BECOMING ALL THAT I CAN BE: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF
AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS’ LITERACY PERCEPTIONS AND
EXPERIENCES IN AN URBAN TITLE I SCHOOL

by

MARCIA VERNISE WINGFIELD

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by

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my beautiful daughter, Trinity Renee Wingfield. May the many bedtime stories, trips to therapy, library and coffee shop visits lead you to write your own poetry of life, liberation, and joy.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank God for giving me the strength and the husband to endure this journey.

To my husband, Cedric, thank you for your continued commitment during this process. I do appreciate your supportive role and sacrifices in order for me to thrive in this endeavor.

I want to thank my family and friends for your role in babysitting, cooking, cleaning, and encouraging me throughout the process. To my work family, my expressions of gratitude and appreciation for your understanding and flexibility throughout this journey.

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To my grandmother and mother, who have both authored books that relate to the lives of African Americans. I appreciate your creativity, innovation, and willingness to venture into the unknown. Thank you for being the example and maternal strength in our family.

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ABSTRACT

MARCIA VERNISE WINGFIELD
BECOMING ALL THAT I CAN BE: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS’ LITERACY PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES IN AN URBAN TITLE I SCHOOL
Under the direction of WYNNETTA SCOTT-SIMMONS, Ed.D.

This narrative inquiry used the frameworks of critical literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy to understand literacy experiences of recent high school graduates. The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of recent African-American high school graduates’ literacy experiences throughout high school. Also, this study sought to promote educators’ acknowledgment of culturally situated and culturally diverse perceptions of African-American students’ varied literacy practices as viable contributions to the conceptualization of literacy curriculum. Through in-depth interviewing, three participants who were graduates of an urban, historically low-achieving, Title I high school told stories of their past, present, and future. Participant narratives were analyzed using the sociocultural approach to narrative analysis. Findings from this study revealed students’ varied literacy practices helped construct meaning of their experiences in school and out of school. Additionally, findings suggest building relationships throughout high school with teachers and peers cultivated increased engagement in literacy. Further, participants felt their overall high school literacy experiences prepared them for college level literacy tasks. As a contribution to the existing body of research for African Americans, this success-oriented narrative
recommends pedagogical shifts in literacy instruction that not only acknowledge the
social and cultural literacy practices of African American students but also incorporate
multimodal forms of literacy in the critical analysis of the dominant curriculum.
PROLOGUE

I Am the Black Child
I am special, ridicule cannot sway me
I am strong, obstacles cannot stop me
I hold my head high, proudly proclaiming my uniqueness
I hold my pace, continuing forward through adversity
I am proud of my heritage
I am confident that I can achieve my every goal.
I am becoming all that I can be
I am the Black Child, I am a Child of God

- Mychal Wynn

Poetry is the rhythm of the soul, the mind of imagination, and the freedom of expression. Poetry is a form of expression that uses metaphors to describe and understand human experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The light, lyrical flow is deceptive in its ability to simultaneously engage and persuade. Poetry, through its limitless forms and formats, provides a doorway into the world of imagery, symbolism, and perceptive possibility. Poetry defies the rules for standard forms of expression and allows the author to suggest, propose, and advocate through innuendo and inference. It affirms while appraising and critiques while entertaining. It uses embellished and suggestive language to support as well as admonish. It is multifaceted in its simplicity and deceptive in its use of ordinary terms and etymological phrases. As such, poetry has the potential to be a powerful tool for social justice that allows students to advocate for their own communities (Clift, 2013; Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010). The use of poetry as a metaphorical backdrop for this research study is appropriate in that the human experience is metaphorical in nature, and the ways in which we think and act are
predicated on how we compare realities of everyday life (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Weiss (2005) and Clift (2013) discussed the use of poetry among urban minority youth as a vehicle to counter silence in creative forms of self-expression. According to Clift (2013), poetry allows students to experience life and literature in a divergent and culturally situated manner. For students of color, culturally situated poetry is a means to make connections between their personal cultural experiences to the larger world, which can in turn validate their experiences as relevant to the larger society (Stovall, 2006).

Some may call this type of liberating poetry that counters silence, urban-framed poetry (Clift, 2013; Stovall, 2006).

Urban-framed poetry explores topics of race, gender, religion, and other controversial topics that may otherwise be absent from the standard classrooms’ curriculum (Clift, 2013). Students, through the literary freedom provided by poetry, are at liberty to find alternative methods of expression that aide in understanding the world and their role within the world (Clift, 2013; Stovall, 2006). Thus, it is critically important for students to read urban-framed poetry as well as write their own poetry. When students write original poetry, it helps others to understand them, their lives, and their lived experiences. As expressed by Furman (2007) and Stovall (2006), writing original poetry creates an opportunity for students to define themselves and is essentially a reflection of students’ lived experience.

My experiences as an English teacher, and now an English language arts instructional coach, have provided me with the opportunity to witness the academic and personal achievement that poetry provides for students, especially those classified as
underserved, at-risk, or marginalized other. I have witnessed students engage in beautiful
depictions of pain, struggle, resilience, happiness, and hope through their analysis and
creation of poetic verse. Poetry has provided the vehicle for students deemed to be
failures by teachers, holding diminished views of their potential, to produce eloquent,
racially, politically, and socially charged poetry with great figurative meaning.

My former student selected the Mychal Wynn poem at the opening of this chapter
because he felt the words of the poem depicted his peers’ beliefs about their personal
identities and journey. Students featured in the schools’ Black History Month Spoken
Word Café chose to recite the poem at the end of the program. Throughout the program,
students presented original poetry and told stories of opposition, pain, rape, racism,
freedom, feminism, emasculation, police brutality, will, drive, perseverance, and
determination. Essentially, these students expressed insightfulness and sophistication
that I had never experienced before. These experiences had helped shape their literacy
lives in a much more positive manner, a manner that was divergent from what they may
have typically been asked to do in their classrooms. Interestingly and disconcertingly,
some of these same students were considered at-risk delinquents with little hope for the
future, when labeled using mainstream criteria.

I selected this poem as the metaphorical frame for this chapter because of the
message of hope and possibility that it conveys. Just as the Obama Effect (Vaughn,
2015) engendered hope, possibility, and academic achievement for African-American
students, the message in this poem embodies the potential for African Americans when
their experiences are socially and culturally situated (Bartlett, 2007; Barton & Hamilton,
2000; Street, 2003). The intense media attention focused on Barack Obama as an African-American successful presidential candidate reduced common stereotypical associations for African Americans, which created positive images for African American youth ( Vaughn, 2015).

In addition to messages related to the Obama Effect ( Vaughn, 2015), literacy practices that are culturally and socially situated further help shape students’ identities and link broader cultural issues with school content (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 2003). The poem speaks to the hearts and minds of the many African-American children sitting in classrooms across America. The poem embodies a sense of pride, a sense of belonging, a sense of achievement, a sense of perseverance, and a sense of unmatched confidence. Despite being overlooked and infrequently documented, these qualities epitomize the stories of African-American children and their divergent literacy achievement. Society, in general and in the academic environment in particular, has failed to paint the canvas with colors representative of the confident, prideful, intelligent, and strong African-American child ( Edwards et al., 2010). Regardless of the embedded nature of deficit thinking, on the part of educators, researchers, and policy makers, this research sought to highlight the ability of African-American students to overcome adversity and prevail in their socially constructed literacy endeavors ( Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2001; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Trent, Artilés, & Englert, 1998).

Furthermore, this research sought to expel the negative labels of deficient, helpless, and incapable, which often appear in research and media outlets about African-American adolescents ( Delpit, 2012; Edwards et al., 2010). While embracing the legacy
of success that lies within every mind, soul, and body of African-American students, this research study will add rich counternarratives that challenge the accepted grand deficit-narrative about African-American students.

Collins (1992) and Walker (1996) supported the conviction that there is a brilliant child locked inside every African-American student. Thus, it is our responsibility as educators, community members, mentors, coaches, and human beings to provide a handle for the door to open endless opportunities. The freedom, nonstandardization, poetic artistry, and lyrically based expression used in poetry are parallel to the themes this research sought to address, which corroborates its use as the metaphorical backdrop to this study.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

You see I believe African-American students have the key,
It’s there already inside of them.
Only need a little encouragement, a little step stool to reach the handle,
A little grace to fall and try again,
A door slightly ajar to peer through to possibilities that lie ahead.
- Marcia Wingfield

Possibility . . . potential . . . encouragement . . . support. The key to the ability of African American students to reach their highest potential lies in the belief of those tasked with their education that they can achieve. While there are theories and research that support the idea that African Americans are culturally deprived or culturally deficit (Gay, 2010), there is research to refute these claims (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010). Scholars like Delpit (2012), Kinloch (2012), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Tatum (1997) refused to accept the ideas that African Americans have an inherent lack in the mental capacity to succeed. Rather, these scholars embrace ethnic identity and responsive pedagogy as vital in the recognition of African Americans’ cognitive abilities and talents (Ani, 2013). There exist stories of African-American students as critical thinkers, literacy learners, problem-solvers, leaders, and artists (Kinloch, 2012). However, national school culture and the narrow curriculum of most public schools do not fully meet the needs of a great deal of African-American students (Ani, 2013; Gay, 2010; Kinloch, 2012; Pai, Adler, & Shadiow (2006).
Janks (2014) contended,

In the actual world—where a 17-year-old boy sells one of his kidneys for an iPad; where adult men rape babies; where rebel fighters video themselves mutilating and cannibalizing the body of an enemy soldier to post on YouTube . . . it is even more important that education enables young people to read both the word and the world critically. (p. 349)

A continuous increase in disparities among groups of people classified as other prevails in American today, and a critical approach to education may assist in questioning such injustices in order to enact change among them (Janks, 2010). Literacy, which is embedded in all content areas and all facets of life, has the potential to provide real world relevancy to curriculum content (Morrell, 2008).

Protocols, practices, and procedures must exist beyond K-3 education to address the needs of children who may face challenges when developing literacy skills. In my experience, students who struggle in literacy are socially promoted in elementary and middle school. As an English teacher in the Georgia public schools for a number of years, I have seen the results of social promotion in urban schools. Socially promoted students lack the prerequisite skills needed to access the high school curriculum. Furthermore, students who are victims of social promotion tend to exhibit other issues, such as misbehavior and emotional instability, which may cause students to lose more in-school time. Rader (2016) agreed, socially promoted students tend to have attendance and discipline problems, and some do not finish high school. For students who are ill prepared for advanced literacy development and exhibit lower proficiency in literacy,
postsecondary options are limited resulting in unfulfilled promises (Zimmerman, 2011). Consequently, not only are literacy skills a major contributor to academic success in secondary schools but also to students’ sense of belonging to school and eventual life outcomes (Zimmerman, 2011).

Morrell (2008) maintained, “For our children (African-American), literacy determines their ability to engage the world as citizens, as intellectuals, as workers, and hopefully as the artists, filmmakers, and writers of the next generation” (p. xi). This is important because, according to Ford and Moore (2013), “Nationally, data indicate that African-American high school students, on average, perform 4 years behind White students in reading and math” (p. 402). Thus, literacy instruction in 21st century schools needs to focus on meaningful, memorable, and useful practices that enable students to reach their individual promise (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007; Jackson & Cooper, 2007). In doing so, educators consider critical literacy as an avenue to engage marginalized youth in exploration of self-concept, examination of oppressed social contexts and relations, and discourses of exclusion, resistance, and change (Morrell, 2008).

**Background**

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Literacy across the Curriculum (2003) provided historical data on literacy development. Ash (2003) reported that in 2001, “Failure rates on employer tests of literacy and mathematics skills grew from 19 percent to 36 percent in 1998” (p. 2). On the 2000 High Schools That Work Assessment, only 28% of eighth grade students tested at or above reading proficiency level, and only 34% of twelfth grade students tested at or above reading proficiency level (Ash,
Simultaneously, 2000 marked the year that National Education Goals were to be met:

1. Every child will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, art, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our nation's modern economy. (Urban & Wagoner, 2014, pp. 323-326)

These goals are three of the eight that directly correlate with data reported by Ash (2003) that revealed there is much work left to do regarding meeting the goals of America 2000. This appears to be a striking contradiction of what was achieved and what was expected. According to Thompson (2004), two categories of research explain underachievement: research that blames the victims and research that attributes underachievement to schooling practices.

Despite a glaring emphasis on underachievement of African-American students, Thompson (2004), along with Delpit (2012), dispelled much of the belief that African Americans are hereditarily predisposed to a lack of intelligence and further interrogated the idea of the schools’ and society’s perpetuation of underachievement in African-American students. Because culture is deeply ingrained in educational experiences
(Howard, 2010), “the relationship between literacy and culture is bidirectional; moreover, cultural diversity mediates the acquisition and expression of literacy, and literacy education influences and molds an individual's cultural identity” (Flippo, Hetzel, Gribouski, & Armstrong, 1997, p. 645). Thus, in some cases, a critical literacy framework and culturally responsive pedagogy have proven successful for African-American students situated in urban communities and draw on the connections between education, culture, and literacy (Gay, 2010; Morrell, 2008). Furthermore, the goals of American 2000 encapsulate the idea that it is possible to quantify all children to such goals. It is important to consider that children are complex individuals; the cultural and social context they possess warrant consideration when designing goals and school curricula. Contrarily, schools have neglected to incorporate literature that directly relates to marginalized individuals, therefore creating an atmosphere of alienation and disrespect that conspires to push marginalized youth out of school (Morrell, 2008). While a plethora of research conducted by Ford and Moore (2013), Morales (2008), Emdin (2016), and McKinley (2010) associated literacy development with positive social and economic outcomes, Morrell (2008) suggested that a lack of literacy practices and pedagogical understandings that challenge the dominant literacies and provide the needed exposure to literacies from the underrepresented population exists.

A central component of culturally responsive pedagogy is that culture is omnipresent during the educative process (Sperling, 2003). Boykin (1994) argued that a significant gap between Eurocentric cultural norms of the school and cultural norms of
African-American students contributes to underachievement of students of color. It follows that many educators have adopted lower expectations for students of color that further perpetuate such underachievement, and teachers tend to view students of color from a deficit viewpoint (Billings, 2015; Delpit, 2012). Unintentionally, teachers focus on shortcomings rather than positive qualities that become visible when framed by culturally specific content. Eurocentric-based curriculum leads to a direct discrediting of the unique perspective and insight students of color possess.

Chang (2013) offered counternarratives as viable options to promote culturally responsive pedagogy and critical literacy:

Counter-stories within the CRT [critical race theory] tradition are narratives told by historically marginalized peoples, whose experiences, cultural practices, and ways of knowing have been delegitimized, erased or co-opted into dominant discourses like those of meritocracy, capitalism, heteronormativity, whiteness, and empirical research. (p. 349)

As such, critical literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy provide students with an educational experience that enriches their lives and values their cultural and social backgrounds.

An increasing number of African-American students attend urban schools categorized as low socioeconomic, academically failing, and socially nonstandard (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2017). Urban school districts have unique characteristics that include high poverty rates, significant numbers of immigrant students, nonwhite students, and a transient student body (Kincheloe, 2004, 2010). Thus, urban
schools face greater challenges to meet the needs of such a diverse student demographic that tends to frame perceptions and reality associated with urban school systems (Ahram et al., 2017). Orfield (2004) concluded that school policy and educator perception that fail to acknowledge the inequality that exists in urban schools contribute to the achievement gap among ethnically and linguistically diverse students. Thus, culturally responsive pedagogy provides a pedagogical paradigm that teaches to and through personal and cultural strengths of various ethnic groups that are represented, while recognizing their intellectual capabilities and prior accomplishments (Gay, 2010).

Students who attend these schools often experience disassociation with schooling. Ani (2013) explained this phenomenon on the exposure to low quality instructional materials and curricular methods that are divergent from their learning style and culture. Teach for America (2011) suggested that issues associated with poverty, inequitable political influences, historical structure of school systems, low expectations, and racism contribute to a disassociation with school. Edwards, McMillon, and Turner (2010) asserted, “When African-American children hate school, they are likely to disengage from the enterprise of learning, which can have dire consequences for their educational and social lives” (p. 4). Therefore, for students of color who struggle to find commonalities and relevance in texts, schools, and society, it is essential for educators to offer students opportunities to become aware of their potential and create meaningful connections with school content (Edwards et al., 2010). African-American students are talented, motivated, and unique, but some schools have failed to access these characteristics of excellence.
With this premise of critical literacy, this research study seeks to situate the education of marginalized students, inclusive of African-American students, in the context of culturally responsive pedagogy to illustrate its connectedness to critical literacy and potential effectiveness in the achievement of African-American students. More specifically, African-American students need to receive an opportunity to read the word and the world critically in order to access the dominant curriculum and make it relevant to their everyday lives to increase their engagement and achievement (Freire, 1970; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Morrell, 2004). Billings (2015) addressed the fact that students of color feel alienated from school and possess a negative self-concept, while in contrast, students who excel academically feel valued, intelligent, and capable. These discussions substantiate the need for a counternarrative that highlights the success of African-American students who may otherwise experience labeling by the hegemonic discourses of mainstream media, literature, educators, school systems, and society. Therefore, this narrative inquiry research will focus on African-American students’ perceptions of lived experiences about their literacy experiences and culturally responsive pedagogy as a contributor to these experiences.

