

Cultivating Racial and Linguistic Diversity in Literacy Teacher Education

Teachers Like Me

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Chapter 2

Teacher Educator by Day, Homeschooling Parent by Night
Examining Paradoxes in Being a Black Female Teacher Educator

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2

TEACHER EDUCATOR BY DAY, HOMESCHOOLING PARENT BY NIGHT

Examining Paradoxes in Being a Black Female Teacher Educator

Monday mornings are always tough in my household, as they are for many families. It is often a mad dash out the door, hoping that my son has packed everything he needs and racing to get him to school on time. On one particular Monday, as we traveled our normal route and filed in line with all the other cars packed with families and students on their way to my son's independent school, I was stunned by the sudden sounds of sirens and the image of flashing lights through my rearview mirror. A police officer was signaling me to pull over to the side of the road. On this Monday morning, my son and I were interrogated about where we were going and where we were coming from right in front of his school as we watched other families continue on with their normal morning routines. We experienced this at a time when the issue of profiling and policing Black and Brown people has heightened presence in our social awareness and cultural consciousness, especially in the wake of a young unarmed Black man being gunned down by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Sadly, I raised my hands up, both physically and symbolically: I was sick and tired of being sick and tired, as civically engaged activist Fannie Lou Hammer once said. I did nothing wrong. I did what every other family was doing at 7:50 a.m. that Monday morning—I was taking my kid to school. There is a lot more to this moment than what I can convey here, but it is layered with complexities. One, my partner and I had recently made the choice to move our son, who had been homeschooled for three years and who then attended an urban charter school, to this private independent school in an affluent neighborhood. Our son is now the only Black male student in his seventh grade class. Second, some people, upon hearing about our Monday troubles, asked whether I told the police officer that I was a tenured professor at Syracuse University, as if my academic and professional capital would exempt me from this situation. This assertion suggests that somehow my son and I are “the exceptions” or

“the good ones.” That when we think about social injustices, whether predicated on race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and/or the intersections of these identity markers, we’re not the ones who experience such things—we’re presumed safe and untouchable.

I begin this chapter with this moment because, for me, it underscores the dissonance I’ve experienced and continue to experience in the multiple roles I embody. One of the biggest challenges I’ve encountered over the past seven years, both personally and professionally, is navigating educational experiences for my son. There are fewer times in my lifetime than those dealing with my son’s schooling that I have blatantly and overtly experienced and understood what it means to be Black in America. For my son, in his 13 years, has had to confront firsthand a narrative around his Blackness and maleness that is prescribed to him. Dialogues around race and racism are frequent and commonplace at our kitchen table, and I often question whether the same is true for my White colleagues and their families or for my predominantly White teacher education students. Without question, I know that my praxis as a Black woman teacher educator is deeply informed by my experiences as a mother of a Black boy. I also know that my own educational history, from attending an inner city Catholic school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to eventually being bussed to a high school in the suburbs and then attending a historically White university, also shapes my ways of knowing and thinking around racial and linguistic diversity in teacher education.

In this chapter, I explore the intersections of the multiple identities I occupy and have occupied—as a Black female student in mostly Black and in predominantly White school contexts; as the only Black female teacher education student in a predominantly White teacher education program; as the homeschooling parent of a Black male student; and as a Black woman teacher educator in a predominantly White teacher education context. I examine how my identity as a mother who homeschooled her son informs and is informed by my work as a teacher educator in this context. I also share examples from a qualitative study of other Black homeschooling parents to provide a broader context for how my individual experiences and insights voiced in concert with other Black homeschooling parents shape a framework for teacher education inclusive of diverse identities and perspectives. The intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality are at the center of my thinking about my own life and my work in teaching and teacher education. As Dill and Zambrana (2009) write, “intersectionality is a product of seeking to have our voices heard and lives acknowledged” (p. 3). Privileging these intersecting identities is important to understand both why I conceptualized the research inquiries highlighted in this book and how my insights about teaching and teacher education, specifically in literacy and English education, are informed. To discuss these intersections, I will share “moments” in my history that center each respective role and that directly relate to the book’s primary premise: to understand the need for cultivating racial and linguistic diversity in literacy teacher education. Starting with my self is paramount, and to

do so, I draw on both autoethnographic tools and Black feminist and womanist theories. Autoethnography, as an autobiographical genre of writing, allows for a display of the multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I rely on autoethnography in an attempt to theorize my personal experiences in these intersecting roles and identities, simultaneously working to challenge and disrupt the dominance of Whiteness and monolingual, monolithic ideologies within the teaching and teacher education context. Through an autoethnographic lens, I share racial and linguistic stories that weave through my life as a student, a teacher, a teacher educator, and a school-age parent.

