit much debate: What do teacher candidates need to become effective teachers? Zeichner et al. (1998), Cochran-Smith (2003), Duffy (2002), Turner (2006), and Kennedy (2005) responded to this question.

Zeichner et al. (1998) have discussed three types of design principles of good practice in multicultural teacher education programs: (a) institutional and programmatic principles; (b) personnel principles; and (c) curriculum and instruction principles. Marilyn Cochran-Smith's (2003) article, "The Multiple Meanings of Multicultural Teacher Education: A Conceptual Framework," provides a conceptual structure for interrogating the multiple meanings of multicultural teacher education—first simply to reveal them and suggest their complexities, but then also to chart their origins and implications as they both shape and are shaped by local and larger political, economic, and social contexts. She poses eight questions that teacher education programs must answer to determine whether or not they are multicultural. These questions include: (a) the ideology, or social justice question; (b) the diversity question; (c) the knowledge question; (d) the teacher learning question; (e) the practice question; (f) the outcomes question; (g) the recruitment/selection question; and (h) the coherence question.

In addition to the programmatic structures and policies that support teachers' development of effective teaching practices, the current work on vision (Duffy, 2002; Mercado, 2007; Rohr, Qualls, & Turner, 2007; Turner, 2006; Turner & Duffy, 2007) reminds us that it is important to help teachers develop their own images and conceptions of "instructional effectiveness" in literacy classrooms. Duffy and Hoffman (1999) argue that teachers' own images of practice are important because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to effective teaching. Effective teaching is not scripted; rather, good teachers orchestrate productive literacy classrooms and pedagogy by using their own visions of practice to guide their instructional decisions (Duffy). However, many practitioners, particularly new teachers, need significant support in articulating and expanding their visions of practice in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms (Turner, 2006, Turner & Duffy, 2007). Given the realities of scripted curriculum, state/district mandates, and high-stakes testing, new teachers also need support to sustain their visions of practice in today's literacy classrooms (Mercado, 2007; Rohr et al., 2007).

"Reform the schools! Improve teaching!" These battle cries of American education have been echoing for over 20 years. Mary Kennedy (2005) asked, "So why does teaching change so little?" (p. 1). She takes us into the controlled commotion of the classroom, revealing how painstakingly teachers plan their lessons, and how many different ways things go awry. Teachers try simultaneously to keep track of materials, time, students, and ideas. In their effort to hold all of these things together, they can inadvertently quash students' enthusiasm and miss valuable teachable moments.

Several researchers have worked tirelessly to prepare teachers to teach in diverse settings. Some examples include: (a) model of generative change (Ball, 2006); (b) Early Field Experiences (Lazar, 2004); (c) cultural self-analysis (Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2006); (d) cultural imagination (Florio-Ruane, 2001); (e) autonomous model, ideological model (Au, 2006); (f) multicultural literacy (Diamond & Moore, 1995); (g) poetry writing (Rosaen, 2003); and (h) poetry pedagogy and performance (Apol, 2002; Apol & Harris, 1999; Certo, 2004).

Model of Generative Change

In her model of generative change, Arneeta Ball (2006) allows teachers to focus on their own personal literacy experiences and challenging life-held perspectives, focus on ways new theoretical perspectives are embraced or rejected, focus on teacher research as a perceived need for change and

growth, and focus on planning and implementation which emerges from student's visions for new possibilities.

Early Field Experiences and Cultural Self-Analysis

Althier Lazar (2004) allowed her preservice teachers the opportunity to participate in early field experiences which gave them the confidence to teach in urban settings. Patricia Schmidt and Claudia Finkbeiner (2006) created a model to help present and future teachers become culturally sensitive so they might begin to think about ways to communicate and connect with students and families from minority populations.