Statement of the Problem

An increasing number of African-American students who attend schools with low socioeconomic demographics lose interest in school and experience diminished academic achievement (Edwards et al., 2010; Teach for America, 2011). One of the catalysts for this is the lack of literacy skills among students that makes it more difficult for them to relate and adapt to the rigor of school (Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). Zimmerman
(2011) suggested that educators’ perception must shift, and educators must understand that literacy integration does not detract from content, but instead improves comprehension and retention. In the education of African-American students, fundamental changes are necessary for these students to thrive (Edwards et al., 2010). Thus, the incorporation of critical literacy practices is essential. The transforming of current literacy practices to a more culturally responsive approach will promote equality (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). By doing so, the research will emanate from a position of transformative axiology that fosters “the pursuit of social justice, the importance of cultural respect, and the need for reciprocity in the researcher-participant relationship” (Mertens, Sullivan, & Stace, 2011, pp. 230-231).

According to Abt-Perkins and Greene (2003), schools with higher populations of students from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds receive literacy instruction that is outdated pedagogy and not theoretically sound. Hence, it is imperative to increase knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy and its impact on literacy instruction for African-American students. According to McKinley (2010), researchers “have conducted comprehensive studies that demonstrate that culturally responsive approaches dramatically improve the academic performance of low-income and minority students” (p. 2). However, Thompson (2004) highlighted that culturally relevant teaching is still a topic of debate met with resistance from some educational professionals. One perspective that is missing from these academic circles is one driven by students and their beliefs, assumptions, and experiences regarding literacy acquisition (Jackson & Cooper, 2007; Thompson, 2004).
Theoretical Framework

How do we know what we know? How do we come to know truth? What is our perception of the world? These are questions, or paradigms, to consider when conceptualizing and conducting educational research. Based on Given’s (2008) definition, “a paradigm is a set of assumptions and perceptual orientations shared by members of a research community” (p. 591). Thomas Kuhn introduced the paradigm construct, and in the 1970s qualitative researchers began adopting a different view of paradigms and their relationship to educational research (Given, 2008). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), paradigms can be broken down into three major facets: ontology, epistemology, and methods. Various assumptions are associated with these aspects, and none are restricted to simply one way of gathering and analyzing data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For the proposed research study, I plan to employ a qualitative inquiry with a social constructivism paradigmatic viewpoint to understand African-American students’ perceptions of culturally responsive literacy, which uses personal narratives to shape a counternarrative for African-American students.

With the understanding of a paradigmatic viewpoint, a constructivist paradigm embodies the understanding of perceptions of human experiences as it relates to literacy; therefore, it is appropriate for the nature of this study (Costantino, 2008). Glesne (1999) referred to the constructivist paradigm as a construct that “portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing” (p. 5), and further discussed research paradigms as approaches, methods, and purposes for a particular researcher and his or her study. This social construction occurs through social interaction with an
emphasis on understanding a phenomenon; therefore, the research must study individuals within the context of their social and cultural lives (Costantino, 2008).

Constructivism emerged from the anti-positivist movement of the 19th century (Costantino, 2008). Influenced by the hermeneutic tradition, William Dilthey (1833-1911) identified hermeneutics as a method for the human sciences because of its focus on context and the circular process of interpretation (Costantino, 2008). Other notable contributors to the constructivist paradigm were Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Max Weber (1864-1920). Costantino (2008) indicated that Husserl’s most significant mark on constructivism was the development of phenomenology, whereas Weber focused on participants’ motivations of actions within social science research. John Dewey also made an impact in the constructivist paradigm through his belief that humans learn through interaction and construct knowledge in social contexts; moreover, he advocated for student-centered learning (Costantino, 2008). According to Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006), Vygotsky believed that the “social environment accounts almost entirely for the development of higher-level cognitive processes such as language, memory, and abstract thinking” (p. 192). Because of this constructivist ideology, Vygotsky developed the sociocultural theory regarded by many as the most significant contribution to the constructivist paradigm (Costantino, 2008).

Paradigms take on multifaceted features when framed by ontological, epistemological, and methodological beliefs (Costantino, 2008). Crotty (1998) discussed the ontological beliefs associated with the constructivist paradigm as realism because what we view as reality is an understanding of our social constructions. Realism is the
idea that human social life is meaningful and reflected in our explanations, concepts, and theories when approaching our theoretical work (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Essentially, literacy is a social practice in which individuals interact with text, each other, and the world to make meaning (Perry, 2012; Street, 2013).

According to Bartlett (2007), sociocultural approaches to literacy helps us to understand how people position themselves culturally and socially in order to construct their identity which is vital as people engage in the ongoing process of literacy acquisition. With this in mind, sociocultural approaches to literacy have played a major role in the field of literacy and in the context of everyday life as a social practice (Bartlett, 2007; Perry, 2012). Thus, it is only appropriate to situate the proposed study in the social constructivist epistemology, rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory (Costantino, 2008). Additionally, Perry (2012) contended that sociocultural perspectives of literacy include an emphasis on power relations; therefore, the epistemological belief in critical theory is also relevant to the study.

To emphasize the relationship between a constructivism paradigm and sociocultural theory, critical literacy theory, and culturally responsive pedagogy, Figure 1 depicts the wide-reaching theoretical construct of constructivism to a more specific theoretical understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and its alignment to this study.
Constructivism is grounded in the concept that individuals construct knowledge through social interaction. This socially situated interaction establishes literacy as a communal practice through an understanding of sociocultural theory (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984, 2013). Critical literacy—with an emphasis on power relations—serves as a foundation for culturally responsive pedagogy that fosters cultural competence and critical social consciousness (Freire, 1970; Scherff & Spector, 2011) through diverse forms of reading the word and the world.

Not only are a researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions of importance throughout qualitative research, the chosen methods of data collection are also critical in the implementation of a research study (Costantino, 2008; Crotty, 1998).

*Figure 1. Theoretical triangle*
Pai and colleagues (2006) asserted, “There is no escaping the fact that education is a sociocultural process. Hence, a critical examination of the role of culture in human life is indispensable to the understanding and control of educative processes” (p. 2). The researcher used narrative inquiry to explore lived experiences of participants as told in stories of the past, present, and future. These stories derived from interviews and participant writings that reveal the sociocultural perspectives of the participants' literacy experiences leading to the understandings of literacy as a social practice mediated by culture and power.

This study acknowledges that students’ literacy experiences do not exist bereft of cultural and social context. Furthermore, by giving students a platform to share their lived stories of self-determination and agency, this study explored the process of deconstructing power relations within school contexts and defied the deficit narrative for African Americans by highlighting, centralizing, and validating diverse form of literacy expression.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of recent African-American high school graduates in regard to their high school literacy experiences. The goal of this research exploration was to understand the ways in which participants’ literacy experiences throughout high school have shaped their understanding of the world and have responded to students’ culture. To accomplish this, the researcher investigated perceptions of African-American high school graduates from the class of 2017 who attended a low-income school in an urban community. The high school was particularly
noteworthy for this study due to its history of failure in academic achievement, locale in a major city, and demographics of predominantly low-income African Americans. Therefore, it was important to understand how students from this particular school managed to persevere despite some unique challenges while navigating the dominant literacy curriculum.

Students’ wellbeing and opinions should be at the center of curriculum work, teacher pedagogy, educational policy, and scholarly educational research (Kinloch, 2012). As other research has in the past, this study engaged urban youth in a reflection of their literacy spaces and feelings associated with literacy within schools (Kinloch, 2012). As stated by Kinloch (2012) and Jackson and Cooper (2007), a certain duty rests with scholars of color to unfold the creative and inspirational stories of African-American students to counter the deficit paradigms of mainstream research associated with African Americans. In doing so, scholars of color contest traditional measures of literacy, reading and writing, and embrace the expansiveness of literacy in terms of knowledge construction, identity, and social interactions (Kinloch, 2012).

Additionally, this study hoped to promote educators’ acknowledgment of culturally situated and culturally diverse perceptions of African-American students’ varied literacy practices as viable contributions to the conceptualization of literacy curriculum. Moreover, this study sought to add culturally derived personal narratives to the body of research that will stand as rich counternarratives that challenge the accepted grand deficit-narrative about African Americans and their literacy proficiency.
Research Questions

The following questions guided the investigation:

1. How do African-American high school graduates from a low-income urban community school describe their high school literacy experiences?

2. How do African-American students perceive the ways in which their literacy experiences were culturally responsive by addressing their varied literacy practices?

Limitations/Delimitations

According to Glesne (1999), limitations contribute the limited state of knowing in social research and assist the readers in understanding what to expect when interpreting the research. One limitation in this study was participants’ willingness to provide candid and descriptive responses, which had the potential to influence the data collection process. Another limitation was the implicit bias the researcher brought to the study. Additionally, the setting in which interviews took place varied; therefore, the researcher did not have sole control over the context or place of the interviews.

A delimitation of this research was the selection of the participants through purposeful sampling of African-American participants from a low-income urban area in the southeastern United States. Participants were also recent graduates of 2017 from the same high school. These delimitations affect the generalizability of this study.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are intended to help clarify the commonly used terms in this study:
Counternarrative is a method of storytelling about people who have been historically oppressed and underrepresented in majoritarian stories (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Critical literacy, according to the critical literacy framework derived from Freire’s (1998/2001) work, recognizes literacy as a process of consciousness that involves extracting from the printed word, connecting it to the world, and then using that for purposes of empowerment. This process fosters resilient literacy learners who possess the ability to maintain focus on learning in the face of difficulty (Edwards et al., 2010).

Culturally responsive pedagogy is an intentional and critical deviation from status quo teaching and learning through critical consciousness, cultural competence, and high expectations for all students (Scherff & Spector, 2011).

Culturally relevant teaching is a theory of teaching that incorporates the cultural knowledge, experience, and frames of reference of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant for students whose cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social class backgrounds differ from that of the majority (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001).

Marginalized students refer to students of color who have experienced some form of oppression by mainstream forces. Additionally, marginalized students are inclusive of African-American students as some researchers (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Morrell, 2008) make references interchangeably.

Urban schools are defined as schools whose socio-demographic are primarily nonWhite students from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, higher concentration
of poverty, community that is located in dense populated areas, and a transient student body. Although not exclusive to all urban schools, most urban schools have high teacher turnover rates, lower achievement in standardized assessments, and social and economic structural inequities (Kincheloe, 2004, 2010).

Summary

Culturally and critically situated literacy practices for adolescents are those that reflect the ideas of the real world where various cultures, economic status, religious affiliations, and sexual identities are represented (Gay, 2010; Morrell, 2008). With a constructivist paradigmatic view of the world, this research sought to provide an avenue by which educators consider a variety of ways to engage with African-American youth, for that practice is critical to the students’ continued achievement and growth as individuals.

This study expounds on Morrell’s (2008) ideas that the literacy experiences provided by 21st century schools mitigate student self-concept, examination of oppressed social contexts and relations, discourses of exclusion, resistance, and change. In an effort to understand student perceptions of literacy, this study sought to highlight students’ experiences throughout high school in order to provide a success-orientated narrative for African-American students. By giving power to the unheard voices of African-American students, divergent perspectives of students’ forms of literacy will resonate with the tenets of the metaphorical backdrop of poetry for this study (Kinloch, 2010; Stovall, 2006). These counternarratives will assist education professionals in understanding and acknowledging students’ perceptions as viable contributions to the body of research.
Throughout this research study, poetry was infused and framed in the context of the urban, social, and contextual lives of African-American students. The poems selected for this study further elucidate the power that language has to depict individual life experiences. The poems speak to the underlining premise of cultural responsiveness in that poets challenge traditional norms of language and express themselves from a personal position of cultural context, situations, and experiences. The act of writing poetry allows the writer to negotiate identity, address stereotypes related to people of color, and construct meaning of life, literature, and social interactions.

Thus, each chapter opens with a poem followed by an explanation of the poem as it relates to this research study. Through every line and stanza of poetry exists themes associated with the sentences and paragraphs outlined in the chapters. Chapter 2 presents a discussion of the research associated with valuing student perceptions in the existing body of research, followed by traditional and divergent explanations of literacy, narrowing the research down to specifics of critical literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy and their roles in the education of African Americans. Chapter 3 provides the rationale for narrative inquiry and the methods chosen to yield stories from participants. Chapter 4 relates the analysis of participants’ stories through the lenses of the research questions and the theory of cultural responsiveness. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a summary of the findings and conclusions and addresses implications, recommendations for further research, and limitations experienced throughout the study.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.
But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped
and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.”

- Maya Angelou

Are African-American students the caged bird or the free bird in American schools? This study values the assumptions that African-American students are both the caged and free bird. There is hope in the caged bird in that “he opens his throat to sing”. The caged bird has not given up but offers some glimmer of resilience to strive for the freedom of flight. Angelou’s poem offers a beautiful depiction of resilience and self-realization, despite social inequities (Ramirez & Jimenez-Silva, 2015). Angelou’s self-expression in the form of free verse is critical in understanding the message of resilience in that the poet is allowed to be free through her use of culturally situated language and literacy. Language, as well as literacy, is linked to beliefs and practices of our cultural past, present, and future that allow us to understand and use language and literacy to
make sense of the world around us (Jones & Woglom, 2016). According to Furman (2007), writing poetry is a means of expression that honors the individual and his or her subjective views of experience. The subjective views of experience are important for this study in that culturally responsive literacy for African-American students fosters engagement with school content that allows students to understand the word and the world (Freire, 1970; Gay, 2010). Poetry, thus is an appropriate metaphor considering its “interplay between the external and internal worlds of the person that are often complex, contradictory, and even dialectical” (Furman, 2007, p. 2).

Background

Are the school’s curriculum and content along with students’ overall experiences, reflections of students’ real lives? Are the school’s curriculum and content, along with students’ overall experiences, reflections of the culturally diverse backgrounds, heritage, and values of those students? Are the school’s curriculum and content, along with students’ overall experiences reflections of the varied literacy practices of individual students? As explained by Nieto (2017), a greater number of students from diverse backgrounds attend modern schools than ever in American public education; furthermore, conditions of race, economic and structural inequality, and negative perceptions of difference make it challenging to address the needs of students of color. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), “The percentage of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools who were White was less than 50 percent (49.5 percent) for the first time and represents a decrease from 58 percent in Fall 2004” (p. 1).
Figure 2 from the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) provides a more detailed summary of the faces in American schools.

Because of the overwhelming influence that literacy, in all its forms, has on identity, self-worth, and intrinsic motivation, culturally relevant literacy is important to overall school success for all minority students; however, due to the numerous societal factors that impede the academic success of underprivileged children, culturally relevant literacy is critically important in urban schools. Thus, it is essential to incorporate culturally relevant methods that create an intersection of culture, school, and community,
specifically in urban schools (Gay, 2010; Kinloch, 2011) where there are greater numbers of students who live in poverty and feel disconnected from the world around them (Kincheloe, 2004, 2010). In urban school settings, there is an urgency to respond to the unique academic needs of students, for it may be difficult for students in urban school settings to focus on school because of challenges they face within their low-income urban environment (Sperling, 2003). Gee (2004) discussed this intersection of culture, school, and the community because “people learn new ways with words, in or out of school, only when they find the worlds to which these words apply compelling” (p. 2).

This narrative study explored culturally situated and culturally diverse perceptions of African-American students’ varied literacy experiences and practices. Shared, as the center of this research study, are the stories of students’ lived literacy experiences that have shaped their understanding of the world and responded to their cultural expectations. Counternarratives told by students of color confront negative stereotypes and depictions of deficit (Chang, 2013). The aim is to position the culturally derived narratives of these students’ individual literacy experiences to stand as a rich counternarrative to the existing body of grand narratives of deficit for the literacy experiences of minority students.

Chapter 1 presented a foundation for this narrative study, along with an explanation of the symbolic meaning of the extended metaphor of poetry used and a rationale for choosing narrative inquiry. In doing so, the researcher also integrated theoretical underpinnings that support the need for a counternarrative that investigates power, race, and culture at the center of literacy experiences in a low-income urban high
school. This chapter offers a review of the existing research associated with the theoretical views of literacy—social, cultural, and critical—and the achievement gap among African Americans. A discussion of empirical studies that highlight the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy and critical literacy framework for students of color will also be explored.

Organization of Review

Hart (1998) suggested literature reviews “identify relationships between ideas and practices while distinguishing what has been done from what needs to be done” (p. 27). Further, the literature review emphasizes a critical analysis of current research literature in order to identify gaps or undeveloped topics to propose a deeper understanding of the participants and dissertation research (Randolph, 2009). With this in mind, this literature review sought to address the underlying principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, critical literacy, student perceptions, and deficit mindset that define, support, validate, or challenge the educative processes of African-American students’ literacy experiences.

Conducting this research study instigated a search for the words that would culturally align phrases and terms to adequately define literacy; complicated by the culturally-held belief that literacy is much more than the ability to read and write. When approached by other professionals in the field, the researcher discovered that literacy was more difficult to define concretely or sufficiently within the confines of standardized terms or socially-situated principles and canons. Bloome and Enciso (2006) argued to expand traditional views of school literacy that embrace diverse literacy practices and prepare students to make adjustments in diverse situations.
The beginning of this chapter establishes a working definition of literacy for the context of this study. Next is a review of the multiple theoretical views of literacy. Multiple views of literacy include socially and culturally constructed forms of literacy, power structures within literacy, and culturally responsive literacy. Because this literature review “is a contribution to an established line of theory and empirical research” (American Education Research Association, 2006, p. 33), a discussion of the theoretical views of literacy will elucidate current research in the field.