Black feminist and womanist theories and histories (see Collins, 1986, 2000) largely influence the ways in which I understand my own history and lived experiences. They also provide a framework for privileging and positioning Black women as knowledge producers—in essence, our words and our stories matter and are deemed sources of legitimate knowledge. My own trajectory as a Black female educator and community engaged activist is inspired by the legacy set forth by my grandmother, Bessie Gray, a Black childcare pioneer and family advocate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from the 1960s into the 21st century. A mother of nine children, she pursued a career in childcare, specifically targeting the need for quality care by Black working-class families, because she herself needed childcare. At a time when Black mothers were being stereotyped in the media as “welfare mothers” who drained the economy and as a burden to society, my grandmother opened Gray’s Child Development Center as a quality educational facility for Black and working-class families. Her leadership and teaching philosophy were predicated on the idea that all people have “the will to do” and on culturally responsive and family- and student-centered education. Gray’s was one of the first schools I attended, and in all of my educational experience, it is the only time I had a Black teacher, and in this case, a Black male teacher. The teaching staff was racially and culturally diverse, and I had teachers who looked like me. I fondly remember Gordon Gowdy, a Black male teacher, who loved to sing and dance and who let us listen to Roosevelt Franklin from *Sesame Street*. However, from kindergarten through the rest of my formal education, I never had another teacher of color. My grandmother’s lived experience and actualized philosophy of education ground my own prerogative in teaching and served as the initial framework for my understanding of what culturally relevant, community engaged, and inclusive education can be. She stands along with other Black female educators and activists, from Harriet Tubman to Anna Julia Cooper to Fannie Lou Hammer to Marva Collins. My Black feminist standpoint is informed by knowledge produced via the experiences of Black female educators and activists. Moreover, my own identity development as a Black female teacher, and now teacher educator and researcher, is foundational to my scholarly inquiries into the experiences of preservice teachers of color, particularly of the women of color whose stories are the foundation for the chapters ahead.

The Danger of a Single Story: From Student to Teacher

In her TEDtalk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) talks about how vulnerable and impressionable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. She says:

Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Things changed when I discovered African books. There weren’t many of them available, and they weren’t quite as easy to find as the foreign books. But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized. Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

Her talk resonates with me as I look back on my childhood imagination and the limits of that imagination in the face of larger societal representations and realizations, whether it be media, television, and film or from the curriculum and educational contexts that I was exposed to in my K–12 schooling. To be sure, there is a single story of being and becoming a teacher that exists within the United States, and if I had bought into that single story, I would not be the English educator I am today. Preservice teachers of color face the dangers of that single story and have to work to discover where and how their stories fit with and within the larger dominant narrative of teaching and teacher education. My own self-reflection and examination are also critical in setting the stage for understanding the dangers of a single story of who can become a teacher.

I come from a family of early Black child educators. My first teachers were my own Black mother and then the teachers at Gray’s Child Development Center. After attending preschool at my grandmother’s childcare center, I attended a half-day kindergarten program in the Milwaukee Public School System, and then my parents enrolled me in an inner city Catholic school where the student population was majority Black, Latino, and Italian, all from working-class backgrounds (see Figure 2.1). Most of my classes were taught by White nuns who treated their work with us poor Black and Brown children as part of their missionary work, a form of constant atonement with God. I got into a lot of “trouble” in elementary school, often receiving demerits for misbehaviors and small infractions (i.e., talking, moving fast, moving slow). Besides recess and socializing with my friends, I did not particularly like school, often looking for ways to avoid



FIGURE 2.1 My second grade class photo

it. I avoided going to school on Mondays by pretending like I was sick so that I could stay home watching daytime television shows like *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Gong Show*, *The Price Is Right*, and ABC soap operas. Daytime television was my classroom, and actors like Carol Burnett and characters like Angie and Jessie on *General Hospital* were my teachers. There was a period in my childhood, from fifth through seventh grade, where I was very isolated and disinterested in school. The curriculum and teaching did not reflect who I was or who I was becoming. So I decided to supplement my own education. In addition to watching daytime television, I lost myself in books, meeting characters like Miss Celie in *The Color*

Purple and Ponyboy Curtis from *The Outsiders*. I spent a great deal of time reading books, expanding my world, and meeting characters whose lives I could relate to. But, early on, I experienced a huge disconnect between the kind of learner I was and the kind of educational experiences offered in my Catholic school setting. My learning took place largely beyond the walls of school—on my television, in my local library, in my regular church meetings, and through rich family traditions.

By eighth grade, my parents decided to participate in the Chapter 220 lottery, a program to bus inner city children from Milwaukee to more affluent and resourced neighboring suburban public schools. Each morning, I traveled an hour on the bus with other inner city kids, mostly African American students, to be in a segregated school environment. The city kids were tracked into lower level classes while the majority White students from the suburbs were enrolled in honors and advanced placement courses. I tested into the higher tracked courses and often was the only Black student in my classes. Over the course of four years, I never had a teacher of color. My English courses were taught by teachers who worshipped the literary canon and whose ideas of American literature did not include many of the authors who looked like me or who had common histories. Instead, I found ways to relate to and appreciate Hemingway, Chaucer, Steinbeck, Sinclair, and Williams. These courses not only neglected racial diversity, but the authors and perspectives represented were mostly White, male, and English speaking. Throughout my high school years, I thought I would go to college to pursue becoming a lawyer. In my senior year, however, I had a young White female preservice teacher who changed my mind. She taught an English literature course with a new energy and enthusiasm I had not encountered with previous teachers. She disrupted the mostly White, male, and English-speaking canon that was privileged in this high school curriculum and introduced multicultural literature and critical literary theories, which, at the time, was an innovative teaching method. Often disengaged from school-sanctioned curriculum, I found myself engaged in this English class. In my senior year, I decided that I, too, wanted to become an English teacher.

I attended college at a predominantly White institution in Iowa, and by extension, I was the only Black female student in the English teacher education program. Like most beginning teachers, I wanted to become an English teacher because I loved to read and loved to write. As I often hear from my own preservice teachers, I wanted to ignite that same love of reading and writing in my students. But my relationship with English teaching was colored by my developing awareness of what it meant to be a speaker of a non-dominant language. Before then, I did not have a language to describe the way I spoke when I was at home with family or with my mostly Black friends. I became hyperaware of my ability to code-switch from one context to another and with different people, and I was hyper-vigilant about displaying the “correct” knowledge and use of the English language when demonstrating my teacher proficiencies both in the university classroom and in my student teaching placements. I had to work hard to not be found out as a “foreigner” to the English language. Now, not just my racial background, but my

linguistic background, further distanced me from what perceivably makes one capable of being an effective English educator. In essence, a particular English was privileged over other Englishes, and I did not have ready access to the dominant discourse.