Autonomous Model, Ideological Model

Au (2006) examined the literacy achievement gap experienced by students of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds from different perspectives: community, classroom, and school. Au believes that social communities often attempt to evaluate the academic success and failure of such students based on stigmatizing beliefs and overgeneralizations. Many people believe that schools should uphold only one form of literacy in mainstream society. As a result, the mainstream language becomes dominant, while the primary languages, family values, and cultural backgrounds of students are often devalued. In this paradigm, which Au calls the autonomous model, students of diverse backgrounds are often tested on their cognitive skills and literacy proficiency based on mainstream ideas that are as yet unfamiliar to them. Therefore, these students have difficulty developing a sense of ownership in the process of learning. The Autonomous Model does not teach students how to celebrate and respect differences in the processes of their literacy development. However, Au argues not being proficient in one form of literacy does not mean that students are incapable of learning, because literacy development is the result of a process of social construction. Teaching students to value differences should be a fundamental emphasis in classrooms. She calls the concept of acknowledging multiple types of literacy the ideological model.

Multicultural Literacy

Diamond and Moore (1995) helped in-service teachers organize their classroom instruction to mirror the new multicultural reality found in their classrooms. Specifically, they worked with teachers and students for 3 years from three culturally diverse school districts: a predominately African-American, economically deprived district; a racially balanced, economically varied population; and a predominately white, economically sufficient population. Through numerous, regularly scheduled visitations to classrooms, they discovered ways to help teachers acquire a sensitivity to multicultural literature and ways to integrate multicultural perspectives across the curricula.

Cultural Imagination

Through the use of and sustained conversations about autobiographical texts, Florio-Ruane (2001) introduced teacher education students and experienced teachers to the complex nature of culture. She understands culture not as a product reduced to a set of artifacts, foods, costumes, and rituals but rather as a meaning-making process, noting that "culture is both meaning and the process of making meaning" (p. 27) where the cultural participant is both the weaver of this "web of meaning" as well as the strands woven. Using ethnic autobiographical texts as "representations" of

an ethnicity is risky business. Such tactics create new stereotypes as well as reinforce held stereotypes. But Florio-Ruane shows that through sustained conversations, "the idea of an autobiography being reducible merely to an 'ethnic' one, the story of a 'them' different from an 'us' merely on the basis of nationality, mother tongue, or hue of skin, grew less and less appropriate" for the participants (p. 134).

Poetry Writing and Poetry Pedagogy and Performance

Rosaen (2003) used poetry as a site for teacher candidates to explore aspects of their own culture and share their knowledge with one another. In particular, she described teacher candidates' perceptions of the poetry writing activity and their learning in four areas: curriculum, pedagogy, multicultural competence, and social justice. As part of poetry pedagogy and performance, Apol (2002), Apol and Harris (1999), and Certo (2004) explore authentic environments and strategies to encourage preservice teachers to: a) read diverse poetry; b) to write poetry; and c) to discover ways to perform poetry—from recitation to reading to slam—so that they are more inclined to create such environments for students.

Despite the struggle to teach African-American students in integrated settings, many European American teachers have had success with teaching these students. And, several African-American adults have written poignantly about European American teachers who made a difference in their lives. Turner (2003) analyzed three stories: *Unafraid of the Dark* (Bray, 1998), *A Hope in the Unseen* (Suskind, 1998), and *Project Girl* (McDonald, 1999), as well as her own story of resiliency in her dissertation study.

In other words, as researchers, we have tried to "change" the teachers, "fix" the students, utilize new literature, and implement innovative classroom strategies and teaching techniques. However, despite numerous debates, theories, perspectives, and best practices, the achievement gap still remains for African-American students.

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARENTS IN THE LITERACY LIVES OF THEIR CHILDREN

Despite the continued low academic performance of poor black students, for the most part, those concerned with this situation continue to look to schools for school-based solutions. However, they fail to pay sufficient attention to the family as a possible source of help. As Gutman and McLoyd (2000) put it, "Research on the family life of poor African-American children...is miniscule"—this is despite the fact "that the home is the major ecological setting for children" (p. 3).

