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RECRUITING AND RETAINING (MORE) WOMEN OF COLOR INTO THE FIELD OF  
EDUCATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis focuses on the limited number of women of color in the field of education. Schools are becoming increasingly more diverse as the makeup of student populations changes. This diversity, however, is not reflected in the population of teachers in these schools. The research related to the low percentage of educators of color focuses almost exclusively on black educators. In order to address the gaps in the literature, the methods involved doing an autoethnographic study in which I explored, discussed, and reflected on the formative moments in my educational history as a student and teacher of color. A method for self-reflection on issues of race and privilege was developed as a framework for recruiting and retaining women of color in education.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body... Living as we did- on the edge- we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. (Kendall, 2001, p. 8)*

Schools are becoming increasingly more diverse as the makeup of student populations changes. In 2010, the percent distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools was 52.4% white, 16% black, and 23.1% Hispanic (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). This diversity, however, is not reflected in the teaching force of these schools. In the 2011-2012 school year, the percent distribution of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools was 81.9% white, 6.8% black, and 7.8% Hispanic (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). While there is a dearth of research related to all educators of color, the research available focuses largely on black educators. Throughout the thesis, I use both *black students/educators* and *students/educators of color* depending upon which term was used in the research cited. Much of the research related to the low percentage of black educators is concentrated in the 1990s, yet the problem persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to continue the critical discussion of this issue, this thesis explores the reasons why there continues to be a lack of black women in education, the implications of this gap for other educators of color, the ways in which recruiting and retaining women of color can improve education, and suggestions for improvement.

In order to situate myself within this conversation, it is important for me to share how I identify. I am a woman of color. While I do not typically use pan-ethnic terms to describe my

identity, I am Hispanic. When people ask me about “what” I am, referring to my ethnicity, I tell them that I am part Puerto Rican and part Dominican. However, it is more difficult for me to racially identify myself. While I am not white, I do not consider myself to be black. Like the 37% of Hispanic respondents who identified as “some other race” on the 2010 U.S. Census, despite the census explicitly stating, “Hispanic origins are not races” (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2015), I view my ethnicity as part of my racial background. Regardless of my struggle to understand my racial identity according to the official U.S. definitions, I am a woman of color. I broadly identify as such throughout the thesis in order to highlight the commonalities shared among various groups who experience layers of marginalization due to their being “nonwhite.”

Before desegregation, the limited opportunities available to blacks meant that many black women became educators (Gordon, 1997). Their role was to “prepare black children for freedom, respectability, independence, and self-reliance” (Irvine, 1989, p. 54). Their responsibility and dedication to their students’ liberation and success helped in uplifting the race, making teaching a prestigious career (Irvine, 1989; Gordon, 1997). While the goal of school desegregation was to provide an equal education for black students, the historical development did not come without negative effects. After desegregation, many of these black women lost their jobs, and the black community developed a distrust of the education system that they felt would be unfair to their children (Gordon, 1997). Participating in a society that did not hold their educators in the same high regard had a damaging impact on the profession; the decrease in the black community’s active participation in education coincided with a decrease in the respect of the teaching profession (Gordon, 1997). Since then, the reasons black women do not enter the field of education have only increased. In June A. Gordon’s (1994) study, she interviewed 140 teachers of color on why they think students of color do not go into education. She classified their

responses into three areas: educational experience, cultural concerns, and social and economic obstacles (Gordon, 1994). Although there is a dearth of research on black women in education, and an even greater dearth of research on other women of color, what little is available on the topic seems to coincide with these three interrelated dynamics, which will be briefly discussed to provide context for the thesis.

One of the obstacles to consider when thinking about recruiting black women into the teaching profession is their educational experience as school-aged children. In 1990, the high school graduation rate for black students was 77% (King, 1993). In nearly 25 years since, the statistics have decreased. For the 2011-2012 school year, the graduation rate for black students was 68% as compared to 85% for their white peers (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). If black women are less likely to graduate from high school, they will undoubtedly be absent from college and the teaching profession. Their low graduation rates may largely be attributed to their negative school experiences, the main reason respondents gave during a pilot study for why students do not go into teaching (Gordon, 1997). There continues to be a large gap between the educational opportunities available to middle and working class students, including safe school environments, access to textbooks and materials, and quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The lack of equality in the system results in low quality education for many black students (King, 1993). Not having equally accessible resources means that many black students are at a disadvantage compared to their peers attending school in middle-class areas. If they do not have the quality resources to accomplish basic tasks, let alone the resources to challenge them and push them further, they cannot be expected to reach the same levels of success as their other students.

The lack of cultural awareness that exists in schools works to promote inequality, thus deterring black students from pursuing careers in education. Of the resources needed for a superior education, teachers have the most profound impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2004). One of the issues with teachers working with inner-city youth is that they are unprepared to work with diversity (Gordon, 1994; Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). Unfortunately, “often teachers form misinformed, negative, false, and fixed expectations based on race and class resulting in different treatment of African-American students” (King, 1993, p. 122). As stated by Achinstein & Aguirre (2008), there is a dominant color mute stance among educators that silences the discussion on the ways race and culture impact student-teacher relationships. Regardless of the lack of communication on this issue, the harmful preconceived notions held by some teachers often result in black students feeling isolated and detached from the rest of their peers and the overall classroom environment. This problem is only exacerbated with the insufficient congruency between their culture and the culture promoted in schools, that of Euro-Americans (King, 1993). Teachers rarely take the initiative to remedy this cultural disconnect, perceiving minority students’ cultural knowledge as “unsafe territory” (Irvine, 1989). These negative school experiences cause disillusionment with the benefits of school for many black students, contributing to their overall failure in excelling in their education (King, 1993). In teacher preparation programs, when educators try to prepare their students and discuss issues of race and privilege, students can often become uncomfortable, defensive, or resistant. A common response to these discussions is that racism no longer exists, all people are now equal, and where people stand in society is a result of the work they put in. Met with these responses, some teachers choose to stop the conversation instead of pushing back and delving deeper into what many may consider “touchy” subjects.