Upon successfully completing the teacher education program, I decided I was not ready to teach. Not because my teacher educators, student teaching supervisors, or mentor teachers expressed any doubt in my ability to become a “good” teacher, but because I did not see myself reflected in the role of teacher. In the schools where I student taught, whether urban or suburban contexts, I was the “only one,” often isolated or sensationalized in department meetings and in the teacher’s lounge. Similar to my university classrooms, the spotlight was often on me, and there was no real community where I felt “at home.” Couple that with my own internalized insecurities about my command of “standard” English, I backed away from the profession before I even began.

Now as a teacher educator, I share these experiences with my secondary English preservice teachers, and at the beginning of the English method course, I ask them, too, to reflect on why they are deciding to pursue a career in English education. I ask them to look back on their earliest educational experiences; to reflect on the teachers who both inspired and discouraged their decisions to pursue teaching; and to consider the role television and media play in their constructions of who can be a teacher and what a teacher should be. We use a critical media literacy framework to deconstruct and analyze the “usual suspects” that are mentioned when I ask them to brainstorm exemplars of teachers they’ve been inspired by in television and film, including Robin Williams as John Keating in *Dead Poet’s Society*; Hilary Swank as Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers*; and Michelle Pfeiffer as former US Marine LouAnne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*, all White teachers. The stories represent the narrative of the White male English teacher, who wears tweed jackets and loves to teach the classics to predominantly White, middle-class students, or the one where the White female teacher comes to the inner city to help a group of troubled urban youth of color from low-income communities. Few students mention teachers of color in the brainstorm, which isn’t surprising. Growing up, I recall the teacher in *Welcome Back, Kotter* and the coach from *The White Shadow*, both White male teachers. But I also remember African American actress Debbie Allen starring as the dance teacher in the 1980s television drama *Fame*. Seeing her each week challenged the single story and allowed me to see myself represented, even though she was teaching the arts.

To disrupt the fixed representations that are brainstormed, I bring in other teacher exemplars through film, documentary, and literature. We read excerpts from *PUSH* by Sapphire that tell the story of a queer Black woman teacher, Miz Rain, working with Precious, a young, illiterate Black adolescent girl who is the victim of physical and sexual abuse, homeless, and pregnant with her second child. Layered by watching scenes from the film adaptation of the book, we analyze the role that Miz Rain plays in Precious’s literacy development, and we deconstruct

the many teaching strategies and methods that she employs. The book is in many ways the story of literacy development, and in this story, a teacher of color is integral to this student's learning. We also watch scenes from the 2011 documentary *Precious Knowledge* that centers on the banning of the Mexican American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) of Arizona. My preservice teachers meet Mr. Curtis Acosta, an English literature teacher featured in the documentary who anchored his curriculum and pedagogy with the cultural histories and experiences of his students. After the Mexican American Studies Program was voted illegal and banned from the school curriculum, Mr. Acosta had to make the tough decision to abandon teaching practices that he found effective with his students. In a letter to friends and supporters that was published on Rethinking Schools website, he wrote:

What I can tell you is that TUSD has decreed that anything taught from a Mexican American Studies perspective is illegal and must be eliminated immediately. Of course, they have yet to define what that means, but here's an example of what happened to an essay prompt that I had distributed prior to January 10th.

~~{Chicano playwright Luis Valdez once stated that his art was meant to, “. . . inspire the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at a solution. Express what people are feeling.” The novel *So Far From God* presents many moments of social and political commentary.}~~ Select an issue that you believe Ana Castillo was attempting to illuminate for her audience and write a literary analysis of how that theme is explored in the novel. Remember to use direct citations from the novel to support your ideas and theories.

~~{Culture can play a significant role within a work of fiction. For generations in this country, the literature studied in English or literature classes rarely represented the lives and history of Mexican-Americans.}~~ In a formal literary analysis, discuss what makes *So Far From God* a Chican@ novel and how this might influence the experience of the reader. Remember to use direct citations from the novel to support your ideas and theories.

The brackets indicate what I had to edit since the statements were found to be too leading toward a Mexican American Studies perspective. In plainer terms, they are illegal and out of compliance. A quote from a great literary figure, Luis Valdez, is now illegal, and a fact about education in our nation's history is also illegal.

You can imagine how we are feeling, especially without any clear guidance to what is now legal and what is not, and what makes matters worse is that TUSD expects us to move forward and redesign our entire curriculum and pedagogy to be in compliance. (Acosta, 2012)

Sadly, Mr. Acosta was challenged with realities that many teachers face today in the wake of moves to further standardize school curricula, to mandate scripted teaching, and to racially and linguistically sanitize literacy teaching and learning. What is accomplished by bringing stories like those of Miz Rain and Curtis Acosta into the teacher education classroom is the disruption of the perpetuation of the White teacher/students of color narrative. While the majority of the students in my methods classes are White female teachers, they cannot leave our time together thinking that teaching is a White profession. For some, I am the first educator of color they have encountered in their entire schooling experiences, especially in the area of English language arts. As a teacher educator of color, it is critical that I assemble a collective of diverse teachers, both real and fictive, to counter the public assumptions of what teaching should be and what a teacher looks like.