After an in-depth discussion of the multiple theoretical views of literacy, the achievement gap among African-American students and White students is examined and correlated with the research that exists for improving academic outcomes for African-American students. The purpose of a discussion on the achievement gap is to examine the multilayered factors that contribute to the gap, specifically literacy proficiency. This is important in order to explain the connection between achievement disparities as a product of culturally divergent literacy practices and values at odds in the curriculum and deficit mindsets on the part of educators and policy practitioners. An additional purpose for discussing achievement gap is to examine the narrowing ways in which schools define students’ literate abilities. A discussion of deficit mindsets that contribute to the achievement gap for African-American students revealed the importance of taking into consideration student perceptions and views of students’ varied literacy practices as necessary and important components of this exploration. The conclusion of the chapter will explore and identify the gaps in qualitative literature and necessitates the need for
this narrative study of African-American students’ perception of their literacy experiences.

Search Strategies

The following literature review addresses student perceptions of literacy with a focus on the following relevant theories: sociocultural theory—literacy practices in a social context which include an emphasis on power relations; critical literacy—a critique of the negotiations of power in dominant literacies (Morrell, 2008); culturally responsive pedagogy—an appreciation of culture in the educative process (Gay, 2002). As suggested by Randolph (2009), a criterion for inclusion and exclusion of research studies and related articles should be established. This study utilized numerous general criteria for empirical research studies: the report was written in English; the report was available through Mercer University databases or through interlibrary loan, the report was scholarly and peer-reviewed, the report discussed African-American students’ secondary literacy or cultural experiences, or the studies explored student perceptions of literacy. In addition to locating empirical research, the researcher also located literature using various search approaches and use of specific keywords and phrases. These included: culturally responsive pedagogy; culturally responsive literacy; divergent literacy; deficit literacy expectations; literacy among African Americans; critical literacy; counter-narratives; counter stories; community -situated literacy practices; varied literacy; standardized literacy expectations; culturally diverse heritage; achievement gap; and minority student perceptions. The results of these search approaches led to thinking more narrowly and a
subsequent exploration of the reference pages of the articles most related to the topic. Various reference lists led to identification of experts in the field.

After exploring the literature results of the search, it was clear that little research exploring or highlighting students’ perceptions of their high school literacy experiences existed. The researcher sought to give power to the participants in this study by sharing their stories about their literacy experiences. The research found did not depict individual success stories of experience but rather small vignettes of classroom interactions among teachers and students, most of whom were struggling readers. Therefore, it became vital to share a story derived and told by students that did not focus on deficit thinking but instead countered some of the existing research in the field.

Theoretical Views of Literacy

Tracey and Morrow (2006) provided an extensive overview of the most influential theories and models related to literacy learning. The theories include: 

sociocultural literacy—literacy practices in cultural settings (Street, 2001),
sociolinguistic literacy—literacy is used to communicate meaning and establish social relationships (Bloom & Green, 1984), and social constructivism—learning is a result of social interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, this overview is helpful in the delineation of relevant theory development in the field of literacy for this study. Because there is no single theory by which to explore or understand literacy, this section of the literature review makes connections across socially and culturally constructed literacy, power structures in literacy, and culturally responsive pedagogy and their relationship with literacy experiences for African-American students. Its purpose is to provide a
discussion of the application of relevant literacy theories to practice in schools as a necessary foundation to understand the philosophical underpinnings of this study.

Literacy Defined

Literacy does not have a simple definition; it is rather fluid and changes based on context, content, time, community, and individual. Over the years, literacy has blossomed from its once hard science empiricist stance to a more social practice perspective (Street, 2013). Eisner (1994) defined literacy as “an individual's ability to construct, create, and communicate meaning in many forms” (as cited in Jackson & Cooper, 2007, p. 248). However, Janks (2010) contended that the definition of literacy is simply an antithesis to illiteracy, whereas Street (1984) defined literacy as a social practice. Despite scholars’ different views on literacy and its evolution, many agree that literacy is fluid and socially, historically, and culturally constructed (Eisner, 1994; Kinloch, 2011; Street, 1984). Consequently, literacy cannot be fully conceptualized without a discussion of context and cultural considerations. For the context of this study, literacy is the ability to construct meaning from various print, digital, and media texts that are always socially and culturally situated.

Kinloch (2011) referred to various forms of literacy as multiple or multiliteracies that are acts, practices, and events in context. Kinloch (2010) argued that multiliteracies including a variety of media are becoming part of the educational landscape for students. Twenty-first century literacies refer to modes of meaning making that encompass visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and linguistic modalities of learning (Broderick, 2014; Cope & Kalantzis, 2010; Kalantzis, Cope, & Fehring, 2002). Rethinking traditional tenets of
literacy and recognizing the multiple sign systems across various cultural situations resonates with the concept of multiliteracies (Broderick, 2014).

Unfortunately, in the traditional sense of literacy, frequently set as the standard curricular practices in traditional educational environments, not many accountability measures in today’s schools measure literacy rates with the ability to communicate in the ways valued by the multiliteracies concept (Kinloch, 2011). Since legislation of No Child Left Behind, the definition and teaching of literacy has continued to narrow, causing the public to question what it means to be literate (Cremin, Comber, & Wolf, 2007). In the case of multiliteracies, what it means to be literate changes based on the tools students use to make meaning (Pyo, 2016). Researchers argued that embedding multiliteracies allows students to experience different critical roles in the classroom that prepare them for the 21st century literacies (Broderick, 2014; Kalantzis et al., 2002; Kinloch, 2010). Thus, multiliteracies refer to two main ideas: literacy that is culturally, socially, and professionally situated in contexts and literacy as meaning making in visual, audio, and gestural patterns (Kalantzis et al., 2002). Pyo (2016) concluded, “Literacy is viewed as the ability to construct and understand all the possible meanings made available by multimodal forms in multiple languages and through communication patterns that frequently cross cultural, communal, and national boundaries” (p. 422).

Traditionally, literacy within classrooms meant that the text had all the answers, and students were expected to regurgitate information through explanation and analysis (Beers, 2007). However, due to the evolution of society, producing—not consuming—coupled with students’ ability to think creatively and critically within spaces that foster
collaboration and inquiry have become the measure of success (Beers, 2007). While Beers (2007) provided insightful perspective on literacy in today’s society, scholars have suggested that this belief in literacy developed from an abundance of research and theory development throughout time. These include a broader view of literacy that embraces the multiliteracies students possess and will use in the world (Kinloch, 2010). Thus, beyond academic literacy—literacy usually practiced in schools—multimodal forms of literacy include, but are not limited to, images, sounds, music, speech, and gestures that students practice both in school and out of school (Pyo, 2016).

For example, Kinloch (2010) conducted an ethnographic study of two African American males, Khaleeq and Phillip, in which a story of their divergent literacy perceptions was voiced, describing their feelings associated with the gentrification of Harlem. In the study, Khaleeq and Phillip used multiliteracies to examine how their neighborhood was changing, and they used various learning modalities and contextual literacy experiences to convey their stories and critique the issues present in their gentrified community space (Kinloch, 2010). For instance, Khaleeq and Phillip created maps as visual stories, video projects, and images of oral discussions (Kinloch, 2010). The aim of Kinloch’s (2010) study was to position urban students of color out-of-school literacies as a pedagogy of possibilities to push the boundaries of school academic literacy. Just as Kinloch (2010) facilitated a discovery of an otherwise silent voice—voices of Khaleeq and Phillip—this study sought to honor divergent literacy practices and multiliteracies of typically silenced voices.
Social and Cultural Forms of Literacy

As stated earlier, this study positions and presents literacy as culturally and socially situated. Barton and Hamilton (2000), Street (1984), and Vygotsky (1930/1978) contended that learning is internalized when it is experienced in both a cultural and social context. This section of the literature review will first discuss literacy as a social practice and its theoretical foundations, followed by a discussion of culturally responsive pedagogy. In the discussion of culturally responsive pedagogy, the review draws on conclusions by researchers in the field to suggest culturally responsive pedagogy as a practical framework for integrating culture and power in the literacy curriculum for African-American students.

Literacy as a social practice. Various theories support the assumptions that social interaction influences knowledge construction and emphasizes the social and cultural contexts in which literacy is practiced and acquired (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Some of those theories include: sociolinguistic, sociocultural, social constructivism or sociohistorical, social learning theory, and social cognitive theories (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Perry (2012) explained that these theories have been instrumental throughout K-12 education, although many stem from social science scholars such as Vygotsky (1930/1978), Street (1984), Barton and Hamilton (1998), Heath (1983), and Purcell-Gates (1995). Accordingly, sociocultural theories shape our conceptual understandings of literacy learning and instruction to assist educators and researchers in understanding that social, cultural, and power relations contribute to literacy learning of students who are not considered mainstream (Street, 2013).
During the 1970s, literacy research revealed that most reading instruction used with high school students did not reflect the complexity of the reading process and was limited to read-aloud and resource programs (Street, 2013). Researchers in the field, such as, David Bloome, Ken Goodman, and Charlotte Huck, continued to conduct ethnographic studies that related to reading as social activity (Street, 2013). Researchers soon concluded that reading instruction should focus on constructing meaning rather than mechanics, integrating literacy within disciplines instead of in isolation from other content, valuing discussion, and personal connections with text, rather than atomized skill and drill (Street, 2013). Although this ushered a new era for literacy, some researcher still argue for a skills approach (Street, 2013). Pedagogy that embodies literacy as a social practice attempts to move beyond the narrow skill-based definitions and pedagogy of literacy instruction (Street, 1984). Knott (1986) defined literacy instruction as a social-cognitive-linguistic process and advocated for purposeful and dynamic instruction that valued social context. Knott (1986) believed the writing process was a social interaction with a real audience and reading and writing are interconnected. Within the literacy field, researchers have termed this shift new literacy studies, which recognize multiple literacies, promote literacy as a social practice, and interrogate relations of power (Gee, 1999; Street, 2003).

Literacy as a social practice is grounded in research from Street (1984) that revealed multiple ways in which people use reading and writing for different, often socially framed purposes. Street (1984) described literacy as social practice as two contrasting models of literacy: autonomous and ideological (Perry, 2012). The
autonomous model situates literacy as technical and formal with clearly defined skills that are applicable to any situation, whereas the ideological model views literacy as practices—not just skills—that are context specific and linked to power and cultural relations (Perry, 2012). For this study, the ideological model of literacy corresponds with the researcher’s position that literacy is not isolated from students’ cultures, home environments, and worldviews. With this in mind, the participants in this study and their culturally situated perspectives of literacy are illuminated through descriptions of their reading, writing, listening, speaking, and doing experiences throughout high school.

In addition to Street’s (1984) ideological view of literacy, Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory of learning promoted continued cognition and literacy acquisition as well. Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006) discussed cognition, memory, concept development, and creativity being mediated by the social needs of an individual that lead to the discovery of an individual’s social and cultural life as literacy. According to Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006), Vygotsky believed the social environment affects the development of higher-level cognitive processes and that all fundamental cognitive activities have social foundations. While many of these social theories of learning are relevant to literacy, social constructivism and sociocultural theory are best suited for the underpinnings of this study.

More specifically, Tracey and Morrow (2006) discussed sociocultural theory as it relates to literacy development. Au (1997) wrote, “Sociocultural research on school literacy learning attempts to explore the links among historical conditions, current social and institutional contexts, and inter-psychological functioning [that which takes place
within the individual]” (p. 182). In this manner, school literacy is a social process affected by historical circumstances, and a child’s success or failure in literacy acquisition cannot be isolated from the environment, which potentially encompasses culture and power (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). With this understanding, sociocultural theory is applicable to the literate lives of marginalized students (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). The knowledge that marginalized students bring to the classroom does not typically “fit” the mainstream curriculum, which creates a perceived deficit narrative for marginalized students (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Due to the historical conditions and institutional contexts of sociocultural theory, literacy learning has political tenets that have become the foundations of critical literacy theory research (Tracey & Morrow, 2006).

Conversely, not all scholars support the degree to which sociocultural theory impacts the literacy education of marginalized students (Hill, 2011). Some argued that with such an emphasis on the individual’s cultural, social, and historical environment, educators may lose sight of a broader perspective that challenges the role of power to inform local literacy practices. Furthermore, the current research in sociocultural theory fails to address practical issues associated with literacy learning (Hill, 2011). Hill (2011) suggested that the exclusion of the broader perspective and role of power in sociocultural theory research are problematic for African Americans and proposed a more worldview approach to literacy and theory.

Barton and Hamilton (2000) described literacy as social practice: “Literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relationships between people,
within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals” (p. 8). By this understanding, Barton and Hamilton (2000) offered the following six ideas about literacy:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. (p. 8)

As a means of synthesizing the various strands of literacy as a social practice, literacy studies reflect broad theoretical frameworks that are continuously evolving. Schools have an obligation to first recognize, understand, and change the landscapes perpetuated by the dominant culture (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). For this study, literacy as social practice is mediated by students’ cultural and social experiences.

Culturally responsive pedagogy. This section of the literature review discusses culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP)—its definition, brief history, and the relationship to culturally responsive literacy. Also highlighted is the relevance of CRP in the
education of African-American adolescents. In doing so, this review informs the reader of existing literature that highlights African-American students’ successes in environments where culturally responsive literacy has improved student academic outcomes.

The term *culturally relevant* appeared in educational anthropology to describe students’ use of indigenous languages and cultural practices to preserve their home environments during academic learning (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) in response to the concerns associated with achievement differences and high school dropout rates related to socioeconomic status, race, and English language ability. Additionally, CRP is a response to traditional curricular and instructional methods (Vavrus, 2008). Because of the Civil Rights Movement and multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy was birthed to provide practical considerations for implementation in the classroom (Vavrus, 2008). Ladson-Billings (1994) described culturally responsive pedagogy as leveraging African-American students’ cultural strengths to enhance social and academic achievement, while Scherff and Spector (2011) described culturally responsive pedagogy in three elements: “(1) academic excellence for all students, (2) the fostering of cultural competence, and (3) the development of a critical social consciousness” (p. 16).

Further, Gay (2010) noted that academics for ethnically diverse students improve when taught through their own cultural lens. Gay (2002) recommended teacher implementation of the following components of culturally responsive teaching: participation in the design of culturally relevant curricula; demonstration of cultural caring and development of a learning community; cross-cultural communications; use of
culturally congruent instructional practices. These culturally congruent teacher practices acknowledge differences among students whereas if differences are not recognized, educators risk the chance of insults of students’ cultural heritage (Gay, 2010).

Thomas (2013) conducted a study of teachers from various racial backgrounds as they analyzed classroom talk for moments of conflict in a diverse classroom. Findings from Thomas’s (2013) study suggested that while a White teacher in particular taught controversial material within a diverse classroom setting, the challenges the teacher faced existed not only within the classroom, but also in the larger societal metadiscourses of classroom conversation. Furthermore, the teacher in the study worked through her discomfort in such conversations, and she later strengthened her practices in handling the conflict of classroom conversation with students (Thomas, 2013). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) described these teachers’ actions within the three domains of culturally relevant teachers: (a) teachers’ beliefs of self and others, (b) teachers’ epistemological views of knowledge, and (c) teachers’ structuring of social relations. Thomas (2013) also concluded that culturally responsive teachers diffuse conflict, deploy practices to build community in the classroom, and encourage undermotivated students.

Culturally responsive literacy. With a focus on classroom practice, Gay (2002) defined culturally responsive teaching as a process of “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Gay (2002) suggested, “Cultural characteristics provide the criteria for determining how instructional strategies should be modified for ethnically diverse students” (p. 112), which questions the effectiveness of a one-size-fits-all
approach to the mainstream curriculum. In the context of literacy, teachers incorporate texts and tasks that promote cultural awareness (Gay, 2010).

While a multitude of research associates literacy development with positive social and economic outcomes, there is an apparent disconnect of literacy practices and pedagogical understandings of inclusive environments and texts that not only address the dominant literacies, but also the underrepresented population (Morrell, 2008). Scherff and Spector (2011) argued that culturally responsive pedagogy attempts to improve the disparities among students of color through eliminating irrelevant curricula by making course content connect to students’ culture.

One study conducted by Coffey and Farinde-Wu (2016) revealed that teachers must also acknowledge their own educational and cultural experiences and their influence on their teaching practices when using culturally relevant teaching practices. The purpose of Coffey and Farinde-Wu’s (2016) study was to explore a novice teacher’s experiences of bridging culturally responsive theory to classroom practice in order to engage African-American students in an English classroom. Despite the teacher’s efforts to modify the traditional curriculum to reflect a more culturally responsive curriculum and to create a classroom environment rich in images and portrayals of prolific African Americans, the teacher lacked the instructional support of a seasoned mentor teacher with experience in implementing culturally responsive literacy (Coffey & Farinde-Wu, 2016). The study also revealed that more preservice teacher programs should address cultural awareness of a teacher and the impact such self-concept has on the education of African-American urban youth (Coffey & Farinde-Wu, 2016).
Additionally, Peterson (2014) described two approaches a school used to improve literacy among students in a high poverty and urban high school. The study compared students’ success with the implementation of the Striving Readers prescribed curriculum as opposed to Deep Roots culturally responsive curriculum. Peterson (2014) found that the prescribed curriculum had no statistical impact on student reading gains or student motivation to read. Because of these findings, the school created an elective course that used the Deep Roots curriculum to impact students’ success. The grades, attendance, and disciplinary records of students who participated in the Deep Roots curriculum improved. Furthermore, the Deep Roots: Civil Rights project helped students recognize and respond to the dominant cultural norms. In doing so, students described their experiences as relevant, unforgettable, memorable, life changing, and motivating (Peterson, 2014).