The social and economic obstacles faced in the teaching profession further deter women of color from entering the teaching profession. The resistance of black women to the field of education is not only due to their negative educational experiences but also due to the negative image of the profession itself. The increased interest in the STEM professions has contributed to the devaluation of social service work, including teaching (Gordon, 1997). One of the respondents of Gordon's (1994) study gave a poignant reply as to the reason why students of color do not go into teaching: "As a minority, you don't get the respect that you deserve and as a teacher you don't get it either; so why be a teacher?" (p. 350). After desegregation, more educational opportunities and career choices became available to blacks. With teaching lacking the positive professional status, sometimes requiring more years of education, and paying considerably less than other professions, black women and other minorities turn to the more prestigious careers that are now more open to them (Irvine, 1989; King, 1993; Gordon, 1994). Furthermore, the difficult, objectionable conditions that teachers work under are another deterrent from the field. In their research conducted in the 1990s, King (1993) and Gordon (1994) suggest that when black women who were taught in urban segregated schools think back to the dilapidated buildings they went to with overcrowded classrooms and a lack of supplies, they are not likely to want to return as a professional. While today's potential teachers were not educated in segregated schools, the historical trends noted in the relevant literature continue in the present-day. Although public schools are no longer segregated by law, they are often segregated in fact (Tolsdorf, 2005). According to PBS reporter Sarah Childress (2014), "By 2011, the percentage of black students in majority white schools was 23.2 percent — slightly lower than it was in 1968." Given the de-factor segregation in schools that has gradually

occurred since desegregation, the argument that King (1993) and Gordon (1994) make can still be made today.

In the following chapter, I review relevant literature and discuss two pressing issues related to the scarcity of black women in education: the value of recruiting black women into the field of education and strategies for recruitment. These two inextricably related and intertwined themes are explored and examined with the support of relevant literature.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Value of Recruiting Black Women into the Field of Education**

Many black women have experienced racism, sexism, and classism throughout the history of the United States (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 72). As such, they have a certain perspective on what it means to face adversity, particularly in a white male-dominated world (Castro, 2014). The epigraph in Chapter 1 from Kendall (2001) speaks to this unique perspective of groups typically “outside the main body,” whether racial, gendered, or otherwise. Minorities, like black women, find themselves at the margins while the majority find themselves at the cultural center and with greater power than the rest of society. These power dynamics can be a charged topic as they are often subtle and implicit. A look at the disparity in opportunities and resources between whites and people of color is telling of how the system is unequal for the two groups. For example, while white men make up only 43% of the workforce, they hold 95% of senior management positions (Kendall, 2001). The list of examples is extensive and transcends the scope of this thesis. Delpit (1988) discusses five aspects of power, one of which states that there are a set of codes/rules for participating in power, which she calls “culture of power.” These rules are a reflection of the rules of the majority (Delpit, 1998), thus ensuring that they remain at the cultural center of society.

However, those in power do not intentionally perpetuate their status. In fact, it is those in power that are least likely to be aware of its existence or acknowledge it (Delpit, 1988;

McIntosh, 1989; Kendall, 2001). A member of the majority will find it difficult to realize that society caters to them as the cultural center because their power is normalized as society operates by their culture's rules. Those on the margins are most likely to be aware of its existence (Delpit, 1988) as society normalizes a culture that is not their own. Even as school-aged children, minorities are faced with the injustices of the culture of power in their everyday lives. Not only do they rarely have teachers they can identify with, they cannot even relate to school content that has cultural biases toward the experiences of white people. These cultural biases can be seen by taking a look at the reading materials used in classrooms and even the racial identification of the authors of said materials. Students of color are immediately set apart from birth because they are nonwhite. In fact, the typical negative school experiences of black children are typically characterized by alienation and rejection (King, 1993). Consequently, these experiences as school students can greatly affect their decision to opt out of education as a career choice. In fact, in a research study conducted by Gordon (1994), a third of the teachers of color that were interviewed gave negative experiences in school as a reason why students of color do not enter the field of education. Middle-class white students, on the other hand, do not need to worry about whether or not they fit in since they are part of the norm.

Because of their cultural background and position in society, teachers of color bring a different perspective to their classroom than white teachers do. In the discussion of the need for educators of color, one of the reoccurring viewpoints is that they serve as role models to students of color (King, 1993; Irvine, 1989). With the majority of teachers being white middle class women, it has become a profession to which students of color have difficulty relating (Gordon, 1997). In order to undo this damaging unfamiliarity, what it looks like to be a teacher must be recreated. As educators, black women can be examples that the field of education is not closed

off to people of color. However, Irvine (1989) argues that the viewpoint that black teachers are needed primarily for their function as role models has great limitations. Instead of role models, students of color need *mentors*: “Mentors are advocate teachers who help black students manipulate the school’s culture, which is often contradictory and antithetical to their own” (Irvine, 1989, p. 53). Students need more than teachers they admire. They need teachers that will act as their voice, speaking up against school policies that do not have their best interests at heart. Furthermore, they need teachers that will talk about these very issues with them, including them in the discussion about race and culture and the implications on their education. These responsibilities may seem overwhelming as they create a unique role for black teachers as advocates against the hegemonic powers of the cultural center. White teachers, as part of the cultural center, need never take on this particular role, thus being a black teacher comes with a greater charge to the students they must educate on matters beyond the curriculum. It may seem daunting especially when the field ultimately works against them.

As black women educators teach students how to navigate through a society modeled after a culture that is not their own and at the same time teach them how to embrace their own culture, black women educators are able to draw on their personal experiences with this very dilemma (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). In struggling with issues of race alongside and with their students, black women educators are able to establish a stronger, deeper connection with them (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). Their way of teaching allows them to get through to their students of color, relating to their culturally-specific views and definitions of authority and communication style. This discussion, however, is not to say that all black women educators are excellent teachers nor that all of them have the same teaching methods and strategies. The potential contributions examined here are based on research studies that indicate similar trends.

As such, it is impossible to ignore the value of recruiting and retaining black women in education.

### **Ways to Recruit and Retain Black Women in the Field of Education**

If students are to benefit from the teaching pedagogy of black women teachers, strategies must be implemented to recruit and retain them given the tremendous contributions they can/do make to students and their school communities. As stated by Gordon (1994), "... [the] token representation of minority teachers will in and of itself not attract more students of color to the profession" (p. 352). How black students and teachers are treated and the support and resources with which they are provided need to improve drastically if there is any hope of making teaching an appealing, viable option. First and foremost, support must also be given to their overall success and completion of primary and secondary grades. This goal must be reached for any other interventions to be applicable. In order to have a pool of black women candidates from which to recruit and retain into the field of education, efforts must be made to ensure that they have the resources they need in order to graduate from high school and enroll in college (King, 1993).