Homeschooling Parent by Day, Teacher Educator by Night

Despite the systemic challenges that my parents faced as they navigated my P–12 education at each turn, I was academically successful, and I secured promising post-secondary opportunities. However, I was hyper-aware of being a Black girl who spoke a nonstandard dialect within educational settings. I understood that I needed to embody particular identities and engage particular discourses to become a legitimate member of the predominantly White, affluent suburban high school and the predominantly White university I attended. And I did so successfully. My own struggle with these issues begins with my history as a racially and marginalized student. In my English methods classes, I always pause when the majority of my preservice students reflect on what it means, often in urban settings, for them to have different racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds from the students they teach. I pause because in my entire P–12 education, and even my post-secondary experiences, I never had a teacher who looked like me. I never had a teacher who lived in my community or who related to African American culture and language. I experienced culturally relevant pedagogy in my home, church, and community, but not in school. As a mother to an African American boy in a 21st-century educational context, it has been my conscious exercise to ensure that he does not have to engage in such language and literacy performances. Instead, I have worked to identify spaces that are inviting and validating of his many identities and discourses and that seek to equip him with the necessary tools to excel academically. Because of my unrelenting hope, I, like my own parents, have made tough choices regarding my son's academic journey.

Homeschooling Parent by Day

For three years, my partner and I homeschooled our son. Now 13, he has attended public school, Catholic school, charter school, homeschool, and now an independent private school. As a strong public school advocate and as a teacher educator

preparing preservice teachers to work in urban public school settings, I often encounter students who are curious about how I can prepare them to teach in public school settings when my choices for my own child have represented alternatives. At one time, I was a homeschooling parent by day and a teacher educator by night. I am an educational researcher committed to identifying viable solutions to improve the educational experiences for marginalized youth, particularly African American children in urban school settings. Yet as a school tax-paying member of a small urban community, I chose to pull my son out of the very public school system I purport to serve. This was a difficult decision for me because my convictions question how one can advocate for children and families in schools and not send one's child to those very schools. What does it mean for me to prepare teachers to teach in the public school system, and encourage them to be strong advocates for public education, while homeschooling my child? Am I promoting the message that my child is better than other children or that he deserves (or is entitled to) a better opportunity because his mother is a university professor? This is a complex question with a complex set of answers, and it is one that I revisit constantly. This ongoing process of critical reflection, however, informs my work as a teacher educator and educational researcher.

When my family first moved to Syracuse, New York, in 2008, it was important for us to live in the city limits and be in close proximity with the students and families I hoped my research would serve. Prior to the move to Syracuse, my son attended a neighborhood public elementary school in Boston where, with both advantages and disadvantages, we were a part of a school community committed to ensuring educational opportunities for children. I was not always 100% satisfied with my son's educational experiences in Boston; however, I was a part of a community that welcomed my voice whenever I had concerns. I had lived by the philosophy that if I was working to transform public schools, I could only do so by working from within (Collins, 1986). This meant that my son needed to attend a public school and that my partner and I needed to be active parents in that school community. Once we moved to Syracuse, we settled on a house in the city and enrolled our son, Phillip, who was entering first grade at the time, in the neighborhood elementary school. Excited to learn about our son's new school, we scheduled a visit with the school administrator. We wanted to tour the school, see our son's first grade classroom, and potentially meet his new teacher.

During the first meeting with the principal, which occurred after school hours and inside her office, she proceeded to deliver a sales pitch-like presentation about her wonderful school. While the principal presented a positive picture of the school, we wanted to talk with teachers, see teachers and students working together in classrooms, and hear from parents about their experiences in the school. The principal was hesitant to fulfill this request, letting us know that our talking with teachers might be seen as disruptive. She stated that our request to talk with the teachers was odd given that other prospective families did not ask to do so. The school had three first grade classrooms, and we were told that the

principal would assign our son to one of those three classes. The rationale for those assignments was not clearly articulated; at best, we were told already enrolled parents made requests about which classroom they wanted for their children. At the time of our enrollment, those requests had already been made and fulfilled. We asked the principal to explain the difference in those three classes and the styles of those three teachers. Uprooting our son from one school system to another was stressful enough; we wanted to make his transition as smooth as possible. We were hoping the principal might take into consideration the learning needs of our son and place him in the classroom environment that would be most conducive to a smooth transition, both academically and socially.

When I received notification of our son's classroom placement, I immediately called the school and asked to schedule a time to meet his new teacher. On the phone, I spoke briefly with his new teacher, and she asked me a few questions about my son. I shared with her how much he loved school and that he loved learning. I told her that he was reading and that he had strong verbal communication skills. He was very excited about his new school. The teacher expressed that she was somewhat surprised he was assigned to her classroom because historically (she had been teaching in the school for over 20 years) she worked with children who entered first grade with low literacy skills and who needed support with language development. She characterized her class as "remedial." She feared that, based on what I had shared about my son, if he remained in her class, he would be instantly bored and she would need to supplement each lesson for him. I, too, was concerned given the positive conversation I had had with the principal. One of the reasons we were excited about our son attending this school was because of the large percentage of English language learners and students from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, it appeared that students were potentially segregated and tracked into different classrooms. I asked the teacher if there was tracking by ability level in the school. She paused and did not answer directly, but she did say, "Mother to mother . . . advocate for your son. I'm also the mother of an African American boy, and this happens way too often. You have to do what's best for your child."

My partner and I scheduled another meeting with the principal, a White woman who had been the principal at the school for 16 years, to discuss our son's placement. We also wanted to meet his potential first grade teacher, a Black woman who had taught in the district for 30 years. Even though she was honest with us in stating that she did not feel her classroom was the right placement for our son, she did say she would do everything she could, as his teacher, to make sure he got what he needed as a learner. It was not a surprise for us to learn that the majority of the children in his classroom were Black children and that many of the children received special education services. Sadly, it was also not surprising how easily our son, an African American boy, was placed in a "remedial" track.