While this review of literature and culture have provided practical applications for educators to employ in the classroom, literacy is not only socially and culturally situated but also negotiated by power relations. In order to understand fully the scope of culturally responsive pedagogy and literacy, one has to explore critical literacy as a foundation for progress within culturally diverse environments. As one considers the hegemonic ideology of school systems, there is an unstated framework for acceptable literacy, often based on the dominant culture’s way of knowing and doing (Wood & Jocius, 2013). Because learning always occurs in a cultural setting, critical literacy values cultural perspective through variations of texts and socially constructed language. Therefore, this literature review will further discuss the role critical literacy education plays as a theoretical assumption for the literacy lives of African-American students.
Literacy and Power

I have come to understand that power plays a critical role in our society and in our educational system. The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential.

-Delpit, 2006

In the quote above, Delpit (2006) discussed the role of power; she struggled with the ideas that others are continuously making decisions for people with no regard of those without the same privileges. Privileged positions consist of accrued advantages due to race and cultural dominance (Leonardo, 2009). Hence, this struggle of power leads to negotiations of position, opinion, fact, discourse, and success (Taylor et al., 2009). Educators who fail to realize the existence of power hierarchies in the classroom and school environment only serve to perpetuate their continuation through standardized behavioral, academic, social values, and practices. Power structures exist within relationships, discourses, and texts in modern classrooms. When referring to text, this study does not embrace texts as only print, but rather any visual, audio, digital, or print medium. Throughout this discussion are generated connections between critical literacy theory, practices within the classroom to foster achievement of African-American students, and critical literacy as a contextual basis for culturally responsive pedagogy.

Freire’s (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed is a seminal text related to critical theory and all its sub theories. Freire discussed the banking concept as an instrument of oppression. In the banking concept of education, the teacher is the bearer of all knowledge with worldviews perceived as superior to those of students (Freire, 1970). Knowledge is seen as a transaction, and learning is one sided, not a mutual experience.
between students and teachers. Freire’s (1970) conviction was that “every human being, no matter how ‘ignorant’ or submerged in the ‘culture of silence’ he may be, is capable of looking critically at his world in a dialogical encounter with others” (p. 13). Freire’s (1970) text dealt with an obvious truth: “Just as the oppressor, in order to oppress, needs a theory of oppressive action, so the oppressed, in order to become free, also need a theory of action” (p. 185).

Critical Race Theory

Many African Americans have contributed to the African-American critical theory tradition, such as W.E.B. Dubois, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Frederick Douglas, and Carter G. Woodson. These scholars dedicated their lives to counter narrate the strategic dehumanization of African Americans (Lynn, Williams, Benigo, Mitchell, & Park, 2007). These scholars influenced the African-American epistemology of “making a way out of no way” (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010, p. 8) because of their need to create a renewed life despite years of oppression. African-American scholars such as these have risked their lives to gain access to literacy.

Critical race theory (CRT) is the fabric of being African-American in the United States due to the ability to critique race relations in an effort to change them for the betterment of oppressed people (Morrell, 2008). Grounded in the assumption that Whites and Blacks are polar opposites, which justifies a fixed conundrum of a racialized society as we know it, critical race theory addresses the power of race in the education system (Ladson-Billings, 2009). As a result of this polar opposite mindset, people tend to develop “conceptual Whiteness” and “conceptual Blackness”, so categories like “school
achievement, middle classness, maleness, beauty, intelligence, and science become normative categories of Whiteness, while categories like gangs, welfare recipients, basketball players, and the underclass become the marginalized and delegitimated categories of Blackness” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19). By this understanding, Whiteness is considered the norm, whereas everyone else is ranked or categorized in relation to the positions of White normalcy (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2009) concluded that Bell’s work, Faces at the Bottom of the Well (1992), contended, “racism is a permanent fixture of American Life” (p. 21). Thus, critical race theory is designed to deconstruct, reconstruct, and construct these structures of a racialized society for one that promotes democracy and social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Acknowledging racialized America assists researchers in understanding CRT associations to critical legal studies (Bell, 1980, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Critical legal studies sought to analyze and dispute traditional legal scholarship to expose the inconsistences in ideology that structured the class system of the U.S.; however, many critical race theorists criticized critical legal scholars’ inability to include racism in its critique of such legal scholarship (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This dissention caused critical race theorists to begin analyzing myths and conventional wisdoms about race that sought to portray Blacks as second class (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Some critical race theorists even argued that civil rights laws served the interests of Whites (Ladson-Billings, 2009). These findings challenged the work of earlier theorists and scholars. Even so, critical theorists agreed on two common interests of critical race theory: “to understand how a
‘regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America’” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xiii) and “to change the bond that exists between law and racial power” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 23). Although the legal battles of desegregation of schools and civil rights focused on equal opportunity for African Americans, these battles failed to address or redress historic inequalities of African Americans. This created a condition of playing catch up for African Americans, which is still evident today with the sustained inequity in the areas of curriculum, assessment, instruction, and school funding (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Essentially, CRT in education brought race and racism to the forefront in urban schools and explored how policy and practice, educational leadership, curriculum and instruction, and student perspective are laden with racism (Lynn et al., 2007).

Lynn and colleagues (2007) discussed the role critical race theory had on classroom practices, which informed the eventual success or failure within urban schools. Lynn et al. (2007) reviewed the literature on urban education and concluded that critical theory research has focused on three main areas: (a) teachers’ practices that failed to foster personal and academic achievement; (b) teachers’ practices that enhanced the abilities and political awareness of urban students; and (c) teachers’ practices that examined the broader social entities of school reform efforts to understand urban education. Consequently, some studies in urban environments revealed a pervasive sense of hopelessness among students and teachers in many low-socioeconomic urban schools that propagated the factory-like, skill-and-drill teacher practice (Anyon, 1995). Delpit (2012) described the landscape painted in classrooms of low-income children of color as
reductionism at best. Students spent countless hours engaged in test-prep worksheets that fostered no critical thinking (Delpit, 2012). When teachers lacked control in the classroom, they resulted to meaningless seat work which further subjugated students of color. Haberman called this the pedagogy of poverty (Delpit, 2012). Delpit (2012) described her experiences while observing a high school social studies class:

One young man was obviously trying to shield his paper from my view. I tried to coax him to let me see it, but he would not. . . . Later, after the period was over, I stealthily took a look at the paper, thinking I would find a note or even a story he didn’t want to share. What I discovered instead saddened me profoundly: a coloring sheet of a turkey, which he had begun to color with different colored pens. (p. 124)

Yet, the students in this class were enrolled in a program to finish high school at an accelerated pace and many wanted to attend college (Delpit, 2012). Thus, this teacher’s practices in this particular social studies class were contributing to the failure of African-American students. Schmoker (2001) termed this as the Crayola Curriculum, where the most predominant activity within schools was coloring. Because of this Crayola Curriculum, many African-American families have sought after Afrocentric schools as an alternative (Delpit, 2012). Some students who attended an Afrocentric school in Connecticut remarked, “In regular public school you just take what the book says as the truth. Here we can question what the book says or what the teachers say, as long as we have a good argument” (Delpit, 2012, p. 126). This student described critical literacy in action by students’ ability to analyze textbooks for its “truth” (Delpit, 2012).
In response to critical race theory, there are various approaches to assist students of color (Delpit, 2012; Edwards et al., 2010; Morrell, 2004). Educators tend to struggle to translate theory into practical considerations for the classrooms. Nevertheless, critical literacy frameworks are viable options for educators to embrace (Edwards et al., 2010; Morrell, 2008). The next section of this literature review discusses critical literacy frameworks in the education and emancipation of African-American students.

Critical Literacy

Historically, the critical literacy framework derived from Freire's (1998/2001) work recognized literacy as a process of consciousness that involved extracting from the printed word, connecting to the world, and then using that for purposes of empowerment. While Freirean pedagogy initiated the dialogue of critical literacy, the seminal work of Lankshear and McLaren (1993) posited critical literacy as an approach for teaching and learning that explored how and why inequality exists (Bishop, 2014). Anderson and Irvine (1993) defined critical literacy as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (p. 82). Critical literacy is also meant to challenge contradictions in society and examine structural violence, poverty, power systems, gender and race while outlining emancipatory theories of learning to advocate for social justice and civic engagement (Bishop, 2014). Bishop (2014) synthesized five core principles for cycles of critical literacy: (a) activate learners as social actors to disrupt the commonplace; (b) engage in research and analysis of multiple viewpoints on a particular issue; (c) identify sociopolitical realities directly related to the learner’s life; (d) design and implement
actions of social justice outside of the classroom; and (e) create visions for future projects while reflecting on actions.

Even though Bishop (2014) outlined five core principles for critical literacy, not all researchers agreed with such a formulaic view. Behrman (2006) acknowledged that researchers like Luke (2000) had intentionally resisted the development of a narrow approach or methodology for critical literacy. However, research has persisted in articulating practices in which students may engage in critical literacy tasks (Bishop, 2014). Behrman (2006) catalogued common practices for critical literacy learning tasks: reading supplementary texts; reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective; producing counter-texts; conducting student-choice research projects; and taking social action. Although many researchers have attempted to bridge theory to practice with the implementation of critical literacy in the classroom, barriers remain in venturing into the unknown and in politically charged jargon that challenges the business of education and educational policy (Bishop, 2014). One aspect of critical literacy that is more readily implemented is the assessment of texts in order to understand and uncover power relations and dominance, but the idea of taking social or political actions has not been met with the same level of commitment within school-based literacy curricula (Bishop, 2014).

In the case of urban education, Morrell (2008) discussed the hegemonic discourse and the imperative need for educators to teach students how to navigate such discourse in the discovery of personal identity. Morrell (2004) argued that the urban classroom is the ideal context for critical literacy learning because students can engage personally and
transform their own communities. Morrell’s (2004) critical ethnographic study revealed that critical literacy projects produced proficiency in academic literacies. One critical literacy project Morrell (2008) described was that of *Odyssey and Godfather* where students were able to make core arguments and relate the two texts, one being a film, to larger sociopolitical issues. The participants in this study were considered *average* students at an *underperforming* school, yet they were able to construct meaning through writing essays that displayed great textual authority that critiqued the author’s motives and oppressive structures (Morrell, 2008). The students’ success with the unit also revealed a greater skill gained of interrogating text, which is transferrable to world contexts (Morrell, 2008).

When it comes to the education of urban youth, some would agree that multicultural education eradicate the inequalities that urban youth face (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Where this agreement usually ends is the conditions of modern urban life (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Acute issues are unknown to teachers, curriculum specialists, and policy makers that shape students’ knowledge (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). As a result, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) continued to work in classrooms across the U.S. and developed a grounded theory of practice with core principles of critical pedagogy for urban schools. For six years, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) cotaught in an urban English classroom and applied critical pedagogy while facilitating academic skills and achievement. Administrators, teachers, and the community all agreed that students in this research study needed to achieve academically with preparation for employment, college, civic participation, literacy skills, and
communication in Standard English (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). With comprehension as a prerequisite for critique of texts, they understood that students needed exposure to canonical literature, as well as to pass standardized assessments (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). One way to question the dominant literature is to read the canonical literature in order to conceptualize fully the power relations and hegemonic discourses within the text and the world, while including multicultural and popular culture texts from music, film, mass media, and sports (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) stated, “In no way, shape, or form did our focus on academic literacy compromise our commitment to critical pedagogy and to literacy education for individual freedom and social change” (p. 51). Students read classical texts for evidence of multiculturalism; students found the other within the characters from these classics (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Arguably, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) dispelled some educators and literacy theorists’ belief that multiculturalism meant offering only texts written by or about African Americans, for they found that some of those texts were just as disempowering or oppressive as other mainstream canonical texts. Geertz (2000) valued the practices of crosscultural literacy study in that “the more we study the cultural practices of others . . . the more they help us to understand our own practices as equally unique and equally meaningful” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 52). Additionally, during the study students critiqued hegemonic texts, such as local, state, and national legislation; contracts; labor agreements; and mortgage offers, in order to understand their dominance and language so students could engage in the rewriting of
such texts (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). The researchers found that the existing literary canon was exclusionary because it sent messages that contemporary and popular culture texts were less intellectual or aesthetic, which further perpetuated the hierarchy that exists among literary texts (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

In order to connect the curriculum with the students’ personal lives, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) allowed students to study their own everyday culture as students attending urban schools or as citizens of a metropolitan city. Another principle of critical pedagogy, the empty banking model, was considered during the implementation of the research study (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Students exercised a great deal of autonomy because assignments centered upon dialogue and inquiry, which created a learning environment of a more equal exchange of ideas and knowledge. Ultimately, six units were designed: Savage Inequalities in Urban Schools, Teaching Hip-Hop Music and Culture, Race and Justice in Society Unit, and Serious Voices for Urban Youth in which students engaged in interviews of political figures, wrote personal narratives and poetry of school experiences, and students took ownership of their learning (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Critical Literacy and Curriculum

Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013) explored learning theories that supported and informed critical literacy curriculum and urged teachers to create a space for students to engage in critical literacy to create justice-orientated citizens. According to Giroux and Giroux (as cited in Vasquez et al., 2013) “One imperative of a critical pedagogy is to offer students opportunities to become aware of their potential and deepen democratic
values, institutions, and identities” (p. 20). Thus, educational researchers have the responsibility to find ways in which teachers may analyze curricular materials and resources for critical consciousness and capacities (Haddix & Rojas, 2011). Since many teachers continue to rely on the use of textbooks for most instruction, critical literacy pedagogy questions what teachers consider appropriate literature. Moreover, the increase in diversity among student populations of modern schools appeals to critical literacy pedagogy in order to eradicate the silencing of notable authors considered other or multicultural by mainstream curriculum (Haddix & Rojas, 2011). According to Jackson and Cooper (2007), textbooks typically do not relate to the daily experiences of students, and they are generally out of date from the current social and political climate of the world. Therefore, it is important to include curriculum texts written by authors from various cultural backgrounds (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Haddix & Rojas, 2011).

Critical race theory recognizes the mainstream school curriculum as a “culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 29). As a consequence of master scripting, stories about, by, and for African Americans are erased when they challenge the authority of dominance; the stories about, by, and for African Americans that remain are stories that confirm the dominant culture’s positions of power (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers and students may find degrading or menial descriptions of prominent African Americans in textbooks (Ladson-Billings, 2009). There is also a race-neutral or color-blind perspective toward curriculum portrayed in textbooks which results in lessons that suggest ‘we are all
immigrants’ (Ladson-Billings, 2009) as to declare that people share the same past and destiny.

When it comes to analyzing various texts, it is vital for teachers in urban settings to expose students to critical literacy practices (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kinloch, 2011). Because students of color from poor communities are continuously stereotyped by the media via film, reality television, news outlets, and social networking sites, exposing these students to texts that counter these stereotypes are imperative (Haddix & Rojas, 2011). A myriad of research supports the idea that minority students feel stereotyped as academically incompetent in school (Ani, 2013; Delpit, 2012; Kinloch, 2011; Pyo, 2016). This consistent negative stereotype leads to a mindset of failure and underachievement (Wasserberg & Rottman, 2016). Previous studies from McGee (2013) revealed that students felt they constantly had to prove their academic worth; one student explained, “It seems like, you know, how you get that feeling that—yeah, and that I have to prove myself all the time” (Wasserberg & Rottman, 2016, p. 58).

Not only does critical literacy recognize that these stereotypes exist, but it assists students with tools to critique and question the stereotype and the sources propagating the stereotypes (Morrell, 2008; Wassergerg & Rottman, 2016).

Kozol (1991) described not only the curriculum content, but also the rigor within the curriculum, as one teacher made the following remarks:

The curriculum [the White school] emphasizes critical thinking, reasoning, and logic . . . six girls, four boys. Nine White, one Chinese. I am glad they have this
class. But what about the others? Aren’t there ten Black children in the school who could enjoy this also?” (p. 96)

Keiler’s (2011) study of urban students who had failed during the school year and then engaged in a summer school program revealed that students thrived when offered high quality instructional experiences that actively engaged students, focused on understanding rather than memorizing, and facilitated a belief mindset in students’ potential to succeed. The curriculum during this summer program was not diluted, and urban students had an opportunity to excel beyond expectations because of the program (Keiler, 2011).

One ethnographic study conducted by Dyches (2017) took place in the southeastern U.S. and discussed a White British Literature teacher’s experience with engaging urban students in a countercurriculum to the White, Anglo, and male British literature curriculum. The article opened with a criticism to the canonical or “great works” of the curriculum that is dismissive of any other cultural ideals and even require ethnically diverse students to learn European cultural norms (Dyches, 2017). Historically, colleges required an analysis of classical literature for admission, and high schools still require Shakespeare at every grade level (Dyches, 2017). Despite the commonly embraced metaphor for literature curriculum, mirrors and windows, the British literature canon does not include any non-White authors (Dyches, 2017). Therefore, classic literature is nearly an all-White body of literature that many devoted English literature teachers will defend with honor (Dyches, 2017).
The theoretical framework used for this study was Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) (Dyches, 2017). Dyches (2017) used purposeful sampling to determine which teachers truly embraced CRP while teaching the British literature curriculum and interviewed potential teachers to determine eligibility for the study. Sam, the teacher selected for the study, was a White male who identified as gay who taught in an urban school where 91% of the students were students of color. As participant observer, the researcher conducted classroom observations, interviews, cotaught, and planned with the teacher over an 18-week period. Data analysis consisted of multilayers of open coding and in turn generated grounded theory. Sam completed the Multicultural Teacher Capacity Scale (MTCS), which Dyches (2017) used for an additional layer of coding.