At the same time that most schools do not look to parents for help and support, few would disagree with Epstein (2001) and Lightfoot (2003) that parent involvement is important. The involvement of parents in their children's education is considered a cornerstone to children's success in school. Irvine (1991) argues that for black parents, their role as teachers in the home is "crucial," and is the one role directly related to the achievement of black students. Ogbu (2003) wrote, "parents' supervision of their schoolwork and homework was an important reason for their academic success," (p. 241) according to black students he studied who were doing well in school. Yet, the teachers of these students tend to believe that poor working-class black parents fail to supervise the homework of their children. We also know that black children living in poverty are far more likely

than others to have academic difficulties, "including low performance on cognitive tests, low school performance, and higher rates of school drop out than their non-poor European-American peers" (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000, p. 2).

The school, according to Comer (1993) is an instrument of the mainstream culture. Indeed, schools not only inculcate the middle-class-middle-income culture into our children but they are also designed, at least the public schools are, to shape and mold students to fit in that culture. Yet, many poor families are not really a part of that culture; as a result, they send children to school ill prepared to learn. The children lack the values, attitudes, beliefs, and communicative styles upon which the school is built, and which the school uses to teach the child. Such children are often hopelessly behind when they start school. If parents fail to work to boost the self-esteem of the child, fail to teach the child to delay gratification, fail to teach the child discipline or the moral and intellectual-cognitive lessons so important to the school, not only does that child begin the educational experience behind but he or she is likely to fall even farther behind as the school experience becomes increasingly negative (Lightfoot, 1978). However, I know that this is not the case for all poor black school children. Sampson (2004) is quick to point out that "some poor blacks...appear to be middle class and do many of the things that seem to be important for good academic performance for their children, while others are not and do not" (p. 12). Epstein (1985) reinforces the importance of parent involvement by discussing the positive effects that it has on parents' abilities to help their children learn.

Clark (1983) made detailed observations on the quality of home life, noting how family habits and interactions affect school success and what characteristics of family life provide children with school survival skills, a complex set of behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge that are the essential elements in academic success. Clark reported that high-achieving black students had parents who: (a) were assertive in their parent involvement efforts; (b) kept abreast of their children's school progress; (c) were optimistic and tended to perceive themselves as having effective coping mechanisms and strategies; (d) set high and realistic expectations for their children; (e) held positive achievement orientations and supported tenets of the achievement ideology; (f) set clear, explicit achievement-oriented norms; (g) established clear, specific role boundaries; (h) deliberately engaged in experiences and behaviors designed to promote achievement; and (i) had positive parent-child relations characterized by nurturance, support, respect, trust, and open communication. Conversely, underachieving black students had parents who: (a) were less optimistic and expressed feelings of helplessness and hopelessness; (b) were less assertive and involved in their children's education; (c) set unrealistic and unclear expectations for their children, and (d) were less confident in terms of their parenting skills.

Sampson (2002) concurs with Clark (1983) by saying that "differences in family dynamics and/or home environment account for the differences in school performance" (p. vii). Sampson (2004) also argues that it is important to remember that blacks are not a monolithic group. Sampson summarized the research of Clark (1983), Ford (1993), and Comer (1993), which supports his belief that black are not monolithic groups. He stated:

Not all blacks are poor, and some poor blacks are in fact middle class in terms of their values, attitudes, and beliefs. All other things being equal, the children in these families tend to perform quite well in public schools, which are, after all, middle-class institutions. Some poor blacks have discipline, ability to delay

gratification, internal control, high self-esteem, sense of responsibility, and the ability to conceptualize and plan for a future—all characteristics needed for good performance in schools. (2002, p. 5).

Sampson (2004) lamented that “all too often, scholars, teachers, and educational administrators look at all Blacks as though they are the same: disinterested, undisciplined, with no ability to delay gratification, and little sense of responsibility” (p. 5).

Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (2000) reported in their work with low-income schools that beat the odds, that a large number of African-American parents were involved in their children's literacy lives. They further reported that teachers in the most effective schools realized that good communication and collaboration, found among the staff, must also extend to the parents of the children in their schools.