In the end, we pulled our son out of the district and sought other schooling options. My introduction to the city's public school district was as a parent, not

as a teacher educator, researcher, professional developer, or educational consultant. I entered into this context first from my location as a parent who was concerned with securing the best educational opportunity for her son, an African American boy. Many education scholars have looked at the disproportionate placement of African American children in special education (Hale, 1994; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Russo & Talbert-Johnson, 1997) and at how tracking disadvantages certain groups, particularly African American students from low-income communities (Oakes, 1985). Yes, I was concerned that my son was placed in a remedial class given that his formal academic and development records pointed to his being “on track.” I was also horrified by the thought that other students were assigned this class because their parents did not have the social, cultural, and/or linguistic capital to advocate for them. Why was I any different? Why was my son any different from “other people’s children”? It remains critical that I trouble my subjectivities as I explore questions about literacy education for African American and other historically marginalized children.

In February 2009, I participated in a community forum on the state of education in the city of Syracuse. My involvement was first as a parent who had a troubling experience with the school district, but also as a literacy scholar and English educator from Syracuse University. As I listened to the stories from other community members, I heard parents expressing frustration that “Black boys don’t even go to school” and “our African American boys don’t know how to write.” One parent said, “You are your child’s first teacher. The schools don’t teach the children anything about history. They need to know their history.” Parents and other community members discussed the importance of the Black community taking back the education of our children. We talked about the need for mentors and the importance of nurturing parent involvement in schools. Some in attendance were unaware of the failure of the local schools to educate all children. Few were aware of the local school data that reported a barely 50% graduation rate for all students and 25% graduation rate for African American male students.

As my work in the community evolved, my interest in the importance of community engagement in improving academic achievement for African American youth, particularly African American adolescent males, in urban communities took shape. My involvement in the community forum was initially as a concerned parent and as a literacy researcher and university professor with resources and “capital” to serve the needs of my community. In time, I began to identify as an emerging community activist desiring real change in our schools and in the lives of the children and families who lived in the community. One of the solutions that emerged during the community forum was to initiate a parent movement to “Take Back Our Children’s Education.” Many parents, fed up with what some called the “persistent miseducation and failure of African American youth,” discussed the possibility of forming their own schools and the vitality of African American homeschooling. During those community meetings, I met several

families who had removed their children from the public school system and had taken on homeschooling as an immediate solution. I had never considered homeschooling to be a real possibility or an option, mainly because I held certain misguided assumptions about homeschooling. I learned from the other parents in my community about homeschooling, and I made the decision to join an African American Homeschoolers Network.

Deciding to pull my own child out of the school system and educate him “at home” was a scary decision, even for a literacy scholar and teacher educator. How would I homeschool my son and work full-time as a literacy scholar and teacher educator? At the time, I was a non-tenured assistant professor at a research institution that signifies certain scholarly and professional expectations if I wanted to earn promotion and tenure. I was preparing the new generation of teachers to teach other people’s children, yet at the same time, I felt I was neglecting the quality of the teaching and learning experience I wanted for my own child. My decision to homeschool was possible because it involved an equal partnership between my partner and I, and we cultivated a support community through the African American Homeschoolers Network. Being realistic about the multiple identities that I occupy, I had to determine a way to find balance between being a researcher, a teacher educator, a community activist, and now a homeschooling parent.

When we initially decided to pull Phillip from the public school system, we felt our only option was to enroll him in a private school. For two years, he attended a private Catholic school where he was one of few students of color in the entire school. While he did fine academically, his academic experiences were dominated by the completion of worksheets and learning the rules. We witnessed his sense of creativity and originality dissipate slowly while he fought hard to “fit in.” This was a challenge, given his racial background in a student population of mostly White, middle-class, Catholic children (we also were not Catholic). We had two experiences where our child came home in tears, retelling experiences that he was bullied, teased, and ostracized because he was Black. In one incident, fellow students told him that he could not play with them because he was Black. The principal’s reaction to this incident was “boys will be boys.” As parents, we knew that over time these kinds of experiences would chip at our child’s self-esteem and that, without significant safeguarding and intervention, he would begin to resent all that he is.

After much reflection and deliberation, my partner and I decided to pull Phillip from the school system and begin homeschooling. We had a lot to learn about homeschooling despite both coming from families with strong ties to education. To my advantage, I also have three education degrees, and, at one time, I worked as a teacher with both 7–12 English and K–12 reading certifications. Coupled with my partner’s experience as a youth program director, one might expect that we would be well qualified to homeschool our child. Yet this was one of the most difficult decisions we have experienced in our parenting journey. We are huge proponents of public school education and community engagement, so

homeschooling our only child felt like we were instantly isolating ourselves and our son. I was most concerned about the lack of social experiences he would have by not attending school. This concern was instantly calmed when another homeschooling parent in the African American Homeschoolers Network asked me if I was satisfied with the kinds of social interactions my son was having when he did attend school, especially given his young experiences with racial micro- and macro-aggressions. Homeschooling our only child meant we would have to be more purposeful about creating opportunities for social interactions and community engagement.