The findings revealed that Sam was an exemplary culturally responsive teacher of British literature; however, Sam experienced some barriers that impacted the implementation of CRP, which included sociocultural tensions, fear of punitive measures from administration, and lack of instructional time (Dyches, 2017). Thus, Sam found it difficult to make the literature relevant and interesting for an entire semester. Even though Sam vehemently felt the curriculum needed drastic revisions, he did not address the district about a revision. Additionally, Sam had issues with his White privilege when trying to relate to students of color and feared criticism for such a social justice approach. Thus, Sam was not able to motivate students fully to social and civic action, which is a key component of CRP.
Despite the obstacles Sam faced, he allowed students to restory the canonical literature, provided supplemental texts, allowed students to critique his White privilege, and created a safe environment for culturally situated discussions. Dyches (2017) concluded the article with a call to action for teacher educators to assist preservice teachers in challenges they may face when teaching canonical literature to culturally diverse students. Moreover, Dyches (2017) challenged educators to consider canonical texts’ ability to disrupt hegemonic conditions if taught correctly. According to Dyches (2017), these advancements in teacher education would afford students from marginalized groups an opportunity to see a reflection of themselves in canonical literature.

An additional avenue to integrate critical literacy in the curriculum is to unpack social practices that perpetuate inequities (Vasquez et al., 2013). Vasquez and colleagues (2013) discussed the idea that no text is neutral; therefore, students learned to interrogate text within frames or mental structures that described human behavior. Through critical literacy, students understand the multiples signs and hidden messages within media especially advertisements (Vasquez et al., 2013). Wood and Jocius (2013) described practical ways educators can incorporate critical literacy in the classroom:

1. Choose text that reflect the culture and lived experiences of your students
2. Determine the context in which the texts will be used
3. Think about whether you want to forefront a critical theme for the text- equity power, race, gender.
4. During read-alouds model how to critique texts and encourage students to express their thoughts and viewpoints of the text

5. Provide opportunities for students to discuss texts independent of the teacher

6. Create extension activities...engage in a class project in which they take action to call attention to a problem in their community. (p. 668)

While critical literacy offers strategies to engage all learners, its use in a broader scale in communities of historic underachievement is key for the opportunity for students to stretch conceptually and become change agents of their communities. Rather than deny realities of racism and poverty in urban schools, embrace the possibility of a more social justice educational experience for students (Morell, 2008). Critical literacy seeks to offer individual liberation for students who need it most, African Americans.

Achievement Gap

In order to improve academic literacy outcomes among marginalized students, educators must understand gaps exist between the achievement of White and Black students. Thus, this section of the literature review examines the achievement gap to justify applications of critical literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy as practical considerations for addressing the multilayered factors associated with the achievement gap among White and Black students. Historically, American education school reform has only offered band-aid solutions to bleeding problems (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Additionally, people tend to blame stakeholders as isolated contributors to the phenomena of the achievement gap. However, the cross-cultural, literacy-based
achievement gap is a multidimensional problem that has multiple layers (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Ford & Moore, 2013). Achievement gap research is widely discussed (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Ford & Moore, 2013; Kincheloe, 2007; McKinley, 2010), but the gap persists for many students in urban communities and fails to address the continuous inequities among students of color (Kirkland, 2006). Due to the narrow definitions of literacy and culturally biased measures of achievement, the achievement gap then continues to contribute to deficit thinking and cumulative failure among African Americans (Delpit 2012; Gay, 2010).

There are patterns in the underperformance of African-American students when compared to Whites and Asian Americans (Ford & Moore, 2013). According to the American Psychological Association (2012), the disparities in the achievement gap are evidenced by health outcomes and healthcare, early childhood and K-12 education, test scores assessing academic achievement, retention rates, dropout and graduation rates, gifted and talented program enrollment, enrollment in higher education, as well as behavior and discipline infractions. According to Smagorinsky (2011), relying on traditional definitions of literacy and achievement continue to present barriers to success among African Americans, and traditional methods of standardized assessments that are often culturally biased are the measure of success. More specifically, “Educational disparities are reflected in the poor quality of schools and schooling that children from low Socioeconomic schools marginalized ethnic minority backgrounds attend” (American Psychological Association, 2012, p. 12). Figures 3 and 4 may elucidate some of the educational disparities within Georgia.
Figure 3 reveals a steady increase in Georgia’s graduation rate for African-American students. However, there remains a significant gap, specifically 6.8%, between African Americans and Whites, with the highest graduation rate being for Asian/Pacific Islander. One may question, is enough being done to address the gap? Twenty-four percent of African-American students have failed to meet Georgia’s benchmark for high school graduation.

Figure 4 provides the statistics for economically disadvantaged students’ graduation rate, 75.3%, which is a significant difference from those students who are not considered economically disadvantaged, with their graduation rate being 84.5%, which is a 9.2% difference. These statistics indicate the necessity for changes within public schools that foster increased positive outcomes for students of color and economically disadvantaged students.

Contextual Factors and Achievement Gap

Barton and Coley (2009) identified 16 variables that contributed to the Black-White achievement gap; all 16 variables corresponded to three major components: home, school, and health and nutrition. Barton and Coley also noted (2009), “Most of the risk factors are related to poverty and all poor children, regardless of race/ethnicity, are at risk of not fulfilling their potential” (p. 10). Barton and Coley (2009) found that the lack of
curriculum rigor and low expectations, inadequate academic training and cultural competence in teacher preparation, less than five years of teacher experience, low attendance rates for teachers and high turnover rates, larger class sizes and more time spent on behavior management, underutilization of instructional technology, negative peer pressures and classroom disruptions were all variables that contributed to the achievement gap. Additionally, Barton and Coley (2009) considered home and health variables, which included various family and cultural factors, poor reading skills, other health factors related to poor nutrition, low birth rate, and lead and mercury poisoning to contribute to the math and reading achievement gaps between Black and White students (Ford & Moore, 2013). Barton and Coley (2009) recommended that race and income should be interrogated and deconstructed, and urban educators must relinquish the idea that these two variables alone determine student achievement, yet urban educators cannot exonerate themselves from the role of addressing factors outside of the school that threaten African-American students’ chance at success (Ford & Moore, 2013).

Figure 5 shows the percentage of students who are retained, thus leading to a downward spiral of disappointments and struggle.
Figure 5. Percentage of retained students in Georgia by race-ethnicity and gender. Reprinted with permission from “The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement: K-12 Public Schools Report Card”. Oracle BI Interactive Dashboards. Copyright 2017 by Georgia.Gov.

Jackson and Cooper (2007) discussed the relationship between dropout rates and early indicators; moreover, students who read significantly below grade level, fail state assessments, take remedial courses, and fail two or more courses are less likely to realize their full potential. For example, in Figure 5, African-American students hold the highest percentage of retention among all other ethnicities. Additionally, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading scale scores (range 0-500) for students in grade 12 for 2015 were as follows: African Americans-266, Hispanics-276, Whites-295, and Asian-297 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In relation to the 2015 NAEP reading scores, the percentage at or above Proficient for African-American student group was 17%, compared to 49% for Asians, 46% for Whites, and 25% for
Hispanics. These scores present a stark reality of the standardized assessment achievement gap that exists within today’s schools. Because of the relationship between reading performance and students’ success, this study sought to acknowledge students’ perceptions of their academic performance and their perceptions of their teachers and school practices. Moreover, the compounding factors that contribute to the achievement gap require a mindset from educators that embodies cultural competence and caring. It is vitally important that teachers deliver high quality instruction that maximizes African-American students’ personal and cultural strengths (Gay, 2010). More pointedly, culturally competent and caring teachers and deficit mindset cannot coexist (Gay, 2010).

Deficit Mindset

Understanding deficit mindset as it relates to the achievement gap and the education of African-American students means that educational researchers should proceed with caution when discussing statistics about the perceived systemic failure of African-American students (Kumasi & Hughes-Hassell, 2017). In doing so, researchers are careful not to reinforce stereotypical beliefs about diverse ethnic groups that contribute to deficit ideologies (Kumasi & Hughes-Hassell, 2017). According to Larson (2003), instances when teachers underteach and restrict knowledge construction among diverse students are both dangerous and oppressive. The paragraphs that follow are an overview of the ideas related to deficit ideology or pedagogy as it relates to educating African-American students.

Brown and Brown (2012) discussed two related counterdiscourse theories, oppositional culture, and cultural difference as they relate to African-American students
and their education. The article was intended to generate a comparative review of the literature associated with the ideas of counterdiscourse being both useful and dangerous. Brown and Brown (2012) provided a historical context that addressed the belief that certain racial groups lack the skills needed to succeed in school and society, but since the 1970s, educational researchers have provided alternative discourses to counter the deficit discourse associated with African Americans. However, not intentional, counterdiscourses can position students as different from what is considered normal and homogenized African Americans. Thus, Brown and Brown (2012) suggested that teachers understand counterdiscourse while embracing culture responsiveness and racism’s role in teaching.

Brown and Brown (2012) referred to the Foucauldian view that educational discourses can be dangerous, yet useful, as the theoretical framework; therefore, counter discourse has the potential to challenge deficit thinking while making racial difference more concrete. Oppositional culture theory is viewed as both dangerous and useful in that it seeks to explain African-American underachievement by understanding African Americans’ rejection of mainstream school systems that proliferate oppression and assimilation, which in praxis equates academic achievement to acting White (Brown & Brown, 2012). Brown and Brown (2012) criticized oppositional theory as not being supported with empirical research, yet it has become an unquestioned metanarrative. While oppositional culture theory brought awareness of sociohistorical structures that affect schooling and African-American students’ critical resistance to these structures, it morphed into a framework that focused on disengagement (Brown & Brown, 2012).
the other hand, cultural difference theory challenged the deficit mindset that African Americans were predisposed genetically to deficient social and intellectual capacities (Brown & Brown, 2012). According to Brown and Brown (2012), the problem with cultural difference theory is that it made African Americans appear deviant from mainstream while teaching from the cultural difference construct was said to only benefit students of color. Additionally, cultural difference theory does not lend itself to critical awareness to enact change to improve societal inequities (Brown & Brown, 2012).

Consequently, Brown and Brown (2012) offered three recommendations for teacher education programs. The first recommendation was training for preservice teachers so they will understand discourse and its role in teaching/schooling. Secondly, preservice teachers should have a thorough understanding of frameworks and theories that support their professional practice and consider the critical argument of diverse perspectives and families. Finally, preservice teachers should have an understanding of contextual factors associated with theories and discourses in order to realize that not all African Americans have the exact same cultural experiences (Brown & Brown, 2012).

Brown and Brown (2012) shed light on the contributions of the two theories to counterdiscourse, which aides in the understanding of the potential to advance educational research as it relates to African-American students, as well as contribute to narrow-minded thinking in the educative processes of African Americans. Like counternarratives, counterdiscourse plays a role in challenging deficit-oriented thinking. Brown and Brown (2012) cautioned awareness of the fine line between the usefulness and danger in counter ideologies and theories. The recommendations made by Brown
and Brown (2012) for teacher education directly align with the changes that educators face in the diversity of classrooms.

Student Perception Matters

As stated earlier, literacy is a social practice and therefore mediated by culture and power. According to Vega, Moore, and Miranda (2015), understanding students’ educational experiences assists educators in providing the appropriate instruction for students. Additionally, Vega et al.’s (2015) study revealed that significant barriers to educational success persisted when students did not feel their opinions were considered as relative to school decisions. These findings challenge educational researchers’ common assumptions that adults know best. Mitra and Gross (2009) stated, “Students possess unique knowledge and insight into the individual, relational, cultural, and contextual factors that affect their academic performance” (p. 523).

Thompson (2002) reviewed the importance of listening to student voices when discussing the achievement of historically marginalized African Americans. For many minority students, education is critical to improve and advance their lives; therefore, alternative methods for research, curriculum, and instruction are vital in the protection of the right for African-American children to garner academic success. However, due to the lack of research that permits African-American students to speak on their behalf (Thompson, 2002), it is important to hear a student’s perspective on his or her educational experiences and contribute to the body of knowledge that exists within the field.
Thompson (2002) validated her belief for more student perception representation in educational research, acknowledging the fact that most teachers’ backgrounds are considerably different from that of African-American students. In making this assertion, Thompson (2002) argued that most news media outlets and educational research reflect negative perceptions of African Americans, thus misleading those who are unfamiliar with the cultures of students of color. Therefore, “Research that is based on feedback from African-American students is timely and imperative” (Thompson, 2002, p. xxi).

While historic educational research of minorities centered on deficit narratives, the National Urban Alliance has made great efforts to provide educational research that provides success stories of African-American students (Jackson & Cooper, 2007). The National Urban Alliance’s commitment to use the “most valid, informative source to determine student needs, the students themselves” (Jackson & Cooper, 2007, p. 246) is critical because students are the true clients of the educational system.

It is common today to make judgments about marginalized students based on standardized assessment results, but policy often takes for granted the opportunity for students to think critically about their own progress toward goals and learning and make informed judgments about their personal experiences (Jackson & Cooper, 2007). Howard (2001) asserted that while discussions of school reform for marginalized students continued, there were several interventions that were ineffective at best and sometimes caused further detriment to learners from diverse backgrounds. Howard (2001) provided an illustrative metaphor to offer clarity on the issue:
In the medical profession, before prescriptions or other potential interventions are proposed, patients are asked basic, yet vital questions such as “What is the ailment?” and “Can you think of anything that may have caused the sickness?” Once the patient is allowed the opportunity to convey the problem and how or why it came to be, the medical expert devises and intervention plan. (p. 132)

This discussion of Jackson and Cooper (2007); Howard (2001); and Thompson (2002) is in fact addressing the larger matter of students’ role in their success in and out of school. These findings have important implications for the broader spectrum of marginalized students to feel valued by the public school system and society in general. Particularly in urban school districts, the current culture of education and its reliance on standardization cause teachers to have a narrowed view of literacy instruction that limits learning through textbooks (Jackson & Cooper, 2007). However, these textbooks are not necessarily relevant to the daily events within students’ lives nor do they address current world affairs or digital modes of communication (Jackson & Cooper, 2007), thus limiting the scope and exposure for students within these urban school systems. One may argue that this idea of limited access to interesting and relevant information does not exist in only urban districts but also in school districts across the country. One notable study showed that as students matriculated through middle and high school, teacher-centered instruction increased; consequently, knowledge was transmitted rather that constructed, and students’ interests and voice were left unheard (Oldfather, 1993, 1995, 2002; Oldfather & McLaughlin, 1993). With this in mind, as students mature in
communication and understanding of their learning needs, teacher-centered instruction does not afford an opportunity for these students to share and impact their learning.

Cope’s (1997) study of 272 students regarding their school reading experiences brought great insight to the influence teachers have on the literacy experiences of students. Cope (1997) asked high school students to write an autobiography of their experiences related to reading from preschool to present. Cope (1997) found the strongest memories associated with reading were negative. Students concluded that difficult language in texts presented barriers to understanding; texts were not developmentally appropriate; assigned reading fostered a disdain for reading; oral reading was threatening; and teaching methods promoted over-analysis of texts (Cope, 1997).

Despite the abundance of negative experiences, a few students did find that assigned reading broadened their reading interests, and more students related that texts read aloud by fluent readers increased their understanding (Cope, 1997). If the students in the study are a valid representative sample, then educators need to reassess the popular assumption that literary classics are the best way to engage students in an appreciation for literature. Furthermore, Cope (1997) acknowledged like many others (Howard, 2001; Jackson & Cooper, 2007; Tatum, 2000; Thompson, 2002) the power of voices,

What is important is the human face they (students) put on research and the power they have in inspiring us to examine our teaching. But more powerful still would be the voices of your own students telling you about their reading experiences.

(p. 23)
Cope (1997) insisted that teachers as educational researchers consider students’ views and experiences related to reading in order to impact reading instruction positively.

Summary

This literature review highlighted a need to increase knowledge regarding the impact of culturally responsive classrooms on the success of students of color. According to McKinley (2010), researchers have conducted comprehensive studies that demonstrate that culturally responsive approaches dramatically improve the academic performance of low-income and minority students. However, Thompson (2004) emphasized that culturally relevant teaching is still a topic of debate met with resistance from some educational professionals. In an effort to understand literacy and culturally responsive teaching, this study sought to highlight students’ success in culturally responsive classrooms in order to provide a success-orientated narrative for students of color and offer critical literacy pedagogical practices that challenges the one-size-fits-all curriculum narrative that has plagued our schools for decades.

Literacy practices for adolescents are those that reflect the ideas of the real world where various cultures, economic status, religious affiliations, and sexual identities are represented. Thus, literacy instruction in modern schools needs to focus on meaningful, memorable, and useful practices that enable students to reach their individual promise (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007). Students’ individual stories are interconnected, forming bridges to broader social and political conditions that reflect our society (Jones & Woglom, 2016). African-American students have managed to accomplish great things in spite of the less than adequate instruction and negative stereotypical depictions of an
oppressed people (Ani, 2013). Therefore, I hope that the individual stories from this research study further validate African-American children’s self-determination to succeed. The following chapter presents a discussion of the epistemological assumptions and methods of inquiry and analysis for this research study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

To you I might just be another child lost in society’s universal negativity.
I suppose now is the time for heads to turn away and shoulders to shrug.
Know this...
Stereotypes can only go so far,
Last so long, and mean so much.

