

MY STUDENTS AND ME: REFLECTIONS OF BLACK GIRLHOOD AT THE
INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER, DIS/ABILITY, AND YOUNG
ADOLESCENCE

by

JEMELLEH COES

(Under the Direction of ZOLINDA STONEMAN)

It has been recognized that the experience of Black girls, especially those of Black girls with disabilities, may not “conform to dominant forms of girlhood” (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 3). While there is great attention to the disproportionate numbers of Black students in special education, there is not much attention to girls specifically. Additionally, the underrepresentation of research of girls of color in education posits a situation ripe to exclude best curricular and classroom practices that would benefit and promote the success of Black girls and that of the society in which they will become active contributors (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2015):

For this project, the goal is to bring to light the stories of the experiences of Black women who were served in special education under the label of specific learning disability, understand the perceived impact on their lives thereafter, interrogate the systems and structures that contributed to those experiences, and create a dialogue between teacher and former student that invites the student to help the teacher reflect critically on their practice. As such, the most useful method of achieving this aim is a

study grounded in narrative inquiry with the accompaniment of duo-ethnographic data collection methods.

A thematic analysis showed that all the co-researchers converged at a meeting point of limited economic mobility. The following were entry points and barriers to mobility: self (the co-researchers themselves), other people in their lives, and systems and structures that guided that ways the co-researchers interacted with the world around them. This study challenges educators, policymakers, and community members to: 1) consider the practices that we do almost automatically without regard for the unintended consequences 2) examine what educational equity looks like 3) change deficit perceptions of dis/ability 4) consider the importance of wrap around services.

INDEX WORDS: BLACK GIRLHOOD, BLACK WOMEN, DIS/ABILITY,
MIDDLE SCHOOL, SPECIAL EDUCATION,
DUOETHNOGRAPHY, YOUNG ADOLESCENCE, DISCRIT
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Kara, Tasha, Bianca, and Rasheema. I cannot thank you enough for your willingness to share your story. Thank you for being authentically you every step of the way. I will always be your biggest fan!

This work is also dedicated to my favorite girl in the whole wide world, Gabrielle Coes. Gabby, at the age of five, you are an exemplary human. You are thoughtful, funny, intuitive, energetic, and brilliant! You keep me in line. Never stop being you!

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In full disclosure, my computer died as soon as my dissertation was complete. The problem is that I was unable to copy my acknowledgements into this document before it happened! So, as I believe the acknowledgement section is important coupled with the idea that I would like to close this document with great urgency in order to preserve a calm mind and courage spirit, these acknowledgments are limited, and the full, detailed acknowledgements will be available at www.jemellehcoes.com one day, assuming that the IT guy at Office Maxx can at least recover my hard drive. Fingers crossed!

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CHAPTER 1

BLACK GIRLHOOD AT THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER, DIS/ABILITY, AND YOUNG ADOLESCENCE

“Please don’t make me go to that class,” she said for the fifth day in a row as the other students packed up to leave and transitioned from our small resource classroom setting to the larger, inclusive environment setting for science instruction. “Science is fun! Today, I think you are doing a lab. You’ll really like the lab,” I replied, trying to exude as much excitement as I could muster. “But, she always...nevermind.” Sarah packed her things and left my class with a deep sigh and a look of defeat that was familiar to me. Many of my students before her had uttered the same words and displayed the same emotion when they talked about going into their inclusive, general education science class. Each time it happened, my heart would sink a little further into my stomach, and the mixed emotions of anger and sadness would consume me. I had visited that class several times before and I witnessed what they had attempted to describe to me with each melancholy, incomplete sentence. My colleague, while very knowledgeable about content and basic learning strategies, often overlooked the learning needs of students with dis/abilities, and when she did acknowledge them, it was in ways that negatively separated those students from their peers. They were hesitant to go to the class because they often felt like the other students would see them as “stupid” or “less than” because of the way the teacher would interact with them. While these comments and concerns came from students of all backgrounds, they most often came from the girls,

especially the Black girls. It could be that these girls felt most comfortable sharing their experience with me because I, too, identify as a Black female, or it could be that they were the ones who truly felt most affected by the actions of this teacher and that my positionality had nothing to do with their desire to voice their concern.

As a teacher, it can be difficult to completely understand the role as a facilitator of learning for all students. We often teach to reach the students with the most basic needs, and our attempts to teach to students with various needs are often misguided and/or counterproductive to those students academically, socially, or emotionally, leading to overt and covert displays of resistance. There must be a way to help teachers understand the effects of our teaching practices on girls with dis/abilities, with special attention to Black girls with dis/abilities in a general education setting. It may be that we rarely recognize the disservice we are doing to all students when our teaching practices are unintentionally divisive. In order for teachers to begin to shift these practices, we must first become aware of the impact of our current practices. Additionally, there is a need for teachers to reflect on the systems in which they perpetuate that may also be harmful. As much as my students would complain about having to go to the larger classroom setting, they would also complain about having to be in the small group setting, citing the concern that other students might see them in that class. This problem is one of systems, one of the construction of service delivery to students who might benefit from special education services. There are considerations that educators, policymakers, and communities should continue to interrogate as they ensure the best possible education for all students, especially those at the period of young adolescence.

Middle Grade Education

In 1963, Dr. William Alexander challenged an audience at Cornell University to rethink the idea of the junior high school and construct an idea that he believed would be more developmentally appropriate and conducive to the learning of children in the period of early adolescence (approximately ages 9-15), a period of rapid change likened to the rapid change of the period of infancy to early childhood. He said:

“The learning of right answers is not enough . . . beyond answers alone, we must help children ask the right questions, and discover their answers through creative thinking, reasoning, judging, and understanding” (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010, p. 11).

Students in the young adolescent phase in life would benefit from being taught to engage with complex problems, thoughtful inquiry, and collaboration with other people. The middle school structure should do just this, ensuring supportive practices and structures that aid in the development of the physical, intellectual, moral, psychological, and social-emotional well-being of young adolescents, categories that cannot be separated, but instead are deeply interwoven and totalizing (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). It is only when these areas of development are attended to that students will be able to reach their maximum academic potential.

Much like the inability to separate the developmental areas in need of attention for young adolescents, the individual differences that young adolescents present are intertwined, reminding researchers and educators alike that there are a great number of additional intersections that are to be considered in the education of young adolescents (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Those intersections include and are not

limited to race, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability, religion, sexual orientation, and any other accepted markers of identity.

During this period, the desire to belong and be accepted intensifies. Students start to shift their attention away from parents and lean toward peer interaction. They are also beginning to receive more messages from the media about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. This turn in development often plays out in family interactions causing blurry and limited communication as students embark on their quest for independence. Young adolescents, still in need of adult guidance, will then turn to other caregivers or educators to build relationships (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010).

The Association for Middle Level Education asserts that young adolescents should be taught to do the following if we are to maximize their potential to become well-prepared members of society:

- Become actively aware of the larger world, asking significant and relevant questions about that world and wrestling with big ideas and questions for which there may not be one right answer.
- Be able to think rationally and critically and express thoughts clearly.
- Read deeply to independently gather, assess, and interpret information from a variety of sources and read avidly for enjoyment and lifelong learning.
- Use digital tools to explore, communicate, and collaborate with the world and learn from the rich and varied resources available. Be a good steward of the earth and its resources and a wise and intelligent consumer of the wide array of goods and services available.

- Understand and use the major concepts, skills, and tools of inquiry in the areas of health and physical education, language arts, world languages, mathematics, natural and physical sciences, and the social sciences.
- Explore music, art, and careers, and recognize their importance to personal growth and learning.
- Develop his or her strengths, particular skills, talents, or interests and have an emerging understanding of his or her potential contributions to society and to personal fulfillment.
- Recognize, articulate, and make responsible, ethical decisions concerning his or her own health and wellness needs.
- Respect and value the diverse ways people look, speak, think, and act within the immediate community and around the world.
- Develop the interpersonal and social skills needed to learn, work, and play with others harmoniously and confidently.
- Assume responsibility for his or her own actions and be cognizant of and ready to accept obligations for the welfare of others.
- Understand local, national, and global civic responsibilities and demonstrate active citizenship through participation in endeavors that serve and benefit those larger communities (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010, p.12).

At present, special education services struggle to foster these processes, often opting instead for more traditional rote processes including giving information, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, giving tests, assigning homework, settling disputes,

punishing noncompliance, and marking grades (Haberman, 1991). The creation of a more inclusive environment might promote more of these practices.

Practices in Inclusive Education

The majority of educators are in support of moving toward making classrooms more inclusive for students. A study conducted by Idol (2006) revealed that only a few teachers thought that education in the separate classroom was a better method of educating students with dis/abilities. Even though reports allude to the willingness of teachers to include students with dis/abilities in the general education setting, a major barrier that has been identified as prohibiting the successful inclusion of students with dis/abilities into the general education setting are the attitudes of peers and other school personnel (Goncalves & Lemos, 2014). The ways that teachers and students perceive and interact with students with dis/abilities can have negative effects on the way those students participate in the classroom. Shifting the climate to one void of division and bound by full acceptance of students with dis/abilities takes time, intentional planning, and ongoing evaluation complete with input from students (Cook-Sather, 2002).

The act of labeling presents one major barrier to climate. In 2010, Ferri and Connor conducted a focus group of urban girls with dis/abilities. A great deal of information was revealed about the girls' experience in school. The girls noted that once people found out they had a dis/ability, both the teachers' and the students' perceptions changed. They felt that they were treated differently in friend groups (Ferri & Connor, 2010). The treatment the girls described could have, in part, been a manifestation of their own insecurities about their dis/ability likely caused by the acquisition of the Marxian

idea of “false consciousness.” This proposes that beliefs about oneself are internalized from messages one receives from a society abound with psychological oppression (Lang, 2007). There is extensive literature to support the idea that labels play a role in altering what people without dis/abilities believe about people with dis/abilities. Labeling can have stigmatizing effects that separate people with dis/abilities from the mainstream populations even if they do not see themselves any different than they did prior to receiving the label (Sutcliffe & Simons, 1993; Gillman et al. 2000; Tobbell and Lawthom, 2005; Caslin, 2014).

While labeling (or not) is a major part of creating a quality climate, there are other practices that make the learning space inviting. A study by Shogren, Gross, Forber-Pratt, Francis, Satter, Blue-Banning, & Hill (2015) was conducted with schools that were identified as having exemplary practices in the area of inclusive education. In the study, both students with and without dis/abilities were included in focus groups. Some of the practices they reported as being most effective in making sure that students felt welcomed in the inclusive environment are:

- Displaying signage that discourages bullying.
- Attending strictly to instances of bullying and giving immediate attention to rectifying infractions.
- Co-teaching, with pairs taking turns as lead teacher.
- Having teachers who are consistently upfront and willing to help students meet high expectations.
- Providing the opportunity for many in the group to go over educational material multiple times.

Students with dis/abilities reported finding value in learning in environments with students without dis/abilities. Students without dis/abilities also found value in being educated alongside their peers with dis/abilities, although their tone seemed to take on one of service rather than one of collaborative partnership (Shogren, Gross, Forber-Pratt, Francis, Satter, Blue-Banning, & Hill, 2015).

Another study showed that teachers and parents working together to provide positive feedback, showing acceptance and nonjudgmental dispositions toward the student, and celebrating and focusing on the talents of rather than the shortcomings of the student may help increase learning outcomes (Bergmann, 2000; Manning, 2007; Elksnin & Elksnin 2006; Wei & Marder, 2012).

Teachers should work to ensure that students are able to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways (Ashby, 2010). This allows students to feel included in all aspect of the running of the classroom and gives space for students to explore their strengths and recognize areas of opportunity for future practice. Teachers should regularly be seeking ways to incorporate discussion about all aspects of diversity including dis/ability in the classroom and school environment. When possible, teachers should endeavor to bring in works and ideas from authors, scientists, and historical figures with dis/abilities. Representation matters when creating an environment that is welcoming to a diverse group of students.

In the Shogren et al. (2015) study, students with and without dis/abilities pointed out some school and classroom practices that could be implemented to create a better school environment. Some of those practices include:

- Providing supports for students with dis/abilities to make friends.

- Not pulling students out from group instruction to take part in activities that were perceived to be related to their dis/ability as it was noted to be a source of embarrassment.

In addition to being pulled out, Hillary, a participant in Ashby's (2010) study describes her frustration with guided notes. She commented that while she thought they helped her learn, she disliked the way she was singled out as the one who had different notes.

Many times, when a teacher has a teacher's aide or co-teacher, if the student with dis/abilities shows signs of frustration, there is sometimes a tendency to complete the work for that student rather than helping them through to process, as was the case in the Ashby's (2010) study. Teachers should be careful not to call attention to students with dis/abilities that may give their class peers the impression that there is an overdependence on adults or a deficit in knowledge (Rose, Espelage, Monda-Amaya, Shogren, & Aragon, 2015). Seamless inclusion refers to a teacher's ability to provide students with dis/abilities the instruction they need without calling any attention to that student's learning needs. It is possible that this may be done without the use of labels, especially as it seems that the labels related to dis/ability are socially constructed (Connor, 2008).

Learning Dis/abilities

While the field of science continues to attempt to operationalize the definition of learning dis/ability to streamline consistency in meaning, other scholars have examined the meaning of learning dis/ability from a social and sociopolitical perspective, particularly after the educational reforms that surfaced after Sputnik (Sleeter 1986).

Lloyd Dunn (1968) and Mercer (1973) have long been skeptical about the social construction of dis/ability categories as it relates to race, social class, and culture. Dunn (1968) was particularly concerned with the practices around labeling. He noticed that Black children were labeled as having emotional or intellectual challenges while White children who exhibited many of the same characteristics were not labeled at all. Christine Sleeter offers a very different perspective on why the label of learning dis/ability has been operationalized, whom the label seeks to serve, and why the definition remains intentionally broad.

During the mid-twentieth century, educational reform demanded that students acquire a greater abundance of knowledge. It was proposed that this be done through reading (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). This posed a problem, since until this point, knowledge had been acquired by verbal or hands-on instruction with little attention given to reading.

Students who did not acquire information at the same rate as their peers were put into five categories: slow learners, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, culturally deprived, and learning disabled. The slow learner and mentally retarded category were given based on IQ score. People with IQ scores between 75-90 were considered to be slow learners and those with an IQ less than 75 were deemed to be mentally retarded. Those categorized as emotionally disturbed exhibited behaviors that were considered problematic for the school setting (Dunn, 1963). The fourth category was reserved for those considered to be culturally deprived and were said to have lacked the home environment conducive to educational growth. (Deutsch, 1963; Reissman, 1962). The fifth category was “learning dis/abilities.” This category was reserved for those

considered to be “normal” but who had difficulty with actual reading (Strauss & Lehtinen, 1963).

During the first ten years of the development of labels, students who were considered to have a learning dis/ability were largely white and middle class (Sleeter, 1986). While the category was not specifically designed for them, it ended up being largely comprised of white middle-class children because educators attributed the deficits of the other students of different races or social classes as being related to characteristics of the other four categories (Sleeter, 1986). IQ testing played a major role in the disparities in students served in the categories. White children, in general, tended to score about 15 points higher on IQ tests than children of color.

Because IQ scores of those diagnosed with learning dis/ability were at least average, it alluded to the idea, more so than the other categories that students with this designation could learn, work, and function “normally,” especially if they were not hindered by their environment as those with other dis/ability designations were considered to be (Sleeter, 1986).

These views were not only supported by the general public, but teachers also viewed students with learning dis/abilities as more “normal” and less demanding to educate (Williams & Algozzine, 1979). Studies conducted by Bianco (2005), Foster & Salvia (1977), Foster, Schmidt, & Sabatino (1976), and Gillung & Rucker (1977) indicate that particular labels shape teacher’s expectations of student success. This supports labeling theory which states that labels are often used to stigmatize and alter views, either positive or negative (Gillman, Heyman, & Swain, 2000). Reynolds (1996) reported that children who were determined to have less severe dis/abilities were more likely to be

educated in inclusive environments, while children with more severe dis/abilities were often segregated into separate settings with lowered expectations. This view and practice persists today with the majority of educators believing that students with dis/abilities such as specific learning dis/ability, attention-deficit disorder, and Asperger's could be educated in the general setting while students with emotional behavior disorders, autism, or intellectual dis/abilities should be given services in a separate setting (Lalvani, 2015).

Because many textbooks often describe a person with a learning dis/ability as one who is extremely creative and intelligent, while many of the other dis/abilities described make no such mention, specific learning dis/ability is often seen as a privileged dis/ability (Smith et.al., 2004). Erevelles (2005) has proposed that it is easier to accept and overlook dis/abilities of people who look "normal," as we often categorize a person with a learning dis/ability as being "normal" but with additional learning challenges. However, it is important to note that the stigma of learning dis/ability changes when it is compounded by other factors such as race and class. When learning dis/ability intersects with whiteness and upper/middle-classness, students are often advantaged as they receive extra education supports without lowered expectations. When specific learning dis/ability intersects with low socioeconomic status or being Black, the privileges (least restrictive setting and accommodations) are often diminished. This is discussed further in the theory section.

According to the 2016 *38th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, in the fall of 2014, there were 67,039,493 students between the ages of 6-21 eligible to receive an education. Of these potential students, 5,825,505 students received special education services under the Individual with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Of the ~5.8 million students, 2,279,343 (39%) of them received services based on a diagnosis of SLD, making it the largest dis/ability category to be served by special education. This means about 3.4% of the total student population in the United States is served by IDEA with a diagnosis of SLD.

Additionally, boys receive services at a higher rate for specific learning dis/ability than the girls. It tends to be the case that "boys outnumber girls by about three to one in the learning dis/abilities category" (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2009, p. 175). This gender disparity is notable because research has shown that when it comes to reading, specifically, just as many girls as boys have difficulty. This might point to an overrepresentation of boys or an under-serving of girls (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

The intersection of race, gender, and economic class in conjunction with specific learning dis/ability is difficult to see using the data that is collected from various, national sources. There is little attention to girls' relationship to experiences or impact of having a learning dis/ability, beyond the notion that they are under-represented. The same is true as it relates to economic class. There is little data reported other than students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to receive services. The data reporting helps point to gaps in policy or practices that relate to race and learning dis/ability that require attention.

As students progress into early adulthood, students with specific learning disability (SLD) express very similar post-secondary interests as their non-SLD peers. The following data was collected from National Longitudinal Transition Study:

- 54% aspire to attend two or four-year college
- 43% indicates a goal to attend vocational school

- 50% indicate a goal to live independently,
- 57% indicate a goal to obtain competitive employment

Additionally, data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study supports this nationally, just as many students with SLD report enrolling in some postsecondary education. However, the college completion rate for students with SLD is 41% as compared to 52% of students who do not have SLD. It is worth noting that once SLD students leave high school, only 17% received services compared to the 94% that received services during their secondary education. This is due in large part to students no longer identifying with the characteristics or needs of supports for specific learning dis/ability (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

As people with learning dis/abilities move beyond compulsory education, the data surrounding their progression becomes significantly harder to track because once students leave compulsory education settings, researchers rely heavily on self-reported data to track their progress. One possible cause for this may be that of the students who attended post-secondary school, 69% did not consider themselves to have a dis/ability and consequently did not inform their postsecondary school (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). In the workforce, only 19% of adults with learning dis/abilities report their dis/ability to their employer.

Girls with Dis/abilities

We have a great deal to learn about girls with dis/abilities. We also have a great deal to learn about what it is like to be one of very few girls in a class of students with dis/abilities, a traditionally male-dominated space (Ferri & Connor, 2010). A barrier in

learning more about girls with dis/abilities is the under-identification of these students. Under-identification of girls gives the illusion that they are absent from special education services. They exist in special education, but the literature that sheds light on girls with dis/abilities is meager (Arms, Bickeet, Graf, 2008).

At a very young age, students are taught, most often implicitly, what appropriate classroom behavior should be for a girl. Female students are often socialized into being passive recipients of instruction, careful not to draw too much attention to themselves by requesting help, even if they need it. They may shy away from taking risks that might bring attention to their weaknesses which makes it more difficult for teachers to identify more serious weaknesses in learning (Arms, Bickeet, Graf, 2008). In an effort to hide their weaknesses, girls tend to work harder and find ways to escape assignments that could expose their need to be tested for additional education supports. Because girls with dis/abilities perform what might be considered traditional girl behavior, their presented identities evade the label of dis/ability making it increasingly difficult to accurately and efficiently identify those who require additional education supports (Arms, Bickeet, Graf, 2008).

The work of Vogel (1990) further outlines the reason for girls' large absence from the identified populations of students with dis/abilities adding that teachers are less likely to refer girls for special education services because they do not exhibit the overt behaviors (i.e. impulsivity, visible inattentiveness, restlessness, etc.) that are commonly seen in boys who receive additional education supports. This practice delays the process of girls receiving the services that may benefit their education and by the time they are identified, they have missed out on the accommodations that may have promoted their

learning leaving them even more vulnerable to challenges that come along with a label of dis/ability.

The well-intentioned, yet misguided practices of teachers often lend themselves to having girls with dis/abilities receive gender-stereotyped education and training. This occurs largely because there may be a subconscious (or conscious) belief that girls with dis/abilities may not be able to attain the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in what might be considered more advanced jobs, and therefore, are often given classroom tasks and jobs that perpetuate their status in sex-stereotyped roles (Arms, Bickeet, & Graf, 2008). Because girls may not receive the education necessary to promote the matriculation to and through post-secondary education for them to reach their fullest potential, they are left confined to career opportunities that most often have lower pay. To another end, girls who fall behind educationally, often drop out of school which potentially leads to their inability to get services and access resources that could support their forward progress as they transition to independent living (Ferri & Connor, 2010).

Women and girls with dis/abilities are often excluded from activities that would facilitate social interactions and friendship building (Hanna & Rogosky, 1991). In middle school, social interactions are just as important as academic development (Wyche, 2015). A student's ability to fit in with their peers gives them status and credibility in peer to peer interactions. If girls with dis/abilities are excluded from these interactions, the potential academic challenges they suffer are compounded by the social isolation they may feel.

In addition, girls with dis/abilities also face stereotypes imposed on them by classmates. In one study, the males, who were also in special education believed the girls

with dis/abilities were either sexually unattractive or sexually promiscuous. In these male-dominated spaces, in this case, a small-group resource class, the emphasis on the girls' sexuality seemed to be of great importance, resulting in girls misplacing their value on their bodies rather than on other aspects of their lives (Ferri & Connor, 2010).

The proclivity, intended or not, to condemn girls with dis/abilities to sex-stereotyped jobs, forces potential social isolation, and imposes characteristics of being asexual or sexually promiscuous, adding more complexity to the issues facing girls with dis/abilities. When these factors are not given attention and efforts are not made to alleviate the potential negative effects, negative academic outcomes are inevitable for girls (Arms, Bickeet, & Graf, 2008).

Bauer (2013) outlines specific practices for teachers of girls with dis/abilities. She notes that teachers should first examine and acknowledge their own beliefs about girls that may promote the domestic roles rather than roles that support independence and higher achievement. Teachers should also provide instruction for girls with dis/abilities about how to advocate for themselves. To facilitate this, Bauer recommends that teachers are intentional about giving girls choices even if they appear to be passive.

Dis/ability in itself requires strategic navigation to transmute the negative connotations that are attached to the dis/ability label. When the element of gender is introduced, navigation becomes even more complex, as now one must navigate "conflicts, contradictions, and ambivalences of femininity" (Gonick, 2003, p.6). The role that gender plays significantly impacts the way girls with dis/abilities experience education. The celebration of girl culture and girl power neglects to include girls with

dis/abilities in the conversations that highlight the value and importance of girlhood and womanhood.

Dis/ability policy ignores the unique needs of women. The feminist movement disregards dis/abilities in its pursuit of equity. The quest for rights of women who simultaneously have dis/abilities is largely absent from the advocacy movements (Traustadottir, 1996; Bauer 2001). Adding the extra layer of race further invisibilizes the girls of color who have a dis/ability. This makes it even more difficult to identify promising practices for their educational success.

Black Girls

It has been recognized that the experience of Black girls, especially those of Black girls with dis/abilities, may not “conform to dominant forms of girlhood” (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 3). While there is great attention to the disproportional numbers of Black students in special education, there is not much attention to girls specifically. Additionally, the underrepresentation of research of girls of color in education posits a situation ripe to exclude best curricular and classroom practices that would benefit and promote the success of Black girls and that of the society in which they will become active contributors (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

Through the available literature, there seems to be a stark contrast between what is reported as normative behavior for girls with dis/abilities compared to what is often reported as characteristics for Black girls with dis/abilities (Morris, 2016). Although it was never identified as such, further research leads me to conclude that much of the literature about girls with dis/abilities refers to a particular group of girls with

dis/abilities. In examining both sets of literature, that which discusses issues related to Black girls with dis/abilities vs. that which discusses issues related to girls with dis/abilities, it seems that Black girls with dis/abilities could potentially have a very different experience in the classroom (Annamma, 2017). In some regards, the experiences are completely juxtaposed.

The inattention to ethnicity in discussions about girls with dis/abilities is unsettling. The literature presents as though the characteristics of girls with dis/abilities are general characteristics of all girls with dis/abilities when in fact, that is far from accurate (*see* Ashby 2010). Black girls with dis/abilities seem to be categorized very differently in the infinitesimal literature that is present about them. While it is indeed an increasingly dangerous endeavor to try to categorize people solely based on gender, ethnicity, or dis/ability, it is also important to highlight various nuances within the overarching descriptions so as not to completely cast out large populations who also take position within a given category. The experiences of Black girls with dis/abilities should be included in the main discourses of girls with dis/abilities and not be “othered” through the exclusion of mention of the unique characteristics they may possess. The claim to the term “girls with dis/abilities” implies that people fitting both the category of girl and having a dis/ability might have some of the characteristics observed from different researchers and practitioners when, in fact, it behaves almost colorblind and blind to issues of socio-economic status, neglecting to include variance or highlight the realities of the non-White girls, in essence, reserving the term “girls with dis/abilities” for White, likely middle-class girls. This is yet another instance of invisibilizing, yet it occurs within

a category that should speak more specifically to the wide range of needs of girls with dis/abilities.

With this practice of exclusion, if practitioners are met with questions about girls with dis/abilities and what they have read and what they are experiencing are at almost opposite ends of the categorical spectrum, they will have an added challenge in generating appropriate solutions for the issues they may face in the classroom. In fact, there is evidence that teachers may implement disciplinary practices that aim to suggest to Black girls that they should endeavor to display more traditional qualities of femininity including passiveness or quietness (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). This is likely in response to the limited knowledge about characteristics and resolutions they are exposed to as a result of a limited presence of best practices in teaching and understanding a more diverse group of girls, especially those with dis/abilities. When teachers are not given opportunities to ascertain insights that provide a more comprehensive view of student background, culture, and behavior, they can participate in and display actions that the student may interpret as a lack of caring (Bondy & Ross, 2008). A display of nonchalance on the part of the teacher can lead to a disconnect in student learning.

2011-2012 data, which included information about girls with dis/abilities, from a study conducted by the United States Department of Education (2014) revealed that Black girls with dis/abilities are given out of school suspension at twelve times the rate of Asian girls, six times the rate of White girls, and three times the rate of Hispanic/Latina girls. In Georgia, Black girls with dis/abilities are suspended at six times the rate of Asian girls, five times the rate of White girls, and 2.5 times the rate of Hispanic/Latina. Although these numbers seem to indicate a potential problem of behavior, there is very

little evidence that Black students at the same schools engage in behavior that warrants higher disciplinary action (Skiba, 2014). This points to a problem of practice or awareness of best practices or even an awareness of characteristics that help better understand how to educate girls with dis/abilities.

If girls are not at school to be educated, we can reasonably assume that they are not receiving the education that other students have access to, which may impede their ability to successfully matriculate through school or to possess the skills to secure and maintain a career of choice (Ferri & Connor, 2010).

In a study about Black girls being pushed out of schools, Morris (2013) captured some of the ways teachers perceive the actions of Black girls. Based on insights from the girls in the study and teacher reports, Morris, by way of educator input, categories the behavior as “unladylike” noting that the girls were perceived to be loud, defiant, and/or disrespectful. One of the girls with dis/abilities reported that she was disciplined because one of her teachers called her “retarded” in front of the class. In response, the girl argued with the teacher about why she believed the teacher was out of line for her embarrassing her in front of the other students in the classroom. As a result, the girl was expelled from school.

Black girls, in general, experience their education in different ways than that of White girls. In a study from Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2015) many of the girls reported that they have had less than ideal, even discouraging interactions with teachers and counselors. Many of girls held the belief that their teachers and counselors saw them as untrustworthy, loud, ghetto, or ignorant.

Girls with the characteristics described here could likely benefit from many of the aforementioned strategies (i.e. seamless inclusion, parent-teacher collaboration, teacher-teacher collaboration, holding high expectations, etc.) as some of the same issues may be prevalent in their setting. However, through reports provided, Black girls with dis/abilities seem to have a different type of interaction in the classroom which leads to the greater likelihood of their removal from the classroom setting (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda 2015). To not acknowledge this as a concern that needs to be addressed would be a gross oversight on the quest of helping more students succeed.

Because of the gaps in the literature about girls with dis/abilities, educators are consigned to utilizing and piecing together the scanty research they are able to find, coupled with data collected through their own practice to identify and implement practices for an array of students (Morris, 2016). More widespread research should be conducted so that quality, widespread data collection can occur. The data can be used to develop a better picture of promising practices and help promote intentional teacher reflection to ensure a positive learning experience for more students. And most specifically for Black girls with dis/abilities.

Purpose of the Study

Using critical theories, this narrative inquiry coupled with duoethnographic methods will examine the storied lives of Black women who received special education services in middle school and the co-constructed memories between them and their teacher in a southeastern, rural, United States town.

Research Questions

1. What were the experiences of Black women who received special education services in middle school?
 - a. How did practices or interactions influence the development of the identity of Black women who received special education services in middle school?
 - b. What about their middle school experiences impacted their ability to negotiate the world?
 - c. What ideologies, discourses, and practices were perpetuated in relation to and as a result of their experiences?
2. What do co-constructed memories between BWD and teacher reveal about each

Individual, teacher-student relationships, educational practices, and structural systems that undergird education?

- a. How can a conversation between a teacher and former student influence future educational practices?
- b. What do a teacher and former students find valuable about their experiences in the same setting?

Importance of the Study

People with dis/abilities in society and in our country, particularly, have had a longstanding battle of resisting marginalization. It remains largely the work of advocacy groups to implore educators and policy makers to attend to the needs of a wider variety of students without holding steadfast to the socially constructed characteristics and labels that have been unintentionally and intentionally used to separate and disadvantage some

of the most marginalized populations (Connor, 2008). While we seem to be becoming more attentive to alleviating practices that foster marginalization, we have become accustomed and oblivious to a few educational practices that continue to promote exclusion even when the intended goal is inclusion.