Counterstories of African American Homeschooling Parents

While homeschooling Phillip, I decided to document my own experiences as a homeschooling parent and those of parents within our homeschooling collective. We, along with other parents in the collective, grappled with many of the same tensions that teachers in our schools today face—how to reconcile the demands of standards-based curriculum with the need to differentiate curriculum and instruction for an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student population. The consequences of not dealing with these tensions are detrimental and life altering for marginalized youth, especially for Black boys. The dominant narrative in teacher education emphasizes the preparation of White, middle-class, female teachers to work with a racially and linguistically diverse student population (Sleeter, 2001) and, more specifically, for educating Black boys (Kunjufu, 1982). This inadvertently suggests that one way to mitigate the educational failure of Black children is via the White female, which subsequently ignores the role of Black educators and the importance of recruiting and sustaining diverse teachers. In a special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education* on “Preparing Teachers to Teach Black Students: Preparing Black Students to Become Teachers” (2011), contributors make direct links between the vanishing of Black teachers to the achievement of Black children and point to the real consequences of having a majority White, female teaching force educate an increasingly racially and linguistically diverse student population. So much emphasis has been on the preparation of White female teachers to prepare racially and linguistically diverse students that little attention has been given to alternatives to educating Black children in the current school system, such as African American homeschooling.

There exists a growing number of Black parents who are deciding to remove their children from the public and private school systems and to educate their children at home (Llewellyn, 1996; Penn-Nabrit, 2003). Several reasons underlie such decisions, but a prominent one is to disrupt the histories of failures for their youth. Empirical investigations of the purposes and outcomes of African American homeschooling are needed to further build on scholarship that highlights effective curricular and pedagogical practice for African American children. I conducted life history and interview research of African American homeschoolers to examine

the role of African American home educators as education and community activists. A goal of this research was to make visible the kinds of literacy teaching and learning that extend from within the African American homeschooling community and, in particular, the practices that support the academic and social achievement of African American boys. I examined these questions: What are African American parents' experiences with the US schooling of their African American boys? What are the reasons underlying African American parents' decision to homeschool African American boys? What do these parents feel are the benefits and challenges of homeschooling African American boys? Across socioeconomic, educational, and religious backgrounds, I learned that African American families were choosing to homeschool for a variety of reasons.

The dominant discourse surrounding the academic and social experiences of African American boys is that they are failing. This discourse disregards how African American boys are being failed by the larger institutional structures that are in place. Given this reality, I (Haddix, 2009) argue,

An overemphasis and perpetual spotlighting of the “African American male crisis” does not identify effective practices either. So, does framing the problem of educating African American males in the dominant discourse of failure and the achievement gap provide us—literacy researchers, policy-makers, educators, and school leaders—with a guaranteed hustle? Does the achievement gap and discourse of failure work because there is universal buy-in that African American masculinity is analogous to intellectual prowess? How do we do the work of correcting the educative experiences of African American [adolescent] males without furthering the stereotypes and misrepresentations of African American masculinity? (p. 342)

It is not just a question of why young Black males are failing, but why they are succeeding. Educators, researchers, and policy makers truly concerned with creating positive academic and social outcomes for Black boys must move beyond negative statistics and dominant representations and insist on systemic investigations of the kinds of practices that sustain both in and out of school literacies of African American males.

While the research points to the crisis state of Black males in the United States, fewer studies have reported on the kinds of solutions that are necessary to lessen the persistent achievement gap between African American males and their peers. Further, fewer empirical studies look beyond how Black adolescent males perform on school-based tasks, as determined by standardized test scores, and take into account other measures of effective learning and engagement, including those that occur outside schools. Willis (1995) wrote about her son's experiences with literacy in school and in home contexts, shedding light on a concern that many African American homeschoolers contemplate—what can parents do when they witness their child disengaging from learning in school?

Historically, homeschooling has been a central tradition in African American communities. Documented history of African American education demonstrates the ways in which home, school, church, and community were intertwined during segregated schooling (Fields-Smith, 2005; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009). Fields-Smith (2005) writes, “This connectedness supported parent and community desires to secure education for their children in a context similar to that suggested by the West African proverb ‘It takes a village to raise a child’” (p. 132). Fields-Smith reports that African American parents’ role in schools included attending conferences and school programs as well as working on committees that influence curriculum and policy. This parental role also included conducting learning activities at home or asking someone else in the community to assist their children with schoolwork when a parent was not able to do so (Fields-Smith, 2005). Such studies point to the integral role of parental involvement in the academic achievement of African American children.

Nationally, homeschooling is on the rise in the Black community (CNN.com, 2010). Many families cite their dissatisfaction and distrust of the public school system to educate their children as a reason for homeschooling. Llewellyn (1996), a homeschooling parent, writes in *Freedom Challenge: African American Homeschoolers* about the reasons some people homeschool:

They see that racial integration in the schools has not always worked for their benefit. Among other things, they feel that it has disrupted community life and thrust children into hate-filled classrooms where few people encourage or home for their success. Some homeschool because they see that schools perpetuate institutionalized racism. Some homeschool because they are tired of curriculums emphasizing Europe and excluding Africa . . . Some homeschool because they want to continue the Civil Rights struggle for equal educational rights, and they feel that they can best do so by reclaiming their right to help their own children develop fully—rather than by working to get them equal access to conventional schooling. (p. 15)

Llewellyn also shares the stories of African American parents who are not satisfied with “mainstream” home schooling networks that often exclude them. She recounts the experience of one mother, who said,

In the homeschooling world, I have noticed that white families have supports that are non-existent for Black families. Our history, needs, and desires are different. No matter how much equality society thinks we enjoy, we are still far from equal in opportunity. In order to improve our lives as homeschoolers, we must again pave our own path. (p. 72)

As this mother points out, the reasons that African American parents decide to homeschool are related to their histories, needs, and desires. In this way, African

American homeschooling cannot be understood through a mainstream, White American lens and must be centrally located within the shared experiences of African American homeschooling parents and their children.