Looking back to the idea of centrality, all students should be afforded the opportunity to learn within the context of their own culture (Cochran-Smith, 1995). When teachers fail to use the knowledge with which students come into the classroom, "these students fail to achieve, become hostile and bored, and eventually become 'school weary'" (Irvine, 1989, p. 61). The voices that the education system is supposed to encourage and advocate for become silenced. Teachers can work to change the negative school experiences described by building relationships

with their students and learning more about their backgrounds, allowing for an exchange of stories and anecdotes in the classroom that can be used to build rapport and inform teaching (Irvine, 1989; Bryant, 1999).

Once black women decide to pursue degrees in education, they must have the opportunities to enter quality teacher preparation programs. In order to ensure that they are fully equipped to serve these critical roles as mentors, it is critical that they receive knowledge and experience on how to teach in diverse settings in order to better serve their students (Cochran-Smith, 1995). Unfortunately, given the focus on the economic purposes of schooling, multicultural education (ME) is not given the necessary attention in teacher preparation programs across the country (Grant, 1989; Neumann, 2010). A research study of 302 university teacher preparation programs found that 75% of programs do not require an ME course of at least three credits in which the content covered is at least 50%-100% about ME (Neumann, 2010). There are inconsistencies in the extent to which universities provide ME courses, which may be explained by several factors including its emergent status, lack of research on its effect on schooling outcomes, and differences in states' needs in regards to racial and cultural demographics as well as teaching ideologies (Neumann, 2010). Without agreed upon aims and boundaries in the ME field, many courses are providing students with "miseducative forms of socialization towards cultural diversity" (Neumann, 2010, p. 8). As teachers form their teaching pedagogy and develop their classroom environment using their knowledge and experiences, this finding is problematic to the goal of teachers understanding cultural diversity and its implication on schooling. If women of color are given the opportunity to grapple with the ways that society marginalizes groups like their own and how they can challenge that, they will be better prepared to guide their students to do the same.

Before women educators of color can teach against the grain and fight against the culture of power, they must first be taught what that is and where they are located within that system. Teacher preparation programs need to provide educators of color with a forum to critically examine issues of race and its implications for teaching. Helping black women and other educators of color to gain a better understanding of themselves and their place in society is a stepping stone in getting them to think about the implications for their classrooms and how they might use this information to prepare their students to function in a society that revolves around groups they are not part of (Cochran-Smith, 1995). It is important to note that this kind of self-reflection and understanding of the culture of power is also beneficial to future educators in the majority groups in that they can be informed about the ways this power is perpetuated and how they too may work for their students and against this unjust system. Autoethnography is a reflective tool that can be used for the type of critical race study suggested here. In order to delve deeper into the implications of being part of the minority group and the power dynamics at work, I decided to use autoethnography as the qualitative method for my research, further discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

Choosing a research method for the topic of recruiting and retaining black women in education was a challenging task. The limited research available discussed “black women” as a collective group, making generalizations that do not account for the unique lives of individual members of the group. Because of the dearth of literature available, it felt as if little more could be done than acknowledging the problems with grouping all black women together and continuing with the writing. After the draft of the literature review was complete, it was clear that the most critical component missing was the voices of black women. Discussing the experiences and challenges of black women without including the stories of members of the group left me feeling unsettled. More work had to be done to address the research gap. Not only did the literature make problematic generalizations about black women, it spoke of the experiences and challenges of black women to the exclusion of other women of color. Instead of attempting to speak to the stories of black women and other women of color as a collective group, I decided to write an autoethnography about my own experiences and challenges as a student and future educator of color. By writing about my experiences as a woman of color that led to my career choice, I contribute one voice to the existing literature. My story as a woman of color is not, nor can it be, a representation of the experiences and challenges faced by all women of color. While we may share the commonality of being “not white” and therefore outside the cultural center of society, *women of color* is a collective term that includes disparate racial and ethnic groups. Each one of us has a unique story to share that has been shaped by our

background, culture, beliefs, and more. The purpose of my autoethnography is not to find answers on how to recruit and retain women educators of color but to develop a series of provocative questions that educators of color can use to self-reflect on and share their own experiences as learners and teachers.

Autoethnography is a research method used to describe and analyze the personal in order to understand the cultural (Ellis et. al, 2011; Sparkes, 2000; Burdell & Swadener, 1999; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Writing an autoethnography will provide the appropriate medium through which questions for self-reflection can be developed. My autoethnography is written in the form of a personal narrative, where I am the subject of study and the focus is on my academic and personal life (Ellis et al., 2011). The aim is to analyze and better understand the experiences that stemmed from and helped shape me as a learner and teacher of color. The goal of a personal narrative approach, as described by Ellis et al. (2011), is to “invite readers to enter the author’s world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives.” My goal in sharing my story as a person of color is to encourage other women of color to share their own experiences as students and teachers. The available research on educators of color excludes our stories, our perspectives, our voices, and that needs to be urgently addressed if we are to continue the discussion on how to make the field more welcoming to women of color.

Autoethnography is a difficult undertaking; the author must engage with her own vulnerabilities through self-reflection and decide how to do so in a way that is logical and organized. Apart from anecdotes I share as a current pre-service teacher, my story is retold using hindsight. In order to improve recall, my data collection methods include self-reflecting on research and interview and artifact analysis. To provide a clearer focus for my autoethnography, I began by self-reflecting on a draft of my literature review. I reread the seventeen-page

electronic document as if for the first time and used comments to talk back to my own writing.

As I read about the experiences and challenges of the collective “black woman educator,” I asked myself questions about my own related experiences and typed my responses onto the document.

Many of my responses included brief anecdotes pertaining to my story as a learner and teacher of color. Self-reflecting on my research allowed me to make sense of the literature through my own unique perspective. After I compiled all of my self-reflections on the literature review, I was able to discern patterns in order to develop a list of evolving themes that I continued to look for through additional data analysis.

Several of the experiences that have come to shape my teaching philosophy took place in Ms. Olivera’s fifth grade class at P.S. 54 in Bronx, NY, back in the 2004-2005 school year. I remember looking forward to that year with endless anticipation; I was one of the students that were selected to be part Ms. Taylor’s (a pseudonym) fifth grade journalism class. Unfortunately, the journalism class was short-lived after Ms. Taylor had to leave the school early in the year due to her father being ill. The second teacher we had, Ms. Barns (a pseudonym), spent most of her time on her cellphone or talking to the teacher across the hall as my classmates and I read silently for most of the school day. I cannot recall when or why she stopped being our teacher, but she did. We had a substitute teacher for a period of time before our third teacher, Ms. Olivera, a young teacher of color, was hired. She walked into a challenging classroom of students who had not yet been able to establish a sense of stability and routine. I do not know how she did it, but Ms. Olivera managed to turn a dysfunctional classroom into a small community of learners. By the end of the year, I felt like we were a family. Ms. Olivera read books to us that we could relate to as urban school students, engaged us in lessons where we could share our experiences, and cared about who we were as individuals.