As it related to Black girls, the phrase “They’re killing our girls!” rings true for too many. The phrase, while not always literal, is widely held belief for many who are concerned with the ways African-American girls are treated in American society. The phrase refers to the ways African-American girls are silenced, dismissed, marginalized, emotionally abused, and forced to conform to traditional (white American) ways of being (Morris, 2016).

Recently, the experience of African- American girls has become a major area of interest for policymakers, educators, and community members. This interest, in part, stems from recent reports of alarmingly high numbers of African-American girls who are being suspended and expelled from U.S. public schools. The rates of suspension for African-American girls have surpassed that of African American boys who once resided at the top of the suspension list (. Within the category of African-American girls, there seems to be one group who is disproportionally penalized with suspension: African-American girls with dis/abilities.

There are many factors that may contribute to the way African-American girls adjust to the more traditional classroom in United States public schools, but there is something unique to those with dis/abilities, something that is impeding their upward mobility in our society. Race compounded by dis/ability with the added intersection of gender seems to be a defeating combination, especially in U.S. classrooms. If we do not

specifically attend to the experiences of African-American girls with dis/abilities, not only do we leave them vulnerable to the inability to access the education afforded to them by virtue of basic civil rights, we also run the risk of publicly acquiescing to their to continued oppression, which has a significant impact on society as a whole.

Dis/ability Studies in Education has recently (2015) created a framework to help navigate understanding best practices as it relates to individuals who are simultaneously impacted by racism and ableism. Yet, even within this framework, it is likely that race has a greater impact on the experience of African-American girls with dis/abilities. The best way to understand the experience of these girls is to have them tell their stories. Additionally, the opportunity to commiserate who may have had a similar experience can also be a source of empowerment for the co-researchers and a source of information for those who seek to ensure their success in American society. The additional element of co-constructing memories with those who were a part of their educational experience may bring forth new ideas and important questions for educators to consider.

Scope of the Study

This narrative inquiry coupled with a duoethnographic methodology will examine the middle school experiences of Black women who received special education services. The duoethnography conducted with primary researcher, me, will explore how a teacher and students make meaning of their experiences from their perspectives as student and teacher.

More specifically using Intersectionality and DisCrit Theory, this study seeks to examine how women with intersecting identities make sense of their experience as middle-schoolers and how their lives and identities have been or have not been shaped by

those experiences. This study also highlights what ideas, memories, and reflections can be conjured when a student and a teacher recall events and experiences together. Finally, this study underscores the impact of systemic influences on the lives of these co-researchers and makes recommendations for the teaching practice. I conducted two interviews with four former students. The first interview was a semi-structured narrative interview. The second interview employed duoethnographic methods using photo elicitation to facilitate a conversation between the participants and me, from this point on to be known as co-researcher (participant) and researcher (me).

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERSECTIONALITY AND DISCRIT THEORY

The depth of the Black girl experience is both exciting and unsettling to attempt to capture. It is exciting because there are so many unexplored facets of the experience that could potentially change the way we all view the world, yet it is unnerving because it runs so deep and wide that the examples of it know no boundaries. However, the experiences of Black girls, especially in formal educational spaces, often goes unrecognized for a variety of reasons including, by not limited to, the inattention to their stories.

Being outcast or marginalized in an educational environment can have long term detrimental effects on mobility and life in general. When I think about the opportunities and barriers that education simultaneously represents, I draw myself back from becoming cynical. That is, education systems often state a mission to help every student become critical thinkers so that they may be ready for life, in many facets, as they become independent contributors to society. However, certain practices are the antithesis of this idea. Some days it appears education systems have the potential to do more harm than good, especially when it comes to educating Black girls, and even more so when it comes to educating Black girls with dis/abilities.

In academic literature, the presentation and discussions of Black girls are often centered on ways in which they are oppressed and marginalized. While there is merit to the claims of marginalization and oppression (*see Morris, 2016*), the continued focus on

the deficits neglect the focus on how and in what conditions Black girls can thrive. Even with a focus on humanizing and celebrating Black girls, it cannot be understated that racism and sexism play a role in their educational experience (Edwards, McArthur, Russell-Owens, 2016).

However, the deficit frame creates limits that reduce the experiences of Black girls in educational spaces to narratives where there seems to be no evidence of prosperity when in fact there is. Whether that prosperity is “because of” or “in spite of” the systems in place, the experiences of Black girls in educational spaces is a story that should be told.

The solution is to construct the narrative of Black girls with dis/abilities and their educational experiences (Evans-Winters, 2010) in a way that honors their ways of being and does not drown out their voices and stories with only those of pain and oppression (Edwards, et al. 2016). Two possible theories that allow researchers to further understand this phenomenon with attention to how Black girls resist oppressive narratives, yet recognize the impact of racism, sexism, and ableism on their experiences are Intersectionality and DisCrit.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a complex concept used to examine the cross between identities, especially when attempting to examine traditionally marginalized identities in an effort to discover root-causes of a particular phenomenon (Crenshaw, 1991). Black girls are, indeed, at a unique intersection often being invisibilized through categorizations that fail to consider the compounding nature of gender and race (Haddix, McArthur, Muhammad, Price-Dennis, & Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). They are often grouped and discussed

with White girls or Black boys, with no attention to the problematic and inaccurate representation that either of those groups offers to the depiction of Black girls. The problem only becomes exacerbated when dis/ability is added.

Noted in *Intersectionality and Urban Education: Identities, Policies, Spaces & Power* “intersectionality is both a set of theories and their methodological and analytical applications to empirical research (Cassidy & Jackson, 2005; Hancock, 2007)” (p.

10). Intersectionality is used in literature in many different ways. Some scholars contend that it is an approach to critical praxis; others view it as a field of study, while others view it as a tool for analytical application (Collins, 2015). This is important to note because the term intersectionality is often used singularly without reference to its utility in context. For this paper, I will discuss intersectionality as a theory to be used analytically (as discussed in Bluth, 1975) to better understand a phenomenon.

In 1977, the Combahee River Collective set forth a statement that would lay the foundation for what would come to be known as intersectionality. They stated:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (Combahee River Collective, 1986)

Theories of intersectionality have been adopted by the field of education from other disciplines. Other Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1981), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and Audre Lorde (1984) are credited with cultivating the idea, and the

work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) is used to ground discussions of the intersections of race, class, and gender in the school setting. The work of Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (1988) has been used foundational in education discussions about intersections of the aforementioned as well as ability.

The term was coined in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw based on concepts of intersectionality. On the idea of intersectionality, she writes, "...the intersectional experiences is greater than the sum of racism and sexism..." (p. 140). That is, it is not enough to look at the marginalization of Black people, look at the marginalization of women, and then put the information gathered together to understanding the experience of Black women. Therefore, rather than starting with looking at the experiences of women or Black people in general, as Crenshaw discusses intersectionality, she begins with Black women, a deviation from beginning with populations with singular identities outside of the American norm which Audre Lorde (1984) describes as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" (p. 116). To that, I add able. Crenshaw (1989) further illustrates an analogy of the benefit of what she calls the "singular burden" (see p. 151). In this she says that Black woman only receive attention when their marginalization is recognizable in alignment with one's who have the experience of the single burden. That is, while Black women may experience some of the marginalization outlined in studies of Black people and white women, there is something unique about the interplay between the two identities that creates further subjugation which has been highly disregarded in understanding the lived experience of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989).

Although Crenshaw originally coined the term to be used to examine the intersectional experience of Black women, in her 1991 work, she highlights the utility for examining other intersecting identities.

Based on the work of Crenshaw, Lykke defines intersectionality as:

A theoretical and methodological tool to analyze how historically specific kinds of power differentials and/or constraining normativities, based on discursively, institutionally and/or structurally constructed socio-cultural categorizations such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age/ generation, dis/ability, nationality, mother tongue and so on, interact, and in so doing produce different kinds of societal inequalities and unjust social relations....Depending on the theoretical framework, they can be theorized as dominance/subordination, in/exclusion, recognition/ misrecognition, power/disempowerment, possession/dispossession, privilege/lack of privilege, majoritizing/minoritizing and so on.” (Lykke, N. 2010, p. 50-51)

Studying phenomena with an intersectional lens is seen by many scholars as social justice work as the explorations of intersections examine issues of power, oppression, resistance, and aims to highlight and transform dominant perspectives (Dhamoon, 2010).

Intersectionality theory can help to underscore inequities in power and privilege found in race, gender, class, and dis/ability and examine policies and practices that disproportionately affect certain populations (Connor, 2006; Cassidy Jackson, 2005). With roots in legal scholarship, it has both an empirical and activist component. The empirical component allows us to understand power and privilege while the activist

component calls us to create resistant among intersections to create change (Gillborn, 2015).

One of the greatest benefits of using intersectionality as a theory is that it attends to complexity, inclusivity, simultaneity, and irreducibility (Carastathis, 2014).

As cited in Carastathis, 2014, Crenshaw offers a metaphor to explain the complexity of intersectionality. She gives the example of cars colliding at an intersection causing fatal harm to the person in the center. In the metaphor, cars are coming from various directions. The roads that will intersect represent the identities. The cars represent the impact of the identity. When the cars collide, it is almost impossible to recreate the accident to figure out which car is at fault. Even if the accident can be recreated, it is impossible to determine which car actually caused the fatality. That is, even if it was possible to identify the identity that has the greatest impact, we could not be sure that it was because of that identity that marginalization occurs. Instead, we recognize that it is the work of all of the cars (impact of all of the identities) that caused the fatality because if even one of the cars was absent from the collision, it might be possible that the person would have survived.

Collins (2015) writes that the use of intersectionality theory as a tool for analysis embrace some or all of the following concepts:

1. Race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, nation, ethnicity, and similar categories of analysis are best understood in relational terms rather than in isolation from one another.
2. These mutually constructing categories underlie and shape intersecting systems of power; the power relations of racism and sexism, for example, are interrelated.

3. Intersecting systems of power catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for people who live within them.
4. Because social formations of complex social inequalities are historically contingent and cross-culturally specific, unequal material realities and social experiences vary across time and space.
5. Individuals and groups differentially placed within intersecting systems of power have different points of view on their own and others' experiences with complex social inequalities, typically advancing knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations.
6. The complex social inequalities fostered by intersecting systems of power are fundamentally unjust, shaping knowledge projects and/or political engagements that uphold or contest the status quo. (p.14)

This list is a provisional, evolving guide that helps to concretize the utility of intersectionality theory.

Intersectionality theory has its share of critics. As cited from Davis 2008, Gillborn (2015) writes “[intersectionality is] sometimes viewed as a “buzzword,” whose frequent iteration often belies an absence of clarity and specificity (p. 278).

The scholarship around intersectionality is growing rapidly, and frankly as stated by Collins (2015) citing Collins & Chepp 2013, surveying the related research it is a daunting task. Because of its rapid growth, dynamic use, and sometimes inattention to the foundational principles, if the integrity of the concept is not grounded, “‘intersectionality’ may serve to obscure and thereby reproduce the very phenomena intersectionality was

conceived to illuminate and overcome” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 312). That is, intersectionality has been used in a widespread manner, sometimes with no regard for its grounding: critical legal scholarship and Black feminist theory (Bliss, 2016). Crenshaw, Cho, and McCall as cited in Nash (2016) also express the concern that much of the current literature about intersectionality misuses the theory and does not adhere to the originating texts. Two major critiques about intersectionality that have been made based on misinformation include that the theory is only about race and gender, giving attention only to Black women and that the theory has taken scholarship as far as it can go and scholars should now focus on post-intersectionality inquiries (Carbado, 2013). One suggestion in support of a move toward post-intersectionality comes from Nash (2013).

The author writes:

I use “post-intersectionality” as an invitation to problematize the interdisciplinary fetishization of intersectionality’s “complexity” (Nash 2010; Wiegman 2012), as part of a larger endeavor to uncouple black feminism and intersectionality (Nash 2011), and as a move toward recognizing black feminism’s other political traditions....I hope to show that black feminism’s political tradition is rich and heterogeneous, that it has reflected and unleashed myriad “freedom dreams” (Nash, 2011, p. 8)

There are other cautions and critiques about intersectionality that are attentive to the originating texts. Ludvig contends that attempting to point out specific forms of categorical oppression make intersectionality theory a difficult theory to work with. She argues that oppression cannot be reduced to axes, structures or systems because of the complexity and contradictions of our society. Ludvig says that because the list of

differences is endless, we must be cautious and thorough in representing findings that leave out identity markers when using intersectionality theory (Ludvig, 2006).

Intersectionality is contextual, and when examining phenomena through the lens of intersectionality, “mapping hierarchies onto particular identities obscures that both power and social categories are contextually constituted” (Carbado, 2013, p. 813). That is, because the impact of an identity marker may shift depending on the context scholars should be careful not to rank the marginalization of the identity when using an intersectional lens.

Although Crenshaw originally started her inquiry into intersectionality theory with Black women, other scholars who study with an intersectionality theory start from a variety of intersections with attention to Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) work. Critical dis/ability scholars start with dis/ability. Critical race scholars start with race. Feminist scholars start with gender (Gillborn, 2015). Scholars often choose this starting place because it is a place where they believe the most change needs to be effected. This is important to note because while the starting places are different, intersectionality theory adheres to a “both [at least]-and” (Lorde, 1984) impact of the intersecting identities. As it relates to dis/ability, Shakespeare (1997) specifically cautions against using dis/ability as a ‘sole and significant’ identity marker concurring that it is the collective impact of the identities that help understand the experience, noting that the identities should not be considered additive, but rather they should be considered totalizing.

DisCrit Theory

However, Gillborn (2015) in a study about Black students with dis/abilities, notes that there seems to be a "primacy of race." That is, subjugation is first based on race and

all other intersections follow. Gillborn recognizes that intersectionality theory does not support this line of inquiry in this way, as race alone is not an intersection, so he calls on other theories to use in conjunction with intersectionality to examine phenomena. For his study with Black students receiving special education services, he used intersectionality and critical race theory, a theory developed by Derrick Bell (1984) originating, like intersectionality from critical legal scholarship. At the time of Gillborn's study, the combination of intersectionality and critical race theory provided him with an adequate lens for inquiry. Since that study in 2015, Gillborn has helped to legitimize a theory that not only examines race, but examines the intersection of race and dis/ability as a unit. This theory is known as DisCrit.

I intend to use intersectionality in conjunction with DisCrit theory to examine the experiences of Black women with dis/abilities. DisCrit Theory allows me to explore deeply into the intersection of race and ability specifically. However, DisCrit does not attend to issues of gender which is another very important intersection related to the experiences of Black women with dis/abilities. Intersectionality allows me to examine the interplay between all three marginalized identities. Additionally, even though it has been used in expansive ways since its origin, the grounding of intersectionality as a theory to be used to understand the Black women may be additionally beneficial for understanding the experiences of these women.

DisCrit theory emerges from longstanding knowledge that the experiences of people with dis/abilities are unique depending on the other identifying markers (Davis, 2008). Race and dis/ability, considered socially constructed identity markers, have both been historically marginalized. Woven together, they are often used to perpetuate

oppression and inequality (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Beratan, 2008; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Gillborn, 2015).

Particularly, the field of special education has been notorious for creating systems and practices that shape the experiences of students due to the combination of race and dis/ability (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Oliver, 1996; Tomlinson, 2014). This has been cited as being the case even when students come from middle class homes. That is, even when there are controls for social class, an identity that can be privileged or subjugated, the combination of race and dis/ability still negatively impacts students' experiences (cited in Gillborn, 2015).

While over the last few years special education seems to be evolving in a manner that would suggest that there is more attention to the social aspects of education, it still remains largely on the part of advocacy groups to implore educators and policymakers to attend to the needs of a wider variety of students without holding steadfast to the socially constructed characteristics and labels that have been unintentionally and intentionally used to separate and disadvantage some of the most marginalized populations (Connor, 2008).

DisCrit Theory can be used to help underscore the experiences of Black women with dis/abilities. This framework pulls from dis/ability theory and critical race theory to marry the intersection of race and dis/ability in be applied to the examinations of everyday occurrences of people who experience life with these labels. It helps to clarify the vast difference in the way people of color experience having dis/abilities versus the way white people experience the world while having a dis/ability (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2013). The authors note that many times attempts at using only one theory

(dis/ability or critical race) to engage in the discussion of a phenomenon with and about people who belong to both groups, gives a distorted view of the experience of those people.

As previously noted, DisCrit Theory, like most other theories, does not specifically attend to all the major intersections that Black women with dis/abilities inhabit. Experiences that may be related to gender coupled with dis/ability and race are not outlined in this theory. However, the broad nature of the tenets of DisCrit allows room for pairing with other theories, namely intersectionality.

DisCrit theory is made up of seven tenets:

- Tenet one highlights the covert ways that race and ableism interact which reinforce ideas about normalcy.
- Tenet two encourages the acknowledgment of intersecting identities forcing viewpoints beyond a singular identity.
- Tenet three examines the socially constructed ideas about race and ability and recognizes the impact of being given labels that deviate from the norms of the racialized and ableized western society.
- Tenet four "privileges voices of marginalized populations" (p. 27) as they are rarely acknowledged and reported in research literature.
- Tenet five examines the history of race and dis/ability and underscores how they have been used individually and cooperatively to deny rights.
- Tenet six recognizes that the upward mobility of people with dis/ability is mainly because of the benefits, or convergence of interest, to middle-class White people. Whiteness and Ability are both regarded as property.

- Tenet seven emphasizes activism and supports the resistance of any effort that perpetuates racism and ableism. (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2013)

DisCrit¹ is a relatively new theory, uncomfortably new, honestly. However, many scholars are attempting to put it to use. What follows are ways in which each tenet has been used and the effectiveness of use to further understand a phenomenon.

Tenet One: Connectedness of Race and Ability

Tenet one of DisCrit aims to highlight the connectedness of race and dis/ability. That is, perceptions of race perpetuate the beliefs about perceived ability; perceptions of ability can be co-signed by perceptions of race. For example, in an excerpt from Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent, and Ball (2016) a participant tells a story about an encounter with a teacher who suggests that a student's low performance is linked to low motivation and alludes to the idea that the student might just be a low performer. The student has not been tested for a dis/ability, nor does the teacher see a reason for the student to be tested for possibly having a dis/ability. The parent perceives that the teacher's position of identifying that the student is low performing due to low motivation (rather than due to a possible dis/ability) stems from the teacher's low expectations of children of color. That is, the parent believes that the teacher holds a belief of, "Your daughter is Black. Black people perform low academically. Black people perform low academically because they have lower academic ability. However, if she tried harder, maybe she could do better." The following excerpt captures much of the parent's experience:

¹ DisCrit is a name I find odd as it does not encompass the word race. Maybe it should have been "DisRace", which is even more questionable...AbleRace? No. I now see the conundrum.

A discrepancy was emerging, that she would get a B for a piece of work that she had spent time doing [at home] and then she would get a D or an E even [for timed work in class]. So I contacted the school and said, “Look, there’s a problem here.” And they just said, “Well, she needs to work harder.” So they were actually not at all helpful....she accused me of being a “fussy parent”. And what she said was that my daughter was working to her level...to a D.” (p.49)

The interplay between race and ability in this vignette can be linked through the verbalization of low expectations of the student because that was the level the student was on without consideration of a possible underlying cause of low performance. The parent is exceedingly frustrated because she knows her child is putting forth quality effort but may need additional support.

The experiences of students with dis/abilities cannot be easily separated by the perceived or actual impact of any identity marker. Instead, it is the totality of the identities that create the experience. If we take the scenario from above and added the teacher’s knowledge of the dis/ability to the situation, tenet one would say that the teacher could blame low performance on either the dis/ability or the student’s race. The presence of both of these identities, from the deficit perspective that this parent believes the teacher holds, makes the achievement level of the students easier to justify. Through historical marginalization of these two identities either one is ripe for attributing low academic performance, or whichever identity garners the attribution, the other seeks to support as they are both seen with deficit. Other identities (i.e. gender, social class) may conflict and

push back against these deficit perspectives of race and ability, but the combination of these two identities has a major impact on experience and the perceptions of others.

Unfortunately, these are beliefs that are perpetuated by a system that has a significant overrepresentation of Black students in special education because they may behave outside of what has been set as the norms of education (Penuel, 2010). Even when dis/ability is a part of a person's experiences, beliefs about racialized behaviors can withhold the label (Gillborn, 2012). Gillborn (2012) points out the primacy of race. While I am heavily inclined to agree, it's a hard point to prove and is, in fact, unnecessary to prove, as dis/ability seems to impact perception regardless of race and race seems to impact perception regardless of dis/ability. There are, however, other personal characteristics and other intersections that trouble the ideas of this relationship. It is because of my orientation to this tenet that I will use intersectionality to explore the phenomenon further.

Tenet two: Intersections

Intersectionality addresses how multiple identities such as race, gender, class, dis/ability, sexual orientation, and other identities intersect to construct a multidimensional identity (Crenshaw, 1995). This tenet helps DisCrit theory remain open to the idea that while the combination of race and dis/ability have a confounding relationship that needs attention, other intersections such as gender, socioeconomic status, and religion may also impact how people experience marginalization (Connor, Ferri, Annamma, 2016). This tenet allows space for the collaborative efforts of other theories to further examine the phenomenon without contradicting the efforts of DisCrit.

Erevelles and Minear (2010) suggest three frameworks for examining intersectionality as it related to race and ability:

1. Anticategorical frameworks that insist on race, class, and gender, as social constructs/fictions
2. Intracategorical frameworks that critique merely additive approaches to differences as layered stigmas
3. Constitutive frameworks that describe the structural conditions within which social categories in the above models are constructed by (and intermeshed with) each other in specific historical contexts (p. 19)

The anticategorical framework operates in the post-positivist tradition as it requires an unlearning or the willingness to consciously reject everything one has learned previously about people, including ourselves. The elimination of categories forces us to recognize the individual attributes of people, but it would be challenging to generate potential ways to help various groups in the society that we have socially constructed. Instead, intracategorical frameworks critique work that approach intersections as additive rather than totalizing. The intracategorical framework supports the impossibility of pinpointing the impact of a particular identity but recognizes the values of compounding identities.

Constitutive frameworks seek to understand how each identity has played a role in the way the current identity is constructed. This is the framework most closely aligns with the original work of Crenshaw.

Tenet Three: Social Construction and Labels

The tenet undergirds the role of socially constructed labels. Socially constructed identities have certain significance and implications, both positive and negative, to those who accept (or reject) the identity. The identities which have been socially constructed are also seen as deviations from normative practices or ways of being. As a result, particularly in the case of dis/ability, it fosters segregation. That is, race is social construction enforced by skin color. Dis/ability is a social construction that is enforced largely by pseudo-scientific characteristics (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). In an educational setting, those with dis/abilities have been separated by both classroom and school setting, and as Beratan 2008; Kim, Losen, and Hewitt, 2010 point out, segregation by any other construction would be illegal in an educational context.

In an excerpt from Gillborn, et. al. (2016), a parent discusses how her son was cast as the problem after being bullied by students who called him a "Black monkey." The parent attempts to get help from school personnel, and at first, it seems as though they will take the matter seriously, but then the focus of fault shifts to the student who was the target of the name-calling. The parent reports this correspondence:

“And I had a stinker of a letter back from him essentially suggesting that my son was some sort of latent gangster ... that he talked to some of his peers, who said they found him an intimidating presence, all sorts of things! If you’d looked at his school reports for those 4 years, there’s never been any suggestion of bad behavior; in fact, most of the teachers say he’s a nice boy. That his peers found him an intimidating presence, that something about the rap culture, he talked about specifically about bling ...” (p. 53).

There is a clear suggestion that the culture that the student may or may not subscribe to somehow play a role in the way students respond to him. The identity of the student is socially constructed as deviant as it does not fit into the expectations of western norms. What follows seems to be an excuse for the treatment he received based on these problematic behaviors that appear to lean toward a description of what has been constructed as unacceptable or aggressive urban or African-American behavior, behavior that the parent reports had been undetected in the last four years. Once the student has been categorized, the power of the categorization overshadows injustices imposed.

People of color are often branded with deficit identity characteristics. Dis/ability also carries deficit characteristics. While labeling may have some benefit, including access and additional support, the negative effects seem to have a greater impact for many as they may be stigmatizing or lead to exclusion from the mainstream society (Gillman, Heyman, Stein, 2000).

Tenet Four: Privileged voices

Special education has long been studied using a medical framework, but the social, qualitative aspects are beginning to be more prevalent and are dismantling the traditional understandings of dis/ability (Connor, 2008).

The lived experiences of people with dis/abilities are often missing from conversations that include plans for potential interventions for them. When it comes to people of color who are also labeled as having a dis/ability, the narratives are far more difficult to find in literature (Connor 2008, Blanchett 2006). Lisa Delpit (1995) writes, "People are experts in their own lives" (p.47).

Books such as *Dilemma of a Dyslexic Man*, *Faking It: A look into the Mind of a Creative Learner*, *A little Edge of Darkness*, and *The Reality of Dyslexia* paint the life portrait of the people behind the dis/ability and journeys into what it is like to be told or to feel like you will not amount to much. In one book, *If I can Do it, So Can You: Triumph over Dyslexia*, written in 1999, the author describes his dis/ability, but the book is about how he was determined to be more than what his dis/ability was supposed to allow (Connor, 2008). Dis/ability has been cast as a problem even though the problem more accurately rests with the society, systems, and structures that continue to perpetuate barriers (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). To change the narrative of the problem of dis/ability, the voices of those with the experience must be heard.

Social justice cannot be attained if the voices for those with the first-hand experience are ignored. Most important to the work of putting the tenets of DisCrit to work are insights from people of color and with dis/abilities. Their first-hand experience should be held in the highest regard and not diminished by those outside of the community. Instead, solutions should be generated with the people in the community, if that is their desire; then those solutions should be implemented with their guidance.

In my work, voices of the experienced will be primary. The space of the privileged voices must first be established as the source from which decisions and reflections are based.

Tenet Five: Denying of Rights

King, Thorius and Tan (2016) discuss the historical context in which the denial of rights continues based on historical misconceptions and current laws that feed into the acceptance of those ideas. King, Thorium and Tan analyze the contributions to the

educational debt, a term coined by Ladson-Billings (2006), and the role race and ability play in its increase.

Historically, African-Americans were denied the right to an education based on the understanding that they were intellectually inferior. People with dis/abilities were once excluded from receiving an education based on the idea that their dis/ability was deviant (Artiles, 2013).

As a crossroad, Lloyd Dunn (1968) cautioned that the practice of placing the most vulnerable populations, poor, and minority students into segregated school settings. He urged policymakers and citizens to call for the halt of labeling “deprived” students and to stop segregating them into special education programs. He argued that it is, indeed, true that some students would need specialized learning experiences, but that students who learned at a slower pace should not be put in that category or be labeled as needing special education services as it further disadvantages them. That is, whether or not they needed a specialized education, minority students would likely be given one, and it would be of lower quality. The practice, with the aid of the federal law, IDEA (Individuals with Dis/abilities Education Act), continues today.

Individuals with Dis/abilities Education Act, rather than providing protection as intended, could be part of the reason that students of color are treated inequitably (Artiles, 2011). The measures used to label students with high incidence dis/abilities hold a large amount of subjectivity as does the granting of the use of the least restrictive environment (LRE) as a tool to guide placement in the school setting which could be separate from their peers without dis/abilities. Blanchett (2006) notes that the use of LRE based on subjective measures perpetuate White privilege and racism. While the provisions of LRE

are under the charge of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which included the parent input, parents are often disadvantaged in conversations about the special education process as they are often pressured into aligning their views with the recommendations of the school (Tomlinson 2012). This practice allows for unfair practices that could perpetuate exclusion.

Tenet Six: Interest convergence

This tenet points out society's proclivity to value whiteness and ability, highlighting that many structures or systems in society have been built in a way that also benefit those who are white and/or able. For example, while people in wheelchairs benefit from ramps and wider doors, people with strollers or any other wheeled apparatus also benefit from the availability of ramps.

Practices in education that are often put in place for one group often gain large support because they benefit those in power. Bagerli (2016) discusses how differentiation and Universal Design for Learning, elements of inclusive education, are two such mechanisms used.

The practice of differentiating instruction, once associated only with special education, however, is now widely recommended, along with the assertion of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a framework to seek equity for students with dis/abilities and others who may be excluded from regimented curriculum and instruction. It may not be a coincidence that differentiation and UDL have gained wider support as the audit culture of high-stakes testing is once again ratcheting up, perhaps threatening otherwise privileged children with being identified as 'at risk. (Bagerli, 2016, p. 184)

Steinberg and Kincheloe (2009) discuss the interest convergence of multicultural education. The author writes that multicultural practices were embraced because they "exoticize difference and positions it as necessary knowledge for those who would compete in the globalized economy" (p. 4).

In both cases, as DisCrit points out, a push toward these movements benefits White and abled privilege which is of concern. It produces a shallow implementation and understanding of the practices which, in turn, prevents the mobility of students of color and/or dis/abilities (Bagleri, 2016).

In relation to my work, I think about the ways in which the benefits or intended benefits are given to Black girls with dis/abilities also benefit the other students in the classrooms with them as well as ways in which the convergence subtracted from the learning of these students. For example, because of laws and provisions such as the Individuals with Dis/abilities Education Act (2005), there are additional funds available to help ensure that students with dis/abilities have the resources they need to be successful in the school setting. The resources used are often shared with, directly or indirectly, with students in the class who may not have a dis/ability. Prior to IDEA, inclusion was resisted because of the anxiety of having to share resources (Cole, 1998). Once it was understood as a capital benefit to other students, it became more acceptable. The practice seems exploitive. It is possible that it also feels exploitive to those from whom others benefit.

Tenet Seven: Activism

The seventh tenet pushes for action. The call to action is one of the most important aspects of any movement, and while DisCrit theory may not be a movement

itself, the ways in which we choose to use it to dismantle perceptions and ideas that perpetuate inequitable treatment can be. This tenet touts the importance of the insurance of just and fair systems. Tomlinson (2012) writes that no system can be just or fair if some groups are devalued, resources are distributed unequally, and there is a vested interest in maintaining current conditions.

Bagerli (2016) outlines three ways to resist aspects of education that continue to negatively impact students of color and/or with dis/abilities.

1. Resist the meritocratic practice of schooling and normative assessment structure. (p.186)
2. Reconceptualize curriculum as being in service to communities rather than in service to individuals or the economy. (p.187)
3. Support community-based control of the economies built up around dis/ability and disaster capitalism. (p. 188)

This call to action is a call to everyone, both those who identify with subjugation and those who do not. It is a reminder that only through action does change occur. “The oppressor never voluntarily gives freedom to the oppressed. You have to work for it...Freedom only comes through persistent revolt, through persistent agitation, through persistently rising up against the system of evil.” (King, 1957, n.p.).

Conclusion

These frameworks can be used for critical, emancipatory work with Black women with dis/abilities. As I consider my work with Black women with dis/abilities and examining their middle school experiences, I think about how better understanding the middle school experiences of Black women with dis/abilities can bring awareness to

people who work with in these communities so that they may become better allies and advocates. This work is also important to providing a counter-narrative to the one of deficit that is often present about Black girls with dis/abilities by challenging our ideas of what we have often held as Truth or absolute.