At the time of my study of African American homeschooling parents, LaSonia was in her first year homeschooling her two sons. The mother of four school-age children, her youngest and oldest daughter both attended school while LaSonia homeschooled her two middle boys, first and fourth grade. Based on the challenging schooling experiences her sons had in a charter school the year prior, LaSonia questioned, if she did not pull her boys out of their public school, “Will the boys fall behind? Will they slip through the cracks? Will they end up losing their enthusiasm to learn?” She was “not willing to sacrifice her children to the system,” and she did not want to see her Black boys fall through the cracks like so many other young men who are uneducated, unemployed, incarcerated, or dead. Rita was an African American mother who homeschooled both her son and daughter. She first began homeschooling her son because “his whole demeanor and energy started to change when he started school.” For Rita, homeschooling was a way to counter the deficit treatment of African American boys in schools and to prevent her son from internalizing the negative Black male identity that he witnessed in school.

My partner and I also participated in the study. At the time of the study, our son was in the third grade. Because of my role as a full-time university professor, the primary responsibility of homeschooling our son often belonged to my partner. He provided an important perspective on the role and impact of Black fathers in the academic lives of their Black sons—a perspective that offered a counternarrative to the prevailing misconceptions of Black men as absent from their children’s lives.

Through the observations and interviews with homeschooling parents, I learned that homeschooling was seen as a last resort to “save our boys.” I learned that families were tired of witnessing their children being labeled, underserved, and ignored in school. Parents in this study discussed the importance of their sons’ formative years. Each mentioned how vital a strong early educational experience is in shaping the future success of their sons, and each could note a negative experience connected to race that made them hesitant with keeping their sons enrolled in the public education system. Parents witnessed their children performing poorly in school because the instruction was described as lacking cultural relevance, inclusive methods, and student-centered focus.

For LaSonia, homeschooling became an option because she was “not willing to sacrifice her children to the system” or have them fall through the cracks. Through homeschooling, LaSonia believed her children were more invested and in control of their education. While the boys were in the charter school, she found that she often had to supplement and re-educate at home because Kendell, her oldest son, did not fully understand his teacher’s lessons. She described the boys’ experiences in the classroom as disconnected and felt that the teachers were

“behind the curve” in their instruction. This disconnection resulted from large class sizes, distractions, and what was taught versus what was learned (“teaching for the test”). Thus, she relied on homeschooling as a viable option to provide her boys with a strong educational foundation. According to LaSonia, “If they don’t have this grounding right now . . . there’s some people that never make that up.” For example, when she learned about the current New York State graduation rates for Black males, she said, “You can either look at it like there is something pathologically wrong with Black boys where they cannot graduate from high school at a decent rate or there is something irretrievably wrong with the current public school educational system.” She opted to go with the latter, stating, “The current educational system doesn’t fit the needs of its students.” LaSonia also felt a strong need to teach her children about their heritage, culture, and the counterhistories. On Columbus Day, for instance, she did not want them to just recite a rhyme about Columbus discovering America but to learn the truth about how Christopher Columbus and other Europeans destroyed and stole the land of the indigenous people who inhabited America. She wanted them to have more Afro-centered curriculum through experiences and field trips. This represented her desire to offer a critical examination into history and to center Afro-based curriculum in her boys’ educational experiences.

Similar to LaSonia, Rita—another homeschooling parent I interviewed—sought ways to ensure that her sons would receive quality educational experiences. Rita decided to homeschool her son for two specific reasons: she noted that the public school was more focused on disciplining over education, and she was invested in her son’s growing perception and self-awareness of his racial identity. When her son asked in first grade, “Mom, why do all the kids that kind of look like me . . . why are they always getting in trouble?” she saw her son beginning to form a negative perception to his identity as a Black male. As he began to look to her for answers about whether he was inherently “a bad kid,” she chose to pull him out of school mid-year rather than have that negative perception grow. She said, “I was going to have to do something different.” When Rita was asked why she decided to homeschool her son, she said,

I felt school was more toward discipline and not educating. I noticed that my son his whole demeanor and energy started to change when he started going to school. So already it is starting to form some kind of negative, and he wanted to know if he was a bad kid . . . One reason we continue to homeschool is because of the [national and state graduation] statistics.

Rita also discussed the value of creating an independent learner who will speak up and challenge stereotypes, assumptions, and misinformation when he needs to.

Knowing the reported statistics about academic and social outcomes for Black males, both Rita and LaSonia saw homeschooling as a way to prevent their sons from not making it. They felt that simply allowing their sons to be subjected to

subtle and overt racism in the classroom was not acceptable. Witnessing their children's diminishing spark to learn encouraged them to take back their children's education, which was their way to disrupt the current status quo and deficit constructions of their children. Both LaSonia and Rita described homeschooling as the best alternative to building a strong, solid foundation for their sons' education and for their social, cognitive, and gender development. As Rita expressed,

When your child goes out, you do not allow other people to frame your child in a way that does not bring back a person that is an asset to your household and to your community. Right now, we have a lot of African American boys who end up being criminalized, put into special education, . . . [or] encounters with the law . . . you are setting that child up to not be an asset to their household. They will then become another burden . . . So you've got to match with people [in your close network] who really get that we are at a war for our kids' minds right now. Especially the minds of the boys.

For these parents who were not willing to take any chances with their sons' education, homeschooling became the best option because they were in control and could offer the necessary support and mentors for their child.

These stories presented by African American homeschooling parents challenge the danger of the single story that only a certain kind of teacher is capable of educating diverse student populations. It also disrupts the dominant narrative that some parents are somehow disinterested, disengaged, and uninvolved in their children's academic lives. Drawing from some of the pedagogical and curricular choices of the African American homeschooling collective, strategies and methods that are student centered, culturally relevant, and critical teaching, my own teacher educator "toolbox" grows with exemplars of teaching practices that do not align with the White teacher/student of color narrative. These stories exemplify the idea of "teachers like me" by highlighting the plight of Black parents taking back their children's education.