Several foundational family literacy texts have been written during the past 2 to 3 decades (e.g., DeBruin-Parecki & Knol-Sinclair, 2003; Morrow, 1995; Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995). In addition, several texts have been written on home and school influences (e.g., Allen, Michalove, & Shockley, 1993; Edwards, in press, 2004; Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Heath, 1983; Li, 2006; Paratore, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Schmidt, 1998; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991). Finally, there are family literacy texts which focus specifically on “funds of knowledge” (e.g., González et al., 2005; Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2002). All of these resources, and others, have helped us develop a better understanding and appreciation of the role of parents and families in the lives of all school children, and in particular black school children. They have provided ideas and strategies for working with parents and families with the goal of enhancing learning for these learners.

Most educators agree that parent involvement is important, however, few actually know how to implement successful home-school connection initiatives. In the section that follows, I discuss three courses of action for effectively working with families.

DIFFERENT COURSES OF ACTION FOR WORKING WITH FAMILIES

In my examination of the literature, I found three courses of action, which I have categorized by drawing upon the framework of Wiley (1996)—accommodation, incorporation, and adaptation. All three courses of action have strong support.

- *Accommodation* requires teachers, supervisors, personnel officers, and gatekeepers to have a better understanding of the communicative styles and literacy practices among their students (p. 148).
- *Incorporation* requires researchers to study community practices that have not been valued previously by the schools and incorporate them into the curriculum. It also means *surrendering a privileged position* by acknowledging that something can be learned from other ethnic groups (pp. 148-149).
- *Adaptation* involves the expectation that children and adults, who are held to have substandard knowledge and skills, to acculturate or learn to match or measure up to the norms of those who control the schools, institutions, and workplace (p. 147).

The last course of action that researchers have employed in working with families is adaptation, and it is within this course of action that many controversies and conflicts emerge concerning how

families should be involved in their children's literacy development and what they need to know to be effective partners in literacy. I strongly support the *adaptation course of action*. I, along with other supporters of this course of action, have claimed that many poor, minority and immigrant parents want to give their children linguistic, social, and cultural capital to deal in the marketplace of schools (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Super & Harkness, 1986). They have also suggested that “when schools fail to provide parents with factual, empowering information and strategies for supporting their child's learning, the parents are even more likely to feel ambivalence as educators [of their own children]” (Clark, 1988, p. 95).

Supporters of the *adaptation course of action* recognize that reading to children is not the only activity that helps children become readers and to do better in school. Critics of family literacy programs that “educate” believe that: such programs promote “blaming the victim” (Cairney, 1997; Shockley, 1994; Street, 1995). These programs, critics say, imply that the homes of poor, minority, and immigrant children are “lacking literacy” (Auerbach, 1989; Chall & Snow, 1982; Goldenberg, 1984). Further critique holds that family literacy programs do not recognize that “literacy is not something which can be pasted on to family life; it is deeply embedded within it (MacLeod, 1996, p. 130). Thus, for some, family literacy programs “have perpetuated the ‘we know, you don't know’ dichotomy” (Shockley, p. 500).

As an “insider,” I question the criticisms. I ask: (a) Where have researchers' fears, doubts, reservations come from?, (b) What do researchers think these parents are being “forced” to read?, (c) Does evidence exist where researchers have interviewed parents who have attended these family literacy programs?, (d) Is it fair for researchers to insert their own personal feelings about parents participating in family literacy programs without highlighting parents' voices, perceptions, and evaluations?, and (e) Are researchers' fears, doubts, and reservations justified? (Edwards, 1995, p. 562).

As an African-American scholar who developed a family literacy program embedded within the adaptation perspective, and who has “trained” parents to read to their children, I would argue that these criticisms are not justified because children have to understand how to function within the “culture of power” in order to do well in school (Delpit, 1982). Auerbach (1989) agrees that “authority is vested in those belonging to the mainstream culture, the literacy practices of the mainstream become the norm and have higher status in school contexts” (p. 173).