Crenshaw's work in defining intersectionality and utilizing intersectional frameworks when examining issues of justice was done to ensure that that the experiences of Black women and, in its evolution other subjugated identities, do not continue to be of secondary importance (Cooper, 2015). As such, my work will begin with an intersectional framework utilizing DisCrit as an accompaniment. DisCrit theory enhances this work as it gives specific attention and a critical framework for examining the intersection of dis/ability and race.

A frame of intersectionality allows for “different interpretations of the same facts” (Clarke and McCall 2013, p. 351) making room for Black women with dis/abilities to tell their stories, beginning with their own backdrop rather than the white, male, able backdrop from which their stories often begin.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE INQUIRY AND DUOETHNOGRAPHY

For this project, the goal is to bring to light the stories of the experiences of Black women who were served in special education under the label of specific learning dis/ability, understand the perceived impact on their lives thereafter, investigate the systems and structures that contributed to those experiences, and create a dialogue between teacher and former student that invites the student to help the teacher reflect critically on her practice. As such, the most useful method of achieving this aim is a study grounded in narrative inquiry with the accompaniment of duoethnographic data collection methods. Narrative inquiry allows me to examine social justice issues, create identity narratives, create representations of experiences, and the bring interests and people together (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry takes a specific interest in the stories and descriptions (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). It is a collaboration between the participants and the interviewer that focuses on the human, social, and cultural interactions (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) that tell the story of a person's lived experience that may enrich and transform themselves and others (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). It helps to reconstruct the experiences in relationship with the social contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The voices of people with dis/abilities are paramount to conveying their lived experiences accurately. However, their voices are often left out of conversations about

them, privileging the perspectives of "experts" (Gerber, 2006). By researching alongside people with dis/abilities, we can center their voices, offering a counter-narrative which might help to emancipate individuals with dis/abilities and decrease the marginalization that they are often subject to (Oliver & Barnes, 2006). Studying the storied lives of people with dis/abilities can help educators better understand their experience (Smith-Chandler & Swart, 2014).

Participants in a narrative inquiry communicate their stories related to the research. This part of the methodological design focuses heavily on the participants and their experiences and helps to ground the next element of the research. Strategies from duoethnography will be used to inquire about specific details in regard to the teacher and student interaction/relationship.

Duo-Ethnography

Duoethnography is a collaborative research methodology that positions the interviewee and interviewer as co-researchers working simultaneously to study a cultural phenomenon or shared event (Norris, Lund, 2012). Co-researchers are given the opportunity to construct their own counter-narrative in relationship with the interviewer me, a person who has a shared experience of the event. Each of us reflects on our own views of an experience and challenges the other researcher to think deeper and more reflexively about those experiences (Norris, Lund, 2012). Duoethnography is multidimensional in what it aims to achieve. As stated in Barber (1989), we can learn about ourselves from the other researcher in the study. Additionally, we are given the opportunity to explore our narratives against metanarratives and dominant narratives (Said, 1993).

In this study, as a former teacher of the co-researchers, I am a potential influencer of their experiences. Research with them provides me the opportunity to reflect on the implications of my own practice, the practices of others in middle school spaces, and overall structures of schooling that impact their experience. If other educators take up this sort of inquiry, their stories have the potential to affect the experiences of current and future Black girls.

This unique sampling of co-researchers is important because it presents the opportunity to collect information that can only be captured by the pairing of this researcher and these co-researchers, each remembering together and reflecting individually on their orientation to the shared experience. It is important to leverage the insights that only a partnership like this can provide. To do this, I will borrow duoethnographic data collection techniques.

The reporting of duoethnographic data is an invitation to the readers to enter the conversation, question their own stories, and think critically about the stories and positions of the researchers (Norris & Lund, 2012). Clandinin (2006, 2010) writes of the value duoethnography holds in helping researchers reconstruct their lives with another. Duoethnography provides a way for researchers to engage in the mutual reclamation of the meanings of their experiences (Norris & Lund, 2012). It is mutual in design and intended to be reciprocal in result as both researchers' voices, positions, experiences, and orientations are made clear.

Duoethnography does not seek a universal truth. Instead, it values and appreciates each researcher's perspective. This mitigates a possible tendency to highlight the narrative or metanarrative of any one author (Norris et al., 2012; Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

It accepts the idea of multiple truths by allowing us to learn more about ourselves through the stories of others. By reflecting on ourselves in partnership with others, we become more aware of ourselves and how we can create change (Wagaman & Sanchez, 2017).

Duoethnography is gaining a great deal of attention in the field of teacher education because the process for which teachers learn through duoethnography allows them to be transformed through the execution of the research itself. (Krammer & Mangiardi, 2012; Lund & Veinotte, 2010; Sawyer & Liggett, 2012).

Duoethnography helps teachers rethink perceptions related to curriculum, students, and praxis, a perception that Clandinin and Connelley (1988) say is rooted in our own lived experiences which shapes the ways we teach and interact with students (Higgins, Morton, et. al., 2018). It helps underscore the importance of practitioner-based research by gathering data that can only be effectively gathered by the practitioner. The relationships that we have with students are far more important than traditional research has examined or made concession to explore; yet, relationships are at the center of all practice, creativity, and change (Higgins, Morton, et al., 2018).

Duoethnography serves to help researchers examine their present practices by critically engaging in discourses that allow them to critically reflect on their personal histories and beliefs which may help them better understand their present orientations and actions. Duoethnography promotes praxis.

Duoethnographers are encouraged to develop their own style so as to allow duoethnography's dynamic positioning (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). As a matter of representation, duoethnographers often choose to present the data collected in script format rather than as a combined voice in order to retain the truth in voice and

perspectives of the respective researchers. This is done intentionally to highlight their different voices to underscore the various perspectives so that readers may be invited to question the dialog (Norris & Sawyer, 2012).

The use of duoethnography requires that the researchers (researcher/co-researcher) in the study have a shared experience. Duoethnographic methods are useful for this inquiry because it focuses the experiences of the researchers on the shared event of experiences from our different vantage points. To focus this discussion, I will use photo-elicitation methods to generate the conversations that will become the data to be analyzed.

As a classroom teacher for six years who now primarily works with students at the university level, I often think about the life paths that my former students have taken. Every once in a while, I will see posts of students from the school at which I taught, but even more rarely, I will see posts from students I actually taught. I have had on and off contact with one of the four contacts in this study, while I have only seen the others once or twice after they left my care as their eighth grade teacher.

Research Design

As I used co-researchers, I obtained approval from IRB for permission to conduct this study. To secure co-researchers, I contacted them via Facebook and asked them about their interest in participating in a research study. Once I confirmed possible interest, I sent them the consent form and scheduled our first meeting. Before beginning the first meeting, I discussed the consent form with each co-researcher and answered questions they had about the study. I made clear that they had the option to end their participation in the study at any time. I obtained their signature on the consent forms. In

order to maintain confidentiality, I asked that each co-researcher provide a pseudonym. Confidentiality will be carefully attended to by ensuring that co-researchers' names and other identity markers are concealed throughout the duration and after the study.

Sampling

I used criterion-based sampling to select the four co-researchers for this study. The sample of four co-researchers offers the opportunity for a variety of stories to be told while remaining true to the goal of narrative research which focuses on the individual without a demand for large samples. It is understood that these stories represent the stories of these co-researchers and may or may not be the narratives of others like them (Pinnegar & Daynes 2007). Creswell and Poth (2018) write that in narrative inquiry the sample size may be as small as one. Criterion-based sampling is the selection of co-researchers based on a particular set of criteria (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). The co-researchers for this study met the following criteria: Black, at least eighteen years of age, identified as a female during their middle school experience, served in special education under the label of learning dis/ability, attended the middle school in which that the primary researcher (me) taught between 2008-2013. The designation of the years 2008-2013 ensured that co-researchers were at least 18 years of age. Co-researchers included those who had graduated from high school at least six months prior to the interview.

These criteria were chosen because the focus of the inquiry is Black women who were served in special education under the label of learning dis/ability and the co-researchers are in the unique position to collaborate with me to co-construct perceived or

actual realities of our experience which is an important part of the duoethnographic elements of this study.

This unique sample of co-researchers is important because it presents the opportunity to collect information that can only be captured by the pairing of me with these co-researchers, each remembering together and reflecting individually on our orientation to the shared experience. It is important to leverage the insights that only a partnership like this can provide.

CO-RESEARCHER CHART			
CO-RESEARCHER	AGE	MIDDLE SCHOOL REFLECTION	CURRENT STATUS
Kara	19	• Shy • Few friends • Academic difficulty in math and reading	• Experiencing homelessness • Unemployed • Enrolled in school • Pregnant with first child
Tasha	19	• Confident • Lots of friends/acquaintances • Academic difficult in reading	• Lives with parents • Works as cashier • Trying to get into school • Has one child, raises 2 others
Bianca	20	• Very involved in school activities • Small group of friends • Academically average overall	• Experiencing homelessness • Unemployed • Hoping to get into school • No children
Rasheema	23	• Abrasive • Few friends • Academically average overall	• Experiencing homelessness • Various job statuses • Did not complete technical school • Raising her three children

Figure 1

Data Collection

Narrative inquiry allows for multiple ways of knowing, authentically (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, a variety of methods can be employed when conducting narrative research. I conducted two interviews with each co-researcher. The first interview was the semi-structured interview with the questions listed in Appendix A. The second interview was conducted using photo-elicitation. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews that inquired about middle school experiences of the co-researchers as well as about their lives after middle school. In the interviews about their middle school experiences, I asked specific questions related to their special education services, including questions about academic progress, social and emotional development, interactions, delivery of services, and unique occurrences. I asked how they believed those experiences did or did not impact their current life situations as well as encourage the meaning making of what these experiences meant to them in the grand scheme of their lives. I used data from the interviews to help address the research questions.

Interviews were recorded using handheld tape recorders. Prior to the interview, I asked the co-researchers for their permission to record the interview. I notified them that I would take written notes as they spoke. As they spoke, I briefly noted my thoughts so that I could return to the notes later to fully develop my thoughts around their answers to the questions after the interview. To conduct the interviews, I asked each co-researcher a list of questions. As they answered each question, I listened to the information provided and listened for natural entry points to glean follow-up information. My questions

remained close to what was outlined in the protocol, overall. The interviews were conducted at the local library in private rooms.

Semi-structured interviews allow space for the researcher to focus on the co-researcher's narrative as it develops throughout the conversation. It gives the researcher license to dive deeper into particular points of interest and areas in need of clarity that are revealed by the co-researchers (Galletta, 2013). This style of interviewing is important and most beneficial for this study because the meaning that co-researchers give to the focus of the study can be most accurately captured in the moment with good follow-up questions developed by me during the course of the interview.

Photo-elicitation

I used photo-elicitation to foster the conversations and co-construct the memories of the co-researchers and me. Barthes (1967) as cited in (Dockett, Einarsdottir, Perry, 2017) notes that, "Photographs can provide a shared focus for discussion, as well as an anchor" (p. 227).

Photo-elicitation methodology asks both the researchers to comment on images presented. The photos potentially open the door to information, feelings, memories, reflections, clarifications, interpretations and reinterpretations (Harper, 2002). We are not only asked about our perceptions of images, but we are also asked to discuss the meaning and value that the images hold for us (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). It positions the researcher and co-researcher as the expert (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Rose, 2016).

Photo-elicitation is also useful in creating a more relaxed research environment as the co-researchers are familiar and connected to the visuals presented. It is an excellent catalyst for bridging understanding between us and providing details of the individual

realities and reflections that we bring (Pink, 2007). Additionally, it expands the conversation to include discussions that the research design may have overlooked. Photo-elicitation opens up dynamic ways to participate in the research process (Guillemin & Drew, 2010).

The photo-elicitation was based on the school yearbook from the eighth grade year of each co-researcher. It is a neutral artifact, not created by nor in consultation with either researcher. This artifact was also chosen as a focal point of the research because the memories generated from the abundance of images located in the yearbook can produce extensive, rich data of both positive and negative experiences with attention to the variety of experiences that occurred in the middle school (interactions with students, teachers, administrators, orientation to auxiliary activities and sports, participation in classroom events and experiences, etc.) that both of us experienced simultaneously.

To conduct the photo-elicitation, I gathered the yearbook from the eighth grade year of each co-researcher. I owned two of the three yearbooks used, and I requested the other yearbook from the school. It was their only copy. I was reminded of this three times before being allowed to borrow it. Together with each co-researcher, we went through each page of the yearbook and discussed the images, events, and people we came across. We skipped images that did not seem relevant to us. For example, we skipped the sixth and seventh grade class pictures. Two images we were sure to include was their yearbook picture and my yearbook picture. These images were included to give the co-researcher and the researcher explicit time to reflect on the person they see in the image together. One hour was sufficient for this line of inquiry.

To help guide the conversations around the images, I used the questions that are outlined in Appendix C. I attempted to use these questions to guide the conversation as well as to keep the conversations as focused on the research topic set forth. However, my co-researchers often had their own ideas about what they wanted to talk about and what kinds of questions they wanted to ask and answer. Because there are shared power dynamics in this part of the research methodology, I allowed their insights and directions into the conversation. During this conversation, the co-researcher and I provided input to recall memories and make meaning of the images at hand. In addition to having the conversations recorded via handheld recorder, I took field notes about what I noticed about the researcher and co-researcher interaction. While I invited the co-researcher to do the same, none of them took advantage of the opportunity. Because much of the portion of the data collection was about open and honest reflection, many of my reactions and the reactions of the co-researcher were recorded via tape recorder.

Trustworthiness

The unique pairing of these co-researchers and me lends itself to the opportunity to generate data that could not otherwise be generated. Although a relationship between the co-researchers and me can be a point of caution, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) report that when they built relationships in a school community they were studying, they were able to gather richer data.

Clandinin and Connelly (1988) write:

Collaborative research constitutes a relationship. In everyday life, the idea of friendship implies a sharing, an interpretation of two or more person's spheres of experience. Mere contact is acquaintanceship, not friendship. The same may be

said of collaborative research which requires a close relationship akin to friendship. Relationships are joined, as McIntyre implies, by the narrative unities of our lives (p. 281).

A solid relationship between the co-researchers and the main researcher can be beneficial. As stated in Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007), relationships are a valuable part of narrative inquiry. It is also essential for duoethnography (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). The co-researchers and I have known each other for a long period of time, long enough to build a relationship of trust to encourage more open story-telling which is imperative to quality narrative work (Hollingsworth, et. al., 1993).

In their 2006 work, Craig and Huber detail how their experiences with teachers rested on the relationships they had. They note from one teacher with whom Huber already had a relationship that it might be difficult for some of the teachers to trust the researchers because "We [Black people] have to be suspicious of everyone" (p. 261). This is a sentiment also echoed in the work of Lisa Delpit (1988). Delpit notes that there is often mistrust between Black people and researchers because their stories are not told as they see them or because Black people are skeptical of the motives of the researcher, an outsider (Delpit, 1988).

It cannot be denied that it is possible that co-researchers may withhold information from me due to a desire to protect my feelings or to protect the relationship overall. However, those power dynamics manifested in unique ways throughout the interview. There were clearly times when the co-researchers took the lead and guided the conversation in ways they thought were most meaningful. There were times that I

recognized that I was guiding the conversation a little too much, so I pulled back. More issues related to staying true to the methodology are noted later in this chapter.

I did member-checking with all co-researchers by asking them to review the findings to ensure that the information has been accurately captured (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Huberman & Miles, 1984). At that time, I also asked them for the updates on their lives.

It was important for me to be reflexive in conducting this research to be fully transparent to the reader, especially as it related to my perceptions of the co-researchers' willingness to be forthcoming. The practice of reflexivity allows researchers to discuss their values, assumptions and reactions in relation to the experiences of the co-researchers. By carefully attending to my reflexivity, I can clearly convey to the audience my own beliefs as well as clarify my understanding of why something is happening. My background and own experiences play a role in the way I approach inquiry, and reflexivity throughout the process aids in helping the readers make sense of the outcomes (Fook & Gardner, 2007).

Research Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, the researcher looks across multiple stories to develop themes, or similar ideas or concepts that reoccur. Thematic representation brings together the major concepts of the stories of individuals which helps in potentially understanding a phenomenon even if the contexts shift (Reissman, 2008). I looked for themes across the interviews with the goal of accurately representing the collective experiences of the co-researchers while remaining attentive to their individual experience. That is, where themes were present, I made the

trend clear. Where themes were not present or were only present in the narrative of a singular co-researcher, I presented the data as a unique occurrence.

Interviews were transcribed using an outside transcription agency. I imported the transcriptions into Nvivo, a data management system. I used the data management software to investigate data in the following ways:

1. Identifying themes across the interviews of the co-researchers individually.
2. Identifying themes across co-researchers in each type of interview--I looked at the themes across all of the semi-structured interviews; then I looked at themes across all of the photo-elicitations.

Themes were first coded by alignment to the respective tenets used in the study, Intersectionality and DisCrit. This was done for the narrative inquiry and the photo elicitation separately. Then coded data from the narrative inquiry was brought together to create one seamless narrative to create a portrait of the co-researcher. In the tradition of duoethnography, each identified theme in the photo-elicitation retained its script presentation and is superseded by follow-up discussions and insights. Within each analysis, other important data will be noted even if a theme does not appear to be present. Glaser (1992) writes that even if a point is mentioned only one time, if it is related to the research questions, it should be reported.

As themes were investigated and organized with the use of NVivo, I used memoing to capture ideas that I had about each. Memo writing was essential to helping me think through the data and capture my ideas as I reviewed the data corpus. It helped to organize thoughts, served as reminders, and assisted in making connections to other ideas.

Charmaz (2006) reminds us that memo writing is the precursory step before writing which allows researchers to examine emerging themes. Saldana (2015) also offers a guide to memo writing. He notes the value in memo writing through the citation of Birks, Chapman, Francis (2008) mnemonic: M- mapping research, E- extracting meaning from the data, M- maintaining momentum, and O- opening communication (p.50). Memo writing offers an additional opportunity for the researcher to be reflexive not only in the process of review the transcriptions, but also in the process of elaborating on the rationale for particular choices made in the identification of themes. Memoing allows for additional transparency on the part of the researcher.

Methodological Challenges

There were a number of methodological challenges that were essential to consider before embarking on this research and there were a few that I had not considered that arrived in the moment. Those challenges included:

1. **Threat of breaching confidentiality-** There were times when another student would come up in the conversation, and I had insights on the students that the co-researcher did not have. I wanted to give my full reflections on that student or a given situation, but I could not because I did not want to risk breaching the confidentiality of the other student.

Solution: I did not breach the confidentiality of any student. In the write-up of the conversation, I do mention the insights I had about the student, but I am now concerned that while the larger audiences will not be privy to the information on who that student was, my co-researchers will be.

2. **Saying too much, even if it does not breach confidentiality-** I had to decide how much I said or did not say about other students, even information that did not breach confidentiality. The reality is that these students, including the co-researchers, are still connected, especially with social media holding such a large presence in their lives. Any of my co-researchers could easily go back to their circles and tell other people what I said about certain students.

Solution: This was handled on a case by case basis depending on the co-researcher, the sensitivity of the information, and the possibility for it to do harm.

3. **A lack of push back from co-researchers-** There were times when my co-researchers defaulted to my ideas rather than asking me more questions and challenging my ideas. I think it was difficult for some of them to move into the role of equal researchers as our relationship was built on my being the guide. It is interesting to reflect on this idea because as an educator you hope that your students become the teacher and you believe that you are equal learners in the process of learning, but is that truly possible? What conditions make that possible?

Solution: When my co-researchers seemed to be holding back, I would ask them what they thought or if they had any questions about what I thought or why I thought it. I would then try not to start the conversation for a few of the pictures in order to give them a chance to take the lead. These techniques worked well-overall.

4. **Keeping the photo elicitation interview focused-** From time to time, my co-researchers would get sidetracked by the images and life stories of the people they were seeing in the pictures in the yearbook. The stories would not be on the topic of how those people influenced their lives or their experiences. More often, the sidetracked

conversations were about who is working at the strip club, who had children, and who was in or headed to jail. The problem is that I often got sucked into the story! I wanted to know the other details that she had about the people she was describing.

Solution: I allowed it at times! There were other times that I would refer to the questions to get the conversation back on track. I did this to foster relationship building and to allow my co-researchers some room to guide the conversation.

5. **Disclosing the researcher's identity-** While being the researcher, it is difficult to write about yourself in your research because your life is tied to the lives of so many other people. If certain people read this narrative, they could probably guess who I was referring in various situations throughout the chapters. It made me apprehensive about the full disclosure of details in some relationships.

Solution: All names and duties of particular people have been changed in an effort to increase confidentiality. In some cases, the descriptive information for particular personnel has been completely removed. I believe the point of that person's influence was still made without those additional details.

Notes of the Reader

One goal of this research was to hold true to the duo-ethnographic principles of ensuring that all researchers have an equal voice in all aspects of the research study, especially as it relates to data collection, data analysis, and the presentation of findings. In the qualitative tradition of full transparency, I must point out that my co-researchers played an equal role in data collection and part of the data analysis and presentation of findings. That is, I selected what parts of the duo-ethnographic data would be presented. My co-researchers reviewed that information as I presented it and agreed with what was

written, but they did not have initial input on selecting what would be included. They were, however, privy to all of the data they collected.

The decision to choose the parts of the data that would be included without input from my co-researchers was made in an effort to ensure that the research questions that were posed in the research design would be answered.

In the interest of full transparency in research, it is important that readers have a clear understanding of my relationship with each of my co-researchers. As such, each chapter begins with the background of our relationship.

CHAPTER 4

KARA

I taught Kara during my fourth year of teaching, in my small-group language arts class. I was also her special education case manager. Kara seemed shy and nervous, but she consistently carried a spirit of joy with her. She spent a lot of time with Tasha who often hung out with me, so we were able to establish a solid relationship that helped me get to know more about Kara outside of the classroom. Tasha would frequently hint to me that there was something going on with Kara outside of school. Sometimes she would just come right out and say: Kara is having some trouble at home.

I talked to Kara one-on-one from time to time to see if there was something that I could and/or should help with. I soon found out that there was. Kara had been house hopping from family and friends, but was currently living in her car with her mother and brother. It was near the holidays, and I knew that holiday presents would not be a reality for her. Beyond that, having a place to stay for the holidays would not be a reality for her, either. My husband and I, along with the support of our community, were able to pull together enough resources to rent a hotel for her family for the week. We also purchased Kara a few necessary clothing items for the winter.

After that, trust was established, and Kara regularly confided in me about what was happening in her life outside of school. I attempted to build a relationship with her mother so that I could offer supports, but there were times that I felt a little uncomfortable about providing supports as it seemed that it was becoming a more regular

and expected occurrence. Kara would sometimes tip me off of plans for her mother to ask for things even when she could probably get them herself, putting me in a difficult situation. Through it all, Kara's spirit of joy persisted. I trusted Kara, and she trusted me. That dynamic remains.

After Kara left eighth grade, I did not see her again, but her story had stayed with me. I found Kara through social media; she was not difficult to find and like the others, we comfortably picked up right where we had left off.

“Why am I like this?”

I started at Top Crest Middle when I was in 6th grade. It was awful, to say the least. I had just moved from Atlanta. I was born there.

We moved here so that my mom could be with my step-dad, but once we got here they weren't really getting along. My mom would always be at work. Nobody would be home. We'd be there with him. I wasn't used to the country stuff. We were living in trailers and I'm like, "What is this?" I just wasn't comfortable. Not long after that, Mom quit her job at Whitfield Poultry, (a nearby chicken factory) because she had gotten sick out there. She really didn't find another job so she started drinking and all that.

That was hard to deal with. She'd come home fussing and arguing. My brother and she would get into it often. One time, my brother got locked up after one of their disagreements. It was a lot. It was always a lot. Then I had to wake up the next morning go to school with everything that happened the night before on my mind. I could not focus on school. All I could think about was, “Is my brother going to get out? Is mom okay? Then when I get home, am I going to have to deal with this again?” Like I said it was a lot, constantly.

My mom didn't really come up to the school when I would have events and stuff. If there were meetings, you know for like my IEP, she would come. That's about it, but anything else, it was just--she wasn't really open to the school stuff I guess.

She didn't really help me with my homework or anything like that. I would always ask, but she would be like, "I don't know this," or "I'm busy." Then I'd go to my brother and ask, "Can you help me with my homework?" He would say, "Kara that has been so

long ago. I'm in high school now. I don't know nothing about that." So, I had to figure it out on my own. I did not always figure it out. I just had a hard time with some of that stuff. It was just tough all round. There's like things going on at home and I had to do all of this school work. I remember thinking, "Man. It's just hard. Everything is just hard."

At school, I used to look rough. Yes, I used to look BAD, but I've grown up now. I used to have thick eyebrows and a unibrow! That's one of the reasons I used to get picked on. I used to come home and tell my momma that people were picking on me about my unibrow. It used to make me so mad!

Kids also used to pick on me because I was new to the area. You know how people are when you're new to the area. They don't really know how to interact with you, so they don't. I didn't know anybody, and nobody really liked me at first. I would keep to myself. It didn't take too long to make friends though. It was probably in the middle of my sixth-grade year when people started to come and talk to me. I started getting a little more comfortable then. I used to think, "Okay, I got one and two friends here." It took me a while to get used to get used to living in the country. The kids were different, and the school was kind of different, but that's because of the kids, I guess. Middle school, overall, was okay for me. It wasn't all that fun because I used to get picked on a lot, but seventh and eighth grade were much better than sixth as far as making new friends.

I knew I had a dis/ability early in life, definitely before I got to middle school. When I was in elementary school in Atlanta, I would have special services. I had extra teachers helping me. That's when I realized I was like, "Something's not right." I would try to tell my mom about it, but she would just say, "You are all right." She didn't seem to think that it was a problem that I would read and write backwards, but I knew that

something was wrong. My teachers would teach me how to read and write the correct way. My mom never told me I had a dis/ability, but I feel like she always knew. As I got older, I figured out that I might have a dis/ability that was keeping me from learning like everybody else. I'm glad she didn't tell me about my dis/ability. I think that if she had, I would have gotten angry and given up earlier in life. But having to figure it out for myself gave me a chance to really think about what it means to have a dis/ability and think about how it affects me. So instead of getting mad and asking, "Why am I like this?" it was more like, "Ummm...this is something I need to figure out more about."

It was rough having a dis/ability. I took classes in the big group and in the small group. I was in the small group for reading and math. Those were the subjects I struggled most with, but I was more comfortable in those classes. Sometimes in my big classes, everybody else in the class would get whatever the teacher was teaching. Me? I'd be looking at the paper or looking at the board and I really didn't know what was going on. I didn't know what they were teaching, what I was supposed to be learning, or what we were supposed to be doing. That happened about half the time. I would often say to my teachers, "Can you teach it again? Can you go over it again?" because it just took me a long time to grasp information. I especially hated when teachers would be like, "Oh Kara, do this on the board," this and that. I didn't know how to do *this*. I wouldn't want to get up and embarrass myself. Sometimes the teacher would have us read aloud. The teachers would say, "Kara, read this." I'd look dead at the paper and I'm like, "Well, that's one word I don't know. I don't know that word. I don't know that word. Hmm...I don't know that word either." I would never really want to read out loud but they would be like, "Try it." I'd try it and I'd mess up a word. Students would laugh and I would think, "I don't

want to read anymore." The teacher would want me to keep going, but I wouldn't. I just did not want to be embarrassed anymore.

Sometimes I felt like maybe some of the teachers were kind of aggravated by having to give me extra help. I don't know. That's how I felt sometimes. They would seem like they really didn't want to read things to me more than once or they would act like it was too much work to have to explain things to me or have me redo assignments. I know they were getting aggravated, but so was I. It was not fun to have to ask for help when it seemed like everyone else understood. I hated that I had to ask because I knew it was frustrating for them, so sometimes I didn't.

Of course I also had teachers that would say, "You can do this," taking their time with me. Sometimes I'd stay after school, and they'd help me.

My seventh-grade year was really difficult. I was so concerned about passing and going to eighth grade. The work was really hard for me. It was a rough patch all around. The work was hard and the kids were pretty mean.

Some kids used to pick on me because I used to get pulled out of certain classes. In history and science, some of us would get pulled out for tests to be read aloud to us. The other students would say things like, "Why they getting pulled out?" or, "Y'all got to get it read to y'all." I think most students probably knew I had trouble with reading and other school things.

I would get rejected by peers from time to time when I would try to ask for help. I'd be struggling and say, "Man, help me with this." And sometimes people would help, but most times they would say something like, "I can't help you," or "You got to do that on your own." For the most part, it was embarrassing, but some students were like, "Let's

go with them. I want to go out the classroom since they're going." They thought it was cool, I guess, because we were leaving out the classroom.

Sometimes it was difficult to be in school around other kids and see how happy and successful they seemed. I always looked around and I saw some kids that were less unfortunate and some kids that had everything. They had cars; they had all the right clothes; they were in all of the afterschool activities. They had what they had because they had things handed to them. They had good parents who were lawyers, doctors, teachers, and all that.

Some kids really had to work for their stuff day and night. This is what I had to do, and that's what I still have to do. I never got anything handed to me. Everything I had to do, I had to work for it. Nothing came easily or quickly for me like it did for other kids. My mama didn't even have a job. I just had to make the best of it. Got stuff handed down for me as far as clothes and all that. I used to look at the girls and think, "Oh, they got their nails done, they got their hair done. I wish I could have all of it." I wish I was farther than where I am now, but it takes time. You've got to be patient. I'm just being patient, taking my time.

My favorite memories about middle school were the dances. We just used to have time to socialize and dance and listen to music. Sometimes the music would get a little too crazy, and a teacher would have to tell the DJ to play something that was a little...well...I don't know. I just remember that one time, they played "Lick it like a lollipop", and that song was not about candy, so, they made the DJ change it.

As for my favorite memories about time in the classroom, I remember two projects that we did that I really liked. We had to build a cell membrane. People did it with cakes

or blocks or other things. That was fun. The other classroom activity that I remember enjoying was the Wax Museum. We dressed up as famous people and then we stood really still. People would come by and press out button and we would give a speech about that person. That was fun. It was fun because we got to do something outside of the classroom and everyone from around the school came to watch us.

Throughout eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade, we really didn't have a stable place to live. When I got home from school, I had to worry about mama having to find somewhere to stay. This was like every day. We never knew where we would stay from day to day. My ninth and tenth grade years, those were the roughest because of our living situation. We really did not have anywhere to stay at that point. We would just move from hotel to hotel, or we moved back to Atlanta to stay with a family member for about a month, then we would move back down here. When I would get home, I would often say, "Do we have to move again?" Sometimes we just did not have anywhere else to stay, so we would just stay in our car. That made going to school really difficult.