My experiences in Ms. Olivera's classroom not only reinforced my desire to go into teaching, but they helped to define who I am as an educator. Even after over a decade after moving on from P.S. 54, I have shared and discussed the memories created in her classroom countless times throughout my undergraduate career. My autoethnography would not be complete without including anecdotes and reflections about my fifth grade year. In order to strengthen the retelling and reflection of some of the formative moments in my life that were critical in my development as a learner and teacher of color, I interviewed Ms. Olivera through email correspondence about our shared experiences that year in fifth grade. The interview was semi-structured and included five questions that guided the conversation, including the following:

1. What challenges did you initially face with our 5th grade class?
2. What were your goals for our class?
3. Did your experiences as a person of color impact your teaching approach? How?
4. Did your knowledge of your students as students of color impact your teaching approach? How?
5. What were your reactions to the poems we wrote for the Poetry Slam?

To assist me in reassembling autoethnographic memory, I used artifact analysis. I selected documents from my educational history that were representative of my development as a learner and teacher of color. As discussed in Chapter 2, research studies cite negative school experiences as one of the deciding factors for why people of color do not go into teaching (Gordon, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2004; King, 1993). Through my autoethnography, I unpack my own experiences as a school-age child to better understand the formative moments that led to my entering the field of education. The relevant literature already discusses the disadvantages

and obstacles placed before children of color in our current education system, but what can happen when a woman educator of color, like Ms. Olivera, works against the norm? One of the most lasting experiences for me as a K-12 student was a unit study on poetry in Ms. Olivera's fifth grade classroom. My school brought in a published poet to work with us on our writing and performance techniques. My peers and I worked for weeks on writing poems to perform as part of a poetry slam competition. When I was reflecting on the experience through comments on my literature review, I wrote, "Many students, including myself, wrote very personal and very raw pieces about our community. I wish I still had the document!" I could not find the poem I had written, but I reached out to Ms. Olivera, and she was able to email it to me. After over a decade, I still could not believe that I had written about such provocative content as a young child. Sharing and analyzing my fifth grade poem served to strengthen the impact of my autoethnography.

In selecting additional artifacts for my autoethnography, I considered assignments from my undergraduate career that allowed me to express myself as a learner and teacher of color. The documents for consideration, however, were limited. As indicated in Achinstein and Aguirre's (2008) study, detailed in Chapter 2, the dominant color mute stance among educators stifles discussion about the implications of race and culture on teaching instruction and pedagogy. Autoethnography, as noted by Ellis et al. (2011), Sparkes (2000), and Reed-Danahay (1997), is an invaluable tool that can be used to break the silence. As I reviewed past assignments, I thought about which pieces would speak to how my teaching philosophy has been shaped by my personal experiences as a person of color. For the artifact analysis, my sampling includes an English assignment on my educational experiences, an Educational Psychology research paper on improving urban education, and an Educational Theory and Practice presentation about

Jonathan Kozol's (1996) *Amazing Grace*, which examines the South Bronx, where I was born and raised. The assignments were specifically selected for the insight they give into my educational history and how my personal background as a person of color has shaped my career choice and professional goals. I then wrote about the selection process and context for which the artifacts were created. The interview and artifact data was analyzed using the themes that evolved through my self-reflection on my literature review.

After I collected and analyzed data, I synthesized my research. Throughout the various components of my autoethnography, I discovered two reoccurring themes, *voice* and *solidarity with students*, as I reflected, interviewed, and analyzed. These themes provided the focus and organization for my autoethnography and are further discussed in the subsequent chapter. As a result of my research, I developed a method, further discussed in Chapter 5 that educators of color may use to embark on their own journey of deep, personal self-reflection.

## Chapter 4

### Data and Analysis

In following the approach detailed in Chapter 3, I made thirty-four comments in which I reflected on my experiences, challenges, and beliefs as a student and future teacher of color. The coding of the thirty-four comments made during self-reflection on research and artifact and interview analysis resulted in seven interrelated patterns: 1) (changing) messages that students receive, 2) teacher biases and stereotypes, 3) space for discussion, 4) connecting with students, 5) meaningful/relevant learning, 6) expressing self, and 7) stories of other people of color. The pattern “(changing) messages that students receive” emerged from six comments in which I described the negative messages that students of color sometimes receive from their teachers and my resolve to ensure that my students know that they matter. The seven comments categorized as “teacher biases and stereotypes” detail some of the experiences I have had with the biases and stereotypes some teachers have regarding students of color and my thoughts on how they impact the teachers’ instruction and interaction with students. “Space for discussion” includes eight comments where I focused on the need for pre-service and in-service teachers to have a place where they can talk about and reflect on issues of race and privilege as relates to our students, our attitudes and beliefs, and our teaching practice. In the eight comments categorized as “connecting with students,” I discussed building relationships with and fostering a sense of community among my current and future students as part of my teaching philosophy. The pattern “meaningful/relevant learning” is comprised of seven comments in which I shared the educational experiences that were meaningful and relevant to me personally as a woman of color who was born and raised in the Bronx. The three comments categorized as “expressing self”

relate to times in my academic career where I was given the opportunity to write about and discuss my personal experiences and views. The pattern “stories of other people of color” emerged from three comments where I expressed the need and desire to read/listen to other people of color share their experiences as they relate to a variety of topics, including education, race, and privilege. After developing the seven patterns from analyzing the thirty-four comments, two dominant themes emerged, voice and solidarity with students. Voice is comprised of the four patterns meaningful/relevant learning, expressing self, stories of other people of color, and space for discussion.