I believe in the adaptation perspective because children who live outside the mainstream of American life are precious human cargo and do not have time to wait until researchers find all of the plausible answers about how to accommodate and incorporate their literacy practices into the curriculum of schools. While we patiently wait for answers from the research community, these families and children, in the meantime, have to develop a “double-consciousness” of how to negotiate the borders between home and school. Personally speaking, in my journey of developing a “double-consciousness,” I did not perceive that my home was lacking literacy. I did not feel inferior. In fact, I felt empowered when I could move successfully between the black and white worlds. I was already succeeding in my home, but my parents wanted me to succeed in school, too.

RETURN TO "TELLING MY STORY"

Literacy and education are valued and valuable possessions that African-American families have respected, revered, and sought as a means to personal freedom and communal hope, from enslavement to the present (Gadsden, 1993, p. 29).

Figure 2. Annie Kate Edwards, Patricia, and Callie



Figure 3. Callie (grandmother) & Gladys (aunt) Plummer



The above quote reflects my family's views about education and I am sure the views of other African-American families. Other examples of black families with high educational values include *Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family* (Comer, 1989) and *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* (Carson, 1990). I often heard from my parents that education has always been an equalizer for the African-American community.

One may wonder where my high educational values originated. My parents, John and Annie Kate Edwards, shared with me that success in school was a top priority in my family. My grandfather (Tate Plummer) organized a school for African-Americans in the early 1900s, and his brother, Elzee, was the first teacher at the Plummer School. My grandmother, Callie "Robinson" Plummer's brother "Bailey Robinson" was Ray Charles'

Figure 4. Tate Plummer (grandfather) Founder, Plummer Colored School (Albany, GA)



father. Ray Charles' mother, Aretha, sent him to the state-supported school for the deaf and blind in St. Augustine, Florida. Although he was heartbroken to be leaving home, it was at school where he received a formal music education, and learned to read, write, and arrange music in Braille. My uncle, Joseph Plummer, was the first in my family to graduate from college (Albany State University) and the first black principal in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Albany State University is where Ray Charles made a sizable contribution, and it is my undergraduate alma mater.

HOME AND SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

In a 1993 article published in *Educational Policy* entitled "Before and After School Desegregation: African-American Parents' Involvement in Schools" (see Edwards, 1993), I had the opportunity to interview my mother, a first-grade teacher, and an elementary school principal, Mr. Erasmus Dent.

Figure 5. John and Annie Kate Edwards



My mother was president of the PTA throughout my entire six years of elementary school. When my mother was asked by Mr. Dent, the teachers, and the parents to run for PTA president, she felt that she did not have enough education to be a good president. She said, "I only finished high school, and I don't know how to conduct a meeting." Despite the fact that my mother did not know how to conduct a meeting, Mr. Dent and the teachers agreed to show her how. I remember the night my mother was elected president of the PTA. You would have thought that she was elected president of the National Council of Negro Women or the President of the United States. When I asked my mother to talk with me about her role as PTA president, I was astonished to find that she had actually saved a copy of her 1960 opening address as PTA president. In her opening address my mother said:

Education is the key. Our children have to go further than we did in school. We don't want our children working hard for nothing. Times are tough and we want our children to have the education to get a good job. We want them to make something out of themselves. We want them to be strong men and women. We want them to not have to put up with what we have to put up with on our jobs. We don't want them to be treated unfairly and feel that they cannot do anything about it.

My mother said her eyes swelled with tears, but she continued her speech by saying:

We all know what happened in Alabama to Rosa Parks. You work all day and white folks want you to go to the back of the bus or get up and let a white person have your seat. That's not right and all of us know that they know that's not right.² We will no longer accept this type of treatment. Oh no, we will not tolerate it. We will fight to the end and our children will take up where we left off. The way

we can stop this treatment is to work with the teachers to help them educate our children. We need to reinforce at home what the teachers and principal are trying to do at school.

I have known Erasmus Dent all of my life. We were childhood friends and now we are neighbors. We live right across the street from each other and that is why I decided to send my children to River Road Elementary School. I know he is a good principal. He and the teachers need our support. I know that I am a hundred percent behind Mr. Dent and the teachers. I am honored to serve as your P.T.A. president.