Not having anywhere to stay was tough enough but having to move between here and Atlanta was really rough, schoolwise. In the middle of ninth-grade year, I moved back to Atlanta. When I got back to Hillsboro, I was so far behind, I had to do a credit recovery course. In fact, I had to do a few. Sometimes it was difficult for me to really understand some subjects. When the teacher taught it to me, it wouldn't click. I wouldn't understand it. But when it was on the computer, I could understand it more.

Then my senior year came, we finally had people to help us out to get us an apartment where we stay at now. It got better.

Since I've graduated from high school, I don't talk about my dis/ability. I don't ever tell my potential employers that I have a dis/ability because they might think or say, "Well, this might not be the for you, or, "You can't do this job". I just don't tell them because I don't want them to doubt me. You can't never doubt anybody. I want them to at least let me try. Plus, it's embarrassing to tell people about your dis/ability.

Even though I don't really talk about it, having a dis/ability still affects me. There's certain stuff I still don't know but I try to learn or teach myself. Take money for example. Money is a topic that I didn't know much about. I didn't really know how to count it correctly for a really, really long time. Now that as I got older, I know how to count and work with money.

Reading is still kind of hard. I don't really try to show it as much. I know some stuff and what it means, and what it is. But sometimes I have to ask someone else what certain words mean. I often say, "What's this word?" or, "How do you spell this word?" It still affects me now but not as much as it did when I was in middle school and stuff.

Right now, I'm looking for another job. I was working in a warehouse in Looke. It was a really good warehouse. It's about forty minutes from here. I worked there for three days. Yes. Three days. The check from was good for three days. I made like \$260 in three days. Imagine if I was working the whole week! I was making \$11 an hour. But me friend who used to drive us down there stopped wanting to drive all the way out there, so all three of us just stopped going. That was great while it lasted.

Now, I'm really trying. People keep telling me that I need to start looking for a job in Statesboro instead of somewhere far, somewhere I can walk, but I'm not trying to

walk. I'm not trying to walk because Statesboro has gotten kind of crazy. There are gangs and all kinds of stuff out here. It is not like it was when you were here.

You know, I do not think that middle school itself had a major impact on who I am today. I think that life and all that happened to me outside of school has impacted me most. It was really just life that just made me who I am today. Life is tough. At a young age, I've seen a lot and just. I've been through a lot.

If I have to bring a child into the world today I wouldn't want to put my kids in those types of situations at all. I'll make it better for them so they won't have to go through what I went through.

Kara and Me: Remembering Together

When Kara and I sat together over an open yearbook from her 8th grade year, we dove right into the duoethnographic conversation. What follows are our reflections and an analysis of those reflections. It is important for readers to further critically analyze not just what is provided in the larger portions of this transcript, but also what is *not* being said to fully understand the depth of the experience.

Teachers

One of the first pages that she was interested in discussing was the page that had pictures of all the teachers.

Kara: I don't know. I just remember a lot of these people: Ms. Gray, Mr. Poland. I remember her, but I forget her name. It started with a C.

Jemelleh: Childs.

Kara: I remember her.

Jemelleh: I just went back today to pick up that other book, and I saw a lot of these people. It's crazy to see all of them because I know a lot of us have moved on from Top Crest, but there's still a lot in there.

Kara: Coach Ocean

Jemelleh: Oh Lord. [laughs]

Kara: And then Mr. Mincey. He at the high school now.

Jemelleh: No, he's here. He was there.

Kara: Oh! Mr. Poland. Yes, that's the one. That's at the high school.

Jemelleh: Yes, he went to the high school. I haven't talk to him in a long time.

Kara: I remember Ms. Pepper. That was her name.

Jemelleh: She's the bookkeeper. Used to do attendance.

Kara: I remember her.

Kara recalled a great deal of the people from her years at LCMS. Her recalling them by name prompted me to think more about my interactions with them as a colleague and my perceived interactions with the students they had. The colleagues that she pointed out were ones that I remember fondly. They showed a dedication to students and their goals. The inflections and tone that Kara used as she recalled them indicated that she believed the same to be true.

As Kara recalled what she knew about each staff and faculty member she came across, I stopped when we got to one in particular. She was a special education teacher who I was less than fond of and wondered if Kara had had any notable experiences with her.

Kara: And who else? Ms. Shuman

Jemelleh: Yes. That's right. When I stare at this picture I see a faculty and staff that for the most part cared about kids, and they really like their job. They are some of them that I know personally, and they stand out to me as racist. That just bothers me to think about how harmful that is to kids. I think they're racist, but there are those racists that don't know they're racist?

I brought up racism when I talked about this specific teacher. She was racist, and I'm not sure she recognized it. She would say things like, "Well, you know his dad is black, so that might explain some of his behavior issues." The strangest part was that she would say it to me! It is one thing for people to make racially charged disparaging remarks to people who they might think share those values, but I would think that it wouldn't be assumed that I would not share those sorts of beliefs. I truly believe that she did not recognize those comments as racist, which makes her being around any child, especially those of color, extremely dangerous.

A Special Occasion

In 2013, I was named Teacher of the Year for the district, and the yearbook displayed pictures of the surprise announcement. Kara had been present when the guests came into my classroom to present the award. We talked about students that were in the pictures, the learning activities that took place that day, and the presentation itself.

Kara: This is Jason.

Jemelleh: It sure was Jason.

Kara: That's crazy you remembered it. And then Deion. Then that's that Mexican boy. I remember him too.

Jemelleh: What do remember about this time period? What's happening here was when I was announced Teacher of the Year? What was like that for you? Do you remember what you were thinking? What you were feeling?

Kara: Right. We was in class when they came and did it. It was-- I don't know. It was a good feeling that our teacher was getting Teacher of the Year.

Jemelleh: I remember that day, and I remember that day because we were reading a book. In this picture, I was six months pregnant or something.

Kara: Yes, you were.

Jemelleh: I was.

Kara: I forgot.

Jemelleh: Nobody knew because I was hiding it at the time because I didn't want to not get picked for Teacher of the Year. The day that they made me Teacher of the Year, I was teaching in class, and we were learning about-- Do you remember the movie? It's about a surfer girl that lost her arm?

Kara: Yes, *Soul Surfer*.

Jemelleh: *Soul Surfer*.

Kara: I remember that.

Jemelleh: We were reading *Soul Surfer*, and I made copies of parts of the book rather than buy the book because it was too expensive! Just so you know, you're not supposed to do that. They walk into this room, and y'all got all these illegal material [laughs].

Kara: Oh my God.

Jemelleh: I'm like, "Oh my gosh. Thank you. Y'all put away your stuff." All those people that were there. I remember that this picture was actually staged. We weren't doing anything.

Kara: We wasn't. You told us, "Act like we're doing something."

I shared with her that at the time of the presentation, I was hiding a pregnancy for fear of being disqualified from the running. As I reflect on that decision, I am not sure that I needed to do that, but if I could go back, I would do it the same way. There is a stigma that comes with motherhood that suggests that mothers are less capable of career success than non-mothers because of the added duties. I did not want that perception to impede my possible winning of the award. If I had to do it over again, I would make the same decision. I also told Kara about the copyright laws that were being broken. I remember it so vividly because my heart skipped a beat when the awardees came in. Likely, they didn't seem to notice the contraband. I asked Kara about her feelings of me being named Teacher of the Year. I asked because I worry about breaking the confidentiality of the type of services I provided as a teacher. That is, as the teacher of the year, people know the kind of work you do. For me, that was both special education and general education, but mostly special education. I worried that if people found out who my students were, they would know that they received special education services and marginalize them because of that. This is discussed more in the next chapter.

This conversation opened the door to be able to talk about the experiences of being in the small group setting.

Special Education: Setting

Jemelleh: What was it like for you being in that class?

Kara: It was fun. It was real fun, comfortable. It was just a good environment.

That classroom was a good environment. You can always come in and be happy because you know what you're going to come in and do something good in class.

It wasn't nothing boring, just fun.

Jemelleh: I liked that class a lot.

Kara: I had all my friends in there.

Jemelleh: Yes. I think that's why I liked that class so much. I think the class before that for me that year had all boys. It was twelve boys in a class. I was like, "It's got to be illegal for it to be twelve boys with various learning needs." When y'all would come in, it would be like—(sigh of relief)

Kara: Yes, girls.

Jemelleh: Exactly [laughs]. Y'all were much calmer.

When Kara talked about the class in which I was her teacher, I was glad to hear that she felt comfortable in that space. I was glad to hear that she had fun in the class. Her thoughts seemed to be genuine and not coaxed by the fact that I was conducting the interview, but I did wonder for a moment about how our dynamic influenced her answers specifically related to the class. Her reflection also prompted me to reflect on the class period before hers, a class with twelve boys with a variety of needs. It was one of the best and worst classes I've ever taught. It was the best because it was awesome to watch the boys grow together while negotiating power in the classroom. It was the worst because they always had an overwhelming and immense amount of energy that I had to be ready for every single day. She did not mention that it was uncomfortable for people to know

that she was in that class, and I didn't ask. I think I was just glad that the memories she shared were positive.

We also talked about one of the most memorable students in that classroom setting.

Special Education: Classmates

Jemelleh (pointing to a picture of one student): --he had a lot of energy. [laughs]

Kara: Yes, so much. Couldn't stay still for nothing.

Jemelleh: I will say sometimes I felt like I had to give him so much attention. I couldn't really focus on teaching--

Kara: You used to have him sit right there by you. I remember that.

Jemelleh: Do you ever feel like I had to give him, and you can be honest, I gave him too much attention, so that y'all didn't get what you needed? Did you ever feel like you didn't get what you needed because of--?

Kara: No. I feel like you gave everybody enough attention. It was equal.

Sometimes he might have gotten a little bit more than us, but it was, you know, we all got what we needed.

Jemelleh: You think that everybody got a fair amount of attention.

Kara: Yes.

In a small group class, individualized attention is one of the goals of the setting. As written in the next chapter, I worried about the attention I gave Jackson and how that was perceived by other students. Kara thought that Jackson might have gotten more attention, and she seemed to understand why. She was also sure to mention that everyone received the attention they needed in order to be successful. Her perception is a slight

deviation from Tasha's (next chapter), who was also in this class, but reassuring for me as an educator because it seems that Kara understood that fair is not always equal, which allows me to be able to do my job without that constant pressure of feeling like I need to provide equal time, resources, etc.

Special Education: Teachers and Paraprofessionals

After our conversations about class spaces, specifically the small group setting, we talked more about the people who were in charge of those spaces.

Kara: Yes, some of these teachers I felt like they was like, "No, she can't do it."

Jemelleh: Which ones? You remember any of them?

Kara: I remember-- Let me see where she is. Sometimes Ms. Shuman, it seemed like she used to get frustrated. I think that was really just Ms. Shuman. Everybody else was okay.

Kara internalized message of doubt from some of her teachers. She named Ms. Shuman specifically, but I wonder if that is because I had already expressed my apprehensions about her or if she truly remembered the ways in which Ms. Shuman was problematic. Either way, the claim is 100% believable. She did not say that she had actually heard anyone say that they didn't believe that she couldn't do something, but their demeanor reflected an attitude of frustration that seemed directed toward her inability to understand a concept. While Kara did not indicate that I ever made her feel that way, it made me consider times that I may have gotten frustrated, making my students perceive my frustration and potentially question my belief in their abilities.

We moved on to discuss the paraprofessionals who helped provide special education services.

Kara: I remember Ms. Golden. She was the one that used to take us out-- would take our tests and stuff.

Jemelleh: Okay, I think Ms. Golden was great, and I love her to death. Do you think that she ever gave you the answers?

Kara: Yes.

Jemelleh: Yes? I knew it.

Kara: She did. When it says it have A, B, C and D, she would be like, "Take out C, and take out D", and then we only got two choices. Then we know--

Jemelleh: That don't sound right.

Kara: So it's this one. Sometimes she used to give us the answers. I just didn't tell nobody. I'm like—

Jemelleh: Were you okay with that?

Kara: I was okay because I'm like, "I need that passing grade".

Kara is one of the three participants to directly reference getting answers for a test or assignment from a teacher or paraprofessional. Not only that, but she references it in a positive light, thankful almost. I wonder for a moment whether this is a good or bad thing and then I rethink, "Why does it matter at all?" Additional thoughts and full discussion can be found in the duoethnographic portions of subsequent chapters and in the final chapter.

School Involvement

As we moved through the yearbook, we transitioned our attention to the activities that took place in school.

Jemelleh: You remember these? What are these pictures? These are Spirit Days.

Did you ever participate in Spirit Days?

Kara: Tacky day.

Jemelleh: Yes, Tacky Day and Twin Day.

Kara: I think I did.

Jemelleh: You did?

Kara: I think so. I want to say I did. I don't know. I think I participated in Tacky Day. But Twin Day, no. I didn't do that.

Jemelleh: Why didn't you participate in Twin Day?

Kara: I ain't really had no--

Jemelleh: Didn't have a friend to twin with?

Kara: No, actually I did participate. I used to participate in all the all days.

Jemelleh: Yes. Look at you. I used to participate in all the days. I don't know why, I just think --

For some reason I recalled Kara being less active in school activities. That perception could have come from a variety of places including the fact that I knew she was not a part of the most well-known group of students in school. I somehow made the assumption that that meant she didn't participate in activities, a huge, wrong leap from the truth. Apparently, Kara had participated in almost all the spirit day activities, indicating that she felt a connection with her school community. As a teacher, I would also participate in school activities. I did it for two reasons: 1) They were usually fun and gave me a reason to dress up or do something outside of the norm and 2) I wanted to encourage students to also participate in hopes that they would become more connected

with the school community. I remember participating in Twin Day one year. I 'twinned' with one of my students who had some behavioral challenges. He graduated from high school a few years ago, and he and his mother sent me a thank you note. It was a little thing that made a big difference for me.

Although Kara was involved with school activities, there was still some tension between her and other students.

Interactions: Students

Kara: I don't really think I fit in with them.

Jemelleh: Why not?

Kara: Because they was like-- I don't know. I felt like this is their clique. I felt like they were just on a different level. They ain't really want nobody around them and stuff like that. You got different cliques like they think they all that. You got all the white folks together, and then you got Mexican and all.

Jemelleh: You think that this group was more like--

Kara: Kind of stuck up.

Jemelleh: They are stuck up?

Kara: Yes, and mean.

Jemelleh: They were mean?

Kara: Yes. Because at first, Keisha didn't like me when I first came here.

Jemelleh: Keisha didn't like anybody when she first got there. That girl was mean. She was legit mean to everybody.

Kara could see what others could see, this particular group that she speaks of was an exclusive group and if you weren't a part of the group, they treated you with little

respect or compassion. They would get in trouble from time to time about their interactions, but that did little for curbing their behavior. Of all the groups that are created in middle schools, Kara has a specific apprehension about this one.

We continued the conversation about her interactions with students and her feelings of being outcast.

Kara: I used to get picked on a lot.

Jemelleh: When they picked on you, they picked on you for--?

Kara: Unibrow, stuff like that. Then it's like, "You're so hairy", like my arms and stuff. I'm like, "I can't help it. My daddy Mexican. I can't help it." Some kids pick on me for me getting taken out from class, reading test. "Y'all dumb." I used to be so mad about it.

Jemelleh: Do you remember anybody in particular that used to do that?

Kara: Not really but I just remember.

Jemelleh: You remember that it happened.

Kara: When we were going out of class, they make slick comments, and I'd just keep walking. I'm like, "Okay."

Jemelleh: Oh my gosh, that's so awful. I will tell you that I used to worry about that for y'all. I used to hate having to take you out of a class. I hated that you had to come to my classroom and people had to see that you were in the small group. I hated that. I don't know how to fix that.

Kara: That's what I used to say. They'd be like, "Why is less people in the class?" I'd just be like, "I don't know." "Why we not in that class with y'all? She teach the same thing. Don't she?" I'm like, "Yes, she teach the same thing. I don't know." I

just really not know how to explain it to people when they asked. I was like, "I don't know" and kept walking like, "Y'all go ask her. Don't ask me."

Jemelleh: I feel you 100% because I used to think the same. I'm like, "I know people are asking them about it. I don't want nobody to ask to them none of their business. It ain't none of their business. Stop asking them about nothing." I know, girl. I know.

Kara: It used to be a little tough, but hey, we got through it. We made it. We made it this far.

Jemelleh: How do you think that could've been different? I think about that a lot. How could we have made that different for you?

Kara: I don't know. To be honest, it really wasn't no type of way to make it different. It was what it was. Some kids, they just learn slower than others.

For me, this is one of the most important discussions that Kara and I had. She says something that I have refused to accept for a long time. She says that some students just learn slower than others. Learning differences are a reality, but it does not have to equate to deficit. I wonder if it is me that is equating difference to deficit and if yes, why have I made that choice? Kara again brings up the experience of being picked on. This time she talks about having to explain her placement in the small group classroom. The narrative of, "She teaches the same thing," was one that I worked to help penetrate the minds of all students. That, of course, gave rise to more questions. In hindsight, I wonder what the response would have been if I had chosen to spread the narrative that I taught something that seemed more appealing. I wanted to change the perception of how students in my

small group classes were viewed by others. I constantly worried about how being in that setting shaped self-efficacy.

Interactions: Unstructured time

As we progressed through the yearbook, we got to pictures that led to conversations about the everyday running of the school. We talked about the “in-between” times of instruction such as transitions and breaks, specifically, the restroom.

Kara: We would go into the bathrooms when we were coming back from the library or Lunch and stuff. Sometimes without permission.

Jemelleh: When kids went to the bathroom, I never asked, “What took you so long?” even when I should have probably! Have fun. I’ll see you whenever you get back.

Kara: My teacher's like, "What you was doing in there?" I'm like, "What you think?"

Jemelleh: You're taking a break. I'm taking a break from life. That's what I'm taking a break from. I think that's okay. I remember what was real strange about those bathrooms is that you couldn't see the bathroom. You couldn't see what was going on in there. Tell me about what was happening in the bathroom?

Kara: Nothing. Nothing really. We would just be in there chilling. Girls be in there plaiting their little hair, doing makeup, lips gloss and all that, and they're in there gossiping. I remember some dudes they'd pretend acting like they can walk in the girl's bathroom and all that. "We was going to come in there with y'all." "Okay, y'all can get in trouble if y'all want to."

Kara talked about the ducking into the bathrooms while walking in the hallway. It prompted me to reflect on how students used the restroom as a place to rest, converse, or do other things that required hiding from the watchful eye of authority. I used this opportunity to gather as much intel about the activities of the bathroom. I reflected on those moments and remembered that I would on occasion allow whatever was to be to be. That is because I would often grow frustrated with the systems and barriers that dictated the appropriate time for rest or “rest,” I would allow students to rest or “rest” whenever they required. But of course, there are possible consequences to those actions. I will always question whether I would or should take risks like that.

Our conversation continues about the other outside of the classroom spaces.

Jemelleh: What do you think your teachers thought about the hall? I know I'll tell you about this hall. Every time we used to change classes, I'd think, "Lord, just don't let us lose any kid." I just knew somebody was going to walk right out the back door, and they just not come back. [laughs]

Kara: When the bell rang, I'd be like, “All these people shouldn't be bumping into each other. They are going to be stopping in the hallway talking to each other. Get to class! I used to walk right through like, "Man, I'm trying to get to class. I want to get to class on time," because we used to have tardies. If y'all tardy, you got to go to the office. I'm like, "No. I'm not trying to do that. I got to go. Stop talking to me. I got to go. I've got to get to class."

Before Kara could answer, I answered my own question! This conversation allowed me to reflect on the anxiety I felt when the halls would fill with students. Kara shared that same anxiety for a different reason. I was worried about what could possibly

happen in the chaos while Kara was trying to distance herself from the chaos so as not to get into trouble. The mass exodus of students out of classrooms during class change could potentially be anxiety-inducing for both the teachers and students. There are middle schools that require that students walk on a line around the hall to get from one class to another during class change. This creates more order in the school, but it limits the potential for student interactions outside of the classroom space. What effects could that have on student desire and motivation about schooling?

Middle School Kara

We finally arrive at the picture of Kara.

Jemelleh: Tell me what you see when you see this girl?

Kara: Not the bang. [laughs] I done came a long way. That's what I see.

Jemelleh: Who was that girl in middle school? Who was she?

Kara: She was a very sweet girl, real sweet.

Jemelleh: What else about her?

Kara: She needed a lot of help in school, a lot.

Jemelleh: What about friendship wise? How would you characterize her with her friends, or with other kids?

Kara: With friends, the friends I had, open, caring, real sweet. Then the people I didn't know, I was real closed in like, "I don't want to talk to y'all. I don't want to sit over there because y'all talking about this person and that person".

Jemelleh: Who was this girl outside of school? What was her life like outside of school?

Kara: Tough. Real tough. I was going through it at home: mama drinking, worried about bills and all kind of stuff. It used to be stressful at home, outside of school. Sometimes I'd be so ready to come to school because I'm so ready to get from home. School was like a getaway from home. Then it wasn't really because I had kids, they were picking on me. It was like I already go through stuff at home, then I got to go to school. It was just crazy.

Jemelleh: Was there anything that made school easier?

Kara: Yes. You. I could always come to you to talk to you about stuff. I had friends like Shelly, Justin, and all that for me to come to them and talk, and stuff.

Jemelleh: When I see this girl, I see a lot of the same things. I see a very sweet girl. God, she was so sweet. Oh my God, the sweetest, calmest, most patient, hard-working girl. She wanted to do well, and she struggled a little bit academically. Just a lot of innocence and I worried about that because I worried that there would be people around you that would influence you to do things that you shouldn't do or things that you didn't want to do. I worried about that a lot for you. I see a girl who would've been friends with anybody. I've never seen you bully or be mean to anybody. I don't know. Maybe you were, but maybe I just never saw it. I never saw you do that. You're just so kind. I don't know.

Kara: No, I never used to do it. I used to be scared like might get beat up or something. I'm okay. I kept my mouth shut. I'm all right. When they used to pick on me, I used to cry, man. That used to be so mad. Y'all feel so bad, I'm like, "Damn".

Kara, from my perspective has a very accurate and honest description of herself. She recognizes her strengths and well as areas of opportunity. She was gentle and kind, but she was also shy in some ways which might be attributed to her level of confidence. Kara consistently remembers and talks about being picked on. It is clearly a major part of her experience. She notes that it was helpful to her to be able to confide in me and her friends with all that was happening to her inside and outside of school.

School Activities: Superlatives

Jemelleh: What do you think about doing superlatives in eighth grade? Do you think it's a good thing, bad thing?

Kara: It was a good thing.

Jemelleh: Yes?

Kara: Yes.

Jemelleh: Why do you think so?

Kara: I guess it was good because it really showed the keys as like actually good.

Jemelleh: I don't like it because if you ask me, you should have been....You should have been-- what else you should have been? You should have been most intelligent, you should have been--

Kara: Well, yes. I get what you are saying, they had their peaks, and it was more kids that was like- I used to feel bad but now I'm like damn, I'm friendly.

Jemelleh: You should definitely have been friendliest. Why do you, how would you categorize these kids? Who are those kids that you say?

Kara: Darius and Keira. It was good that they got this, because Keira, she's real sweet to this day. I had class with her my senior year and she would always come

in, "Hey, Mickie" this and that. It was just so sweet, always speeding and come down the hallway, like bringing donuts to class. It was sweet. And Darius- same thing. Going down the hallway, it don't matter like, you're black, white, mixed skin, light, you got a dis/ability, or not. Always speak, smile at you, he'll do stuff like those--

Kara: They earned it, you're saying.

Jemelleh: Yes, they earned it.

Kara: That just upsets me, this whole page upsets me.

Kara: That shouldn't have been in the yearbook because I feel like it is too soon for that kind of stuff. We are still trying to figure out stuff about ourselves.

Jemelleh: I agree like, I think that there's like what does that even mean? In the middle school.

Kara: I agree. That's a good point. I didn't even think about the actual category, I hate the idea because I just think, like you said, you are still trying to figure things out.

Jemelleh: Best Sense of Humor. He was funny. Both of them were funny. I give them that. They're funny, but it was, you know, a lot of other people that was real funny in class, too. But this, the Most Intelligent thing, like that shouldn't have been in the yearbook neither, though, because it's like, you know when certain kids see that like, "Oh man, I'm smart, too. Why I didn't get this, why am I not in this?"

Kara: I'm with you. I see what you mean. I see what you mean.

Jemelleh: And then Most Athletic, like that was good, they were-

Kara: They're pretty athletic, they're good.

Jemelleh: Most Spirited

Kara: Most spirited. I don't know, most school spirit.

Jemelleh: I give them, I give her that.

Kara: Yes?

I was not a fan of superlatives because it lacked the representation of the entire eighth grade student body. Rarely would a student who received special education services be included in those awards. Kara agreed, but she also noted that there were students who she felt deserved the awards they got. Even with her vote of confidence in support of some of the awards, I still grapple with the idea of promoting this kind of, what I consider, a popularity contest. In this exchange, it seems as though she wants to agree with me, but she sticks to her opinion of being able to find value in the awards. This is reassuring for me as a researcher and as her former teacher. She has her own thoughts and perceptions and when necessary, she will stand her ground.

School Activities: Pageant

As we continued through the book, we arrived at images of the pageant.

Jemelleh: Oh, what about this? The pageant. Did you ever want to participate?

Kara: Oh, yes, I did. I did, I did. But I don't know, for some reason, I just thought I wasn't pageant material?

Jemelleh: What? Why didn't you think you were pageant material?

Kara: I don't know, because like these girls was like real, real, I don't know, pretty. Like I'm pretty too but it's like, I don't know, man. I don't know what to say. Like, look, I couldn't afford none of that. No dresses, none of that. That

wasn't given to them, their parents went to go buy that. "Oh mom, can I be in a pageant? Oh, I gotta get a dress that's like \$200." Like, "No." We wasn't fortunate for none of that so it was like, I just like, all right. You know.

Jemelleh: So you know you're gonna ask me to be in this pageant, right?

Kara: I don't know. That's the thing, I know I could have, but it's like this is how I am now. I don't like asking for people for anything.

Jemelleh: Me too, I feel.

Kara: I hate it. I'd rather just struggle. I hate it.

Jemelleh: I did, too, I feel you. I'll tell you. I always wanted the girls in my class that I taught to be in the pageant, because I wanted you to know that like you were just as good as everybody else on the stage. And sometimes I felt like, though you would think that you're not, but you are. You are just as beautiful and as smart and as talented. What was that?

Kara is one of three co-researchers to share negative perceptions of the pageant, pointing to the idea that there is something that should be considered in future productions of the pageant. There is further discussion of the pageant in two of the following chapters and a detailed discussion in the final chapter.

School Activities: Black History Program

Kara: I remember there was that team.

Jemelleh: Yes?

Kara: It's that team. I forgot what this was.

Kara: Oh that was in the history program. Yes. And then who is this?

Jemelleh: I don't remember. The Black History Program. This is the year I stopped doing the Black History Program. Me and another teacher started it two or three years before it happened, for the first time. And this is the first year that I wasn't there because I had just had Gabby. She was born this year. I didn't get to help, but I wanted to.

While we were talking about other activities and programs, for me, this conversation brought up ideas about my new journey in motherhood and what that meant for my practice. I remember taking on fewer roles in the school, but I cannot be certain as to whether that was because I was a new mother or because I would be taking the next year off to serve as an advocate for education, outside the classroom. I was so caught up in those thoughts, I did not ask Kara more about what she thought about the program.

School Activities: Student Council

Our conversation about activities continued.

Jemelleh: I remember like, Student Council. Did you ever wanna be on the Student Council?

Kara: No.

Jemelleh: Why not?

Kara: I don't even know.

Jemelleh: You got to make decisions for the school.

Kara: Yes?

Jemelleh: You like "yes but no"?

Kara: I stayed in the background.

Jemelleh: Why do you think you like the background?

Kara: I don't know. This is what I'm just used to. I'm used to being in the background, that's why. Then I got so used to it so it's like--You almost like it.

Jemelleh: I thought it was pretty nice. You would have been great at it.

Kara: I felt more like, "You go be great. I'll be over here."

Kara saw herself as someone who stayed in the background. I think about the messages she internalized that made her feel that way. I think about whether those messages were explicit or implicit and where they occurred.

Kara: After the Interview

The first time I talked to Kara after the interview, she was worried about being put out of her home because she had no way to pay for rent. Her mother, who at the time was incarcerated, used to receive money from the state for rent, but since she was incarcerated, she was unable to receive that money. Kara was able to avoid experiencing homelessness. Since then, she has enrolled in college. She is still looking for employment. I now keep up with Kara on Facebook. She just announced that she will welcome her first child later this year.

CHAPTER 5

TASHA

I met Tasha when she was in third grade and I was a student teacher, and then taught her again in sixth and eighth grades. Before this, I observed her and about seventeen other students in an informative “unscheduled for observation” lesson in which I heard her say, “No, those were not the instructions given. You are supposed to stand over here. Have you finished your worksheet? You have to finish your worksheet before you can join the rest of the class over here. I like the way you are using your resources. Good job on being a team player.” Then she turned to her teacher, who had not request that anything be done in the first place and inquire, “What do you want me to do next Mrs. Martin?”

I knew right away that Tasha was a force, and I was happy to begin building a relationship with her. After her third-grade year, I left the elementary school to begin my career as a middle grades teacher. However, my roommate at the time, began working at Tasha’s elementary school. She told me about a fierce little fourth grader, and it didn’t take me long to realize that she was talking about Tasha. Tasha would visit with my roommate outside of school from time to time, so I would see her on occasion, but after I got married, I lost the connection until she walked into my classroom in middle school.

I was so overjoyed to see her! She was still bold, confident, and funny--everything I remembered her to be--and our relationship picked up right where it had left off. I reconnected with her mother and began spending time with her outside of school.

We would go to various activities around the community, including a scrapbooking group that I took part in with twelve senior ladies. They were excited to have Tasha join the group that day. They, in fine southern fashion, showered her with scrapbooking knowledge and resources. Tasha loved being there. She often asked to go back, but our schedules only allowed for her to return once.

When my niece and nephew visited me, Tasha would come over to babysit. She would also clean the house and cook breakfast. She loved to be helpful! We talked about everything and everyone all the time. She was my information hotline into all things student. My relationship with Tasha saw only a one-year gap. When I decided to interview her, I easily found her on social media and we picked up right where we left off.

“I don’t worry about that. My confidence is through the roof!”

Middle school?? How am I supposed to remember middle school? I can barely remember what I did yesterday! Middle school feels like a lifetime ago. Like, middle school? Okay, let me give this my best shot!

Okay, um. Oh! I got my hair cut in middle school. It wasn’t just a regular cut. I got it shaved on one side. Completely shaved. It was the worst idea, ever. I looked a mess. A HOT MESS.

I struggled in middle school and still kind of struggle with reading. I really started to notice in fifth grade. That’s when I started doing small groups. In fifth grade-- No, was it before that? Anyhow, I have a dis/ability the effects my reading. I also don’t understand everything as fast as other people. I think everybody in my family has a dis/ability that affects them that way. My family all acts a little slow. LOL! For real, all jokes aside. I think everyone on my daddy’s side has a dis/ability. None of them finished school or nothing. None of them graduated. None of them went past 10th grade. Well, yes, they did-- hold on. My daddy went to 12th grade and he dropped out. But I think they were all in the slow classes. I don’t know.