### **Voice**

Many comments throughout my research were made in regards to my fifth grade experience in Ms. Olivera’s classroom. Out of all of my years of schooling, I identified fifth grade as one of the most meaningful because “Ms. Olivera was able to make learning relevant for us.” I focused particularly on a poetry unit for which my peers and I wrote “very personal and very raw pieces about our community” to perform for a poetry slam competition. There were three comments out of the thirty-four total related to the pattern of “expressing self”; in two out of those three comments, I spoke about the poetry unit. In all my years of schooling, fifth grade was where I most felt I could be myself and freely speak my mind. In analyzing the poem I had written (Appendix A), I made a comment questioning whether I would have been able to write such a poem if I had had a “different teacher,” hypothesizing about the types of negative reactions it might have received. I expressed my gratitude towards Ms. Olivera for giving my peers and me the opportunity to express ourselves about issues we found important. As discussed

in Chapter 1, many teachers avoid these potentially uncomfortable conversations, but Ms. Olivera knew that talking about those “touchy subjects” was exactly what we needed. In describing her reaction to our poems, Ms. Oliver said, “When I read your poems, I felt like it was ‘therapy’ for you guys. You finally found a way to express yourself” (personal communication, January 4, 2016). Another one of the most memorable experiences from my school-age years that I spoke about continuously throughout the research was Ms. Olivera reading aloud a book about a black student living in a neighborhood like the one I grew up in the Bronx. I commented, “She was able to engage all of us, and I believe it was because we could connect to the book in our own way. Some of the challenges the character faced were not unknown to us. I have never had another school experience like that again.” In my six years of elementary school, I never remembered a book so vividly. As noted by Cochran-Smith (1995), the opportunity for students to learn in the context of their own culture is critical. There were no comments made related to “meaningful/relevant learning” or “expressing self” for my schooling leading up to my undergraduate career. In the seven years between fifth grade and college, there were no meaningful experiences to discuss. I wonder how many other children of color go through their schooling with limited culturally relevant learning opportunities. If this disconnect is indeed a common trend, it is not surprising that the educational experiences of black students is characterized by alienation and rejection (King, 1993; Gordon, 1994). Ms. Olivera’s use of our background as a vehicle for learning, as *the* learning, made my fifth grade experience meaningful. The class of thirty-two may have started out as untrusting and school weary, but Ms. Olivera’s ability to connect to us not only as her students but also as children of color growing up in South Bronx strengthened our connection to her. As the research by Irvine (1989) and Bryant

(1999) suggests, the opportunity to share our stories in the classroom contributed to positive student-teacher relationships.

Out of my four years in college, I identified three experiences related to “meaningful/relevant learning” and “expressing self,” two of them taking place during my first year. On my presentation notes for Educational Theory and Policy on Jonathan Kozol’s (1996) *Amazing Grace*, I reflected on how open I was about my personal experiences and views given how reserved I was at the beginning of college. I commented, “To see that I expressed myself so passionately even then speaks to how much I care about urban education and areas like the South Bronx.” As with the fifth grade poetry unit, I expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to share and discuss important issues in an academic setting. In one of the comments, I explained, “For the first time, I saw an important part of what makes me who I am reflected in a piece of literature, and it was empowering.” I described having to respond to many “trite questions” and preconceived notions” about the Bronx from my white peers when I attended suburban schools. I included the following statements as examples of the stereotypes I had to speak up against: “No, I have never seen anyone get shot. No, not every young teenage girl in the Bronx is pregnant. No, not everyone who is on government help is unemployed and lazy. No, I do not fit your idea of what someone from ‘the ghetto’ is supposed to look like, sound like, and think like.” I conveyed a feeling of appreciation for Kozol’s (1996) work in trying to understand and inform other people about the situation in the Bronx.

The other two of the three experiences related to “meaningful/relevant learning” and “expressing self” in college centered on discussing issues of race and privilege with peers. In my self-reflection on my research, I talked about my first-year English course in which my peers and I read and discussed Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” As I read, I said I

continuously compared the author's experiences to my own, thinking, "I can't. People like me can't." I followed that with a series of statements about the ways people "like me" do not experience or benefit from the white privilege that Peggy McIntosh describes. For example, I stated, "People like me can't be sure of having our voices heard in groups where we are the only members of our race." While I recounted the discussions of race and privilege as being "sometimes difficult and uncomfortable," I, for the third time, expressed my gratitude that such discussions took place. Expressing gratitude for the ability to speak is striking. I admittedly felt frustrated with myself for giving thanks for the opportunity to discuss critical issues that significantly affect my life. Having a voice should not be seen as a gift for people of color when it seems to be a birthright to white individuals due to the culture of power (Delpit, 1988). I added, "It felt good to have a space where these topics could be discussed, where my white peers could be informed about and reflect on the power they have as the cultural center of society, where my peers of color and I could voice and reflect on [our] challenges as outsiders of 'the norm,' where everyone could listen and learn from each other." The experience was beneficial to the learning and understanding of how our respective lives are impacted by race and privilege, even if the discussion sometimes caused discomfort.

The theme voice does not only include sharing my experiences as a person of color but expressing the need to hear about the experiences of *other* people of color. After interviewing Ms. Olivera on our shared fifth grade experience, I made eight comments in response to her answers, and four of them contained additional questions, including:

1. What made Ms. Olivera decide to go into teaching?
2. What made Ms. Olivera stay despite the challenges she faced? Why did she remain in teaching after such a challenging year?

3. How did Ms. Olivera try and establish trust between her and the class?
4. [In response to the following: “I knew that the surrounding wasn’t the safest and I knew that you *needed an edge to ‘survive’*.”] I personally understand what Ms. Olivera means here, but I would love to hear more about this statement.

When using open coding to find emerging patterns within the interview, the questions I asked were originally excluded from the data analysis as they related more to Ms. Olivera’s experiences and teaching philosophy than my own. However, upon reviewing the comments again, I realized that the questions that I asked were just as important to the purpose of the thesis as my reflections. In my data analysis, I wrote, “I ask a lot of questions because I want to learn from her as a woman educator of color that inspired me. [My questions speak] to the need to hear the stories of other women educators of color.” In my education cohort, I am the only woman of color. Besides Ms. Olivera, I do not have anyone that I can easily talk to about my teaching philosophy or field experiences as relates to my cultural background. The field of education can be lonely for me as a woman of color. Being able to at least *read* about the experiences of other women educators of color would make me feel less disconnected and provide me with a kind of support system. Autoethnography is a powerful tool for self-reflection, but it can also serve as a way for women educators of color to learn from one another.

As discussed in Chapter 1, studies like those done by King (1993) and Gordon (1994) cite the typical negative school experiences characterized by alienation and rejection as one of the reasons why students of color do not go into education. However, in a comment about the studies, I stated, “I cannot speak to this topic [of negative school experiences], but I am sure someone somewhere can. It is important to hear a multitude of different stories from women of color in order to form a more complete picture.” In order to better understand why the current

teaching population does not reflect the changing demographic in the United States, it is important to learn about the unique experiences of individual women of color and the obstacles they face when deciding to enter, or not to enter, the field of education.