- Anonymous student

This poem reflects the ideology of deficit thinking that teachers may have for
students who are ‘othered’, a term that describes a person, typically found in urban
communities, who is underrepresented in society or divergent from the majority (Delpit,
2006). Poetry evokes the emotions of the writer and the reader and allows both
participants to explore emotions (Mazza, 1999). More importantly, the emotions
expressed in the poem are meant for the listener to acknowledge urban adolescents’
experiences as it relates to school (Jackson & Cooper, 2007). Furthermore, the words
expressed in this poem provide an avenue by which a student may express his or her
views openly to the world and be heard. Some may consider such a poem as a counter-
narrative because it counters the silence of a marginalized voice (Stovall, 2006). As
such, Coffey (2008) concluded that when students produce counter-texts, they promote
critical literacy, which challenges the mainstream narrative for underrepresented students.

According to Stovall (2006), poetry allows adolescents to overcome emotional
barriers of the world and delve into the unfamiliar spaces by being able to experiment
with form and words that reflect their true feelings. Through this critical engagement
with emotions and words, students began to move beyond the lines of the poem and think critically about the world around them (Stovall, 2006). This fosters the idea of writing for social justice, particularly when a group of adolescents shares poems and emotions about their lives (Stovall, 2006). Poetry framed in the context of a counter narrative addresses inequities, offers liberation, and defines identity (Foster, 2012). Through poetry, students write about their celebrations and struggles that encapsulate how they read their identities and their role within society (Burr, 2017). Reading one’s identity (Evans, 2015) as it relates to seeing the world (Freire, 1970/1998) is a central belief of critical literacy and culturally situated literacy. Drawing conclusions from research, poetry, a divergent genre of text, allows students to freely write with rhythm, rhyme, and imagery about their personal or cultural experiences as an analysis of society (Burr, 2017; Foster, 2012; Furman, 2007; Stovall, 2006). Thus, using poetry in the classroom integrates cultural backgrounds of students into the mainstream curriculum (Foster, 2012). Actually, poetry is often used “to challenge the dominant discourses that are typically propagated and supported by school and university curricula and pedagogy” (Leggo, 2008, p. 166). This is especially important for the inclusion of students from underrepresented ethnicities and urban communities (Foster, 2012; Stovall, 2006).

Because poetry can be used in multiple ways during the research process (Foster, 2012), this narrative research study utilized poetry not only as the metaphorical frame, but also as data written by participants. More specifically, Stzo, Furman, and Langer (2005) argued that poems “allow for holistic understanding that transcends a logic that numbers cannot understand” (p. 144). Although some readers may object to the idea of
using poetry in dissertation research, studying the complex lives of people does not always fit into lock-step research methods that tend to diminish the complexities of the topics or participants’ stories (Furman, 2007). In addition, the use of poetry in research allows participants to reflect on lived experiences (Foster, 2012).

Considering the tenets of poetry as discussed in this introduction, this narrative study explored the literacy experiences of participants from low-income, urban communities who were recent graduates from an urban Title I school with a history of academic failure. Literacy experiences are defined as student’s encounters with meaning making through engagement with assignments, extracurricular activities, and social interactions among peers and teachers. Recent graduate refers to a high school graduate from the class of 2017. Additionally, for this study a history of academic failure refers to low achievement scores on standardized assessment for over a decade and a graduation rate significantly lower than the state’s average graduation rate. Exploration of participants within this study is justified to position this research as part of the growing body of research on counternarratives to deficit literacy achievement (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Jackson & Cooper, 2007). Therefore, this study sought to paint a different picture for African-American students’ experiences throughout high school that acknowledges their culturally situated literacies, opinions, and academic potential for success. To achieve a rich counternarrative for this study requires an exploration of the deficit research found in the literature.

According to Jackson and Cooper (2007), the 7,000 students who drop out of school daily in the U.S. are more likely to be students of color, to live in poverty, to be
male, to have failed at least one grade, and to read significantly below grade level. A longitudinal study of early dropout rates in the U.S. revealed that 2.7% of the cohort of ninth graders had dropped out of school by 2012, when they would have been eleventh graders (Rosen, Chen, & Ingels, 2015). Among the 2.7%, dropout rates for Black, Hispanic, and White students were 4.3%, 3.5%, and 2.1%, respectively (Rosen et al., 2015). An apparent disparity exists within the above statistics. African-American students drop out of school for a variety of reasons; however, the narrow definitions of literacy and literacy practices in U.S. schools contribute to low literacy achievement, which is compounded by the social inequities experienced by African-American students (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2017; Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010).

Robb (2013) concluded, “1.3 million high school students drop out each year because they can’t read or write at a level that enables them to cope with school assignments; more than half are students of color” (p. 8). As a result of these statistics, educators sift through research to make judgments about how to improve adolescent literacy learning, but they rarely use the most valid and informative source, which are the students (Jackson & Cooper, 2007; Thompson, 2004). Furthermore, literacy practices and pedagogical understandings in schools that incorporate texts that address the dominant literacies and the underrepresented population are lacking (Morrell, 2008). As a proponent for culturally responsive teaching, Gay (2010) responded to such inconsistencies in literacy practices with the assertion that “teachers must learn how to recognize, honor, and incorporate the personal abilities of students into their teaching strategies” (p. 1). With these understandings as a backdrop for this narrative study, the
exploration of students’ lived experiences of literacy and their ability to negotiate the temporal, social, and institutional power struggles of the dominant curriculum and culture of schooling manifested in a rich counternarrative that challenges the commonly held deficit-oriented beliefs.

The Research Design and Rationale section provides the rationale for situating the theoretical lenses of this research study with narrative inquiry as methodology. Thus, the constructivist paradigm is explored through two overarching theoretical lenses of critical theory and culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as the definition and tenets of narrative inquiry. The Participants and Setting section describes the process of selecting participants for the study and the demographic information of the school the participants recently attended.

The Data Collection and Instrumentation section explains current practices in the field, along with various negotiations from field experts for collecting data in order to provide justification for the chosen methods of data collection. There will also be an anticipated timeline for data collection. The Data Analysis section delineates the analytic techniques employed during the fluid process of analysis for this qualitative exploration. Data analysis consisted of reading in-depth interview transcripts to locate the stories of the past, present, and future. The Dependability and Credibility section addresses trustworthiness criteria and associated procedures discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), used in this study to achieve a noteworthy contribution to the body of research. Finally, the Ethical Safeguard section relates measures taken to protect the identities of participants, secure data, and explain informed consent.
Purpose of the Study Reiterated

The purpose of this study was to explore African-American recent high school graduates’ perceptions of their high school literacy experiences. The goal of this research exploration was to understand the ways in which participants’ literacy experiences throughout high school have shaped their understanding of the world and have responded to students’ culture. To accomplish this, perceptions of African-American high school graduates from the class of 2017 who attended a low-income school in an urban community were investigated. The high school was particularly noteworthy for this study due to its history of failure in academic achievement, locale in a major city, and current demographics of predominantly African-American and low-income student population. Therefore, it is important to understand how students from this particular school managed to persevere despite some unique challenges while navigating the dominant literacy curriculum.

Students’ wellbeing and opinions should be at the center of curriculum work, teacher pedagogy, educational policy, and scholarly educational research (Kinloch, 2012). As other research has in the past, this study engaged urban youth in a reflection of their literacy spaces and feelings associated with literacy within schools (Kinloch, 2012). Kinloch (2012) and Jackson and Cooper (2007) maintained that scholars of color bear the responsibility of relating the stories of African-American students who successfully countered the deficit paradigms so prevalent in the research of students of color. This study also sought to create awareness of the value of the perspectives of African-American students regarding literacy practices. Finally, this study adds to the limited
base of research that counters stereotypical perceptions of the literary proficiency of African-American students.

Research Questions Reviewed

Therefore, this narrative inquiry focused on African-American students’ perceptions of lived literacy experiences. The following questions guided the investigation:

1. How do African-American high school graduates from a low-income urban community school describe their high school literacy experiences?

2. How do African-American students perceive the ways in which their literacy experiences were culturally responsive by addressing their varied literacy practices?

Research Design and Rationale

In designing a research study, it is important for the researcher to connect chosen methodology to a paradigmatic view and explain how methods will address the research problem (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Thus, the stages of a study involve “reflection, planning, entry, data collection, withdrawal from the field, analysis, and write-up” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 244). In Chapters 1 and 2, there is evidence of reflection and planning by a discussion of the background of the problem and the literature associated with this study. This chapter presents discussions of entry, data collection, and analysis. According to Crotty (1998), four basic elements comprise the qualitative research process: epistemological stances and perspectives, theoretical framework, methodology, and research methods. The researcher implemented the
methodology of narrative inquiry as the study of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) through in-depth interviews. This section discusses these four elements as it relates to this study.

Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge (Crotty 1998; Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2001). Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as “the view that all knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 43). While this explanation relates to this study and some theorists use the terms constructionism and constructivism interchangeably, constructivism more closely aligns with this study’s purpose and methodology. Constructivism refers to the process in which “each individual constructs knowledge and his or her experience through social interaction; moreover, a constructivist inquiry is successful if it presents increasing understanding of its phenomenon” (Costantino, 2008, p. 117).

The researcher explored the lived experiences of participants as told in stories of their past, present, and future through narrative inquiry as methodology. In choosing to conduct a narrative study, the researcher sought to understand how African-American students who have graduated from urban, historically low achieving, Title I school constructed knowledge throughout their high school literacy experiences. Additionally, this study sought to determine whether culturally responsive pedagogy played a role in these experiences. Gay (2010) described stories as powerful means for people to establish bridges across factors that separate them (i.e., race, culture, gender, and social
class) while penetrating barriers to understanding. By this understanding of stories, it is appropriate to situate this narrative within not only critical literacy but also culturally responsive pedagogy. Culture gives order and meaning to individuals’ lives; therefore, culture determines how an individual thinks, behaves, believes, and learns (Gay, 2010). Considering Gay’s (2010) proclamations, Pai, Adler, and Shadiow (2006) explained, “There is no escaping the fact that education is a sociocultural process. Hence, a critical examination of the role of culture in human life is indispensable to the understanding and control of educative processes” (p. 6).

In using Gee’s (1996) description of literacy—“language always comes fully attached to ‘other stuff’: to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world” (as cited in Perry, 2012, p. 52)—it is appropriate to view a study on the literacy experiences of African-American students through culturally responsive pedagogy as a theoretical lens, which has a philosophical foundation in critical theory. In exploring the perceptions of African-American students’ literacy experiences, this study referred to Shor and Freire (1987) and the concept that the ruling class’s ideology defines school knowledge. By this understanding, school literacy is confined to a passive reproduction of knowledge. Yet, marginalized groups of students need exposure to culturally situated literacies in order to conceptualize and translate the world portrayed in media, literature, textbooks, and functional texts (Shor & Freire, 1987). As stated by Freire (1970):

If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory
cannot fail to assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process. The leaders cannot treat the oppressed as mere activists to be denied the opportunity of reflection and allowed merely the illusion of acting, whereas in fact they would continue to be manipulated—and in this case by the presumed foes of manipulation. (p. 126)

Freire’s (1970) conclusions have considerations for the methodology chosen for this research study. Giving power to the participants in the telling and retelling of their stories from positions outside of normalized stances involves a critical nature to narrative research, for stories generally have the potential and the power to be a critique of cultural discourses, institutions, and organizations that produce social inequalities (Chase, 2011). Consequently, “Narrative inquiry can advance a social change agenda through the meaning making through the ordering and shaping of experience” (Chase, 2011, p. 415).

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews to collect stories from participants through guided conversations. During the interviewing process, the researcher allowed participants to express themselves in the medium that they were most comfortable. This choice aligns with the premise of culturally responsive pedagogy in that students have choice and autonomy in doing what works best for themselves (Gay, 2002).

Glesne (2006) referred to data analysis as the process by which researchers categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret the collected data. For this narrative study, the researcher identified the stories within the data, located epiphanies, identified contextual details, and interpreted the larger meaning of the story (Creswell,
The timeline for this research study was 12 weeks: six weeks for data collection and analysis, four weeks for reporting results, and two weeks for feedback and revisions.

Participants and Setting

Glesne (1999) stressed the importance of selecting information-rich cases for an in-depth study. After receiving approval from the Internal Review Board of Mercer University (see Appendix A), the researcher used purposeful homogenous sampling because participants share similar backgrounds and constitute members of the same subgroup. Purposeful homogenous sampling is a sample of a subset of a population that meets a preselected criterion (Creswell, 2013). The defined criteria for participants in this study were the following: African American, recent high school graduates in transition to postsecondary options, low-socioeconomic status, and reside in an urban community. The number of participants was three students, two males and one female. Justification of these choices is grounded in Richards’s (2009) view that the data should have adequate scope and depth, rather than larger samples. Creswell (2013) agreed that detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals are best suited for narrative research. A varied number of gendered participants provided perceptions from both demographic groups. Participants were expected to reflect on their lived experiences as high school students as it related to their perceptions of literacy and culturally responsive environments. In narrative inquiry, the researcher has a responsibility to honor and respect the stories of participants (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013). Thus, an ongoing relational inquiry space is called the field in narrative inquiry that fosters a mutual relationship between participants and researcher
(Clandinin, 2013). To protect the participants’ identity and the integrity of the study, participants received pseudonyms for the duration of the study.

The participants selected for this study graduated from Bethune High School (pseudonym). To provide context for this study, Bethune High School was a Title I school situated in an urban community. The school had a history of academic failure as measured by state and federal accountability measures along with a history of negative media attention by the local news stations. Accountability measures included standardized achievement scores on state assessments, low percentage of students reading above 1275 lexile, and graduation rate significantly lower than the state’s graduation rate. The school was predominantly African American with approximately 780 students with a 20% population of special education students, which is relatively high compared to other schools in Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). The following information in Table 1 details the standardized achievement scores on state assessments as well as graduation rate (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).
In qualitative research, the researcher is considered the research instrument because prewritten surveys or questionnaires are not typically used, and the researcher is the key person for obtaining data from participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). The researcher recognized that the role of researcher as instrument can impede trustworthiness in qualitative research, so the researcher implemented certain safeguards during the research study (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). More information for ensuring a trustworthy study is in the Dependability and Credibility section of this chapter.
Czarniawska-Joerges (2004) described three ways to collect data for narrative studies: incidents of storytelling, stories through interviews, and soliciting stories through the internet. With this in mind, the researcher solicited stories through interviews. Soliciting stories through the Internet and incidents of storytelling were not chosen for this research study because these did not align with the research methods of in-depth interviewing. After participants met the specified criteria through purposeful sampling and signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B), the researcher provided context for the purpose of the study. The researcher recorded interactions with participants in the field, which Clandinin (2013) referred to as field texts. Next, the researcher began the interview process to yield stories of past, present, and future (Clandinin, 2013). When narrative researchers gather data through in-depth interviewing, they transform the relationship between interviewer and interviewee into narrator and listener in order to invite narrator’s specific stories (Chase, 2005). The researcher conducted interviews as guided conversations through which the lived experiences of participants were shared and maintained copious field notes via a researcher journal in order to descriptively record events, use of artifacts, attitudes, and feelings within the narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The researcher organized the interviews questions in a life-story format (Ayers, 2008). Some neutral probes included, “How did you begin . . .”, When did you first notice . . ., “Tell me about a time when . . .”, “What did you do then . . .” (Ayers, 2008, p. 545). These types of neutral probes elicited a connection of events for both the researcher and the participants (Ayers, 2008). Additionally, the environment in which interviews took
place was not at the discretion of the researcher; consequently, the researcher adjusted to accommodate each participant’s availability and preferred location (Yin, 2014).

All data collected in the field were considered field texts in narrative inquiry; field texts are co-compositions that reflect experiences of researcher and participants (Clandinin, 2013). When conducting narrative research, it is important for the process of data collection and analysis to occur simultaneously in order to assist in managing the abundance of data (Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described field texts as “these records, descriptively made to record events, happenings, attitudes, and feelings, freeze specific moments in the narrative inquiry” (p. 83). Field texts consist of the existential conditions and the researcher journal entries of the internal conditions; therefore, the field texts are the researcher’s personal notes as part of the field experience being studied and personal reflections of that experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Other sources of data included the artifacts used to activate memories from experiences. Some experts in the field agree that researchers may use artifacts to trigger the telling of stories and memories of important times (Clandinin, 2013). Creswell (2005) viewed artifacts as physical objects that capture meaning in figured worlds and guide researchers to new understandings. Anticipated artifacts may include, but are not limited to, common books read, photographs/visual images, articles, sample senior portfolio.

During the data collection process, tension takes place with not only researchers but also participants as they position themselves within the three-dimensional narrative space. The researcher mediated such spaces to avoid running the risk of collecting data disconnected from the inquiry experience. Chase (2011) asserted that interviews may
limit an understanding of narratives, so other data sets may be used to garner an in-depth understanding of the stories participants share. For example, Chase (2011) used student newspapers, articles, editorials, and student government meeting notes to generate greater understanding of the narrative environment of a university campus as it related to acceptance of diverse populations. Additionally, Riessman (2008) suggested that visual images may also be helpful in communicating meaning. Riessman (2008) described the use of photographs of participants or paintings, while other researchers solicited a construction of an image by the research participant. Since this study valued cultural considerations, students received an opportunity to express their experiences in the medium that was most comfortable to them. In a study conducted by Lutrell (2003), the teens in the study did not want to engage in in-depth interviews so Lutrell asked them to create self-portraits, collages, or media conducive to their preferred self-expression. The teens then shared and discussed portraits with each other, and these discussions along with the images became Lutrell’s (2003) field texts. Because poetry is the metaphorical backdrop of this study, the researcher asked participants to compose an “I am” poem to express their culturally situated experiences and identities. The participants could opt out of writing the poem if they were not comfortable with this form of literacy. Finally, to ensure the integrity of the researcher and the participants, the data collected were stored in a secure location.