But really, who cares if I can’t catch on to information as quickly as other people? There are things that I am really good at that other people have trouble figuring out. Shoot, some of the teachers I’ve had didn’t know everything they should know. Some teachers, know some things and then other teachers know other things. For example, my math teacher was always talking about how he didn’t know anything about English. That was fine. He knew math. Math was his strength. He does not have to be great at English too. As for me, I know about social studies and science and stuff like that more than I

know about reading, and I don't think there's anything wrong with it. That goes for everybody.

When it came to school, my parents cared, kind of. My mom would come to my school events and meetings, but my dad didn't. I don't think he ever came to anything in middle school for me. He would go to my brother's basketball games though. My dad used to say to me, "Hey. You ain't dumb," but he didn't care much about school specifically. He was like, "As long as you make good grades, you're good." Usually, I did. When it came to homework and stuff that was my sister's job. My mom was in school studying early childhood education, so she was away studying a lot. My parents cared about bettering themselves. That's what makes me this way. I am always working to be better.

Even though my parents wanted me to make good grades, honestly, I don't think anybody can make you make As and Bs, or make you want to be a better person. You have to want that for yourself. But when you are in middle school, you didn't really care about that. You are not really thinking about...you are not really thinking about your future or anything like that. You are just trying to pass the class so that you can move on.

I never really failed anything at school, even if I did not understand it well. In most of my classes, we would get the work done before we left. The teachers didn't really ever assign out-of-class work. If they did, they would give us time before or after class to finish it. If I didn't finish something that was on me because I was given time to do it. I usually finished though.

I was glad for the accommodations I received because of my dis/ability. I don't think I could have passed without them. I was in small groups for some tests and for

some classes, and the teachers would read the information to me and some of them help me with some the answers. Haha! I even got extra time to do my work. It helped me stay on track. Those services helped me a lot!

I'm pretty sure other people knew I received help. When I left class to go to smaller groups they probably knew something was going on. But people don't care about stuff like that. If they did care, they didn't say nothing about it. I never felt embarrassed about getting them either. Why would I let anyone make me feel embarrassed or uncomfortable by that? People can't make me feel embarrassed because I need extra help. Nobody can make me feel uncomfortable. Honestly, half of the students who weren't getting accommodations, needed accommodations. If I was passing, I was cool. I didn't care how it happened. I didn't feel embarrassed; I didn't feel uncomfortable; I didn't feel excluded; I think it felt a little weird sometimes when people first found out that I got that kind of help, but I didn't care for long. I was not worried about that. My confidence is through the roof.

I also had to take a study skills class. Most people hated it because they would have to go to study skills rather than going to gym or wood work or art or whatever. I liked going because it helped me to get good grades. I got the extra help I needed to be able to pass.

My favorite thing about middle school was the last day. Haha! I hated having to do all the work that went with middle school. After you do all your work during the day, you are supposed to go home and just chill [laughter]. They want to send you home with a whole bunch of work.

As for my teachers, I don't know if I would call some of them supportive, but they did make sure that I got my work done. I do not think that there were any teachers that I just really didn't like. I remember a few teachers who really wanted to see me shine though. Mrs. Coes was one of them. She cared a lot. She really did. She taught me and my sisters all the way through school. She cared. She was real cool and she made sure you got everything done. I don't think I never had a bad grade in her class. She was a really good teacher and she was like a mom to me. She would help me with my work and she would also spend time with me on the weekends. We went lots of places together. I used to help her with her baby and everything.

Mrs. Davis was cool too. I also really loved science because my teacher was so laid back and funny. I really felt like she believed in me, like she wanted me to do well. She just stayed on us about getting everything done. Before class-- if we didn't do our homework, we got a chance to do our homework before class. She just stayed on you, basically, about getting everything done. When you didn't get stuff done, if you turn it in late, she would, well, some teachers, if you turn it in late it's half the grade or you can only make up to a certain grade. She didn't do that. She let you get full credit and everything. She didn't give you a chance to fail.

As for friends in middle school, I was cool with everybody in middle school. I don't think there's nobody I didn't like in middle school. I kept to myself, kind of. I never had a lot of friends because I don't like people [laughter], but I was cool to everybody. I wouldn't say I liked everybody but I was cool with them. I always had someone to talk to if I wanted to talk and people would always just tell me stuff. It was fun.

Anyhow, in twelfth grade, we moved. My mom and daddy had just gotten a divorce and everything changed. She kind of stopped caring and stopped coming home. Then, I had my own kid, so now, I'm taking care of three instead of two. Life is good, though. It is just really hard. I just have to keep working, working harder than I did before. I've had a job since tenth grade, so I'll just keep working until I'm where I want to be.

Now, I work at the local general store. I have a son. I don't know. I think life had really hit me until around last summer. That was when I had my son. I didn't want to have a baby. I didn't want to have a baby until five months into the pregnancy. It was too late to do anything then. I'm not going to lie. I wasn't going to have a baby, we were thinking about not having it, and then my mom was like, "What do you want to do? Do you want to kill It." then I was like, "No." That made me feel bad. So I kept it.

I don't know. I should have never had a baby. I should never been like, hunching. I knew better than that. My mamma and daddy, they know better than that too. They used to take me to his house, and say, "Yeah, you can go. Go ahead."

I swear. In the summertime, the whole summer they'd take me over to his house. They even used to let me stay the night. Even his grandma let me stay there. His mama put him and his sister out when he was eight because his mother's boyfriend didn't like her kids, so he lived with his grandma. My parents and his grandma were all like, "Cool. Yes, you can go. You can stay the night." What did they think was going to happen? It was dumb.

I was just like I have a son, so now I am an adult, and I am responsible for another person. I have someone looking up to me and depending on me. I have to keep him safe and make sure he's good, you know? It is all on me now.

Actually, a lot has been on me for a long time now. I started taking care of my sister's kids a while ago because my mom was always at work and my sister was always off somewhere. She's 30 years old and she doesn't do anything for her kids. So I help pay the bills and help take care of the kids, Christmas and all kinds of stuff.

At this point, I thought I'd be in college. I did not have the support I needed in order to go to college, so I didn't get to go when I wanted to. I got into two of the local community colleges. There was no way to take care of three kids and go to school, plus I didn't have a car. I could not afford one with my job and taking care of all the kids. I moved out from living with my mom because we got into an argument over taxes, so for a while, I was trying to make it happen for myself. I was away for about six or seven months. I recently moved back.

As for moving through this life, I don't pay attention to the barriers. I don't pay attention to race, but it's hard especially when you live in the racist places I've lived in. Sometimes I think all white people are racist. They are just so rude and they act like they are too good to talk to you or hang out with you. They are ignorant though. I had a best friend and she was white and in my ninth-grade year, we couldn't be friends because I was black. Her momma was a substitute at our school and she was like, "India, you have nigger friends" and all kind of stuff. After that we stopped being friends. Like I said, I don't be paying attention to that stuff though. I feel like we all breathe the same air; we all go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning. I don't feel like we are different, our skin

color is just different. They ain't better than me whether they believe it or not. Plus, me being black can't stop my money or raising my kids and that's what's important to me.

I do, however, pay attention to being a girl. You see, in the jobs I've had like working in a warehouse and in retail stocking shelves, guys always try to do the work for you, and I let them! The best part is that I was still getting paid!

I don't think that my dis/ability keeps me from doing anything. I think it is all about your self-determination. You have to motivate yourself to do what you want to do. Nobody can tell me what I can and can't do, because I'm not going to listen to that.

I rarely tell anyone that I have a dis/ability. It would be weird to walk around saying, "Hey y'all. I have a dis/ability." I don't ever tell my employer that I have a dis/ability either. I don't think they need to know. I'm no different than anyone else. There is nothing wrong with having a dis/ability. And I'm going to keep working until I'm where I want to be.

Tasha and Me: Remembering Together

In duoethnography, it is required that the researchers have shared power; however, there were moments that I could feel myself attempting to control the flow. In this particular conversation, I was once-again reminded that power has to be shared and if I wasn't going to share it willingly, it was going to be taken from me. And that is just what Tasha did which led us to reflecting on what she was like in middle school.

Tasha: Then and Now

Jemelleh: Oh my God, girl, give me the book.

Tasha: No, I'm trying to find myself.

Jemelleh: One of us, I don't remember. I love that girl because she was so strong.

If it didn't make sense, you were like, "I'm not doing it. That's stupid."

Both: [laughter]

Jemelleh: She was just so confident. It's so interesting. She fascinated me because I loved her confidence, even though-- She was confident in everything, even though she wasn't as strong in everything. Even though she wasn't the best reader or the best at spelling or whatever it was, you were still like, "So? I'm still doing this thing." I loved the confidence of that girl.

Tasha: I'm still like that.

Jemelleh: I see that. You've always been like that.

Tasha seemed to agree with my perceptions of her. Later in the conversation she added comments about not being pleased with her appearance, but she had a very positive sense of self overall. Tasha's confidence was steadfast and unwavering, always. She was not afraid to share her opinion, but still showed careful thought before sharing it.

We continue the conversation with who Tasha is today.

Jemelleh: What she like?

Tasha: The same as she is now.

Jemelleh: Which is?

Tasha: Funny, crazy. You don't want to know what I'm like because [laughs] I'm off the chain now. [laughs]

Jemelleh: Who is she?

Tasha: She was off the chain then, too.

Jemelleh: Tell me how.

Tasha: She wasn't. I was never quiet.

Jemelleh: [chuckles] That's true.

Tasha: My mouth always been big. I just know everybody business and I still be knowing the tea.

Jemelleh: You still know the tea. That is true. You have always known the tea and you still know it. How do you think that helps you? Does that help you to know all the business?

Tasha: No. I just be nosy and just-- I swear to God, I used to be lurking on everything just to know the tea. Now I don't have to lurk, people just be telling me. It just come naturally, I guess. I was real cool in middle school. I didn't like everybody-- I'm lying. I did like everybody. I was cool with everybody.

Tasha was like a chameleon when it came to interactions with other students. She could be in a room where students were having an in-depth conversation, and they would continue that conversation even if Tasha was in the room. She would be sitting quietly but listening intently. People just felt comfortable around her. She kept lots of secrets. In hindsight, I think she knew everyone's secrets. She is where I got a great deal of intel! Occasionally, she would just drop little bits of information that was likely a part of the secret. I don't know how she decided what information to share and when to share it and with whom to share it, but when she did it was always at the right time and relevant to whatever situation was taken place. The strangest part was that even though she would tell the secrets she learned from time to time, people would never be upset with her for telling. When confronted by them she would admit what she did and then gently convince

them that it was no big deal. Somehow, they would come around to agree with Tasha's point, and they would continue to tell her future secrets.

Although Tasha doesn't mention this, being as socially involved as she was her greatest strength. Her social skills overshadowed her reading and comprehension skills. What would happen if educators had spent additional time focusing on her strengths? What would the potential drawbacks have been?

Tasha's outlook on her future always reflected back to her character and allowed her to think about her own role in her achievement.

Tasha: I don't know. Nobody's going to keep sitting and hand you stuff so you got to get up and get it on your own. You can't let little stuff stop you from getting what you got to get done. If I would have let this just stop me and do nothing, or just sat there and be like, "I can't do it," or just let it be, then I would never accomplish nothing in life. You got to let it go and just go with the flow because you-- If you would have stopped-- If I would have stopped back then now I would've been sitting at home on the couch [laughs] looking at the TV, probably.

Jemelleh: That's not you.

Tasha: That can't pay your bills and that can't get you nowhere. Got to have a little bit of education.

Tasha was adamant about "getting it"/succeeding despite challenges, and she was right! I agreed with that. She has an unwavering spirit of determination that was clear throughout both her narrative and our duoethnographic work. Tasha's narrative is the powerful counter-narrative that describes the experiences of Black girls. She will not only

survive, but also thrive. She will be okay. She will be successful despite what the world throws at her.

Frustration: Teachers

One of the most fascinating parts of talking with Tasha was attempting to understand her frustration with reasonable expectations. Here is one example of one of those expectations.

Jemelleh: Music teacher? Ms. Allen. Yes, she's the-

Tasha: Oh my God, she used to get on my nerves. Chorus teacher. She used to get on my nerves.

Jemelleh: Why did she get on your nerves?

Tasha: Trying to make us sing. None of us sing with her.

Jemelleh: You can't sing, Tasha?

Tasha: No.

Jemelleh: I think you can sing.

Tasha: You should have seen her.

Jemelleh: She was very serious about her job though.

Tasha: She was.

Jemelleh: She was like, "You're all going to learn to sing in here. I don't know what you're all used to doing in here, but you're all going to sing."

Tasha seemed to be frustrated with the idea that she had to sing in chorus. Interestingly enough, singing is what chorus is about. Mrs. Thomas, who had the unsavory challenge of creating structure from a predecessor who did not manage classroom spaces well, was a strict teacher. She believed that all students could and

should be pushed to their highest potential, even in subjects that they do not like; for example, chorus. The truth is, Mrs. Thomas did not care whether or not you could sing well, effort was what was important to her. For many of the teachers I worked with if a student put forth effort that was good enough. It is interesting to consider, however, why a student like Tasha, one who almost always does her work, was so resistant to participating in chorus.

Frustration: Testing

Most of the co-researchers talked about their disdain for testing. Tasha was one of them.

Jemelleh: Okay, but what about taking the test. How did you feel about taking those kinds of tests?

Tasha: I hated it.

Jemelleh: Yes? Why?

Tasha: It was so quiet for so long. It's literally no way you can cheat.

Both: [laughter]

Tasha: I'm not even fitting to lie. I'm not fitting to even sit here and lie, it's literally no way you can cheat. I'm not even fitting to lie, that's the only part of the school year that I really sat down, paid attention. [laughs] When we studied in class, I really studied. I swear. That's the only time of the year I really sat down and cared. Really, really, really, really-- I cared, but I'm talking about really, really, really, really caring.

Jemelleh: Why was that test so important to you?

Tasha: Because I could get to go to the next grade. I needed to pass it to move along in life. That's the only time I really, really sat down and paid attention. I don't think I even know how to study, but I studied in class for those tests. When I be reading stuff, it just be-- I feel, when I be at school and I be learning and I be reading, when I get home, it just be gone. I don't even be thinking about it so I have never really studied for a test. Never. I just went with it or cheated, but you couldn't cheat on those tests, so I had to try to study.

Jemelleh: For the CRCT. Because of you wanting to pass to go to the next grade?

Tasha: Yes.

Jemelleh: Was the information that you were learning important?

Tasha: At the time. You want me to lie? Yes. It was very important.

Both: [laughter]

Tasha highlighted three points in this conversation: 1) cheating 2) motivation for learning 3) motivation for passing. First Tasha talked about how hard it was to cheat which indicates a desire or attempt to cheat. In other parts of our conversation she talked about how she cheated on other tests and assignments, much like some of the other co-researchers. She also notes that the tests motivated her to study. The problem is that she was studying to pass a test rather than studying to learn information in which she found value. Chances are, she does not remember much from those tests, and why should she? When this point came up with each co-researcher, I reflected on what we need to do to create meaningful evaluations. It is clear she finds little value in current assessments themselves. She, then, talked about the ultimate goal being to pass, and she points out that she needs to pass so that she can move on in life. The fact that these tests hold such a

heavy weight in what students perceive as their earthly existence, it may be the case that tests as we know it have been given too much power.

School Activities: “Smart” kids

We talked about the clubs that were highlighted in the yearbook and talked about our experiences with them.

Tasha: I consider them-- They be giving the smarter kids more props because they catch on faster. I don't feel that's right. I think we should get some props too.

Jemelleh: I cannot agree with you more.

Tasha: I think that we should get props.

Jemelleh: It's so crazy because, growing up at school, I was in Beta Club and I was doing all those things and all of that. Like, "We have a Beta Club, that's so good." Now, when I think about it and I look back, I think about how-- There's so many problems that come with it. Like you said, what about the kids who learn differently, who catch on at a different rate? Just because they don't, should they not be in Beta Club? I don't know, girl. That makes me sad. Let me turn this page. See? Same thing here. Why is Quest-- This is just the class. Why do you have a whole page for Quest?

Why did we have an entire page in our yearbook dedicated to the gifted education class? There was not a page dedicated to those in special education. For clarity, because of the negative stigma attached to special education, no one would desire to be in a special education picture, yet we put forth the narrative that gifted education and special education are there to provide students with the learning experiences they need to reach their full potential, while ignoring the collateral damage of segregation that both services

promotes. We attempt to deem them both equal and dismiss the very negative stigma associated with special education while reinforcing the value of gifted education and special education by highlighting involved students in the yearbook! Tasha points out that students who are perceived as being smarter are getting more attention than those who may be perceived differently. It is hard not to consider what messages are being sent to both groups of students.

A Special Occasion

We get to a picture in the yearbook that depicted me winning the Teacher of the Year award for the county. Tasha, like Kara, was in my language arts class at the time the representatives came in to make the surprise presentation.

Jemelleh: How was that for you? How did you feel about that? Did you think about it? Anything? Was it weird?

Tasha: No.

Jemelleh: It wasn't weird to have people in-- A bunch of people just randomly in your classroom, in your space? You're cool with it?

Tasha: It was actually fun. It was like a happy little moment. It was fun though. I remember him though, he was a bad little boy.

Jemelleh: [laughs] For me I remember this moment being exciting, but I was also very nervous. I remember thinking that people would be saying, "Oh you're Teacher of the Year, and you're blah-blah-blah. You're a special education teacher." I remember feeling like I don't want to be called a special education teacher because I didn't want everybody to like -- I didn't want them to think

differently about my students. Right? I didn't want them to know that I taught -- that my label was special education teacher because-

Tasha: But nobody knows who your students were outside of the school.

Jemelleh: True. But even in the school I didn't want -- I don't know. I wanted my students to be able to say that's my teacher and not have to feel weird about it because I'm the Special Education teacher. You probably didn't think about it at all but—

Both: [laughs]

I remember the day of that announcement. My principal told me to dress extra nice because I had a meeting at the board office. Since I was six months pregnant did not want anyone to know that I was expecting, I had a difficult time concealing my rapidly growing belly while still looking professional. When the news crew came into the room, I was so nervous they would accuse me of breaking copyright laws. My students seemed to be excited about the award and the announcement. I was further worried because these people had come into my resource classroom with my students who were being served in special education. I did not want anyone to know that they or anyone else was in special education. I did not want them to refer to me as the special education teacher. It was so uncomfortable. But, my students didn't seem to mind. And even though Tasha reassured me, I still think about it constantly.

Special Education: Classmate

In those pictures were candid photographs of other students in the class. Tasha pointed out one in particular for us to talk about; it was the same student Kara had pointed out.

Tasha: Him. Jackson. He was real bad. [laughs] He was real bad.

Jemelleh: Oh yeah, Jackson was in our small group class. Do you ever think that I gave him more attention?

Tasha: No, I think we all got the same attention.

Jemelleh: Yes.

Tasha: I don't know. I think me and Kara got the most attention because we used to always be with you, even outside of school.

Reflecting on how I balanced my attention with students, Jackson also received special education services. His needs were significant in every way. I asked Tasha about how much time she thought I had spent with him vs. her. She didn't see it the way I did. She felt like she got plenty of attention from me. But I know I spent more time with Jackson. He needed a special kind of attention that was rewarding and exhausting. It seemed that Tasha felt like she got plenty of attention because in addition to the classroom time we would spend together, I would take her with me to do different things over the weekend. I told myself that it was an important part of her development and it might have been, but it was also an important part of my development as an educator because I got a chance to see her thrive (or not) in a variety of situations. As inclusive and as open about dis/ability as I work to be, I am always growing, learning, and unlearning information that I'd been taught. Tasha helped me to do that work even outside the class.

Outside of Special Education: Classmate

Tasha directed our attention to another student in the pictures, Aliyah, forcing me to reflect on my role as an educator for all students.

Tasha: She ugly now. She be at home.

Jemelleh: Bless her heart.

Tasha: She's still bad and fast.

Jemelleh: I remember that you used to hang with that girl. I didn't really like that you hung out with her. I didn't because I was thinking, "She's going to corrupt my sweet Tasha."

Diving deeper: Aliyah had some behavioral difficulties in school. She used to get sent to the principal's office at least once a week. I worried that she would influence Tasha, so I used to always make sure that I told Tasha how awesome and wonderful she was, in hopes that she would never feel like she had to hang out with those people in order to be in the cool kids' club. As I talked about it with Tasha, I realized that I was doing what I caution many other teachers not to do. I made Tasha one of "my students" and I "othered" the student that I did not teach directly. I instruct other teachers to ensure that they offer the same level of care, compassion, and attention to all of the students that will potentially be impacted by us. I should have done just this with Aliyah.

Special Education: Perceptions of other people

Jemelleh: What about your academics? What was that like for that girl?

Tasha: I don't know, everyone goes to the same school every year, so when I got past fourth and fifth grade, it just didn't bother me anymore. Being in small groups and-- Because the same people that was in elementary school with you, they just follow you from elementary to high-- To middle, so it just didn't bother me. When I started high school and we moved, it bothered me a little bit because I didn't know nobody there. I thought people were going to look at me different, but my people from my middle school just came there. Most of them.

I always thought that Tasha was comfortable receiving special education services. She never said that but the ways in which she would present herself made me believe that she was okay receiving help. It was interesting to hear her talk about coming into that mindset, that it was not one that she had always carried. She notes the desire not to feel different. Unfortunately, special education services tend to traditionally shine a spotlight on student difference, but I am not convinced that they have to. The services that students with dis/abilities receive can be beneficial for all students. However, we continually overlook our responsibility to do a better job of minimizing the unintended consequences of the provision of services.

Special Education: Paraprofessionals

When we got to pictures of the paraprofessional who other co-researchers indicated had given answers to assignments and on tests, this is how the conversations unfolded:

Jemelleh: You think Miss Keys used to give a lot of the answers?

Tasha: Yes. [laughs] She used to give all of them. I think she used to like doing work because she used to start doing it before she even got done explaining what we had to do. She was already done with it by the time it was our turn. She would just give us the answers.

Jemelleh: Do you think that was helpful to you?

Tasha: [coughs] It helped me pass, so yes.

Jemelleh: [laughs] It's helpful, helping you pass.

I knew Mrs. Golden was giving the answers. I didn't care that Mrs. Golden was giving the answers because this system privileges those with academic strengths and diminished those without. The way Tasha frames her response of, "I think she used to

like doing work,” made me think about internal motivations for teacher and assisting. Is there a particular gratification that teachers or paraprofessionals get from sharing and demonstrating their knowledge and understanding? Did we ever do that to the disadvantage of students?

After the Interview

I remain connected with Tasha through Facebook. She is still working at the local store. She recently got a new car which she has been saving for. She reports that everything else is pretty much the same.

CHAPTER 6

BIANCA

By the third year of my career, when I taught Bianca, I was in a pretty good groove. I was improving in my practice and learning to think about how to provide the most meaningful instruction to students. Bianca was educated in the co-teaching for language arts, so unlike my other co-researchers, Bianca did not have small-group instruction for language arts.

I co-taught with Mrs. Lyon. Bianca and Mrs. Lyon were like oil and water. Mrs. Lyon attempted to build a relationship with Bianca, but Bianca was uninterested. Instead, Bianca would gravitate to me and in that class; she viewed only me as the teacher. She would not hesitate to leave with me whenever I took small groups. I regularly pushed back against the idea of having only students with a documented need for services come with me to do small group assignments, a philosophy that my co-teacher accepted. When it was time for me to take a group, the group would be mixed with students with and without dis/abilities. Bianca would always come with me. Always.

Bianca would also elect to spend time with me when she was supposed to be in her elective course. For her, those were often a remediation course, so I was happy to be an alternative, especially since those courses proved to be ineffective over the years. During our time together, we would intersperse random talk with assignment help.

A major turning point in our relationship occurred about half way through the second semester of Bianca's eighth grade year. Bianca came to school in tears, and she

shared with me that she had been molested. Fortunately, I had a co-teaching class that first period, and I was able to find another teacher to cover for me while I talked to Bianca about what happened. We sat for over an hour, discussing the incident. After that, our relationship grew stronger and when she left middle school, we stayed in contact for a few months before losing contact.

I saw her mother in Walmart about eight months after she left middle school and her mother told me that Bianca has started to run away. I was surprised and very concerned. That afternoon, I found Bianca by going to her house, and I spent the day with her. She told me about her running away, but she her version of the story made it out as though it was no big deal. It wasn't until I conducted the interview with her a few months ago that I realized I was only getting limited details all those years go.

After that, we lost contact again. I attempted to connect with her on Facebook, but I connected through an account that she no longer uses. When I designed this study, I increased my efforts of trying to connect with her. I asked a former colleague who still lived in the area to connect us and she did, quickly.

I received a Facebook message from Bianca that said, "Hey Mama Coes! I heard you've been looking for me." "Thank God for social media!" I thought. I giggled at her title for me, and we began a conversation about what was going on in her life. She seemed to be doing well. I asked her if she was willing to be a part of the study. Her response, "Anything for you, Mama Coes." She has always made my heart smile. That day was no different.

“I’m trying to fix pieces that were never really put together”

In middle school, I was bad boy in that day. It was either silent lunch or detention. I was just a careless girl. I didn't care about nothing. It was always fun, fun, fun and not care about anything.

I used to hang out with the same crew throughout middle school. They were like me, you know, they had a dis/ability too. I would hang out with other kids, but I wasn't as close to them. We tried to make everybody feel comfortable around us. Crack a joke so everybody can laugh, say something, so everybody can be involved. We did not want to seem like we were trying to separate ourselves even though we kind of did sometimes. It was comforting to hang out with other people who were sometimes picked on. Sometimes kids would say, "Y'all are in the slow class. Why are y'all in the slow class? Y'all slow?" That kind of thing. It wasn't no everyday type of thing. Once in a blue moon somebody's like, "You slow. Look at them. They in the slow class." Or they walk by a classroom and see like four, five people in a class and, "You slow." I would sometimes hear other kids whispering "She's slow. She don't know nothing because she always had to get help." I used to get offended about it. It just bothered me a lot.

Sometimes I had to explain my dis/ability to other kids. It's just extra help. I get extra help, extra time on the tests. Help, if you need it, it's there if you decide that you want it. I'm the same person as you. I just get extra help. The worst part of having special education services was that people would try to label me as a slow person.

I wished I was in other classes, but not the ones for the gifted students. Only white kids and black kids who want to be white were in that gifted class. I didn't have any interest in that kind of stuff, but they thought they were better than everyone. Well, that's

how they acted, I think. And the black people who were there came from “Higher families” that would push you to do good in school.

It’s okay if some people want to be white. I’m just not one of those people.

Sometimes I feel like I’m treated differently because of my race, but that is fine. There are a lot of racist white people who feel like they are entitled to do whatever they want to do. Sometimes that means that they call people the ‘n’ word or behave disrespectfully in other ways. It has happened to me once, but I don’t really care.

In middle school, some of my teachers used to treat the white kids better than the black kids. They really only cared about the students that were their color, white.

Thankfully, I never felt like I was treated differently because I was a girl though. I was sometimes treated differently by students and teachers because of my dis/ability, I think. I mean, I think it was because of my dis/ability, but it is hard to separate that from other parts of me, I guess.

I think it was my dis/ability that made me have to go to summer school. That was by far the worst part of middle school. They took time out of my summer. I went to summer and retook that test and I still failed. They had to come to a conclusion of, “We’re going to place her in the next grade or retain her.” I didn’t go to summer school every year, but it made me want to go harder throughout the year so that I wouldn’t have to go. I still ended up having to go. Summer school was awful, but the one good thing about it was that I got to spend more time with my favorite teacher.

One of the best parts of middle school was having Mrs. Coes as a teacher. She made me feel comfortable. She was like another mom, and she guided me. She was like a

big sister I never had or something like that. She was there for me when I needed her most. I remember crying with her after one of the most traumatic experiences of my life.

When I was thirteen, I was sexually assaulted by a thirty-year-old man. He went to jail for his crime, but the backlash from people in the community was intense. I got death threats on my life for at least a year after the trial. He was released from prison, about two weeks ago and I ran into him at the store. It shocked me. I was scared. He was like, "I see you." I didn't say nothing because I was shocked because, at the time, I didn't-- I wasn't actively trying to see who it was. We were in Parker's. He was like, "You didn't think you was going to see me again. You took my life." I was like, "You took your own life." It shook me up a little bit because I didn't expect to see him this soon.

I was going through a lot after I got molested. People were just like, "Y'all, don't talk to her. She got so-and-so sent to jail" and stuff like that. I had a lot of anger from people pushing my buttons and saying stuff like, "She got my cousin sent to jail for this and that." I just was holding it all in.

That's when I started doing all kind of crazy things. The biggest thing was running away. The first time I ran away, it was because my friend wanted me to go to a party that my mom wouldn't let me go to. My friend came to the house. It was time for the party. She was like, "You going to go?" I was like, "You already here, so I might as well." So, the first time, it was more about opportunity and peer pressure than anything else.

We would be at the party, having fun, dancing whatever. They were in there popping pills and stuff. I didn't know nothing about no pills or none of that. Smoking that stuff. They had made some lean. That's cough syrup and Sprite. I had some lean, because

I didn't people to say, "She lame. A party pooper" or nothing like that. It was like, "Might as well." Isn't nobody looking-- "She lame. She's scared. She this, she that." I chose to get with the program. I did a few drugs, but that was it. My friend did stuff with the boys, but I didn't.

When I would run away, sometimes I got into situations that were scary and harmful, but I didn't want to ask questions. Sometimes I feel like it was related to my dis/ability, but it could have also been because I was so young. I'm not quite sure if it was my dis/ability that kept me from knowing certain things, or if I didn't know just because I didn't know. When I was about thirteen or fourteen, and I don't know nothing about sex. There were boys who tried to get me to do sexual things with them, but they would be using "anal" and those type of words. I would be like, "I don't know what that is." They would explain the "oral" was talking about your mouth and that anal sex was talking about, well, you know. But I still didn't really understand. I would never know what it was. You'd have to use like "penis" and stuff like that for me to know what it was. I didn't know what that other stuff was. I was embarrassed to ask someone.

I used to run away a lot. My running away really picked in ninth grade because I was trying to be grown. Basically, I was going to school and running away. At one point, I was running away about two times a month. I would go to school Monday through Friday and go with the guys on Friday. I was just running away and I would come back to Sunday night or Monday, but I would come to school and then go home. I would always make it to school because school was kind of important to me. I wanted to learn and I like being at school sometimes. Obviously, there were things that might have been a little more important to me at the time, but school was still a priority.

Running away was easy, especially because nobody would be home when I got home. My mom and dad never lived together. I always just lived with my mom. My dad was in jail at the time. I used to think, “Well, nobody’s here so I’m going to go. Don’t nobody care. Nobody don’t know where I’m at. Nobody has seen me leave, so I’m just going to go.”