Teacher Educator by Night: Preparing Teachers for Other People's Children

As a Black female scholar, and more importantly, as a Black mother who is not simply interested in but vigilant about the urgent need to change the current educational system for Black children and adolescent youth, my passion and activism often supersede a goal of advancing knowledge for the field of literacy research. Instead, my priorities include working to transgress (hooks, 1994) the boundaries and limits of the current educational system for families and eradicating the detrimental effects of the lack of freedom many families feel in providing educational opportunities for their children. My experiences both as a homeschooling

parent of a Black boy and my participation in the African American Homeschoolers Network informed and shifted my role and impacted my work as a teacher educator. The knowledge gained from these experiences has great potential to contribute to our knowledge about effective curricular and pedagogical practices and interventions for African American boys, and it continues to inform the work I do in preparing teachers to work in diverse educational settings. Dominant narratives in teaching and teacher education position African American parents, like other parents and families from marginalized groups (e.g., immigrant parents, working-class parents), as absent, uninvolved, unengaged, and/or not caring about their children's educative experiences. This inadvertently suggests that one way to mitigate the educational failure of African American children is via the White female and ignores the role of African American parents.

This master narrative surfaces often in my work with preservice teachers. On several occasions, students in my class have voiced assumptions about the lack of parental involvement in urban school settings. There is a displacement (and in some instances, a complete disregard) for students' families and communities. Preservice teachers omit the role of parents in the education of their children and fail to view parents as resources for effectively working with children in schools. As a teacher educator who works with both preservice and inservice teachers, I consider it my responsibility to address the tacit ideologies and attitudes that persist around racial and linguistic differences that teachers bring to the classroom. In doing so, I hope to push them to be confident, effective teachers for *all* children. Teaching is more than just methods and strategies; it is also very much about the mind-set one brings to the profession. It is about the preconceived ideas that an individual holds about his or her students, their families, and their communities. I consider it my duty to remind teachers that our task must be to support the academic achievement of all students while at the same time capitalizing on their cultural and linguistic identities in ways that not devalue or erase them.

When preservice teachers in my classes are in urban field placements, the prevalent classroom talk is about behavior, classroom management, and control, instead of on effective, transformative pedagogies in the literacy classroom. I share with my preservice teachers the stories shared by African American homeschooling parents or from African American male middle school students whom I work with in the Writing Our Lives writing project, a program for middle and high school students in the Syracuse community. In one of my writing workshops, one high school student wrote about an incident in his school where he was falsely accused during a routine school "lockdown" and "hallsweep," an example of how educational institutions borrow from prison language and culture to describe and enact systems of power and control (Ferguson, 2000). Instead of figuring out how to best educate African American males, the greater emphasis is on how to control them and socialize them for the educational system to the prison system pipeline, what Hale (1994) termed "incarceration education." The dominant discourse of failure persists even within the teacher education classroom, and much of my

work as a teacher educator is on moving students away from the positioning of African American males and other marginalized youths as scapegoats for failed academic efforts.

I see African American homeschooling as an example of a contemporary social movement that not only presents viable solutions to the miseducation (Woodson, 1933/1990) of African American males, but it offers insights toward a new model for transformative teacher education. In my classes, I always start with myself—I let students know that ways in which I approach literacy and English education are foreground by the multiple identities I occupy, including being a homeschooling parent. I often share with them my experiences with literacy teaching in the context of our homeschooling curriculum. On the first day of the semester, I let students know that one way I assess their dispositions for certain teacher qualities is by whether or not I would want my son to be a student in their classroom. Certainly, I cannot figure this assessment into their final course grade formally; however, I tell them that I aim to teach them to effectively work with other people's children, including my own.

As a teacher educator and community-engaged scholar, I strongly believe achieving equity and equality in education for all is a twenty-first-century civil rights issue. I now occupy multiple social identities—an educational researcher, a teacher educator, a community activist, a homeschooling parent, and a parent of a child who has attended many educational school settings—that position me to tackle the issues facing marginalized children and families from inside and outside schools. I also reach back to the intersections of my own educational trajectory—as a Black female student in both mostly Black and predominantly White school contexts; as the only Black female teacher education student in a predominantly White teacher education program; and as a Black female teacher educator in a predominantly White teacher education context. This imperative begins with advocating for my own child, and homeschooling was, for me, a form of resistance and way to act loudly. Since our homeschooling years, my son has attended a charter school and now an independent private school, and we face a whole new set of challenges and issues. How do I advocate for my child in ways that do not further marginalize the other students? How can my actions work to improve conditions for all members of the school community? I know that my son is, in many ways, “protected” because of social capital we hold as parents and the knowledge we have gained from our many experiences navigating his educational journey. We know that we have the right to question and confront what we perceive as injustices within schools, and we have taught my son to question and critically examine such instances as well. But, my son is one of many Black boys in this school setting. He cannot be the exception.

Working within the system is a constant struggle, and it is my resolve to do so in ways that inform all I do as a teacher educator and educational researcher. Engaging in social justice and equity work is critical for me because I have to remain vigilant for those parents still searching for their village. Part of this vigilance is my commitment as a literacy scholar and teacher educator to helping

future teachers to unpack the assumptions about students and communities of color and to avoid falling into the trap of a single story. This work begins by starting with the self and locating our many selves within the broader global teaching community.

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42 Homeschooling Parent by Night

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