My mother passed away earlier this year, but Mr. Dent is alive and well. He is 85 years old, and I had the distinct pleasure of honoring him with a 2006 *Crystal Apple Award*, the highest award given to an educator by Michigan State University.

The main lesson learned here is that as researchers, we can and should begin the endeavor of making a positive impact on the literacy development of African-American children, and all other children, by recognizing and accepting the importance of family literacy. It is imperative that teachers and parents build teams and networks to support students' academic pursuits. If athletic teams can have booster clubs to support basketball and football teams, we can have literacy network clubs to support reading and writing.

ROAD TO REDEMPTION: VICTIMS TO VICTORS

In this presidential address, I have used the gospel literacy metaphor to "acknowledge the burden and bear witness" in four areas: (a) the fight for access to literacy; (b) supports and roadblocks to "success;" (c) best practices, theories, and perspectives on teaching African-American students; and (d) the role of African-American families in the literacy development of their children. As we embark on the road to redemption, I want to challenge all of us to think about our roles in: (a) transforming African-American students from victims to victors; (b) transforming our teachers into effective cultural mediators; and (c) transforming our own research into powerful tools that bring about change in classrooms.

Black people have more than their share of poverty, which stunts their ambition and saddles them with a host of social burdens. But by doing the things we can do, we can make the future much brighter for poor black youth, much brighter for everyone (Cosby & Pouissant, 2007, p. 243). As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. says, "As citizens...we ask you to focus on the fresh social issues of our day...We ask you to make society's problems your laboratory. We ask you to translate your data into direction...direction for action" (as cited in Noffke, 1997, p. 305).

I agree with Cosby and Pouissant (2007) concerning the importance of facing reality by accepting the challenge to make education a priority in order to improve the quality of life for blacks. Freire (1993) also contended that it is the responsibility of the oppressed to liberate themselves. I could end this discussion by listing the numerous things that black students and families need to do to improve their own quality of life, but the fact of the matter is that racism is often institutionally perpetuated. It is both necessary and crucial for African-Americans to understand the culture of power. And because we are speaking about people, precious human cargo, we do not have time to

wait until researchers find all the plausible answers about how to accommodate, incorporate, and validate their diverse literacy practices into the curriculum of schools. I feel that as a professor and teacher, researcher, and an African-American, it is incumbent upon me to challenge you to ask yourself how you can help in this struggle to close the achievement gap. Below, I ask a series of questions to help readers consider how change might be enacted.

There are many K-12 students who dream of becoming teachers, but we have a shortage of black teachers because the students struggle through school, and are not admitted into the teacher education programs. By not providing a good education for urban students, we are perpetuating this shortage. How can we expect African-American students to be able to compete and get into the top institutions and become successful if we are not giving them access to the type of knowledge base needed?

How can professors expect teacher education students to help African-American students become successful border crossers if the professors themselves aren't comfortable talking about racial issues, often choosing to ignore and/or omit that teacher education students are not being adequately prepared to teach black and minority students, especially in urban schools?

How can researchers expect research to make a difference for black students and parents, if we continue to know what's needed, but feel uncomfortable being honest and forthright with our own research subjects? We know there are problems. We have identified many of them. Are we doing research for research's sake? Perhaps, just to get an article published? Perhaps to further our own careers? Ask yourself. What am I doing to help close the achievement gap? If your research findings are not used to improve the subjects' quality of life, do you really consider that ethical?

African-Americans and other minorities need access to research studies and researchers who seek to improve their quality of life, not illuminate deficiencies and deficits, but to help them develop the knowledge base and skills needed.