### **Solidarity with Students**

The theme *solidarity with students* is comprised of three of the seven identified patterns: teacher biases and stereotypes, (changing) messages that students receive, and connecting with students. In seven out of thirty-four comments resulting from my research and data collection, I discussed teacher biases and stereotypes held by educators I have interacted with throughout my schooling. Many of the comments containing statements about teacher biases and stereotypes were paired with comments about how the biases and stereotypes influenced the way students came to view themselves and possible ways to combat these negative effects. Because the three patterns are inextricably intertwined, the discussion of the theme has been organized chronologically by my educational history, including my elementary and secondary school experiences, undergraduate career, and current teaching philosophy, and will include analysis of all three patterns.

As discussed in the theme *voice*, my experiences in Ms. Olivera's fifth grade classroom were highlighted throughout my data. In my analysis of my Educational Psychology research paper *A Path to Successful Reform*, I acknowledged the struggles that Ms. Olivera faced and admired her ability to "create a caring and welcoming learning environment from absolute chaos." Ms. Olivera told me that she had felt like walking out at times. She explained that there were seven students in her class of thirty-two that controlled the dynamic of the room with their

disruptive behavior. After many trying times and conversations with the elementary school principal, Ms. Olivera stayed. Receiving the support from the administration was pivotal to her decision. Initially, her goal was to teach us the information we missed after changing teachers three times in the span of three months. However, after she met the class, her more realistic goal was to establish trust, getting us to understand that she was not going to leave us, too (A. Olivera, personal communication, January 4, 2016). In my comment related to her goals for our class, I said, “I love that she saw and understood that the class needed to feel certain that she was there to stay before they could begin learning. If students’ basic needs are not met, how can teachers even attempt to teach content?” According to Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, people cannot focus on maintaining self-esteem/self-actualization until they meet their physical, safety, and love/relationship needs. School is where students make friends and establish relationships, thus making it an important environment for the stage of love/relationship. In order to increase student engagement and self-efficacy, teachers must focus on fostering a sense of belongingness by creating a community. Instead of giving up or placing the blame on us, Ms. Olivera reflected on what it was we needed to be successful and put her efforts into connecting with us as individuals before teaching us as her students.

Although it was never explicitly stated, some of my comments suggest that my fifth grade experience would not have been as powerful had my final fifth grade teacher been a white, middle class educator. After describing the book Ms. Olivera would read aloud about the black student growing up in an urban area like the South Bronx, I shared my thoughts about how other elementary school teachers might have viewed Ms. Olivera’s reading selection. I wrote, “I can only imagine some primary school teachers would be appalled by the book she chose because of the topics discussed, completely dismissing the fact that some of the students were going through

similar situations or knew someone who was.” My comments regarding the potential negative reactions of other educators connects with Irvine’s (1989) argument that teachers view students’ cultural knowledge as “unsafe territory.” None of my teachers ever directly stated their biases and stereotypes but their instructional decisions were telling. Even though I attended many schools where the population was largely comprised of students of color, the teaching emphasized the white, middle class experience. Unless it was Black History Month or Hispanic Heritage Month, the readings rarely reflected the diversity in the classroom. Only during these “special” months would teachers actively take time to read about important people of color. Even during these months, the people of color they chose to focus on were always the same, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, as if the selection of people of color who helped shape America’s history was limited. These attempts at diversifying the curriculum inadvertently tokenized students’ culture. When analyzing the poem I had written for the poetry slam competition, I wondered whether I would have been allowed to produce and share such a poem if we had a teacher that did not understand our background the way Ms. Olivera did as a woman of color and resident of the South Bronx. From the thought stemmed a series of questions: “Would I have been pitied for the bleak images I described? Would I have been in trouble for bringing up ‘drug dealers’? Would I have been politely told that my poem was not appropriate for school? Would my parents have been judged for raising me in a place ‘like that’?” In Chapter 2, I stated that teachers need to talk about race and culture with their students in order to act as their advocates, which is what Ms. Olivera did through poetry. Ms. Olivera became a role model on how to stand with my students even in the most trying times and push back against the stereotypes and biases of the misinformed.

Although the three patterns that comprise *solidarity with students* appeared in each stage of my educational history discussed in the research, the majority of comments coded as “teacher biases and stereotypes” were related to my undergraduate school and student teaching experiences. When self-reflecting on my literature review, I commented on a quote from King’s (1993) research that stated that “often teachers form misinformed, negative, false, and fixed expectations based on race and class resulting in different treatment of African-American students” (p. 122). While King (1993) was speaking about the effects of teacher biases and stereotypes towards African-American students, I related the statement to an experience I had while volunteering as a learning assistant for the Penn State Educational Partnership Program (PEPP) in Southern Middle School, where the student demographic is largely Hispanic. I recounted a time when I sat in the office of the school building and a middle schooler asked me why I was there: “She told me ‘we’re the bad kids.’ I told her I was there as learning assistant for PEPP. She asked if I got paid to be there. I told her I was not, and that I *wanted* to be there. She didn’t seem to believe me... The student I spoke to must have gotten the message she was ‘bad’ so many times that she started to believe it.” While teachers may not realize the impacts that their biases and stereotypes have on their children, such negative and misinformed views damage the student-teacher relationships.

In thinking about how to prevent more individuals from entering the field of teaching with damaging biases and stereotypes, I frequently suggested reflection in preparation programs as a possible first step. In one of the slides for my presentation on Kozol’s (1996) *Amazing Grace*, I quoted the fifteen year old boy who told Kozol, “[It’s like] being ‘hidden...’ If people in New York woke up one day and learned that we were gone... I think they’d be relieved... I think they look at us as obstacles to moving forward” (p. 39). In his book, Kozol (1996) spoke

with many Bronx residents who shared these sentiments that they are not wanted because they are a burden on society. In my reflection of the quote, I said, “This makes me think back to the student at Southern Middle School who thought of herself and her peers as ‘the bad kids.’ *Amazing Grace* or a similar text should be required reading for all student teachers in our education program.” Although our student teaching placement is not located in the South Bronx, I argued that the topics discussed in the book are just as relevant to the city of Reading. Our students experience race and privilege in different ways, but their stories may be similar. Instead of labeling and passing judgement, educators need to learn to listen to their students and work towards understanding. Students of color may constantly receive the implicit message that they do not matter, that they are “a burden on society.” What are we doing to change that?