When I first started running way, I would unlock my window thinking my mom wasn’t going to come home too early. I knew that she would know that I was gone, but I didn’t think that she was going to check my window. She locked my dang-gone window. I couldn’t get back in the house. That was the start of it.

As I continued to run away, my mom would call and ask where I was. She would say, “We going to call the police on you if you keep running away!” I would be like, “I am good, just know, I am okay. I am all right. I am alive, I got food and stuff.” She did end up calling the police. I was put on probation. My mom wanted me to be on leg monitoring, but they wouldn’t because I wasn’t constantly running away. Well, it was pretty constant, but they did not consider it constant because it wasn’t an every weekend kind of thing. They wouldn’t approve that leg monitor, so they had put me on probation for two months. It wasn’t nothing.

My parents wanted me to be more focused on school, of course. They wanted better for me but I didn’t want better at the time. They wanted my head in the books, but I had gone through a lot and having my head in the books was very difficult.

Sometimes I wonder if it would have been different if my daddy was around. I think it would have been better if my mom and my dad had a better connection or communication with me about stuff. I should’ve just been more focused and they should

have...I don't know. My mom and my daddy couldn't do. He was in jail. She should have interacted more with me, but she didn't, and I should have been focused more, but I wasn't.

I remember one time when I really felt like my family was really paying attention to me. I was on the step team and there was a parade that went through the downtown area. I loved being a part of the step team and being a part of that parade because my family and friends were on the sidewalks cheering me on. I tried not to smile so that I could stay focused on the parade, but you know, it's hard not to be proud and feel important and special in those moments.

My greatest accomplishment is graduating from middle school and high school. I never thought I would make it through either of those. I never took school seriously. I always took it as a joke.

I thought my life would turn out pretty bad, especially since I was running away and stuff, I thought I would be a prostitute or something, a human trafficking victim. I need to stop watching TV, that's where I get that from. I really need to stop watching TV.

Right now, I'm doing nothing. I recently got fired from my job because the management thought I was helping someone steal. I was not helping anyone steal, but I have to go to court next week. So, right now, I'm looking for a job. Otherwise, I just stay at home and watch my nephew when my sister is at work. I'm not trying to fail people like my daddy used to. He thinks I'm such a letdown. He tells me that I'll never be anything. His words hurt, a lot.

I'm just trying to fix the pieces that have been broken. Actually, I think I'm trying to fix pieces that were never really put together.

Bianca and me: Remembering together

Bianca was the only co-researcher with which I worked through this particular yearbook. Here are our recollections:

She and I

Bianca: I don't know who that is...I'm just playing. That was my favorite teacher.

She kept me out of trouble, kept me on track.

Jemelleh: Do you think she cared about you?

Bianca: Yes, she did.

Jemelleh: How do you know?

Bianca: She shed a tear about me. You cried with me.

Jemelleh: I shed a few tears about you. I did. When I see that teacher I see-- Gosh she was so young then! I was so young. I learned a lot. You might have been my third or fourth class, maybe. I felt like I had been teaching for four years.

Anyhow, there is something for me that is special about black girls. It's probably because I was once a black girl. I wanted to see you succeed and all the girls that looked like you succeed. Of course, there was something special about you. You wanted to do well. Sometimes you didn't want to do your work. But I could always get you to do your work. Anytime you didn't do your work I was like, "She isn't doing her work? Yes, she is-- she always does her work!" Then I'm like, "I see why she didn't do the work, she doesn't like you!"

Bianca, at first jokes that she doesn't remember me. As she begins to think back on our time together, her voice gets a little quiet as though she is in deep reflection. She brings up a time I cried with her after the child molestation incident she was involved in.

I will always remember sitting at my high-rolling desk on my tan barstool waiting for the first bell to ring so that the students could begin the structured part of the day. She walked into my room, pulled up another bar stool near my high desk, and began to cry as she told me about the incident. I couldn't help but cry, something I do not do often. I had only been teaching for three years at that point, and I was not prepared for that kind of story. The teacher I was at that time felt like she could solve all problems for all of her students, so she attempted to. As I reflect back, I wonder if I did the right thing, which was checking in to see how she was doing regularly. That's all. I believe the counselor already knew, so I did not report it to her. I often think about what else could have been done.

Teachers: Good and bad

Bianca: Mr. Nicholas, he used to save me. He used to try to keep me out of trouble, make sure I was passing all my classes. He used to do a day where it's catch-up on all your work, make sure it's turned in.

Jemelleh: I like Mister Nicholas. He was good for kids. I think he tried to help you.

Bianca: If he could.

Jemelleh: Was his class fun? I don't know because I was never in there. I loved Nicky. He used to do everything he could to make learning engaging for students. He believed in giving students a great deal of chances.

Bianca: It was all right. He taught physical science. It was all right.

Mr. Nicholas was one of the few teachers that Bianca talked about specifically. She indicates her appreciation for his flexibility in allowing students to grow and learn.

From my perspective, Mr. Nicholas' focus was about creating good humans rather than creating students who loved or even knew science. His lessons were often hands-on and applicable. Grades were of little importance to him. He wanted students to put forth effort, be creative, and inquire about the world around them. Bianca references some of that in here. I appreciated this approach because it gave students who may not have been academically gifted in science an opportunity to keep trying and to use science meaningfully, beyond just receiving a grade.

Jemelleh: Why didn't you like her? Verbalize it because chances are, we are thinking the same way, but let's think about *why*. It's probably for the same reason or a different reason. I don't know, you tell me.

Bianca: I don't know. She was always that one teacher that--I would just say she's a B-I-T-C-H.

Jemelleh: What did she do that was so bitchy? You can say it.

Bianca: She was always the one that wanted to see us fail. She used to make up bad things about us. Sometimes we were misbehaving and deserved consequences, but most of the time she was just making up stuff. I thought she was racist. She always wanted to see Black people in detention or silent lunch. She didn't want to see certain kids make it.

Jemelleh: It's so funny because you said that she wants to be able to influence the future, bright future for all. I do not like her either. She's underhanded, she's sneaky. She would do stuff. She would make it look like, oh she was trying so hard but really she was a racist, jealous, very mean lady. I thought she was awful

to kids. She was teacher of the year that year. Why don't we just pick anybody, Jesus!

I HATED this awful terrible lady! She was just awful. She tried to get me fired. I won Teacher of the Year that year, for the state. She pretended to care about students with dis/abilities as she was in a leadership position over students with dis/abilities, but the truth is she believed what too many others believed: they wouldn't and couldn't be successful. Furthermore, if they were successful, it was only a reflection of her hard work. She had that weird savior complex that perpetuates ableism and racism. She did not get it. I appreciated that Bianca saw right through her. Most students could, but many of my colleagues couldn't...until it was too late. Teachers like this speak to a larger issue of what it means to be a special education teacher. What beliefs do we hold? What perceptions are we challenging or promoting? And most importantly, why?

Special Education: Paraprofessional

Jemelleh: Did you ever have to do small group with Mrs. Golden or anything?

Bianca: Yes. I did. I know I did my CRCT with her one year. I can't remember what classes they were. I can't remember. I know she used to give me answers.

Jemelleh: I was just saying because-

Bianca: She would be right there working it with me. How are you getting this one? She's giving me answers.

Jemelleh: Was it helpful to you in life? Or was it helpful to you?

Bianca: Both, because she was like I'm going to work it out so that you can see how to get that answer.

Like many of the other co-researchers, the name of the game for Bianca was, “Don’t fail.” This particular paraprofessional who gave answers to the questions came up several times by my former students, but as Bianca notes, she wouldn’t just give them the answers, she would reteach them the processes by which the right answers came. When I asked Bianca whether or not it was helpful for her to have this kind of support, she said yes because she would get the correct answer and she would be taught how to get the correct answer. I’m not fully convinced that she really learned how to do the problems or answer particular questions after she was given the answer, but I pretended that she did because otherwise, I would have to question the point of even teaching the information to a goal of mastery if it really doesn’t matter if the students actually learn the information.

I reflect on Mrs. Golden’s role, and I am thankful for it and how she did it, because if I’m honest, I did and still question some of the information that was taught in my classroom. For example, identifying an infinitive has not been important to me after I closed the book on the standardized test that required me to know what one was. Looking back, I believe there was sometimes a part of me that may have sent students to Mrs. Golden to get additional help in hopes that she would just give them the answer.

Friends: With Dis/abilities

Jemelleh: I remember Tommy. Tommy is funny.

Bianca: Yes.

Jemelleh: The youngest member of his family, right?

Bianca: I don't know.

Jemelleh: Yes, he was a playing kid. Oh man, I remember Tommy. Tommy was another kid that I hoped, and I was nervous that having a label of Special Education would hinder him, because he's so smart, just like you.

Bianca: Yeah, he used to get in trouble for things that other kids did not get in trouble for. Sometimes he would get really upset about that.

Tommy had so much energy, but he was often misunderstood and miscategorized as bad. I hated when teachers would say things like, “he won’t sit still” or “I can’t do anything with him.” In my mind, I would be screaming, “YES YOU CAN! You just don’t know how to handle him and that’s your fault as a teacher, not his.” It is, however, also important to note that the teacher’s inability to adequately manage Tommy’s behavior and give him a quality education is hindered by mandates that require the teacher to focus on specific content information in order to show progress on measured testing areas.

Bianca and Tommy were a natural match because although they both saw themselves as outsiders at times, they had so much to offer the people around them, including, genuine friendship and good laughs.

Friends: Cheating

Bianca: Yeah, we cheated together in high school. That's how we graduated together.

[laughter]

Jemelleh: How did you cheat?

Bianca: Well, we had every class together.

Jemelleh: So, you used to copy each other's paper? Or--

Bianca: Tommy knew the answer for this. Come on now, you gotta move that so I move on.

Cheating. Bianca is one of the three co-researchers to mention cheating as a way they made it through school. I did not realize that cheating was something she participated in. While I do not condone this mark of dishonesty, I do understand why she felt like this was an appropriate course of action. The stakes for students like Bianca were often high. I remember that she failed the standardized test at the end of her eighth grade year and even though she had done well in her classwork, she was required to go to summer school, missing out on a great deal of rest and relaxation before she moved into high school. She talks about this in her narrative. She only failed the test by three points, which was equivalent to one question.

School Groups: Involvement

Jemelleh: Bianca, you were super involved in school. Now that I think about it.

You were in step team; you did Black History Program; you did Club Pride.

Bianca: I was the manager of the basketball team for the girls.

Jemelleh: Manager of the basketball team? Wow, you were super involved in school. Why were you so involved?

Bianca: It's keeping me out of trouble I guess.

Jemelleh: The Black History Program that year... Was that the one where I was like, "Uh-uhh, we ain't doing that part?"

Bianca: Yes.

Jemelleh: And then I changed my mind after y'all got super upset and said, "Okay, fine, then we're doing that part."

Bianca: Yes, because we did a hip hop dance and that song by Beyonce.

Jemelleh: And you danced to --?

Bianca: *This Is How We Do It*.

Both: [laughter]

Bianca helped me recall how active she was in school. She was so engaged in *everything!* If there was something to volunteer for, I could count on her. I remember that she was the leader of the D.A.R.E. program for years even when the group was very small. Present and engaged, she was always dependable in that way. She had a known presence in outside school activities, even if it was not the lead role. Having her think back through all of the things she was involved with reminded me about all of the activities that *I* was involved with! A colleague and I started the Black History Program. I was also one of the step team coaches. At the time, I knew how important it was to be involved with students outside of my classroom and thinking back with Bianca made me wonder if those experiences were of more value than those inside my classroom.

School Groups: The Haves and Have Nots

Jemelleh: This page bothers me. It's the class.

Bianca: Yes, it bothers me, too. There's not even any Black people in it. You're so right. It's probably like one, two, three, and four.

Jemelleh: I didn't think about that.

Bianca: There's no Black people in it.

Jemelleh: The school is Black as my school. Not quite sure why it's a White class. You were right about that. You were right about that.

Quest was class filled with white kids. It was the clearest example of segregation on our school. The school was mostly black, yet the students in Quest were mostly white. I wish somebody could explain this to me. The very idea of ‘gifted’ education is separatist. It is a form of tracking that has been deemed legal, denying a specialized educational experience to a majority of students. I remember observing what the students in the Quest classes were doing and taking those activities back to my classrooms. I did so because the activities that were designed for students in those classes were often more meaningful and engaging while we were often directed to be more pedagogically static for the students who were not in those classes. My students would always feel a sense of pride when I told them that they were doing what the kids in Quest were doing. I hated that. I hated that they viewed themselves negatively when compared to the Quest students.

We came to the page with pictures of the students in band. In this portion of the conversation, socioeconomics arises.

Bianca: That’s for them nerdy people.

Jemelleh: Nerds? I was in band, I thought band was cool. You didn't think band was cool?

Bianca: No we don't want to pay for no instruments and stuff, no I don't want that we got to save money on this.

Jemelleh: Economics. I see what you mean. Band was expensive, so I get what you're saying. I remember they used to pay like \$20 a month for my instrument, actually \$25. My mom struggled to pay that sometimes. There were some months

that I believed they're going to come and get my instrument because, well you know [laughter].

Bianca clearly understood the economics of school practices. The cost of an instrument can be a heavy burden on families that have limited funding. She has a clear understanding about how economics can impact necessary supplies that can ultimately limit students' full participation in school spaces. I wondered if Bianca's categorization of these students as nerdy was motivated by experiences with them, economic resource perceptions, outside media, or the opinions of others. I wondered if she would have decided to be involved with band if money was not a factor. After all, she was involved in so many other things! A part of me felt taken aback because as mentioned, I, too, was once in band. I, however, am familiar with the nerd narrative as it relates to band students, so I was not shocked.

A conversation about race and identity

The topic of the racial makeup of classes led us to this discussion:

Bianca: They come from the rich, black, wannabe white people.

Jemelleh: Wannabe white? Why would you say they want to be white?

Bianca: Because that's how they used to act.

Jemelleh: What did they do that you would say is wannabe white?

Bianca: They start changing and talking white, you can tell the difference from a hood person and a black person that want to be white.

Jemelleh: What does it mean to want to be white?

Bianca: You just want to live life as a white person, you want to-

Jemelleh: Which is what?

Bianca: The big house, the cars and- the white people do this.

Jemelleh: So black people don't do that?

Bianca: No.

Jemelleh: So black people don't have big houses and nice cars?

Bianca: The ones that want to be white, the rich black people that want to be white.

Jemelleh: They just can't be rich and be black people? They want to be white?

They want to be white?

Bianca: Hood people come from the struggle, so they come from the struggle-

Jemelleh: So what about people who come from the struggle and then they get big houses and nice cars?

Bianca: They started from the bottom and now we here.

Jemelleh: So they want to be white?

Bianca: Yes, well they ain't got to be white. [chuckles] They just made it, they made it.

Jemelleh: Okay so-

Bianca: If that's their goals in life--

Jemelleh: Is that wanting to be white or is that wanting to be better off?

Bianca: They can be both.

Jemelleh: Well I'm just asking, I don't know.

Bianca: They can be both.

Bianca's response to race almost sent me through the roof! I think that I was so upset because she is expressing such a limited view of Black people, but I feel like she

shouldn't. She knows me--she knows that I have a good house and a good car, but yet, it is like I'm also invisible to her, or worse, she thinks of me as acting white--the most disrespectful designation one could be given as a Black woman in America. Or maybe I'm just an outlier. Either way, I want her to see Black people differently because I believe that it might help her see herself differently.

I went on and on about the topic of race. I could not let it go! I asked the question about five different ways in order to get a different response, but she stuck to her first point. White people do well and have nice things. Black people don't. That is her experience. It is concerning to me because as an educator I always feel a great responsibility to expose students to a world outside of the one they see every day. However, her response made me wonder if my efforts were futile. If I teach information in the classroom and students return to the setting in which they live and will spend more time, what impact does what I am teaching actually have on their learning and understanding of the world?

After the Interview

I talked to Bianca a few times after the interview. We are connected on Facebook. She was getting ready to interview for a job as a custodian at a local government agency. She was also preparing to move out of her home and into a place with her sister. She was awaiting the trial for the Walmart accusation. She takes care of her nephew when her sister is at work.

In our most recent update, she has moved out of town after an unfavorable outcome from a court case involving a fight. She is currently looking for employment but

is having difficulty due to transportation issues. She and I have talked about the possibility of her attending technical college to obtain a trade.

CHAPTER 7

RASHEEMA

Rasheema was in my very first set of students. She is different than the others in that she was part of the “guinea pig” class. The class where, as a first-year teacher, I learned the absolute most about teaching, about advocating for students, about being a support, and thinking about all the other things that teachers are to students other than just facilitators of academic instruction.

About halfway through the year, I became Rasheema’s mentor. She became interested in the idea of having a mentor after I asked my husband to become a mentor for one of the boys in my class. As her mentor, I worked even closer with her teachers to ensure that she was on track with her learning and progress for the year. This did not require a great deal of extra time or effort since I was already the manager for her special education services and was already working very closely with her teachers. Outside of the additional attention I gave to her academics, I would spend additional time in unstructured conversation with her. Sometimes these conversations took place during the time she was supposed to be in her elective courses, but since they were usually remediation courses that she was regularly frustrated by, I thought the time would be better spent developing social and emotional competencies through conversation. We also spent time outside of school, going out to eat or going shopping. Organic conversations would develop from these interactions. We talked about her future, goals, and plans for how to achieve those goals. We set up a bank account for her and put \$50 in

it. We agreed that I would put \$50 in it each year she remained in school, and upon high school graduation, she would gain full access to the account.

I stayed in contact with Rasheema after she left middle school through phone calls. Soon after she left middle school, Rasheema got pregnant. Despite our lengthy talks about sex and contraception, she found herself on a new journey toward motherhood. This was not in her plans. I remained her mentor for about a year after her delivery. Then, we lost contact. I would catch her, or she would catch me about once a year and we would give each other quick updates about our lives each time.

The last time we lost contact, we stayed out of touch for about two and a half years. About a year and a half ago, the bank at which we opened the account called to ask if the funds in the account could be released to her. I was unable to answer the call at that time, so they left me a message. I attempted to reach the bank again, and then I began my search for Rasheema who had been back and forth between Georgia and Florida. I texted and called the number I had for her, and I attempted to use social media but was unsuccessful as she uses a pseudonym.

As I designed this study, my search efforts for her increased. It was important to me to have her be a part of this study as she is one of few who meet the criteria and the only co-researcher who knew me as a teacher at the very beginning of my teaching career. I also had a solid relationship with her.

I had lined up the co-researchers of the study and began doing interviews without her. As I sat at my computer one day reviewing data from the other co-researchers, I received a phone call. On the other end of the phone was Rasheema. I struggled to hold back tears. We picked up with the updates just like we used to. As she told me about her

updates, I was both proud of and frustrated for her. I tried to keep my tone balanced through the conversation so that she would not detect the distress I was feeling. I had gotten so wrapped up in her story, I almost forgot to ask her about her interest in participating in the study. When I asked her, she verbally committed, and we set up a time for me to come. As we hung up, I sobbed at the thought of seeing her again. I had always thought of her as my baby, but she was all grown up, trying to make her way through life, and she was struggling. I would find out just how much when we met.

“I tried to avoid it”

Ooooh middle school! I used to get in a lot of fights [laughs]. I was a mess in middle school. I didn't care how I said it. I didn't care how I made the next person feel. I was ready to fight.

My favorite class in middle school was language arts. Ms. Nurse was my teacher. She took her time--actually took out the time with her students--to get to learn each individual student. If we needed extra help after school or in between classes, she was willing to help us. She would help us with projects, presentations, or test. Anything that she could help with, she helped with. Instead of us having to do it in another class where we might not have gotten the help we needed, she would let us come and do it in her class. She took time out with us to make sure that her students succeeded. She cared, and she showed us that she cared.

I only went to the school because...I only went to school because...okay. Once my mom got down here, I came here in the end of seventh grade. I also went to school here in eighth grade. Once my mom came down here that was the beginning of the downfall. When we were in Florida, I used to have all kinds of things, nice clothes, a bike, a nice house, everything. Then we come here, and I had to leave everything in Florida. Soon after we got here, my mom got on drugs, really bad. Even though she was on drugs she made sure I always had a roof over my head. My mom was not herself anymore. I used to go school in order to get away from that.

Then when I met Mrs. Coes we're like [crying]...she saved me. When I met her, she was like a big sister to me. Actually, I looked up to her more than a big sister. I looked at her like as a great friend. She was my big sister, my mom, my friend. She made

me feel loved. She made me feel like someone cared about me. She stayed on me to do well, something that I wasn't getting from my mom. I know my mom cared, but I knew she couldn't show me like that because drugs was taking the best of her. I never did drugs after seeing what my mom went through. Well, okay. I did weed, but no really hard drugs.

I had a learning dis/ability. The areas that I needed help in when I was in school were Math and Reading. Those were the two I needed help on the most so those are the ones I had extra support in, in the resource classroom. Then in high school I just had support in Math. My grades started going up in Reading so I didn't need services anymore, so they took me out of the small group. I was in a regular classroom with the regular kids, but we just had two teachers.

In Florida, I cannot recall myself having special education services, but I know for sure once I got down here, I had it. I know I was getting them when I was in seventh grade. That's when I realized that I had a dis/ability. I was about thirteen or fourteen, seventh-grade. I knew my grades were not on point. I also realized that I had a hard time knowing certain words and then being able to understand what I read after I read it. I knew I needed help, but I didn't always want to take it.

I felt uncomfortable about having to get special education services because I didn't want anybody to know that I was special ed. I didn't want nobody to judge me or try to make it seem like I was slow or that I didn't know anything. I didn't want anybody to know that I needed extra help of learning. I used to try to avoid being associated with anything special education-related. I used to try to avoid going to my small group classes because I didn't want somebody who was not in special education to see me in the small

group, I didn't want to be seen. I used to always try to avoid going in to a small group and being taken out of class to go with another class. I used to avoid it. Well, I tried to avoid it.

In order to avoid it, I would say to the teacher, "Can I just stay here?" or "What if I sit in the back?" Sometimes my teacher would let me. If I knew that I really didn't understand something, and the teacher was there to take a small group, I would go. I didn't want to fail, but I also did not want people to think bad things about me. It was always a hard when I decided to go or when my teacher would make me go. Sometimes I would be so upset about having to go that I wouldn't be able to focus on my work. That part was hard. Really hard.

I didn't like going to the IEP meetings because there would be so many adults in the room: the teachers, your mom, that other lady. I didn't like hearing about my learning dis/ability. I didn't like talking about the learning problems I was having. They talked about some good things too, but I just did not want to hear all those bad things. I knew I had trouble reading and whatever; they knew I had trouble with reading. Did we have to keep bringing it up? During the IEP meeting I would wander off or be looking somewhere else thinking, "Okay, can you all hurry up?!" I wasn't really feeling the IEP meeting.

When we would have IEP meetings, I didn't really say much. I used to let my mama do all the talking. I don't really know why I didn't talk in the meetings. I would tell my mama everything that was going on and all about my learning when I was at home. Then when we would get in the meetings she would tell them everything I said without letting them know that I said it. I felt uncomfortable. I felt like I didn't know

what I was talking about. I think that maybe I was just nervous. I don't really know. I just didn't want them to think I didn't know what I was talking about.

My parents had some involvement in my education. My dad got locked up when I was fourteen, so he did not have much involvement. He's is still doing his time. They gave him sixteen years. My dad was a drug dealer. He sold pills, crack, pot, anything you need, my dad had. My dad wasn't involved. My mom, I guess you could say she was somewhat involved to a certain extent because, like I said, she was on drugs herself. She would try to spend time with me sometimes. Sometimes when I got home, she would try to help me with my homework. But most of the time, she was too high, so I would have to figure it out myself. She also worked, so sometimes work got in the way of her coming to some events at the school. She would send somebody up there sometimes like my aunt, so I wouldn't be by myself.

Right after middle school I got pregnant with my son. I stayed at school while I was pregnant. Then I got preeclampsia and was considered to be high-risk. Once I was high-risk, I had to have the teacher come out to the house so that I could do my school work. I was determined to try to graduate school. I didn't want to let the fact that I was pregnant stop me from doing anything.

I had my son at the beginning of tenth grade. When I was in eleventh grade, my son fell down some stairs and he bust his head open. He had got stitches and staples, and he couldn't go back to school until that healed. The wound was so deep because he fell down almost two flights of stairs. He fell down the first flight, hit stroller and then fell part way down the landing before hitting the wood that gashed his forehead. It took a very long time for his injury to heal, and someone had to stay home with him during that

time. My eleventh-grade year was almost over and my mama had to work because my mama had to pay the bills and stuff, and I didn't really know anybody trustworthy to watch my son. I was the type of mom that I didn't trust anybody with my kid, and I still don't trust anybody with my kid. I made a choice to stay at home with my child, and I had to drop out of school.

After the incident of my son falling, social services was called. I was living with my mom at the time. The social worker suspected that my mom was on drugs and told us that if she didn't get off drugs, they would take my son away from me and me away from her. That's when she started to get clean. She's been clean for five years now. She also had to go through another process to make sure she'd keep us. She had to take some classes and they had to do home visits. She did what she had to do. I was proud of her for that.

After that, I moved back to Florida and then we came back here. I left my mom's house soon after we got back. I moved in with the father of my four-year-old son. When we first started talking I didn't know that he had a cocaine problem, but as it turns out, he did. I found out once I was three months pregnant with our son. I found a cocaine bag up under the table. I asked him, "Do you do cocaine?" He said, "Yes." I didn't want to be with someone who did that and whatever. Once I found out about his drug use, he started abusing me. He used to drag me by my hair and kick me in my face. He only used to beat me at home. Then, I started fighting back. Once I started fighting back, and he stopped troubling me.

Right now, I'm trying to get my life on track. I was staying with my mom for a while. She had custody of my children because it was difficult for me to take care of

them. Then I moved to Savannah and I got into another lesbian relationship. I moved down there and I got on with a warehouse, California Cottage. I moved in with my girlfriend, but then our relationship was starting to get rocky and I didn't want to be in it anymore. The problem was that we were both on the lease. I couldn't tell her to get out, she can't tell me to get out, but I chose to leave and move back down here. I'm trying to get myself together, for me and my kids. We are trying to get stable-stable though. I have custody back over my kids now.

Before I left, I would say, "Mommy help me this; Mommy help me that; Mommy help getting Pampers," you know stuff like that, but since I got them back, I refuse to call my mom for anything. I have been back for about six months now. I don't ask her to come and get them, unless she wants to get them. I don't ask her about pull-ups; I'll find a way to get my baby pull-ups, so I don't ask her to do anything. It's a struggle, but I'm making it work.

Sometimes it feels like being black in this community is tougher than being white. I feel like sometimes it's harder for Black people to get jobs than it is for the Whites. But I don't think that racism is a big problem here. I mean, I have run across some good white people, so I would say that the racism is 50/50, so I don't really pay attention to it. I don't feel like I'm treated different for my race or for my gender.

At this point in my life, I feel like I know a lot more and can understand a lot more than I did back when I was in school. I definitely had a dis/ability while I was in school. I needed extra help in order to pass and understand the information I was supposed to learn, but I don't know that I would still consider myself to have a dis/ability now. Maybe I do though, but it doesn't affect me like it used to.

Rasheema and me: Remembering together

Unlike other co-researchers, Rasheema and I skipped around the yearbook for a while before deciding to go back through from the front to the back. She was anxious to get the pages with the pictures of her classmate. We started there.

Special Education: Classmates

As we progressed through the yearbook, Rasheema picked particular students to talk about. This particular student that she chose was in the small group language arts class with her.

Rasheema: There's Yasmine. She used to be my friends, but she was fake.

Jemelleh: Why do you think that is? I have my own idea about why

Rasheema: Because she didn't want -- I think that she didn't want people to know that she was friends with me or something. I don't know. She knew that the clique she hung around, I wasn't really cool with her clique. That was the Tonya Chase and Nicole Harris, I was not cool with them like that.

Jemelleh: I wondered about what kind of pressure she felt from her friends to not interact with you. Like you said, if her friends didn't think that she should hang out with you, should she hang out with you? I kind of felt sometimes that they -- not bullied but she was intimidated by them.

Rasheema: I felt that way too.

Jemelleh: They would take advantage of her. I felt like she was taken advantage of and I didn't like that. I thought you would have been a better friend for her but she wanted to do something different.

I taught Rasheema and Yasmine in my very first year of teaching. They were one of three of the black girls in my class. They both hold very special place in my

development as an educator. It was with them that I first discovered evidence of the differences in experiences of Black girls with dis/abilities and everyone else. Yasmine, who is not a part of this study, struggled academically. She also struggled socially, although she made great attempts to fit in. She was often taken advantage of by other students and talked into social situations that would get her in trouble. She often had the clothes and the material backing to be socially accepted into the groups that might be considered “popular.” The other two girls that Rasheema mentioned were often the center of attention. One was very academic, smart, and still retained a great deal of street-credit because her older brothers were well-known in the community. The other was socially dominating, a bully, that students responded to whether they wanted to or not. I could see that this was a tension between her and Rasheema, but I could also see that while Rasheema envied some of the attention that Yasmine got, she also understood how Yasmine was also taken advantage socially. It was almost as if Rasheema wanted to tell her that those other kids were not really her friends, but she did not want to appear jealous.

We talked about a few different students throughout the interview. This particular one was of great interest to Rasheema.

Rasheema: Ooh that little girl right there.

Jemelleh: Who was that?

Rasheema: I cannot remember her name.

Jemelleh: Tell me about her.

Rasheema: She was just so antsy like I don't know what was wrong with her. I don't know what was wrong with her but she was -- she used to get into it with a lot of students. She used to be like "Get away from me" like-

Jemelleh: I remember her.

Rasheema: She was so, always in your business and she was just at -- like she couldn't be still or--

The girl Rasheema is describing as antsy also received special education services. She was being served for ADHD and struggled to be accepted socially. Her approach to making friends was to boldly approach people and ask questions that could be seen as invasive (i.e. What did you do this weekend? Why does your hair do that?).

I assume that Rasheema did not know this about the girl and I wonder if it would have made a difference in the way she responded to the girl if she had known. While I was interested to know the answer to that inquiry, I did not mention this fact to Rasheema because I did not want to breach the confidentiality of that student.

As we went through the yearbook, there was a picture of one student that I wanted to recall with Rasheema. I remember one day when they were both in class so clearly, and one part of that particular day that stood out to me was Rasheema's reaction to the event. I was sure that she too remembered it vividly.

Jemelleh: I remember her. I remember a girl telling me a story about her. You remember that time in class with Amber? She was like, "something-something you black bitch" Do you remember that day? You don't remember that day?
[crosstalk]

Rasheema: Amber, White girl?

Jemelleh: White girl. She's pregnant and it's how I think. Do you remember her?