Yes, it is time to take "race" out of the neat little package that we've placed it in—in our research, in our programs, in our courses, in our conversations, and in our personal lives. The achievement gap has taken on a life form of its own. Remnants of influence can readily be seen from accessibility to privileged daycare services to facilitating successful experiences in the ivory tower of academia. If the achievement gap is ever going to be eliminated, the premiere literacy researchers of the world must mobilize themselves for battle. I entreat other researchers, teachers, professors, teacher education students, parents, and school officials and administrators to join me in this fight for accessibility, successful border crossing, and opportunities for improvement. Whatever your interests, whatever your areas of foci, you can: (a) Mentor minority graduate students; (b) Mentor minority junior faculty; (c) Explicitly teach teacher education students how race and culture impact their decisions, their classroom environment, their interactions with students and parents, and their attitudes about education; (d) Develop relationships with minority colleagues and invite them to critique and challenge you concerning how your work can contribute to the war on the achievement gap; and (e) Make a special effort to cite minority colleagues in your work. It is only through such approaches and with honesty and directness about the challenges that lie ahead that we can hope to change the landscape of African-American children.

"Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" and "We Shall Overcome" are two of the songs I grew up singing as a child in Albany, Georgia during the mid-1950s and 1960s. I believe these songs are still relevant and offer encouragement for the challenges ahead:

"Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around:"

Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me around

Turn me around, turn me around

Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me around

Keep on a walking, keep on a talking

Gonna build a brand new world

"We Shall Overcome:"

Oh, deep in my heart

I do believe

We shall overcome some day

Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its Songs (Carawan & Carawan, 2008)

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FOOTNOTES

¹ According to Sleeter and Grant (1994), "deficiency orientation focuses on what we believe members of another group lack, usually based on a comparison to the abilities and cultural resources we have and with which we are familiar. Adherents to the deficiency orientation regard people who exemplify the values, skills, and abilities that mainstream society requires as the standard for normal development" (pp. 44-45).

² According to my mother, this statement received several emotional outbursts from teachers and parents.

How To Get Recreational Reading To Increase Reading Ability

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It is often said that first novels are autobiographical. While that may or may not be the case, much research is. This is a report on a series of studies that spans approximately seven years. This narrative begins with a set of experiences at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the early 1980s. Students in the MA program had to complete an instructional study as the culminating experience in their degree programs. After a large number of students studied the effects of Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) and found nothing, we, as a faculty, declared a moratorium on such studies, despite the popular belief that this was an effective method for improving reading ability. Many of the students reported their desire to implement the program because it required little effort. While I suspected that there was little benefit in recommending USSR, the problem didn't rise to the level of great concern until the publication of the National Reading Panel (NRP) Report, specifically the section on fluency (NICHD, 2000). The NRP report concluded that there was no reliable evidence that reading practice alone improved reading ability. Reading practice as used in the NRP is time spent in reading independent of instruction. Some (e.g. Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992, 1993) have called this reading volume; often it is referred to as recreational reading. The programs covered by the NRP conclusion include USSR, Million Minutes, and DEAR (Drop Everything And Read), and some other variations in which students are encouraged and (sometimes) given the opportunity to read independently. These programs differ in detail, but they typically set aside some portion of reading instruction to have students read something of their choosing. The precise conclusion reached by the NRP was that there was no evidence that reading practice, by itself, improved reading ability. It did NOT conclude that reading practice did not improve reading.

There were some studies of Accelerated Reader (AR), a commercial program that encourages students to read books and tracks the amount of reading that is done. These studies were flawed in their design and execution, and, consequently provided no interpretable evidence for the effect of AR on reading achievement. However, the most rigorous study by NRP standards, Carver & Leibert (1995) showed no effects of amount of additional reading on reading ability and, perhaps a slight decrement in reading ability as a result of increased reading. Carver & Leibert also found that students read books that were very easy. That is, there was little reason to suspect that the books they chose to read would be sufficiently challenging. In other terms, the texts would be at independent levels. Most instruction attempts to place students in instructional-level texts so that students will be challenged to go beyond what they already know how to do. The consequence of this is that there is little reason to believe that reading very "easy" books would provide the context for students to improve their reading ability.

What is important about all of the variations on reading practice, whether it is in programs like uninterrupted silent reading or in programs that encourage recreational reading, is that there is very little evidence that any of them produce gains in reading achievement. On the theoretical level, as noted in the previous paragraph, there are reasons to suspect that independent reading will not