Through my autoethnography, I learned about the extent to which my experiences as a woman of color influence my teaching philosophy. People of color, as noted by Irvine (1989), King (1993), and Gordon (1997), often chose to enter the more prestigious careers now open to them. However, in a comment regarding these researchers’ work, I stated, “I suppose I have thought about this before. I have thought that, maybe, if I had chosen to, I could have been a doctor or a lawyer... but I do not think about it with regret.” Despite the negative image of the teaching profession, I made the decision to go into teaching because it was where I could “make the most difference.” In my one of my college courses, my professors asked our cohort what stage of Kevin Ryan’s (1986) Four Stages of Teaching (Fantasy, Survival, Mastery, and Impact) we were in/wanted to be in. I retold the discussion in the same comment regarding my decision to enter the field of education.

I cannot remember how it began, but I had a brief exchange with my professors about why I was not in the Fantasy Stage, the idealistic stage where the teacher believes she will be

fantastic and will save the children. My professors seemed concerned and wanted to know at what point I stopped being in the Fantasy Stage. I openly told them that it happened while I was I still a student of urban schools like the ones my cohort was placed in as student teachers. I told them that, with all of the challenges and obstacles I will need to face as a teacher and advocate for my students, there was no room for me to think that things would be fun and enjoyable all of the time. I explained that I was excited to go into teaching and knew it was one of the most rewarding jobs, but that I also knew it was a difficult job, especially for my own professional goals. One professor said she hoped that my student teaching would help me get back into the Fantasy Stage a little bit. It has not, and that is okay. I do not want a teaching job where every day is wonderful and pleasurable because that is not why I went into teaching. I chose teaching because I know some of the struggles and inequalities that students can face in urban schools like the ones I attended as a child, and it needs to change. While I know that the words of my professors were well intended, the conversation was a difficult one for me to have. As woman of color who went to several urban schools, my reasons for entering the field of education and my beliefs about teaching are different from that of my white peers. It is critical for teacher educators in all levels of schooling to get to know their students and be responsive to their needs.

One of my ambitions that were continuously reflected in the theme of *solidarity with students* is getting students to know that they matter. When reflecting on my literature review, I asked myself what my teaching goals are as a future educator and how those goals are impacted by my position as a person of color. I answered, “I want my students to realize their full potential, and I have always said that. While it is an important goal to have for all students, I have always thought about it specifically in terms of minority students. I feel that they are not told they can do it nearly as often as they are given the message that they cannot.” In my research

paper on urban education reform, I argued the importance of teachers strengthening their relationships with students to positively impacting academic achievement. In response to this argument, I said, “One of the biggest components of my teaching philosophy is building relationships with my students. I want them to know that no matter how difficult things may get inside or outside of our classroom, they have at least one person who genuinely cares about them and wants them to succeed.” Despite the challenges that I will inevitably face, there is a sense of empowerment when thinking about my vision for my future classroom. As described in one of my reflections about my research, it is a “we-will-show-them-what-we-can-do kind of mindset.”

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

Through my autoethnography, I have learned about the specific challenges and formative moments that have shaped me as a future educator. I have always been passionate about urban education because of the inequities I experienced as a student. However, I have never been able to truly unpack, analyze, and discuss the formative moments that led to my decision to enter the field of education until the writing of this thesis. In order to find my own voice and meaningfully explore the implications of race and privilege on my chosen career path, I had to create my own space. In classes where my peers and I have discussed how race and privilege are significant in our lives, the focus was largely on white privilege. What I was able to share was in the context of the experiences of my white peers, talking about the disadvantages I faced by *not* having that white privilege. While students of color may be aware of their marginalization (Delpit, 1988; McIntosh, 1989; Kendall, 2001), they still need an academic space in which to share their experiences as their own, not as related to the experiences of white students.

I acknowledge that the research I have done in writing my autoethnography will not solve the problem of the teaching population not reflecting the changing demographics in the United States. However, my autoethnography does serve to extend the conversation as we work to better understand the varied challenges faced by women of color when considering a career in teaching. The available literature on the subject is limited and makes problematic generalizations about women of color. While we may have common experiences of marginalization due to our position in society, each one of us has a unique story to share. Autoethnography can contribute an important voice that is critically missing: ours (Ellis et al., 2011; Sparkes; 2000; Reed-Danahay;

1997). Women educators of color can use autoethnography as a powerful tool for self-reflection and understanding what Delpit (1988) refers to as the “culture of power.” Further, autoethnography may be used as tool for recruiting, retaining, and supporting students of color in the field of education.

Reflection is already an essential part of teacher preparation programs. As part of the requirements, students must write about their teaching philosophy, highlighting their beliefs, strengths, and passions as future educators. When writing my own teaching philosophy, I had to think carefully about who I am as an educator while also being mindful that the document could be shown to potential employers when applying for jobs. Because I had to consider my audience, I could not use my teaching philosophy to delve deeper into *how* I have developed into the (preservice teacher) I am today. Using autoethnography as a more critical method of reflection would allow preservice teachers of color to analyze their educational history as impacted by their cultural experiences. Autoethnography can help preservice teachers of color identify what motivated them to enter the field and how they can incorporate those factors into their own instruction, which would assist in the writing of the teaching philosophy already required by teacher preparation programs.

When I decided to use autoethnography as my method, I did so with great hesitation and apprehension. Although I consider myself reflective about issues of race and culture, I rarely express my thoughts and experiences about such issues to others. I prefer to be a silent observer to avoid the overwhelming emotion and potential judgment/criticism that comes with discussing topics about which I am very passionate. I knew that sharing and analyzing the formative moments that led me to enter the field of education would require me to be open, to be vulnerable (Ellis et al., 2011). Treating myself and my life as the subject of my thesis was a