Data Analysis

In order to curtail “drowning in a sea of interview transcripts” (McCormack, 2004, p. 219), the research used coding throughout the data collection and data analysis
phases in order to organize different aspects of the data (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, Merriam (2009) suggested that qualitative researchers collect and analyze data simultaneously to prevent unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming data analysis. These aspects of the data were coded narratively via character, place, events, context, tone, plot, and setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Ultimately, the researcher relied on theoretical foundations of this study to answer the research questions to organize the entire data analysis process (Yin, 2014).

According to Grbich (2013), research questions that garner stories from participants are best addressed through narrative analysis in that these narratives explore specific experiences of events and give insight into how individuals construct meaning from their life experiences. Caine et al. (2013) asserted that narrative researchers view understanding from intimate places of experience during the research process. Since participants were reflecting on experiences of the past-present-and future, the researcher used narrative analysis to draft the story of participants (Grbich, 2013). Merriam (2009) claimed, “Conveying the understanding of the case is the paramount consideration in analyzing the data” (p. 203). Thus, the researcher analyzed the narratives from participants in this narrative research study in order to understand each individual’s account. Essentially, the process of analysis in this narrative inquiry involved reading and rereading field texts, coding the text to organize the data for a more coherent process, developing chronology that connects different phases of the story (beginning, middle, and end), and coding aspects of the data with character, place, events, context, tone, plot, and setting in mind (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
The ultimate decision of data analysis lies in the researcher’s questions and the data revelations throughout the inquiry process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Merriam (2009) stated that this stage of writing the report is particularly daunting due to the continuous process of data collection and analysis. Narrative inquiry writers, without over specifying and limiting themselves, need to imagine a shape for the final dissertation text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reminded narrative inquirers:

Narrative inquiry research texts are indeed “grand contraptions” built on multiple, fluid foundations and formed into ambiguous shapes that may ring more, or less, crisp and clear as one thing from one vantage point and another from another vantage point (p. 154).

McCormack (2004) provided practical considerations for this tedious process of analyzing field notes/transcripts, as illustrated in Table 2.
Table 2


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Construct an interpretive story (Stage 1) | Step 1: compose the story middle            | Re-connect with the conversation through active listening.  
Locate the narrative processes in the transcript.  
Return enriched and constructed stories to participant for comment and feedback.  
Respond to the participant's comments.  
Form the first draft of the interpretive story middle:  
- List agreed story titles.  
- Temporal ordering of story titles.  
- Add the text of each story.  
Redraft story middle:  
- View the transcript through multiple lenses:  
language, context and moments.  
- Take into account the views highlighted through these lenses. |
|                                        | Step 2: complete the story—add a beginning and ending | Compose an orientation and choose the title.  
Add a coda.  
Use visual form and textual strategies to enhance the presentation.  
Share the story with the participant.  
Reflect on the story in the light of the participant's comments. |
| Compose a personal experience narrative (Stage 2) | Step 1: construct a personal experience narrative | Temporally order the interpretive stories in a single document. This document forms the personal experience narrative.  
Share the personal experience narrative with the participant.  
Respond to the participant's comments. |
|                                        | Step 2: construct an epilogue to close the narrative | Reflect on the personal experience narrative in the light of the research question(s).  
Add an epilogue to summarise these reflections and close the narrative. |


While the researcher did not utilize all of the recommendations listed in Table 2, the guide provided a manageable and structured approach for analyzing the stories of
participants. Additionally, during this process, the researcher used guiding questions to facilitate the analysis:

- Who are the characters and how did they impact the participant?
- What is the timeframe of explanations?
- What were the main events and how did the participant react or perceive these events?
- What was the outcome of the experience or resolution? (McCormack, 2004).

Role of the Researcher

Because this study was culturally and socially situated in nature, the researcher acknowledged her understanding of the culture of the high school from which the participants attended. Therefore, a sense of trust developed, based on the researcher’s involvement in various school settings and activities and role as an accepted member of the group. Moreover, the researcher was also a product of the community where the school was located, which indicated a vested interest in understanding the phenomenon under study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) confirmed, “It is not possible to understand any phenomenon without reference to the context in which it is embedded” (p. 302).

Additionally, Given (2008) asserted,

Narrative analysis is employed in the social sciences to refer to texts at several levels that overlap: stories told by research participants (stories, which are themselves interpretive), and the interpretive account an investigator develops based on interviews and fieldwork observation. (p. 539)
A combination of the stories told by the participants and the field texts written by
the researcher were reported in the analysis and findings section of this study, which is in
Chapter 4 (Given, 2008). The researcher also shared a brief verbal narrative of herself
with the participants. By sharing this personal narrative, the researcher hoped to create a
sense of togetherness in research to foster a relational commitment to the research (Caine
et al., 2013).

Dependability and Credibility

Due to the nature of this narrative inquiry, the researcher sought to understand the
participants of this study while providing an accurate account of participants’ stories.
According to Creswell (2013), many perspectives exist regarding validation in qualitative
research. Consequently, the researcher referred to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) approach to
validation as trustworthiness of a study through: credibility and dependability (Creswell,
2013). Trustworthiness is simply the quality of the investigation and its noteworthiness
to intended audiences (Schwandt, 2001). Credibility is a process by which the researcher
attempts to demonstrate confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings by providing assurances
that the participants’ views and the results are the same (Lincoln & Guba, 1985;
Schwandt, 2001). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) might refer to such accuracy of
findings in a narrative inquiry study as wakefulness in that the researcher engages in
ongoing reflection of the decisions he or she makes and understands the subjectivity of
the study. Credibility for this study was evaluated through prolonged engagement and
member checking. Member checking ensured the conclusions drawn were adequate
representations of participants’ realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher created
memos/journals to reflect on decisions that affected participants, also known as an audit trail. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) concluded that audit trails provide a transparent description of the research process.

**Ethical Safeguards**

The nature of this inquiry was one of intimate discourse between participant and researcher; it was a relational methodology (Caine et al., 2013). Therefore, the responsibilities are first to participants, which require an attentiveness to context, personal relationships, and time (Caine et al., 2013). There are also instances of uncertainty throughout the process, so the researcher is aware of the possibility of uncomfortable moments that require a sense of maturity (Clandinin & Connely, 2000). A constant negotiation exists between researcher and participants, so it is beneficial to continue to maintain consent throughout the process due to the sensitive nature of the methodology and the context of the participants socially and culturally to communicate how the researcher plans to present or publish the work (Chase, 2011). The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants in order to maintain anonymity. The researcher also obtained written informed consent with signatures from each participant (see Appendix B).

**Summary**

This chapter provided a description the research design, methodology, theoretical and epistemological foundations, and methods used in this qualitative research study. Furthermore, this chapter outlined the rationale for the choices the researcher made before, during, and after the narrative study. Thus, epistemological stance of this
research study was constructivism with theoretical foundations situated in critical literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy. The methodology was narrative inquiry by in-depth interviewing to elicit stories from participants.

As Merriam (2009) stated, “Case studies can take us to places where most of us would not have an opportunity to go” (p. 258). Even though this was not a case study by definition, it was my goal to venture into the lives of untold stories to shape a very different narrative of African-American students. As poetry continues to be the metaphorical backdrop throughout the lines and stanzas of this research, the data challenge the conventional ideologies of the research process and provide a platform for marginalized youth to express their opinions about their school, curriculum, teachers, and peers. Moreover, this study sought to delve into the intricate stories of participants lived authentic experiences to bring understanding of students’ literacy experiences throughout high school. The researcher sought to maintain the integrity of the participants’ narratives by telling the true and accurate stories.

Chapter 4 presents specific events within the stories and provides an analysis. This analysis also features poems written by the participants as reflections of their cumulative experience.
CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVE RESULTS

Literacy

\[\text{I am literate in daydreams} \]
\[\text{and letting my imagination rule my head} \]

\[\text{I am literate in music} \]
\[\text{where rationale can be abandoned.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in procrastination,} \]
\[\text{pushing away my mind-defying.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in heartbreak} \]
\[\text{which has been already over-endured.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in lazy weekends} \]
\[\text{spent with my sister and a remote.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in creating;} \]
\[\text{not masterpieces, but heart and soul pieces.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in ramen noodle and green tea afternoons} \]
\[\text{in sweatpants and sneakers with no makeup on.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in moment-capturing} \]
\[\text{and finding the right words to explain.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in thunderstorms} \]
\[\text{and dancing in between water droplets.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in heart confessions} \]
\[\text{over acoustic guitars and games of solitaire.} \]

\[\text{I am literate in wanting} \]
\[\text{and taking away from what I already have.} \]
I am literate in wanderlust
and a wholehearted need to escape.

I am literate in color-coordination and clothing arranging
and bringing out all my best.

I am literate in kissing with desperation
and wanting to have it be effortless.

I am literate in wasting my time
in my head, in my heart, and in the clouds.

I am literate in everything mentioned
and so much that I can’t even say.

-Nicole Walsh, (2013)

Introduction and Organization of the Chapter

As this study valued the various forms of literate expression, the poem found at the beginning of this chapter is an expression of the speaker’s various forms of literacy. The speaker in the poem extends interactions of literacy beyond the written word, and the reader gets a vivid picture of the speaker’s literate world. The poem is related to the findings within this study due to its fluid iteration of the speaker’s storied life that values the individuality of literacy. The everyday experiences of the speaker in this poem become a component within her literate life. The experiences of fashion, affection, heartbreak, relaxation, creativity, and writing are juxtaposed with imagery. The reader can see, hear, taste, and smell all of the speaker’s literate life. The intricacies of the speaker’s life are unique to her own identities and foster an ability to forge these identities to construct larger meaning form the world in which she lives. The speaker’s experience does not end with the lines of the poem, and there is no resolution to her story. In a sense, the speaker breaks the barriers of acceptable behavior, appropriate dress,
submissive spaces that force stereotype of the dominant culture’s views on acceptable forms of living. Likewise, her literate life extends beyond the traditional views of literacy, just as the cultural, social, and community literacy practices of diverse groups of people.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of recent African-American high school graduates regarding their high school literacy experiences. The goal of this research exploration was to understand the ways in which participants’ literacy experiences throughout high school have shaped their understanding of the world and responded to students’ culture. It is through this purpose that the researcher participated in in-depth interviewing with participants. The interviews yielded narrative accounts from participants that made connections of their past, present, and future experiences. Thus, this reflection of literacy spaces and feelings associated with literacy within schools will add to the body of research in the field.

This chapter is an analysis of the findings for this study and is constructed using the sociocultural approach to narrative analysis (Grbich, 2013). The interviews were recorded via computer and voice recorder program on a mobile device. The researcher used initial questions to generate responses then allowed the participants’ responses to guide the remaining interview sessions. The interviews were then transcribed to produce a verbatim transcript. Through the sociocultural approach, the researcher listened and read the narrative multiple times in order to locate specific life episodes within the transcript. Next, the researcher examined the emotions and feelings expressed by the participant associated with these life episodes. Following this, through this examination
of emotions and feelings, the researcher linked stories to the relevant theories within this study. These theories included culturally responsive pedagogy, critical literacy, and deficit mindset. Finally, the researcher interpreted the participants’ story in order to construct meaning.

The researcher reviewed the data for narrative elements, such as character, place, events, context, tone, plot, and setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through this review of narrative elements, the interview data was coded for the narrative elements of character, place, events, context, tone, plot, and setting. Epiphanies were noted, and stories were linked to the theoretical lens of critical literacy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and deficit mindset in order to answer the research questions. The research questions were:

1. How do African American high school graduates from a low-income urban community school describe their high school literacy experiences?
2. How do African-American students perceive the ways in which their literacy experiences were culturally responsive by addressing their varied literacy practices?

As a synthesis of data analysis research in the field that uses the sociocultural approach to narrative analysis, the researcher selected questions from McCormack (2004), Clandinin (2013), and Grbich (2013). In order to provide a guided analysis, the researcher annotated the interview data using the following questions:

- Who are the characters and how did they impact the participant?
- What is the timeframe of explanations?
What were the main events and how did the participant react or perceive these events?

What was the outcome of the experience or resolution?

How do the participants make sense of the events? What emotions or feelings are displayed?

These questions helped to locate and organize the story within the data. As suggested by Reissman (2008), as narrative researcher, I analyzed the data by first listening as a form of interpretation; therefore, rather than analysis for themes, I located the participants’ voices to garner an understanding of their experiences. I listened to the stories from participants numerous times to gain a greater understanding. After listening to the data and annotating the data for narrative accounts, I then linked the participants’ stories to the guiding theories: critical literacy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and deficit mindset. In order to do this, I made annotations in the margins of the text. During this data analysis process, I then pulled big ideas to a separate document for each participant and color coded the data based on guiding theories. Based on the color-coded big ideas, I then extracted the stories for a thorough analysis of the field texts.

Each section of the chapter begins with a rich, thick description of the participant in the study, followed by participants’ narratives and an analysis of those narratives. In the discussion of participants’ narratives, an interpretation of the data will be discussed regarding the participants’ emotions and feelings associated with the events within their story (Grbich, 2013). Due in part to this study’s purpose valuing Kinloch’s (2012) views on students’ wellbeing and opinions being at the center of curriculum work, teacher
pedagogy, educational policy, and scholarly educational research, the findings honor the participants’ voices in order to provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences.

Mark’s Coming of Age Story

Mark was an 18-year-old full-time college student at the local university where he was majoring in music education and currently enrolled in a rigorous course load. The rigor of his course load is evidenced in the variety of courses that require in-depth thinking and understanding in order to apply his prior knowledge to connect new learning. Table 3 is a copy of Mark’s course summary from fall of 2017 and his grade point average at the time of this study. Not only had he done remarkably well in college, he was also a gifted saxophonist, as evidenced by his participation in gigs at a café near the downtown area of a large metropolis and by his numerous accolades and awards from musical competitions, along with $260,000 in music scholarship offers. The youngest child of his father, Mark did not really have a relationship with his mother, as he laughingly admitted when he stated, “It was a one-night stand”. He was a rather soft-spoken, compassionate, considerate, and respectful young man who walked to the note of his own saxophone with a great sense of humor and withitness. Even though he had received multiple music scholarship offers, he chose to stay in his hometown, live at home, and commute to a nearby college because of his father’s age of 83 and deteriorating health.
Throughout the interviews, Mark presented a coming of age story in which he described various characters who served as mentors and positive role models in his life.
Mark also described some of his peers and the lessons he learned from their mistakes.

Mark’s coming of age story:

*From middle school, I was really distracted in middle school from the actual Bethune Middle School. I didn’t really take advantage of the real potential I could have gotten out of middle school. And then when I came to high school, I had to really catch up, and some teachers didn’t support people catching up. They just expect you to already be at that point. Well, not here they expect you, but some teachers. Mrs. McWaters wasn’t like that. She forced you, not forced you, but she really made you have to be able to read. She gave assignments where you have to read everyday and write everyday. And the other teachers they can be . . . some other teachers could give you work, but you can fly by it. You didn’t have to put in the work for it. I didn’t appreciate the hard work at first, but now since I’m in college and I see everybody else on way higher levels than me and I’m still playing catch up, so that makes me now appreciate the hard work, but now I really wish I had it from all my years instead of just that one or two years. I started seeing the effects from people, peers, upperclassman—they didn’t get to go to the school they wanted to, or they didn’t get accepted to college at all, and I saw similarities between me and the upperclassmen, especially having the GPA of, I think I had tenth grade year a 2.4, and seeing that I could’ve ended up like them if I didn’t start taking it serious now.*

In Mark’s coming of age story, he described his transition from middle school to high school. In this description, he recognized that in order to achieve the success he desired
he was going to have to get serious and work hard. Based on Mark’s literacy experiences, he desired more from his teachers than what he had received. Delpit (2012) described teachers’ low expectations and minimal work ethic for students of color as *pedagogy of poverty*. Mark differentiated less rigorous classes and classes with higher expectations; furthermore, he realized that he missed some opportunities due to an underwhelmed academic environment. In this case, some of the practices of Mark’s teachers failed to foster personal and academic achievement, which can be linked to common practices in urban education (Lynn, Williams, Benigo, Mitchell, & Park, 2007).

As the interview progressed, a deeper dive into those classes that lacked the challenge Mark longed for emerged. He described a ninth grade biology class:

*Well, science and ninth grade biology, Ms. Patrick [pseudonym]. I don’t know, I can’t really remember it like that I just remember I was distracted but she didn’t help me . . . she didn’t help get people on track. . . . We never had any kind of one-on-one connection or any other connection.*

Mark went on to admit that he failed that biology class, and he learned a lesson from that failure. Mark stated, “All the negatives were lessons, which now I can look back and see what not to do, but then that took a little money away from me. The Hope Scholarship, so that’s why I wish I could change that.” It is noteworthy in Mark’s reflection that he realized his mistakes or negative experiences were all lessons, so he was able to conceptualize his failures to benefit his overall wellbeing. He also realized that grades translated into scholarship money.
Despite Mark’s ability to transform his F in Ms. Patrick’s biology class for his own good, Ms. Patrick also failed in many ways. Ms. Patrick did not take the time to redirect inappropriate behavior, offer help to struggling students, make science content relevant to students’ lives, or build relationships with students. Ms. Patrick lacked cultural competence, caring pedagogy, classroom management, and high expectations for students. In contrast with Ms. Patrick’s actions, a culturally responsive teacher demands high levels of performance through facilitating genuine concern of students’ academic well-being (Gay, 2010). Ms. Patrick was a direct antithesis of a teacher practicing culturally responsive pedagogy.