And she's in our class-? [crosstalk]

Rasheema: I know who you're talking about...I think

Unlike I thought, Rasheema did not remember the situation as well as I thought she would or more accurately, as well as I did. On the day of the incident, when the student called me a black bitch before storming out of the classroom, Rasheema, very riled up said, "Don't let her talk to you like that!" and she began to get out of her seat to chase after the student. I assured her that it was okay and that I would handle it. She went on for about five minutes how I shouldn't let anyone talk to me like that and what she would have done if it were her. Her reaction was so visceral that I thought she would remember. This is one example how events that teachers may deem to be big moments or turning point in their career or major learning experiences could be viewed very differently by their students. Judging by Rasheema's reaction, it seemed like she was not even sure why I brought it up, as though it was extremely minor. For me, however, it was a moment in my career that I reflect on from time to time and think about how it could have been handled differently, even ten years later.

Educators

We looked at pictures of educational leaders who held various roles throughout the school.

Rasheema: That was the _____ [removed in an attempt to maintain confidentiality]. I really liked her. She was always nice.

Jemelleh: I was having a hard time with teaching one student in particular. I was having a conversation with her about that and then, we were having conversations

about something else. And she was like, "Well, look, you don't -- you don't have to try that hard because some of those kids in your class won't learn anyway."

And when she said that, I was like, "I'm sorry, what?" [laughs] because I couldn't believe she would say that. She tried and tried to brush it off, but I held on to that line and I think that it made me teach you harder and more intently and like I already wanted you to learn and I already wanted all of you to be your best but her saying that? Like it lit a fire even under that. I don't know. I think about how people say things that are so terrible but it makes you try harder. Any of that stand out to you?

Rasheema saw this school leader as one who was a role model, encouraging and supportive. But I saw the same woman, behind the scenes, as someone who did not believe that it was worth spending time to educate my students to the greatest extent possible. As I think back to that moment, if that person was not invested in the education of the students who sat in my classroom, how much did she value my role as a special education teacher? I thought about this point after I left the session with Rasheema. I believe that the educator in question valued my role as a special education teacher, but it is possible that she didn't. It is also possible that she valued it differently than other roles? Or was it my students she did not value? This revelation led me to more questions, with few answers.

Leisure time: Lunch

Jemelleh: I remember being at lunch and being in a room with all -- you're so loud.

Rasheema: Yes.

Jemelleh: You were always so loud.

[laughter]

Jemelleh: Like oh, it was just a crazy place to be all the time.

Rasheema: It's lunch.

I attempted to get Rasheema involved in a conversation about how crazy lunch was at school. It was often loud and if drama was to unfold it was often during lunch. However, she seemed unfazed by my revelation and uninterested in engaging in that and instead say, "It's lunch," as if to say, "What do you expect?" As I thought more about it, yes. She was right. Lunch was one of the few times where students had a chance to interact with each other without a directive.

We continue this conversation by talking about another aspect of lunchtime: patio time. It was about a ten to fifteen minute period where students could go outside to socialize.

Jemelleh: What did you think about patio time?

Rasheema: It was a bad time.

Jemelleh: That was a bad time? But I thought it was important -- but isn't it important for you to socialize and talk to other people and stuff like-?

Rasheema: But you can do that in the cafeteria, too.

Jemelleh: That's true.

From my perspective, it is important that students have time to socialize and walk around, but Rasheema disagrees especially when it comes at the expense of what kinds of interactions happen on the patio. Instead, she offers the alternative of hanging out in the

cafeteria, fully supervised. This makes me think more intentionally about my perception of going outside.

The conversation about patio time continues:

Jemelleh: What would you be doing when you would go outside on the patio?

Rasheema: Chilling. I remember some fights that went down on the patio but they would like try to hide behind the trees. [laughs]

Jemelleh: Fights? You would all be sitting on by, you know like, by the benches near the door by the building and then I finally realized that you all were hiding behind the trees doing God knows what.

Both: [laughter]

Rasheema: Yes, there used to be fighting behind the trees.

As a teacher, you try to know everything, but the reality is that you can't. But sometimes what we think we know about something is much worse than the reality. When Rasheema told me that fights took place behind the trees, I was relieved! I know. That sounds awful, but the truth is that anything could have been happening behind those trees! *Anything*. And if it was a fight, it couldn't have been that big of a fight or it would have garnered more attention. A little fighting behind a tree- Meh. Baby making behind a tree? Big problem.

The conversation about patio time continues:

Jemelleh: So, overall you would say that patio time...

Rasheema: Was a bad idea.

Both: [laughter]

Jemelleh: Okay, okay, I see. And it was a bad idea because the teachers did not know what was going on?

Both: [laughter]

Rasheema: Yeah and because some people had boyfriends and they used to wander. I done seen a few.

That is what I was more afraid of: the potential for patio to be a place where students would engage in inappropriate touch. I believe the colleagues that would supervise patio time with me knew what potential was present but decided to teach students about appropriate school interaction rather than constantly policing it.

Testing

We came across a picture of students working diligently on an assignment. It was a good way to naturally bring up the topic of testing. I remember Rasheema always giving her best, even though she struggled to perform well on the tests.

Jemelleh: All right, so this picture reminds me of like tests, like taking a test. How was that? Taking a test? I'll tell you about what I thought--

Rasheema: Frustrating. I hated taking tests.

Jemelleh: What about the C-R-C-T, do you remember like the weeks that we had to do that? Where it was just like, hours--

Rasheema: And hours.

Jemelleh: -and hours of sitting. Well for you -- I was trying not to fall asleep.

Both:[laughter]

Jemelleh: But you all had to take that test and I always used to be like -- I used to think, "Why are they making them take this test?" This is just one test on one day

and I could be doing so much more. They could be learning so much more, they didn't need to take a whole week for them to take a test.

Rasheema: Yes. I hated taking tests. Every time they used to put a test in front of me I used to instantly get frustrated.

While in the classroom, I vividly remember threatening my students with the CRCT which is the standardized test that they take at the end of the year and are required to pass in order to move on to the ninth grade. I remember saying things like, “If you don’t pay attention, then you won’t pass and if you don’t pass you’ll be back here with me next year.” It makes me sick to think that I put that kind of pressure on my students, especially since I understood the impact of their dis/ability on their academic work. I wanted them to do well for themselves, but if I’m honest, I also wanted them to do well for me. It was a point of pride to have students pass the test. It was an even greater point of pride when students who nobody thought could pass, passed!

Testing is a double-edged sword, On the one hand, I know that testing can be used to measure a student’s progress and help identify gaps so that they can be individually attended to. However, on the other, testing is also used in many schools to place students in classes as they matriculate through school. Most often, the lower the score equates to the lower amount of rigor that a student is introduced to and the lower the expectations are for that student. The other side of that sword is f*** your test! Educators know what’s best for students and how to help them grow to reach their fullest potential. However, all educators are not created equally, so is that statement really true? Regardless, it cannot be ignored that tests are just one measure on one day and come with such high stakes that they are anxiety-inducing for teachers and students. Test scores and the ways in which

they are used also present the narrative that students are only as good as their scores reveal. Three other major problems with testing are that 1) teachers are asked to waste time doing test prep and weeks of testing administration rather than cultivating thinking human beings, 2) Nobody cares about slope, y-intercept, and parabolas, the minutely-detailed information on which they will be tested 3) As the quote attributed to Albert Einstein says, ““Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” I hated seeing my students struggle through those tests for no reason. And so did they.

School Activities: Participation

We talked about activities that she participated in while she was in school. There were not many. She shares her reasons for not participating.

Rasheema: No, I just refused to come home from school looking like that.

[laughter] I think, I was also just ready to get out of school some days.

Jemelleh: What did you think about like, me doing those -- like other people who did those sorts of afterschool activities?

Rasheema: They just did it to interact but honey, when you get off the bus, you have to walk down the street to your house [laughs] and people be like what you got on?

She talks about not doing dance because of the potential ridicule that will come from the people in the neighborhood as she returns home. I thought that she did not participate in afterschool activities because she would not have transportation home. I guess a part of me also thought that she felt like she was not good enough to participate in afterschool activities. While I reprimand myself for my limited views, the next part of the

conversation rationalized why I thought the way I did; although, I still should not have made that assumption.

Our conversation about participating in activities continued.

School Activities: Pageant

Jemelleh: Soccer, basketball, golf track, nothing, nothing. None of that, any of these mean anything to you? Did you ever want to do the pageant?

Rasheema: No.

Jemelleh: Why not?

Rasheema: I didn't feel like I was pretty enough for that.

Jemelleh: I always wanted you to do the pageant, but I was like, "She's totally not going to want to do it" so I never asked. I wish I would've asked though. You were plenty of pretty enough to do the pageant, you would have a great chance of winning the pageant so-

I knew the answer to my question. I hated to even ask. I hate pageants that privilege "beauty" and fashion, not because I don't appreciate these things, but because they are so subjective and rooted in European norms of beauty and fashion with an undertone of classist tensions as pageant dresses could cost upwards of \$200-\$300.

Rasheema was perfect in my eyes! Why didn't the world see her like I did? Why didn't she see? As I reflected on her words, I remembered that a few years after she left our school, I ran the pageant. I cringe as I remember it. I did nothing to invite students who many have felt like they did not belong in a pageant to participate in the pageant. To my great embarrassment, I upheld that status quo.

Middle School Rasheema

We finally get to her picture, and I am anxious about what she will say about herself. From the previous portion of the interview, I could tell that she didn't have the highest, positive perceptions of herself.

Rasheema: She's Rasheema. [laughs]

Jemelleh: Who is that?

Rasheema: A torn girl. Short-tempered, a bully, a handful. [laughs] That was Rasheema. But she was also loving to certain people that she cared about. She had her times.

As Rasheema talked about herself, I struggled not to cry. Her first words about herself were all negative descriptions: torn, short-tempered, a bully, a handful. I wondered if that is just human nature though, to first to see the negative things about ourselves before seeing the positive. She saw herself as torn, and from her narrative account, I understand why she felt that way. My view of her was a little different, however. I wanted nothing more than for her to see herself to way I did. A necessary and imperative part of the job of teachers is to believe in the ability for their students to be successful, to help their students emerge from any brokenness that they may feel, and to encourage them to view that brokenness as something other than what it appears to be, rather than brokenness, maybe it is a growth opportunity.

Our conversation about her picture continued.

Jemelleh: What I remember about this girl, is that she was very smart. I remember that this girl was one of the hardest-working kids that I ever met and that she wanted to do well. I remember that about this girl. I remember that she did have a quick temper, but I never saw it. She never interacted with me that way, so when

other people would tell me that she would do things, I would be like, "Oh, can't be. Couldn't be Rasheema" but I knew that she had it in her. I was under no impression that she didn't have it in her. I knew she had it in her, but I'd never seen much of it come out.

I've worried about this girl because I worried that everybody wouldn't see how smart she was and how hard she worked. That's what I worried about, about this girl. I knew that she would do anything that she put her mind to but I also knew that she would get frustrated quickly if she didn't understand something. She'd be like, "I'm not dealing with this." I remember she would rush through her work. She would do a little bit for a little while and then she's like, "I don't know anything about that." I don't know. I remember that there's something special about that girl I did see. I still see something special in this girl. I always wanted that girl to be confident and to know how beautiful and talented she was.

I don't know if she knew that then. I remember that I worried about this girl when she would go to other classes because I didn't know -- in my class, she would always be answering questions. She'd be doing stuff and helping out. In other classes when I would see her, she wouldn't be that way. She'd be quieter and laid back. Why do you think that was?

Rasheema: I don't know. I don't even know. Maybe it was because, like I said, I think because I was so much closer to you and you knew me in school and knew me outside of school. That's why I interacted more but I didn't think that the other teachers understood me. I was distant from them

She seemed relieved that I saw her in a different light than she saw herself. She attributed it to the connection we had. Maybe because of the relationship we had built, she was willing to question what she believed about herself and accepted my more encouraging view. I wonder how she would have responded if my description was more negative than her own.

Our conversation about her continues as she finds herself in other pictures throughout the book.

Rasheema: I'm in another picture?

Jemelleh: Yes I told you you're in a bunch of these pictures. I like this picture because it's so you. You're like, "Look at me, do you strike a pose." I love the confidence, this is you, and this is what I remember about you in middle school.

Lots of personality. Lots of crazy times on the patio. Do you think of any of these people and-? I think about how -- what else do you see?

When I tell Rasheema about the positive light in which I see her, she seems confused about my analysis. She pauses and stares at me with a half-smile, seemingly uncomfortable. I did not probe because she gave me a look that resembled, "Let's just move on," but I imagine that her hesitation was due to the fact that she did not see what I saw or maybe she was just surprised that I said it or maybe she was still taken aback by the fact that she was in it?

We found other pictures of her hanging out in the gym.

Rasheema: Yes. I was a mess in school. I used to play basketball during gym. I remember always wanting to be by myself in gym and just play basketball. That's when I got the time to think.

Jemelleh: Time to think.

Rasheema mentions going into the gym for time to think. I miss this opportunity to ask what exactly she would be thinking about. As much as I thought I knew about her, through this conversation I realized how little I actually knew. I wondered if I needed to know all of this information to be the best teacher for her and for other students. I think about how much information I need to know about my students in order to be the best teacher for them. I also consider what sort of structural supports would have to be in place so that I could optimize my teaching.

The gym was just one of a few places that Rasheema went to think and reflect.

Jemelleh: What about the media center and the library, did you go in there?

Rasheema: Yes.

Jemelleh: Yes?

Rasheema: I used to always go in the back where I would not be bothered.

Jemelleh: I'm seeing a trend of not wanting to be bothered here.

Rasheema: Like I said, I only had a select few that I did talk to and if I was in a class where there was nobody that I really talked to, I would leave and go in my own little world.

Jemelleh: I used to always want you all to go into the library just because -- not only to the check out a book but just I think being in spaces that have books that hopefully encouraged you to read.

Rasheema: I used to get the books but I'd go in the back and I used to read in about other people's lives.

Rasheema is clear that she needed her space and time to think. Her life outside of the school walls attributed to that need greatly. I remember sending her to the media center whenever she asked to go. I would send her because it's the media center with books, and I hoped that the presence of literature would encourage her to open a book or two. I am glad to know that it offered her a place of solace and that she found some comfort in reading about the lives of others when hers was less than ideal.

After the Interview

I was in contact with Rasheema for about a month after the interview. Since then, we have lost contact again. At that time, she had just moved out of the house with her aunt and was staying in a hotel. I am unsure if she has been able to secure employment or begin studying a topic of interest in a formal education setting.

CHAPTER 8

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The co-researchers in this study had a range of life experiences. Yet, all of their experiences seemed to culminate in one way, limited economic mobility. Not only did they all currently experience limited financial security, none of them had a path forward to attaining that security.

They attributed their current mobility in life to an assortment of variables. While each story uncovered new and unique situations, experiences, and impacts the major themes from across the stories can be categorized in the following way: Self, Others, Structure, and Processes. Each of these categories can further be separated into entry points or barriers to mobility. The chart has been created as visual representation of key point of the discussion.

THEMES ACROSS CO-RESEARCHERS		
SELF <i>Assume responsibility</i>	- Managing family relationships: Parent/sibling, Sibling/children, Parent/addiction - Understanding their dis/ability	- Self-Efficacy - Fear of ridicule
OTHERS <i>Desire to belong and be accepted intensifies</i>	- Cool/supportive adults - Like peer groups - Parent support	- Outcast by classmates - Unsupportive adults - Inattention “Gotcha” - Gives the answers
STRUCTURES <i>Promote the development of young adolescents</i>	- Special education accommodations - School activities	- Special education accommodations - Activities - Special education classes - Testing

Figure 2

The discussion that follows connects the storied lives of the co-researchers to one another, to the foundational research of this study, and to the theoretical frameworks that were used as a lens for this study.

Self

Each co-researcher discusses their beliefs about themselves. Their discussions underscore their perceptions and experiences that may be factors to consider as they relate to their mobility.

Literature states that one of the goals of education in middle grades is to help students, “Assume responsibility for his or her own actions and be cognizant of and ready to accept obligations for the welfare of others” (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010, p.12).

As it is put forth as a goal, it is assumed that mastery of this concept would be an entry point for mobility. Each of the co-researchers in this study seem to have embodied this goal, even though for some co-researchers, this realization may have come later in life.

Kara assumed the responsibility of managing the relationship between her mother and brother during her middle school years. As she reflects on her experiences as a special education student, she is able to accept that her challenges with learning are part of her human experience (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2013) Tasha shares a similar acceptance in her reflections.

Additionally, for Tasha, this indicator was long achieved as evidenced in the ways she talks about assuming responsibility for her sister’s children, understanding and accepting the role she played in her own pregnancy, recognizing her responsibility to the

children she has cared for thereafter, and my recollections of her learning during middle school and beyond. Bianca discusses her journey to this point, acknowledging the choices that she made along her journey could have resulted in her being in a very different place in life, one that is more damaging physically and emotionally, one resulting in prostitution or death. She articulates the turning points in her life, including those outside of her control (i.e. molestation), and understands how that impacted her subsequent decisions (i.e. running away, disconnecting from parents). Bianca accepts the consequences of her actions and discusses her determination to continue pressing forward.

By the eighth grade, Rasheema accepted the responsibility for the care of her mother who was experiencing difficulty with drug addiction, leaving little time for her to attend to her own development (Youell, 2013). The acceptance of responsibility for this co-researcher far surpassed the goal of middle grades indicators; she not only had to take responsibility for herself, but extended care to others, as she explained through the descriptions of her dedication to rearing her children.

The co-researchers emphatically push back against narrative that depicts Black girls as only having stories of pain and oppression, instead choosing to discuss the ways in which they continually move forward in spite of the circumstances with which they are faced (Edwards, McArthur, Russell-Owens, 2016). Their understanding of themselves serves as an entry point to mobility as they all seem to embody a spirit of desired progress. Additionally, while they all self-identify as having a learning dis/ability, they all consistently report no longer needing or wanting the support that the label of learning

dis/ability may supply. Instead, they opt to navigate the world under their own terms and labels, or label thereof (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

There were a few times throughout their narratives and in our discussion where it seems that their self-efficacy could be a barrier to their mobility. Lang (2007) writes that people may experience a “false consciousness,” internalizing beliefs about their abilities due to past and present messages they receive about themselves from society rife with psychological oppression.

Rasheema articulates this through her discussion of her individualized education plan (IEP) meetings. She talks about not wanting people to think that she was stupid so she does not speak up for herself; instead she relies on her mother to do so. This promotes a barrier to mobility because she does not engage in the practice of advocating for herself. A similar report was made by a student in a study done by Baker and Scanlon (2016) that co-researcher indicated that the information presented at the IEP meeting was difficult to understand, so she declined to engage.

Bianca and Tasha share these ideas, although their disengagement is exhibited through classroom interactions where they do not fully participate in the instructional content of the lesson because they fear the ridicule that might ensue from their classmates and teachers (Lalvani, 2015).

This occurrence is an example of Tenet Three of DisCrit Theory that examines socially-constructed ideas about race and ability and recognizes the impacts of being given labels that deviate from the norms of the racialized and ableized western society. For Rasheema, Tasha, and Bianca, the label of dis/ability carries with it a set of beliefs that they are not interested in being associated with as the connotation stems from

abnormality or deviance (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2013). Their beliefs about how others may perceive them prevent them from full engagement with the world around them, even in ways that are of benefit to them.

I watched each of these participants manage these relationships, sometimes without my knowledge. However, in reflection, and with their prompting, I can remember some of the struggles that they had that were unexplainable to me at the time. For example, Rasheema was managing this relationship with her mother and her mother's addiction, and while I knew the relationship with her mother was rocky, I did not know the depth or the cause, but if I had, I might have approached what she categorizes as aggression differently. In fact, I know I would have as once I knew about Kara's journey in "assuming responsibility" I engaged with her very differently. In my view, she was assuming more responsibility than any young adolescent should.

The middle school guidelines have not specified in detail what "assumes responsibility" means, but I am confident that all of these co-researchers far surpassed the expectation. However, their exceeding the expectation is accompanied by no recognition that might increase esteem or foster growth.

Others

The people in the lives of these co-researchers play a key role in their experiences and their mobility. These co-researchers all discuss the impact teachers, other students, and parents have in their lives. *This We Believe*, by the Association of Middle Level Education (2013) reports that during this period of adolescent development, the desire to belong and be accepted intensifies. Students begin to shift their attention away from parents and lean toward peer interaction. This turn in development often plays out in

family interactions causing communication to become blurred or limited as students embark on their quest for independence. Young adolescents will then turn to other caregivers or educators to build relationships with.

All of the participants depict their relationship with me as being one of the adult relationships they developed during their period of young adolescence as they worked to cement their identities. Kara, Tasha, Bianca, and Rasheema each describe the mentor-mentee dynamic that existed between us. Ayalon (2011) discusses the impact the mentoring relationship has on the social and emotional well-being of students, and the co-researchers attest to the value of the relationship from their perspective. They also discuss the interactions with other adults that they found “cool” or supportive.

Tasha talks about the support of her parents and references the impact it had on her development. Teachers and parents working together to provide positive feedback, showing acceptance and nonjudgmental dispositions toward the student, and celebrating and focusing on the talents rather than the shortcomings of the student may help to increase learning outcomes (Bergmann, 2000; Manning, 2007; Elksnin & Elksnin 2006; Wei & Marder, 2012). Tasha, of all the co-researchers, has the most positive self-efficacy and confidence. This may be partially attributed to collaboration of her parents and teachers. Additionally, Tasha was readily accepted in most circles making student interaction another entry point for mobility for her. This was not the case described by the other co-researchers.

Women and girls with dis/abilities are often excluded from activities that would facilitate social interactions and friendship building (Hanna & Rogosky, 1991). In middle school, social interactions are just as important as academic development (Wyche, 2015).

A student's ability to fit in with their peers gives them status and credibility in peer to peer interactions. If girls with dis/abilities are excluded from these interactions, the potential academic challenges they suffer are compounded by the social isolation they may feel.

Kara, Bianca, and Rasheema discuss feeling like outsiders from some of their classmates during their middle school experience. Kara talks about students not being interested in helping her when she needed assistance with work. Bianca talks about staying with her own group of friends because she did not feel as though she was accepted elsewhere. Rasheema talks about not feeling like she fit it with other students, and watching people whom she once considered to be her friend do anything to be accepted by students who were considered to be a part of the "in" group. These interactions are a barrier to their mobility as it limits which peers they interact with and how those interactions play out.

Additional barriers discussed by the co-researchers, namely Kara, Bianca, and Rasheema include the ways in which they interacted with teachers. For Kara, this manifested in being ignored or being made to feel as though she did not need help, even though from her perspective, she did. Arms, Bickett, and Graf (2008) write that because girls with dis/abilities perform what might be considered traditional girl behavior, their presented identities evade the label of dis/ability making it increasingly difficult to accurately and efficiently identify those who require additional education supports. Even though Kara had been formally diagnosed with a learning dis/ability, her behavior of blending in with the other students in the class may have led teachers to believe that she did not really need the help she requested. It is Kara's perspective that teachers did not

supply the necessary attention because they felt as though it was too difficult or too time-consuming (Lalvani, 2015).

Bianca and Rasheema's discussion focuses on their behaviors and the impact of their behaviors on their interactions with teachers. Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, (2015) write that there is evidence that teachers may implement disciplinary practices that implicitly suggest that Black girls should endeavor to display more traditional qualities of femininity, including passiveness or quietness. When these behaviors are not displayed, they are often punished more harshly than girls. I watched this occur first hand with various interactions involving teachers whom I perceived to lack a clear understanding of the students they taught.

Another teacher relationship that each co-researcher discusses is the one where they were provided answers by a teacher. The co-researchers all discuss this in a positive light, making it an entry point for mobility that will be further elaborated on in the Processes section of this discussion. The other side of this potentially very beneficial interaction are the unintended consequences and possible messages that were sent to the co-researchers about their ability or beliefs about their abilities. A 2010 study by Ashby found that if the student with dis/abilities shows signs of frustration there is sometimes a tendency to complete the work for that student rather than helping them through the process. The challenge here is that students may internalize a deficit belief about their abilities. Sleeter (1986) suggests that when learning dis/ability intersects with whiteness and upper/middle-classness, students are often advantaged as they receive extra education supports without lowered expectations. However, when specific learning dis/ability intersects with low socioeconomic status or being Black, the privileges (least restrictive

setting and accommodations) are often diminished while expectations are also lowered. That is, the totalizing nature of dis/ability and race produces a lowered expectation for students. Using the theoretical framework of DisCrit, this speaks to Tenet One, highlighting covert ways that race and ableism interact which reinforce ideas about normalcy

It is important to note that none of the co-researchers describe this interaction of receiving answers as anything other than positive. In fact, the relationship of student to teacher in this instance seemed to be built on respect. Ms. Golden served as a paraprofessional for the all of the co-researchers during their time at Top Crest Middle. She held the view that students who struggled academically should be encouraged and supported so that they could have improved self-esteem. For her, this sometimes manifested in giving them the answers to tests or other assignments, so that they might feel the joy of accomplishment when they received higher grades as opposed to bearing the heavy and consistent burden of defeat or frustration.

I watched the world interact with my co-researchers while they were in middle school: students, teachers, systems, communities, politics and policies. At first, I would observe their experiences in comparison to these things, and it took a long time for me to begin to shift my thinking to center their experiences. Our interaction gave me an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with them at the center. What I heard from them was that they did feel the negative impact of outside factors, and they either ignored them or coped with them, but they rarely addressed them head on. I reflect on how that approach impacts the way they currently see and participate in the world. Some of the co-researchers ignored or coped with so much of the negative interaction, they either

normalized it or it no longer even registers with them as problematic. This was especially true when it came to racism, sexism, and in some cases dis/ability. I reflect on whether that is due to them truly not encountering the instances or the ways they learned to orient themselves to those situations.

Structures

Schools should be places that promote the development of the physical, intellectual, moral, psychological, and social-emotional well-being of young adolescents (National Association of Middle School, 2010). This is inclusive of the physical space as well as the climate. As it relates to this theme, the following will be included in the definition of structures: special education services, other classes, extra-curricular activities, curriculum, and testing. These structures presented barriers and entry points for the co-researchers in several ways.

Special Education Services

According to the Georgia Department of Education, Special Education Rules Implementation Manual (n.d.), accommodations provide students with dis/abilities a variety of ways to access the GPS so that their dis/abilities are not barriers to achievement. A lack of needed accommodations in the classroom can prevent a student from meeting the standards that may have been possible with the right accommodations implemented well. Accommodations offer the opportunity for success, but they cannot guarantee that the student will be successful. Accommodations are simply used as a tool to ensure that students can be included in the general curriculum and classroom and state administered testing program. Accommodations are split into three groups: setting (s), presentation (p), and response (r).

While adolescents may have a variety of perceptions of their academic achievement, they often share the concern that they wished their teachers were more discreet in the provision of accommodations (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). The accommodations that were of most interest to my co-researchers were: Special education classroom (s), small group (s), and oral reading of information (p).

Tasha explains that having help is what helped her to pass. She specifically notes that she was unconcerned about what other students thought about her need for help. These results were shared by a co-researcher in a study done by Baker and Scanlon (2016). They, like Tasha, noted that they were glad to receive the help because they felt it essential to their academic success and rarely thought about peer perception. Also, like Tasha, the participant in Baker and Scanlon (2016) indicated that receiving accommodations was okay because “half the kids don’t even notice or don’t even care [that you get accommodations]” (Baker and Scanlon, 2016, p. 103). This was a sentiment expressed by Tasha in her narrative.

The other co-researchers speak about the feelings of isolation or “feeling dumb” when receiving special education services. They discuss the impact of feeling embarrassed and having to explain their needs to classmates. In the Shogren et al. (2015) study, students with and without dis/abilities pointed out some school and classroom practices that could be implemented to create a better school environment. One of those practices included pulling students out from group instruction to take part in activities that were perceived to be related to their dis/ability as it was noted to be a source of embarrassment. This sentiment is expressed by Kara, Bianca, and Rasheema. They note that they did not want to be seen in small group classes. This presents a barrier to their

education as their concern about the way their peers were perceiving them impacted their ability to accept the help they may have needed.

My original thought was that this may have been a barrier of self as it is indeed their own perceptions that are the barrier. As Baker and Scanlon (2016) suggest, "...the student her/himself was the most common source of barriers to using accommodations, with embarrassment, failure to self-advocate, and lack of awareness, respectively, being the primary barriers" (p. 94). However, with an understanding of the development of the young adolescents, we place the responsibility of developing an empowering environment on the school and system, an environment that, by the testament of these students, was not successfully created.

All of the co-researchers agree that receiving help, especially when the "help" arrived in the form of being given the answers to test or assignments, was beneficial to their schooling. They express that it was easier for them to get the answers to questions because it helped them pass assignments and tests that they might not have otherwise passed. It is suggested that teachers should refrain from doing this because it sends the message that students are not capable of learning or that it is not worth the time that it would take to teach them the content (Shogren et al., 2015). However, this is not a sentiment expressed by any of the co-researchers. They were pleased to accept the help, making this an entry point for mobility.

While none of the co-researchers specifically brought up their transition plans, each of them talk about their IEP. Each of their IEPs included a transition plan which I helped create during their eighth grade year, and they were all a part of that meeting. For all of them, it was their first IEP meeting, and one of the most important meetings, as it

was the starting point for them to advocate for themselves in a formal setting. Kelly, Test, and Fowler (2010) write that high schoolers are more successful and confident beyond K-12 schooling when they understand their learning needs and their rights and responsibilities regarding their learning needs.

As outlined by the Georgia Department of Education,

“‘The purpose of a Transition Service Plan is to assist children with their IEP team and natural supports, build the skills and support they need to reach their post-school goals. The successful transition of children with dis/abilities from school to post school environments should be a priority of every IEP team. The purpose of the Individuals with Dis/abilities Act (1997) was “to ensure that all children with dis/abilities have available to them a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for employment and independent living,’ (20 U.S.C. ~ 140 (d) (1) (A).” (Georgia Department of Education, 2015, p. 29)

The IEP is designed to be an entry point to mobility because of its fluidity and growth over time. The IEP, visited annually should be a reflection of the child’s development. I suggest that the accurate utility of this document is essential for success. After the interviews, I reached out to each co-researcher to inquire about what they remembered about their transition plans. None of them remember specific details. I asked the follow up question of whether they thought that the plan designed for them was supposed to lead them to their current status. They all responded with a negative. It seems as if this document was not used effectively as none of the co-researchers have obtained

employment at all or employment that is commiserate with their original plan by my recollection or the most current plan by their recollection.

This brings into question not only the efficacy of the services themselves, but the effectiveness in current implementation methods and their impact on mobility. The transition plan served as neither an entry point, nor I argue that the lack of effective use for this plan was a barrier.

Activities

Middle school provides many extra-curricular activities in which students can engage. This is done as part of the middle school mission to help students “Develop his or her strengths, particular skills, talents, or interests and have an emerging understanding of his or her potential contributions to society and to personal fulfillment.” (Association of Middle Level Education, 2010, p.12)

Bianca participated in a notable amount of extra-curricular activities during her middle school tenure. She notes that it helped her stay out of trouble by keeping her busy. According to Riese, Gjelsvik, & Ranney (2015), participation in extracurricular activities aides in the acceptance by peers.