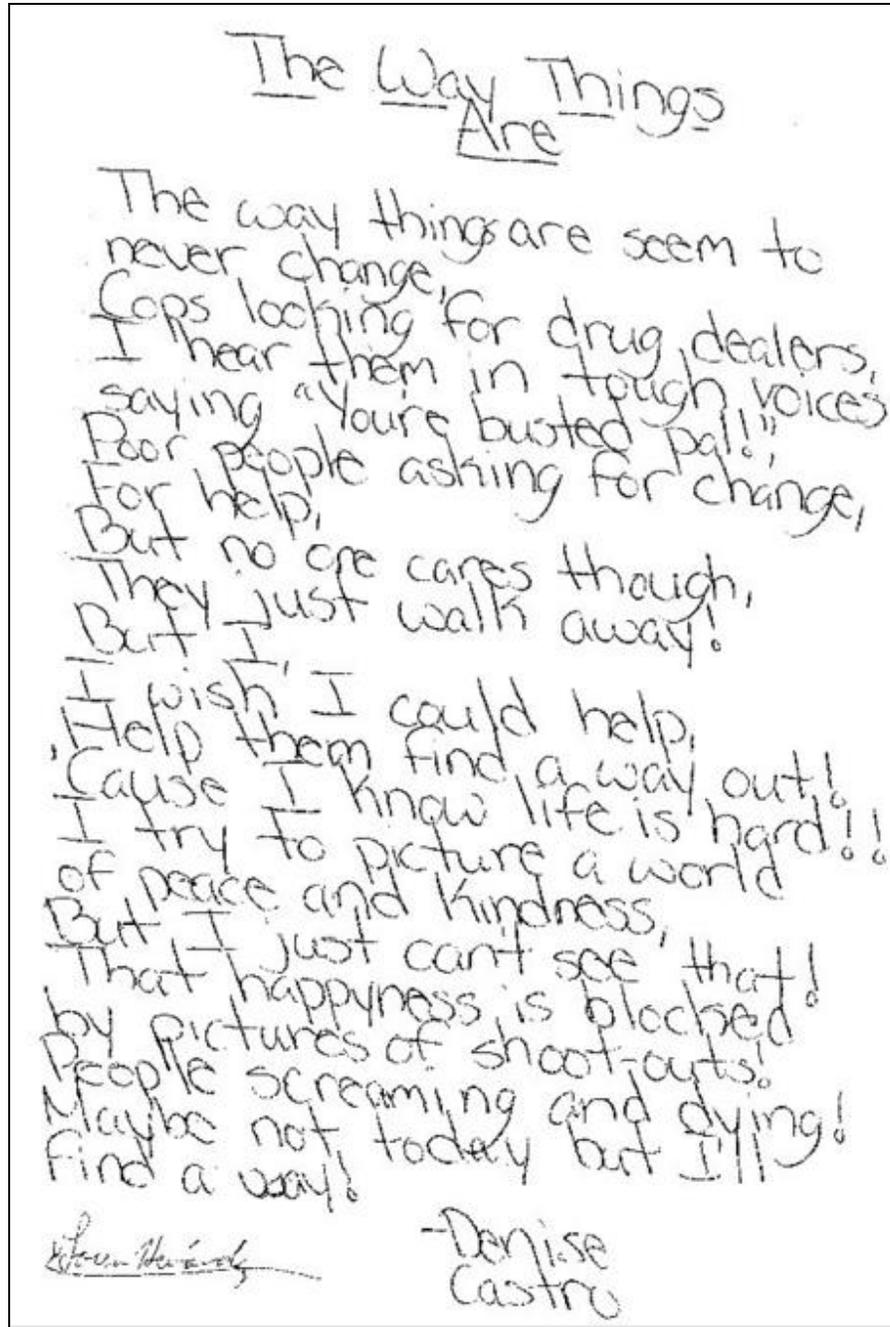
challenging task. However, the opportunity to contribute a voice to the existing research related to women of color in education and the potential to encourage other women of color to do the same outweighed the discomfort that I experienced as a result. As I wrote about my educational history and teaching philosophy as related to race and culture, I often found myself struggling. I struggled with not wanting to offend anyone with what I said. I struggled with emotions that arose from thinking about my hopes for my students versus the current reality. I struggled with explaining my work to people who wanted to know more but did not understand white privilege, or the culture of power, or how race and culture play a major role in my beliefs as an educator. Despite all of my frustration at not being given a strong voice during my schooling and my frustration at remedying that problem, I do feel a sense of relief and liberation at finally finding my voice.

The purpose of the research I have done through my autoethnography is to encourage other women of color to share their stories. In order to continue the discussion of the recruitment and retention of women of color in education, it is critical to understand what inspires women of color who have entered the field. For those embarking on an autoethnographic approach to self-reflection, I emphasize the importance of being open. Fear of how people may perceive what needs to be said only serves to further stifle our voice. The statements that cause the most discomfort will inspire the most thought and lead to more meaningful discussion about the implications of race and privilege on education. Although autoethnography is about the self, women educators of color can come together and learn from one another's cultural experiences and teaching philosophies. As reiterated throughout this thesis, every woman of color has a unique perspective to share. The field of education can be a lonely place for women of color. Teacher preparation programs must provide preservice teachers of color with opportunities to

analyze and discuss how race and privilege impact their lives and, thus, their expectations for the profession. As discussed in Chapter 2, if women of color are able to wrestle with the ways that society marginalizes groups like their own and how they can challenge that, they will be better prepared to guide their students to do the same. At all levels of schooling, we need to assist our students of color in finding their voice.

## Appendix A

## Fifth Grade Poem "The Way Things Are"



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- The President Sparks Award
- The President's Freshmen Award

### **MEMBERSHIPS**

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- Schreyer Honors College
- Phi Lambda Theta: Honor Society and Professional Association in Education
- Phi Kappa Phi: Honor Society
- National Science Teachers Association
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- National Association for Professional Development Schools
- Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies

### **PRESENTATIONS**

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- "Performing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Classrooms: Digital Tools to Enhance Literacy Practices in Elementary Classrooms" co-presenter, State of Maryland International Reading Council (Baltimore, MD), 2016
- "The Impact of Pre-Service Student Intern Service Projects on School Culture, Student learning, and Pre-Service Intern Development" panel, National Association for Professional Development Schools (Washington, D.C), 2016
- "The Influence of Classroom Blogging on Writing Development and Student Engagement at the Elementary School Level", Higher Education Council of Berks County Conference, Albright College, 2015

## **FIELD EXPERIENCE**

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- Student Teacher, Amanda E. Stout Elementary School, Reading, Pennsylvania (August 2015-May 2016)

## **ACADEMIC SERVICES AND SUPPORT**

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- Vice President, Honors Club, Penn State Berks, Reading, Pennsylvania (August 2014- May 2015)
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## **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

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- Learning Assistant, PEPP, Southern Middle School, Reading, Pennsylvania (August 2012-May 2013)

## **INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

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- English 297H “The Idea of the Castle”, involving one-week study in Oslo, Norway (March 2015)
- English 297H “Writing and Communicating Health in South Africa”, involving one-week study in Johannesburg, South Africa (March 2014)
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