While Bianca participated in several activities, she, Kara, and Rasheema discuss how some of the activities offered by the school further isolated them. Bianca discusses the economic barriers of activities like band, a class that doubled as an extra-curricular activity. She notes that the cost, as well as lack of interest kept her from participating. Along with Kara and Rasheema, Bianca talks about not feeling like they were attractive, dainty, or “good” enough to participate in the pageant. They all also talk about the financial barrier of participating and as a result, social isolation. It is important to note

that the pageant was one of the largest events that occurred at our school. There were no financial supports in place for students who desired to participate but could not due to income.

These activities present a barrier to mobility as they further outcast students who are traditionally forced in to the margins.

Special classes and Curriculum

Tracking has been deemed illegal by the federal government, however, the practice still persists in schools today under the guise of gifted, advanced, and accelerated course offers that benefit one group (Welner & Burris, 2013). This practice existed in our school and all the co-researchers discussed what it was like to watch students who were in QUEST, our gifted program, receive special treatment from teachers and from the school, special treatment that came in the form of exclusive field trips, engagement in special learning opportunities, and a special picture in the yearbook. This glaring act of discrimination presents a barrier to mobility as it reinforces messages that these co-researchers have been getting from various sources: they are not good enough, smart enough, or deserving enough to receive what students who have been labeled “gifted” receive.

Another barrier to mobility discussed by one of the co-researchers directly and indirectly by the other co-researchers is in relation to the curriculum. Tasha specifically critiques the curriculum as being useless in life after school. The Association for Middle Level Education (2010) states that students in the young adolescent phase in life would benefit from being taught to engage with complex problems, thoughtful inquiry, and collaborate with other people. However, according to the co-researchers in this study the

learning that took place in the middle school classrooms and beyond did little of these things, creating another barrier to mobility as students felt unprepared to enter the world.

According to the co-researchers, nothing about the special classes or the curriculum offered them an entry point to mobility.

Testing

Testing inevitably exists in the traditional school structure. While it is said that testing offers benefits such as increased student performance and the collection of data to better customize the learning experience for students, the co-researchers in this study push back against the benefits and position testing as a barrier for their mobility.

In Bianca's narrative, she discusses how due to failing the standardized test, she was forced to attend summer school for remediation and then required to retake the test. She talks about this being one of the worst experiences she had in school. During the year she failed the test, she had worked a great deal in math and had shown considerable progress. However, the one test that she took on one day prevented her from enjoying her summer because she missed one question more than she should have. Being in summer school sent the message that her hard work was not good enough, while also preventing her from engaging with other students outside of the barricades of strict, remedial instruction.

Tasha, Rasheema, and Kara talk about abhorring the feelings of frustration and inadequacy that the standardized tests induced as they recognized what was at stake: their promotion to high school. For students with dis/abilities the rates of passing standardized test are often lower than that of their peers without dis/abilities, yet, they are required to pass these tests and are punished if they do not. The one glimmer of hope for testing

being an entry point was Tasha's acknowledgement of the high stakes of the test pushing her to give it her best attempt.

Of all the themes, structures were the most complex in my own reflections. As it turns out, it was the most complex for my co-researchers. They, like me, could see the benefits of the structures that were put into place. They, like me, could also see the barriers. In fact, we agreed on the complexity and worked through each element of the structure together, pointing out the entry point and barriers. This is especially true as it related to the curriculum and testing.

The curriculum chose for all students, but especially for students with dis/abilities (when it was different) was and still remains lackluster. Once a student is beyond 6th grade, the teaching are largely not applicable to real-life unless the students encounter a teacher who is committed to helping them become critical thinkers. In the same vein, the tests that each of the participants discussed having to take serve no purpose beyond their schooling. That is, beyond schooling, there are few instances in life where testing is used. Beyond initial employment, testing becomes almost non-existent, yet we spend a great deal of times preparing students to take tests when we could be preparing them for more meaningful life experiences.

As a teacher, I felt bound by the system. I often felt like my choices to participate in the system as designed would limit my students socially and as a result, emotionally and academically. But short of just not participating and positioning myself to being open to lawsuit for failure to comply with the guidelines set forth by IDEA, I struggled to figure out how to do my job better. Over time, I found little tricks to mitigate the socially stigmatizing practices which would pin-point students with dis/abilities in anyway, but

for me, it was not enough. I felt like I had a direct hand in marginalizing students, and that was not okay with me. As a result, I left the classroom to help change systems from the outside and to train teachers so that they could help change the system from the inside.

Each of the themes found across the stories of the co-researchers reflect entry points and barriers for the upward mobility of the co-researchers. As it relates to the co-researchers themselves, other people in the lives of the co-researchers, and structures there were clear entry points and barriers. Within certain structures, including special classes and curriculum and testing, the reports from co-researchers underscore those themes as barriers only. With these ideas mind, I go into the next chapter with a letter to each co-researcher that outlines implications and future directions, addressing key parts of their stories.

CHAPTER 9

LETTERS TO MY CO-RESEARCHERS: THEORETICAL CONNECTIONS, IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Dear Kara, Tasha, Bianca, and Rasheema,

This chapter is my “Ode to you.” It is because of your stories that I can begin to think about what the implications and future directions for working with and for Black girls with dis/abilities should be. In this chapter, I will share the advice you had for teachers as well as how your stories can impact policy, practice, perceptions, and educational equity. I also share my thoughts of you, what it was like to connect with you again, and what I hope for your future directions. This project focused on your life experiences, as Black women who once received special education in middle school. Together, with me, your case manager and one of your eighth grade teachers, we remembered the experience together, pushed each other to think deeper and possibly differently about our perceptions and wonderings, and constructed ideas about what education can and should be for students who might share some of your experiences.

Kara,

Your story has the power to force us to reconsider the practices that we do almost automatically, while disregarding the unintended consequences.

Just before I picked you up for the interview, you texted to say, “I need a little more time to do my hair.” You are all about your looks; you have to be cute. What’s most

interesting is that you already are without doing anything fancy. You are all about making sure your hair, your clothes and your face are all in order.

This is especially true about your hair. You wanted to make sure that is was exactly what you wanted it to be, so I gave you an extra few minutes. When I pulled up to your house, there were two guys standing and sitting outside. Not sure if I was at the right place and sent you a message saying, "I think I'm outside." You assured me that I was. When you came outside, I asked, "Who are those guys?" and you told me all about them and that even though you have a boyfriend, you spend quite a bit of romantic time with one of these guys.

We had a good conversation about that, which was a great opening for our interview conversation. It was really important to me to talk to you about life in general, including what was interesting to you, fascinating to you, and what was at the forefront of your life, and on your mind. We did that; we got a chance to catch up in that way. You told me about all of those things, and then we got into the interview, our conversation was seamless.

You are always so kind. Even when you're upset, angry, or disappointed, you always put forth a positive demeanor; you always have a cool, calm, collected presence, even if that may not be what you're experiencing on the inside. You are fascinating to me. More than any of the other co-researchers, your dis/ability might have the greatest impact, but you continue to move forward.

Sometimes you get caught up in the mentality that surrounds you, and although you recognize it as something you do not want for your life, it still impacts you, consuming you in minute ways. I can still see remnants of it. I believe that if you were

removed from your environment, you would be very different. Your fortitude would help you rise above.

Your story has the power to compel educators to consider the unintended consequences of their everyday practices.

You note the importance feeling included. The special education services you received seemed to help you in many ways, but you made it clear that there were multiple challenges that came with receiving those services. Feeling like you have to explain your services to other students is never something you should have felt like you had to do. You should have been protected from that. My initial thoughts were that the confidentiality laws of special education should have protected you, but the law is vaguely written and is widely interpreted as protections only covering the details of your services and dis/dis/ability (see National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). The fact that you have a dis/ability does not seem to be protected in any of the available literature, and for that I am deeply sorry. It is an important policy update that should be made. Schools and educators should be required to make a more concerted effort to ensure full confidentiality. We are currently failing many students in this department. We are sacrificing your social and emotional development for what we believe is academic achievement. That is not a choice that should have to be made.

Together we remembered what receiving special education services was like for you and what it was like for me being a teacher who delivered those services. I have written an article for *Education Post* that I hope captures your feelings (Appendix D).

Your story embodies the first tenet of Intersectionality that states, “Race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, nation, ethnicity, and similar categories of analysis are best

understood in relational terms rather than in isolation from one another” (Collins, 2015, p. 14). In your narrative you mention that it was hard to pinpoint why you were treated differently in certain spaces. You did not know if it was due to your race, gender, age, or dis/ability. Collins and other intersectional theorists would say that it was a combination of them all. Our intersections are totalizing and cannot be separated (Carastathis, 2014). Your narrative also embodies the Fourth Tenet of DisCrit theory that "privileges voices of marginalized populations" (p. 27) as they are rarely acknowledged and reported in research literature (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2013). Your story, as related to your special education experiences, echoes the stories of other co-researchers in this study as well as the stories of other students who have received special education services. Your voice is important in making policy makers more aware that their actions have implications, helping educators engage in more helpful practices, and providing members of the community with a better understanding of the school experiences of students.

I intend to share your advice with other educators. You said:

Teachers should try to have patience, you know? Have patience. That’s really it. Have patience and just do your best working with them, don’t try to rush it. Understand where your students are coming from. That’s about it really.

This is advice I hope they take.

Kara, my greatest wish for you is that you get the training you need to obtain a career that you enjoy. I hope that you are able to finish school and welcome your sweet baby into the world without complication. I hope that you are able to provide for them the life you believe they should have.

Thank you for sharing your story.

Tasha,

It was so awesome to see you. I thought about what it would be like to see you the entire drive down. I thought about how you were doing, what I know about your Facebook account, what kind of progress you had made, and what I would hear when I got a chance to sit down with you. I was pretty anxious to meet up with you again which it probably why I got lost once I got in to your neighborhood. I probably also got lost because it was a little late the night I came.

It was dark and I couldn't see so I had to call you. You sounded like you were taking a nap but once I said that I couldn't find your house you said, "All right, I'm coming outside." You came outside and my heart beat so fast because there was my little girl. It was like 2012-13 again, and there was my little Stacey who is all grown up but still to me, you're that eighth grader that I remember or that third grader that I actually started with.

You got in the car, and I squeezed you so tightly because I've missed you so much. Then you said, "Why did you leave me?"

"What do you mean, 'Why did I leave you?'" I replied.

"Well, you don't call me. You don't text me. You just left me."

"Girl, I watched you on Facebook. I see what you're doing. You're doing so good. You're happy. You're healthy."

"Yes, but you don't ever call me or you never check on me."

"Well, you never call on me or check on me."

Every word you were saying broke my heart. I know that I'm not your mom who has abandoned you nor am I part of your family, but there's something special about you

and, honestly, of all of the young women that I met with that weekend. I knew meeting with you would be the most emotional. I knew I would have to hear things that maybe I'm not ready to hear like you needed me and I maybe haven't been there. But am I supposed to be? I don't know. Either way, I should have considered it more deeply and prepared myself better, but I didn't know what that looks like.

Anyhow, we laughed about my choice of music. You said, "You have gone away and you have changed. You are white, girl."

"What do you mean?" I replied.

"You listening to white people music. Look at how you're dressed."

We laughed, and then you laughed at the Taylor Swift that was playing on the radio as you talked about my boots. It was just like old times. Yes, that's how we interacted in 2013.

It was interesting to be back in those moments with you. You told me about your son, Kingston. I can't believe that you're a mom. You've always been amazing with kids. Always. You used to help me with Gabby. You were so responsible. It is interesting to think about you with your own child. It was good to hear you talk a little bit about that responsibility in the interview.

During the interview, you could not remember anything from middle school. That was hilarious to me. As the conversation went on, you started to remember a few things. I really looked forward to meeting you again to do the yearbook, because I knew that that yearbook would help jog your memory.

There were quite a few difficult moments for me throughout the interview, but in particular, when you started to talk about not being able to catch on, and that nobody in

your family catches on quickly, it was inexplicably difficult for me to hear... I think it's because as much as I try not to have my own deficit perspectives of what it means to have a learning dis/ability, I still see things in a light that is not always positive or helpful, and I forget what that means for your education trajectory in life.

But you don't. You are content and confident in the ways in which you learn. You are not ashamed, embarrassed, nor do you see your learning as a deficient, but rather you understand your dis/ability as part of the human experience. Your perspective helps shift mine.

Your story has the power to change deficit perceptions of dis/ability. You highlight a story of an upward mobility despite the many challenges you faced. There is also a danger to your story: a danger that may absolve people of their responsibility to do the right thing for students in need of additional supports. I hope that people see in your story the supports you had that made your success possible, including your natural, unyielding optimistic outlook. Within your story there is the opportunity to highlight and celebrate the power and relentlessness of Black women with dis/abilities.

You note the importance of parental encouragement and the art of not caring what other people think about you. You highlight the natural occurrence of dis/ability and talk about it as being part of the human experience.

Your story embodies the Fifth Tenet of Intersectionality that states, "Individuals and groups differentially placed within intersecting systems of power have different points of view on their own and others' experiences with complex social inequalities, typically advancing knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations" (Collins, 2015, p. 14). While some view dis/ability as a barrier, you do not. In

fact, from your perspective, there were no barriers that you could not overcome. Your story also exemplifies the Seventh Tenet of DisCrit Theory that emphasizes activism and supports the resistance of any effort that perpetuates racism and ableism (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2013). Your persistence is resistance. There is power in the total acceptance of who you are.

I hope to share your advice with other educators. You said:

If I could give middle school teachers some advice, I would tell them to never give up on students like me. Work as hard as you can with them. Also, teach them and everyone else how the real world is going to be. They teach us stuff that they really need to know. We learned lots of information that we did not need to know. They should have taught us about having babies and raising kids [laughter], about bills, and growing up, and then being an adult, but they didn't. And yes, they should start that in middle school because in high school you really only got one class about that. I really needed that class about paying bills and managing money because when it comes time to pay bills every month, I am dead broke the same day. I swear, it doesn't matter how much money I make, I am still broke, and I don't have that many bills!

Then they should teach us how to budget and how to save money. I don't know how to do that. I can't save money to save my life! They should also teach us about life because some of our mommas don't teach us that. They don't care, or they don't know how. But I think they should teach us that. In school, they give you one finance class and child care class, but it is too late by then. These kids are already too far gone [laughter]---having babies everything, so they are not really trying to learn. Start teaching us this stuff early!

This is advice I hope they take.

Tasha, my greatest wish for you is that you continue to unapologetically press forward with an unmatched attitude of “I got this.” I hope that you find continued success in everything that you do, and that you are always willing to take a critical look at yourself when life gets tough. I know that you will raise Kingston to be a good human who never gives up. You got this.

Thank you for sharing your story.

Bianca,

Your story has the power to force us to examine what educational equity looks like.

You are all grown up, but you look exactly the same! Your eyelashes and your make-up were super cute. Your hair was perfectly braided down.

The outfit you had on reminded me of an outfit you used to wear in middle school! That made me giggle a little. It was great to see you. You got in the car, and I felt like I was sitting next to that sweet eighth grader from so long ago. You started to tell me how life was going for you. You said, “You left me.” My heart sank a little bit again.

After the interview with Tasha, I think I'm a little bit prepared for the idea of you feeling like you needed me, feeling like I was not there, or feeling that I left you behind, but it's still hard to hear. You claimed that I left you. I reminded you that you left me first when you went off to high school. We talked in the car about your life and how you had just left her mom's. You told me that your brother and sister also live there and how everybody went their separate ways and now you live on your own.

We talked about your job situation. You told me about recently being fired from Walmart because you were allegedly in cahoots with another person who stole stuff from the store. You contended that you didn't know this person, but Walmart still asserted that it looks like you were helping the person steal.

They fired you and pressed charges against you. You were having a really, really difficult time finding a job. You said you were applying for everything except fast food. It seems fast food is not your thing. When I inquired about why not, you said, "I'm not doing that." This was accompanied by a blank stare to indicate seriousness.

You have applied for many factory jobs and retail jobs. Currently, you had a job interview at the university where you were applying to be a custodian. You believe that didn't get the job because the application asked about pending charges and you have pending charges.

You have a public defender that you hate because you believe he is trying to set you up by making you take a plea deal. Right before this happened, you were looking into going to a five-week program for corrections officers. That is one of your dream jobs, that and becoming a dental hygienist. The only reason you are not currently working in those fields is because the technical school in the area did not have the program nor did you have money to pay for college.

You don't have a job; you don't have any money; you are worried about how you're going to pay rent and how you are going to survive.

You, like all of the other co-researchers, are very, very special to me. I know your struggles. I know what you have been through, and can only imagine what it's truly like for you. I've never been in her position, I can only live through your story.

You are a fighter and you are smart. You always have been. While you are aware that limitations in your life do exist, you also have this outstanding ability to overcome them. Your resiliency pushes you to figure out ways to not allow anything to prohibit you from doing and being.

Within your story lies the opportunity for us to reflect on what educational equity and inequity look like in our schools and to acknowledge our role in perpetuating those systems.

Together we remembered what receiving special education services was like for you and what it was like for me being a teacher who delivered those services. I have written an article for *Education Post* that I hope captures your feelings (Appendix D).

Your story embodies the Third Tenet of Intersectionality that states, “Intersecting systems of power catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for people who live within them.” (Collins, 2015, p. 14) Your experiences with the world, especially as they relate to economics, were designed long before you gained the responsibility of being economically independent from your parents. Your access to resources and opportunities were limited by economic barriers that you discuss throughout your narrative. Our society privileges high socioeconomic while working to maintain the status quo for the majority. Our schools are helping to promote this social reproduction (Toshalis, 2015). There are forces against you. Keep pushing back. Your story also represents the Third Tenet of DisCrit Theory that examines the socially-constructed ideas about race and ability and recognizes the impact of being given labels that deviate from the norms of the racialized and ableized Western Society. You talked about staying close

to your group of friends when you were in school because that is where you felt most comfortable. While you recognize and usually ignored the impact of race on your life, the impact of dis/ability and the labels that come with your dis/ability had on your social interaction in school.

I hope to share your advice with other educators. You said:

If I could give teachers advice, I would tell them to not be nonchalant when it comes to their students. They should care more than just inside of school, taking into consideration if something's going on outside of school that anybody want to open up to them about-- That you can tell something was wrong. They should have been as helpful as Mrs. Coes was. They weren't as helpful. Certain ones were not helpful at all.

Oh! And I would tell them to not make students go to summer school! Summer school was awful. I hated everything about it, except seeing some of my teachers, but I hated giving up my summer to retake that test.

This is advice I hope they take.

Bianca, my greatest wish for you is that you find a way to capitalize on your thoughtfulness about the world around you and use that information to benefit your life goals. I hope that the results of the trial do not limit your forward progress. I hope that you are able to get into school so that you may chase your dream of becoming a dental hygienist. Time is on your side.

Thank you for sharing your story.

Rasheema,

Your story has the power to show us the importance of wraparound services.

Do you remember the morning of our interview? We scheduled to meet in the morning at 9 o'clock, but when I tried to get in contact you the day before, I couldn't reach you. The morning of the interview you texted me at 7:00 AM asking if we would still be meeting that day. I said, "Yes, we can absolutely meet. Would 10:30 be okay?" You agreed, and 30 minutes later, I started my three hour drive to your house.

I was a little nervous that I wouldn't be able to meet with you when you didn't text me back, so I was very relieved we were able to connect. After I got on the road, I called to see what time you needed to be done. You said that you had to pick your sons up by 2:30 PM, and that you needed a ride to do so. I offered to give you a ride to pick up your boys. Soon after, you texted me again and said that your son, the eldest of three, was sick. He had a headache, so he would be with you for the interview. I didn't know how old he was, or how comfortable you or he would be during the interview, but I was glad you were still willing to do it.

I was about an hour away from your house and the nerves set in. I always get nervous before these things, but I think after my last interviews nervousness was warranted. It had been a long time since we'd connected. When I arrived at your house, you were waiting in the front yard all dressed up with your hair and outfit in perfect order. Your son joined us soon after.

That little boy is so amazing! He sat quietly while we talked for over two hours. He colored and watched YouTube videos. He only interrupted when he needed to go to the restroom. His temperament was so calm and caring. He was polite and soft spoken. He seemed to have a little difficulty with speech, but he always expressed himself very clearly, even if I was not able to understand his speech 100% of the time. You told me

that he has been recommended for special education services for Attention Deficit Disorder. I am sure that you could see the confusion on my face when you mentioned that. He may eventually need special education services and if he does, it will not be for Attention Deficit Disorder. I wanted to tell you to tell the people who recommended that to go to hell. I do not trust these systems. They are built intentionally to disenfranchise some and promote others (Friere, 1970). Be careful.

After talking to you, I know that the system as a whole needs a major revamp and the people who work within the system may not be able to push that revamp through. For that reason, you should always consider what the unintended consequence of their ‘good deeds’ might be. Sometimes, the unintended consequences are not worth what is said to be beneficial. It’s complicated. Very.

Your story has the power to force educators and policymakers to reflect upon and revisit wraparound services. Wraparound services are those that help care for the whole child, including their homes lives and mental and physical health (Johnson & Schmidt, 2016). In your story, you talk about your mom having trouble with substance abuse and the importance of having a mentor. When you told your story, you started crying uncontrollably as soon as you started talking about your mother’s struggles. I cried too. I tried not to sob although I desperately wanted to. I felt like I needed to stay strong for you, so I did.

What I gathered from your story is that wraparound services need to include more counseling services. School counselors are often relegated to schedule and data analysis, overshadowing their duties to be able to help students through difficult situations (Bardhoshi, 2012). It is possible that if we were able to better understand part of your

home life, we could have made school more than just a place of solace, but also a place for learning and healthy socializing.

You noted how important our mentee/mentor relationship was. The only downside to it was that I lost contact with you. But maybe, if you had had a mentor once you went to high school, you could have stayed on track with the plans you had laid out. Mentoring should be a part of the lives of all students, whether we can see the need or not. From my perspective, fostering relationships with caring adults who help you navigate life is a goal of the education of young adolescents; however, not enough focus is placed here.

Together we remembered what receiving special education services was like for you and what it was like for me being a teacher who delivered those services. I have written an article for *Education Post* that I hope captures your feelings (Appendix C).

Your story embodies the Fourth Tenet of DisCrit Theory that “privileges voices of marginalized populations” (p. 27) as they are rarely acknowledged and reported in research literature (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2013). You provided a great perspective about how outside factors impact the classroom experiences you had. Your reflections of what it was like to be in an IEP meeting with adults who seemed to understand exactly what was going on while you were still trying to figure it out encourages us to revisit the system that is designed to help students understand how to advocate for themselves. The system of ensuring that students are at their first transition meeting and at all IEP meeting after they turn 16 (Georgia Department of Education, 2015) in theory is great, but there are many gaps that make the effectiveness of the idea faulty. At no point does anyone teach you about the laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or the

Americans with Dis/abilities Act that are in place to protect you. How do we, as educators, expect you to learn to advocate for yourself if you are not given all of the tools that allow you to do so? We missed that mark.

I hope to share your advice with other educators. You said:

If I could give advice to middle school teachers, I would tell them to remember that everybody has their own story. Everybody lives a different life. Specifically, when it comes to Black girls, try to really get to know them. Learn them. Learn each and every one of your students. Remember that just because a person may be seen jolly doesn't mean that they are. Their smile could hold a lot of pain. Get to learn each and every one of your students and try to get them to the path to succeed in life. At least show that you care about your students. BE patient with them and guide them.

This is advice I hope they take.

Rasheema, my greatest hope for you is that you can raise three boys that you are proud of. I hope that you find a place to call home so that you do not feel the constant burden of frequent moving. I hope you find a consistent way to provide for your boys, and that you are able to use your talents and gifts in hairstyling and clothing design to help you reach your goals.

Thank you for sharing your story.

Kara, Tasha, Bianca, and Rasheema, I will retell your stories as often as anyone will listen. I will retell it even when people are not listening. But most importantly, I will continue to work in practice, policy, and advocacy so that I can create spaces where you can tell your own story. It is your voice that has the power to change outcomes, policies, and practices. Your voice can change the narrative.

Conclusion

It has been recognized that the experience of Black girls, especially those of Black girls with disabilities, may not “conform to dominant forms of girlhood” (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 3). While there is great attention to the disproportionate numbers of Black students in special education, there is not much attention to girls specifically. Additionally, the underrepresentation of research of girls of color in education posits a situation ripe to exclude best curricular and classroom practices that would benefit and promote the success of Black girls and that of the society in which they will become active contributors (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2015):

Black women who received special education services while in middle school have a different experience when it comes to being educated in the U.S. public school. Those experiences are not only shaped by what is going on inside the school, it is largely influenced by outside factors that if understood by educators may inform classroom practice.

There may not be a set of particular practices that an educator can reach for when teaching any specific group of students. Instead, it is more important for teachers to continually critically investigate their practices and reflect on the effectiveness of their instruction and interaction with students to promote a more inclusive learning environment. They should also consistently and continually reflect on the unintended consequences of their practice, weight them against the intended benefit, and explore ways to mitigate the negative consequences.

In addition to a call for teachers to be more reflective of their practice, it is also incumbent upon policy makers and community members to reflect on the impact their policies and interactions have on Black girls with dis/abilities and how those interactions contribute to their continued economic stagnation.

The study conducted with these participants did not reveal a lack of desire or lack of effort, a narrative we often associate with people with limited economic mobility. Instead, this study reveals a clear lack of intentionality and urgency on the part of decision-making bodies to create and ensure the implementation of guidelines that would support the economic success of women who identify as Black, adult, and with a dis/ability. By intervening in what seems to be a less than ideal journey during the period of young adolescence in schools and communities, we, as a society may be able provide a better trajectory for all members of our society, especially Black women who received special education services in middle school.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your middle school experience.
2. What were you teachers like?
 - Did you feel supported by your teachers?
 - What were their expectations of you?
3. What were the other students like?
 - What kind of peer pressure issues were present?
4. Who did you hang out with? What were they like?
5. What kind of involvement did your parents have in your middle school education?
6. What was your favorite thing about school? Why?
7. What was your least favorite thing about school? Why?
8. At that point, were you aware of your dis/ability? How/When did you become aware?
9. Did you ever feel uncomfortable about your dis/ability?
10. Did other students know that you had a dis/ability or received additional help?
11. Did you feel included in your school? How?
 - Did you feel safe?
 - Did you participate in extra-curricular activities?
12. What classroom settings were you served in? Why?
13. What were the benefits of receiving special education services? Why?
14. What were the challenges? Why were these challenges?
15. What is your favorite memory from middle school?
16. What is your great accomplishment?

17. What are you doing now?

18. Is what you are doing now different than what you thought you would be doing at this age? How? Why?

19. Is there anything you think could or should have been done differently to create a better experience for you in middle school?

20. Are there middle school experiences that you believe helped shape who you are today? What were they?

APPENDIX B

1. What stands out to you about this person/event/place?
2. What do you remember about this person/event/place in relation to your experience?
3. Would you consider this person/event/place positive, neutral, or negative? Why?
4. Do you think this person/event/place has any impact on your current path in life?
If yes, explain the impact.

APPENDIX C

Special Education Was Created to Push Students Forward But It's Been Used to Hold Them Back

POSTED JUNE 20, 2017 IN [THE BELIEF GAP](#)

I was a special education teacher for six years in the resource and co-teaching setting.

Though I could not be more proud to be an educator with a special skill set in working with students of various abilities, I rarely introduced myself as a special education teacher because 1) the title comes with so many negative connotations and 2) my title of special education teacher ‘outs’ the students (particularly those in the resource setting) as receiving special education services.

Trust me. *Very* few middle schoolers want people to know that they receive special education services.

When I was named the teacher of the year for Georgia, I would watch my students wrestle with the idea of telling others that I was their teacher, and I completely understood why. From the vantage point of a K-12 student, there is nothing positive about being associated with the label of special education. Unfortunately, the belief is also held by many adults, and that is our fault.

Special education was created to ensure that we make spaces where difference can be celebrated, that we acknowledge that it is okay for students to learn in different ways, and that we adopt the belief that all students can learn if they have the right supports and are held to a high expectation.

It demands that we provide supports so that all students can have a quality education and insists that educators should be held accountable for the success of all students. On paper, special education sounds like a perfect idea, but in practice, we continually neglect to address the unintended consequences, making special education the scarlet letter in education, a designation it does not deserve.

In the name of special education, we have privileged academic prosperity over social and emotional development and have turned a blind eye to the idea that some of the practices educators engage in not only ignore social and emotional development but damages it. We pull kids out of their traditional classroom setting to provide small group or read aloud supports for testing, not recognizing that every time we disrupt the environment by removing certain students and not removing others, we are imparting a social tax of deficit on those students.

In the name of special education, we have relegated students to lowered expectations when they were more than capable of meeting the high expectations set forth. Sometimes we provide students with more supports than they need, stifling their progress; sometimes we abandon needed supports, not allowing students to reach their full potential and writing their progress off as “insufficient due to the severity of the dis/ability,”

consequently lowering the expectations so that they can appear successful. However, what that really equates to is a continual need for special services.

In the name of special education, we have separated and segregated children within schools and classrooms, causing teachers to believe that the notion of “your kids” and “my kids” in the same classroom setting is somehow appropriate. Classroom teachers often believe that the achievement of students receiving special education services is the responsibility of the teacher with the special education designation while the other students in the classroom are the responsibility of the teacher with the general education designation.

Our misguided idea that this is appropriate creates a rigid and uncomfortable environment for learning.

In the name of special education, we have outcast and mistreated educators who work just as hard and many times even harder than their peers. Special education teachers have to know content well enough to identify possible gaps in understanding, figure out appropriate accommodations before the gap impedes the learning process, manage any other manifestations of a student’s dis/ability, and keep a detailed record of student progress. Yet, far too many special education teachers are asked to make copies, grade papers, attend to behavior infractions, and cover classes when they should be teaching, as if they don’t have an increasingly important job to do.

In the name of special education, we have created progress monitoring systems that distract from an educator’s ability to provide the best learning experience and opportunities for students. Data matters. However, there are aspects of a child’s education that cannot be accurately captured by the data we attend to most.

The fact that a student is a brilliant seamstress who has designed and created prom dresses for all of her friends will not be captured in “Sarah will increase the appropriate use of answering and asking questions using interrogative sentences in conversation and written work to 20 percent above baseline or 80 percent accuracy as measured by written work samples and observations during classroom discussion. Progress to be monitored and assessed every two seconds (two seconds is an exaggeration, but as a special education teacher, it *definitely* feels like every two seconds).”

Data matters, but sometimes our focus is off and we collect the wrong data.

Special education, was created to be more dynamic than we have allowed. It was created to promote inclusion, yet has been used to foster exclusion. It was intended to be a learning ramp to a more robust education. It was created to push students forward, but has been used to keep them back. It is clear that we have misunderstood and sometimes misused special education. Special education deserves better from us. All of us.