Music Literate

Throughout Mark’s interviews, he continuously referred to music and its major role in his life. Mark’s descriptions of music literacy helped me to understand that Mark could relate music literacy to its role in learning about the cultural lives of people. However, he did not make the connection that this relationship is a form of storytelling and reflects the ways in which people share their lives through music. This relates to the idea that literacies relate to different domains of an individual’s life (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Mark stated,

_I can see it as literacy because music it does not define a culture, but it’s one of the factors in a culture. So, yeah, I can see it. It cannot tell the story, but it gives an insight into how the people live in their culture._

Mark also described the people and experiences that had been instrumental in his literate music life. These people are referred to as characters in Mark’s narrative, and the
experiences help to shape the plot of Mark’s narrative. In the following portion of
Mark’s narrative, he describes his neighborhood experiences as they impact his divergent
forms of literacy which for Mark is musical literacy. Street (1984) suggested that the
ideological model of literacy is not isolated from home environments, so it is then
important to note Mark’s home environment when analyzing his literate life.

When I asked Mark to tell me who inspired him to play the saxophone, he first
hesitated and told me that it was a story and that he would make it short. I assured him
that he did not have to make it short, especially when I thought of my purpose for the
study. I thought that is exactly what I want: a story. Mark began to tell his story:

*I think I was just going to middle school; we got a lake by our house. It’s the
Moultrie [pseudonym] Lake. I didn’t know there was no fish in there. But I told
my dad there were little fish. So he took me over there. And it’s in our
neighborhood, so we’d just walk down there. And we tried to fish, and there was
a person over there, it was funny. My dad asked him, he was like looking over the
water. He was like, “You ain’t gonna jump in there are you?” And then they
started talking or whatever. Then he said, “I could teach your son how to play
saxophone for free.” So, and then when I got to know him, I figured out he was
real successful with his career and everything, and education in music. And it
inspired me to want to do that. You know, one day do that to somebody else. You
know somebody that can’t afford it, you know help somebody out.*

I knew the exact lake Mark referred to in his story. I had passed by the same lake during
my childhood. The lake did not have a lighted pathway or any docked boats on its
perimeter. It was rather a small body of water on a relatively busy street with unkempt grass. When I was a child, it was rumored to house many dead bodies. However, for Mark the lake represented a different experience—an experience that was life changing. This chance encounter at the lake led to Mark becoming an understudy of Mr. Harris. The happenstance meeting prompted the development of Mark’s journey into musical literacy. To this day, Mr. Harris tutors Mark, free of charge. Mark’s encounter at the lake served as an inspiration to provide the same opportunity to others who may not be able to afford professional music lessons. This idea of giving back or service to the community embodies critical pedagogy. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) discussed this form of critical pedagogy as the ability to identify a problem and create a plan of action to address the problem. In this situation, Mark identified through his own experiences that a need for access to professional music educators exist within the context of his larger community; therefore, he had decided to make professional music lessons accessible to students through his service as not only a future music educator, but also a musician. Mr. Harris, a critical character in Mark’s narrative, was able to unlock the desire to serve through music. Mark held profound respect for Mr. Harris and attributed his success in part to Mr. Harris’s involvement in his life.

This conversation between Mark and me led me to inquire about music’s role in helping him understand or read the world. Considering Freire’s (1970) ideas about critical literacy, reading the world and the word, I was pleased with Mark’s response and the level of sophistication with which he was able to relate the ideas:
I mean understand the world, I mean going back to like in this area it’s more than this, the world has a lot more to offer. And music, there’s so many different types of styles of music and people put their different types of cultures into music. And music is like their language. And it just shows you there’s very different ways, there’s way more in the world than just where you at right now. I mean music is everyone’s language for them to express how they feel, what’s going on in their community, or life.

Mark valued the power music has to share culture, community, and life. For Mark, music was a way for him to reconcile with the idea that the world is much larger than the context of his school environment. This reconciliation allowed him to understand the world’s many differences, rather it be culture, people, or different music genres. More specifically, music was his motivator. Music saved Mark’s life and continued to catapult him into greatness.

Although not always intentional, music often entered our conversations, and when Mark referenced music, I took the liberty to expound upon it. On one occasion, he remarked, “Music is my foundation”. He elaborated by providing specific examples for music as his foundation: “Everything in my life, like my career, even school, it’s connected everywhere in my life”. He even mentioned that music brought his long-term girlfriend and him together. Music was vitally important to Mark and has been since that day at the lake. It acted as his mirror and window into the world and into self. The best illustration to explain this metaphor is in Figure 6.
In Mark’s case, text in Figure 6 would be replaced by music. Through music, he understood humanity, politics, worldviews, and more. Through music, he understood his thoughts, feelings, emotions, and struggles. Whether Mark wrote his own musical phrases and notes as author/composer, listened to music, or performed the music, he experienced all of the viewpoints as illustrated in Figure 6 in order to understand himself and the world. By this understanding, Mark described improvisation and compared it to the different forms of communication. He stated, “When you are improvising, you gotta
learn how to speak it . . . or learn how to write. You gotta know what fragments, how
would you get your point across.” Mark was describing the process jazz musicians use to
improve in music. Indeed, there is an art and science behind improvisation in as much as
with traditional forms of literacy. During this conversation, Mark’s use of his divergent
form of literacy to function as traditional forms of literacy do in the life of some who is
not a musician particularly intrigued me. As Kinloch (2011) indicated, there are multiple
sign systems related to multiliteracies, and for Mark music was the most abundant sign
system. Mark also used multimodal forms of literacy in order to engage with the world.
Researchers referred to multimodal forms of literacy as 21st century literacies that consist
of gestural, audio, visual, spatial and linguistic modes of learning (Broderick, 2014; Cope
& Kalantzis, 2010; Kalantzis, Cope, & Fehring, 2002).

Similarly, music literacy helped Mark to begin to think about how the different
genres of music people listen to help to shape their identity and their life, as evidenced in
this excerpt:

As I became a better musician, I started being more competitive. I found
something I was good at, so I wanted to use that as something to keep me going, I
guess, and in the later part of my senior year I saw, I listened to a lot of a
different, a wide spectrum of music—not just jazz, or just the concert music, or
hip-hop or anything. I had a more open mind towards it. I try to feel, understand
people from different places: how do they interpret the music, why they interpret
the music, and why do they still listen to that music like rock? Like here (at his
high school), there is a lot of rap and stuff. So why do people listen to rap?
That's what I'm talking about. I look at it from a teaching perspective. I thought about my different teachers—how would they do their lessons and how would they get people to be engaged and how would they deal with different situations, how the students would interpret different things. I just started looking at it not just this year, but in my later part of my high school career and now since I'm thinking about being a teacher, or not even being a teacher just teaching somebody in order to get my point across.

In this excerpt of Mark’s story, he viewed music metaphorically. He compared the various genres of music and the different interpretations of that music to various teachers in the classroom and ways in which they manage the varying interpretations in the classroom. This constructed meaning of variability in modern classrooms repudiate the metanarrative of a one-size-fits-all curriculum and/or solution to the social, cultural, and political differences in students present in all classrooms.

As I listened to Mark’s story of his musically literate life, I could not help but take notice that he was unable to fathom how music can be integrated in content courses throughout his high school experiences. As I located epiphanies within the data, it became clearer as to why he could not make these connections among music and his core content classrooms. Mark shared his views on his literacy experiences throughout high school. Thus, as an interpretation of his responses, I considered one of the research questions: How do African-American students perceive the ways in which their literacy experiences were culturally responsive by addressing their varied literacy practices?
Mark was candid in his responses, to which I was very grateful as a qualitative researcher. Since music was woven throughout Mark’s literate life, it was only appropriate to consider the ways in which music was integrated into the literacy experiences of the classroom. Mark responded:

*In the beginning, music wasn’t weaved into my high school experiences. It was used to be more social with people, you know other than being in school, to have a time to talk with other people my age. However, I just don’t see how music can be used in the classroom. I haven’t seen a way, I’m sure there’s a way. I just haven’t seen a way that works for me. I mean, that’s like a cliché. You gotta get the kids to be more interactive. I’m not saying it doesn’t work. You know like what they say, try to make the kids learn a song or rap. I mean, yeah, but then you gotta be interested in it too. And if you’re not interested in it, it’s the same result. Well, I gotta be interested in the music. Again, it’s like the rap song. Everybody (teachers) go to the rap song when trying to integrate music in the classroom. But I just don’t like it. I’m not a rapper. I don’t like rapping. I mean that’s just like the generic thing they go to. Make a poem or a rap.*

It was disheartening for me to hear Mark’s account of not having experienced music in the classroom. More surprisingly, research on urban education discusses engaging African Americans in an analysis of hip-hop/rap (Emdin, 2016; Kirkland, 2006; Morrell, 2008). While one may agree with the position of these researchers as their work discusses hip-hop education as a component for critical literacy and social justice, others might argue the potential for a narrow-minded representation of pedagogy related to
social justice. Nonetheless, Mark’s comments remind researchers and educators that a stipulation for being Black is not a love for rap music, and educators, whose philosophical positions are akin to cultural responsive pedagogy, must be cautious not to homogenize students’ interests because they are from a particular ethnic background. Homogenization can also contribute to deficit mindset for African-American students (Brown & Brown, 2012). Instead of an assumption of interests, Mark would value teachers’ ability to appeal to students’ individual interests when trying to create more interactive lessons.

Diverse forms of reading the world foster cultural competence and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Scherff & Spector, 2011). In Mark’s case, he acknowledged that music assisted him in constructing meaning from the world that gave him the ability to become fully aware of his role in society in relation to others. In a sense, Mark attempted to deconstruct power relations within the school and learning environment by protesting the generic strategy of “rap for all Black children”. He further validated his form of literacy expression in the way he interacted socially through music, read the world through music, and accomplished life goals through music.

Mark and I then began discussing the actual literacy experiences in some of his courses. Most of the conversation centered around two English classes, one from Mark’s eleventh grade school year and the other from his twelfth grade school year. These two teachers may serve as authoritarian characters in Mark’s narrative. A lack of interest in the content seemed to be the overall outcome of Mark’s story.
I don’t think I really gave it a chance to connect to the curriculum, so I can’t really say about that. Because I didn’t really give it a chance to actually sit down, read, and try to make a connection or try to see whether this happened in my life or where this is going on somewhere else or something like that. I just wasn’t interested. Especially if I can just search up something on my phone. If the teachers give assignments and they want you to read this, especially if they have Spark notes or something like that, I’m not about to read the whole thing. I’m about to search it up. Especially if it’ll give me more time to do stuff I want to do. Boy, I mean, I would rather listen to some music, or I would rather just be on my phone than read something from the 1700s or whenever the time place was supposed to be or look at a video on it. I remember reading The Great Gatsby, but only because it was a movie.

Overall, I didn’t really feel a connection with the texts I read. The Great Gatsby stood out to me because this was the first time you really, this is Mrs. McWaters’s [pseudonym] class, so this was the first time I got assigned a chapter book. I really had to read it because of the work, because of the actual content that we had. You couldn’t find the content and summarized or anything like that. My experiences in Mrs. McWaters’s eleventh grade English class was memorable. She always give a lot of work, and you have to have it done by a certain time or she’s not going to take it, just like in college. I appreciated having to get the work prepared for a certain time. I never had to do that until Ms. McWaters’s class. Actually, doing work and getting it prepared for a certain time. Actually, having
to put notes in my phone or reminders to do it and abide by the schedule. My own schedule. I have to do this. I have to practice. I have to do this for this class and all that. So that helped me out because now I really have to do that now. And it taught me to make some connections and actually if I become a teacher that’s what I’m going to have to do. I didn’t take it as what I was learning was meaningful, just like how we did it, like structure. I didn’t take, I didn’t really pay attention to any of the readings . . . a lot of stuff from the literature or like that from the books, it’s just how they, how she, Mrs. McWaters, how she structured her class. Ms. Jones’s twelfth grade English class, I really like her because you really had to dig deep and actually go into the text and read, some of it, especially some of the terms or language that was used. But I read through some of it, and she understands where we were coming from. So, she actually helped out, and she would go through it on the board, or she would go through it in the class and point out stuff that no one would really know what’s going on.

Despite Mark’s lack of interest in the content, he was still able to negotiate his disinterest with completion of assignments. He described his literacy tactics that enabled him to complete the assignments by looking up the information on the Internet; Mark was using his resourcefulness to navigate the literacy curriculum at his school that he considered outdated. Although some texts were outdated and not relevant for Mark’s preference, he learned from the thinking processes and organizational skills required to complete the work. In his twelfth grade English class, he felt his experiences elevated beyond surface level analysis, and the teacher provided more contextual relevance students needed in
order to understand complex texts. With the idea that no text is neutral (Vasuez, Tate, & Harste, 2013), Mark’s twelfth grade literacy experiences are more attuned to critical literacy theory because text analysis moved beyond surface-level. Additionally, during analysis of texts the teacher considered students’ cultural, social, and contextual lives as a component of the analysis.

Martez: Humble Beginnings and Big Dreams

Martez was a charismatic 20-year-old young man who had experienced a great deal of turmoil in his life. He had a network of extended family members who were instrumental in his care due to the absence of his mother and biological father. Martez had lived with various relatives throughout his life but had never been in the foster care system. Despite these circumstances, Martez was enrolled as a full-time freshman at a college about an hour away from home where he was able to earn a 3.0 during his first college semester. His course load for fall semester was freshman English, criminal justice, math, and music appreciation. Martez’ ultimate career goal was to become a lawyer due in part to his love of debate. His core academic strengths are English and math. In science, he had struggled to find his place, and he remarked that he was extremely worried of how he would do in his first college science course.

Martez identified as a “visual thinker and hands on type of person”. He stated, “I don’t really like lectures, so for me to fully understand, I’ll probably need more than just words.” As a result of this epiphany, I decided to allow Martez to respond to written questions instead of auditory interview questions. I decided it was important to include
his preferred method of communication due to the nature of this culturally responsive narrative study.

Street Literate

Martez began our conversation with a story of his home experiences. At first, he was overly cautious in his responses, as if he thought he would offend me or speak inappropriately about his former high school or high school teachers. Clandinin (2013) discussed the silence that exists when conducting narrative research as participants intentionally omit certain life events or may not have the words to convey difficult life events. There was a silence by intentional omissions throughout Martez’ narrative, specifically when discussing home environment experiences. I had to reassure Martez that anonymity would be maintained through pseudonyms and that he could be “real” with me; it was okay. This conversation of home experiences stemmed from a discussion of his literacy experiences he would have liked to see change. He mentioned that he wished his teachers had incorporated more hands-on learning and use of technology. He felt that if they employed these strategies, then students would be more cooperative. Not only that, but Martez opened up about his feelings of abandonment:

*Because most kids are just not going to come to school every day and do what you tell them to do. They got to know someone cares because most kids come to school, and the people that they stay with at home, they probably don’t care about if they go to school or not. When I was in elementary school or some of my middle school years, I felt like my mommy didn’t care if I went to school or not. All my older brothers and sisters dropped out except one, and she graduated*
because she moved in with my grandma. So I feel like it wasn’t a big thing for me to go to school. Even now while I’m in college, I feel like it’s not a big thing for me to go. Of course, I know I’m going to finish, but I’m saying, at the same time it’s like a little thing in my head telling me, “Well, if you do drop out of college, it ain’t nothing going to happen to you.” I look at it as they probably don’t care. I know as far as me though, it’s important. So, if you’re there (teachers), and you’re helping them out, and they see that you care, then they’ll (students) care. If they see no one cares, then they’re not going to care either.

My mother never really looked at education as key. She graduated from high school but decided not to further her education. Raising six kids just on a high school diploma was hard for her. It definitely took a toll on me and my siblings. Having to see our mother go to work cleaning up for others was hard. Anyone would think that she would definitely push for her children to get their education and be better than her. This wasn’t the case for her. My four oldest siblings all dropped out of school in middle school. They weren’t disciplined for dropping out; it was like it was the right thing to do. My other sibling didn’t let that phase her. She graduated from a Title 1 high school. All my life I had no one to look up to as far as education, and it was hard. I didn’t take it serious going to school serious, especially because my mom didn’t care if I went or not. She never was the hands-on type of parent. My freshman year of high school, my sister was in her senior year. It was hard to believe, but she did it and paved the way for me. I remember everybody being so happy and screaming for her. I
knew that I would want the same feeling she had. That view didn’t last in my head long. My second semester of senior year is when I knew it was real, and I should get prepared.

Martez had a desire to be held accountable, and he longed for that accountability to come not only from teachers, but also his mother and his siblings. In spite of the lack of accountability and fickle attendance habits, Martez still managed to finish high school. He was honest about the disappointment he felt for his mother’s scant involvement and his siblings’ inability to finish high school. His only sibling to graduate, his big sister, serves as a critical character in Martez’ narrative. Her graduation served as a life-changing event for Martez, as he was just beginning his high school journey. In a sense, continuing to attend school served as a shielding from the street life he had grown to know and understand. By street life, I intend to relate to drug abuse, drug dealing, violence, and crime. It is also not my intention to portray street life as exclusively negative, for that would contribute to the deficit ideology. Without street life, Martez would not have learned survival skills, the importance of family, the value of hard work, and the fullness of recognition. Graduating from high school means a great deal more for Martez than it does for some of his peers.

Martez had internalized these experiences to act as both a motivator and a crutch. He was motivated because he had the most potent example of the consequence of not finishing school, but it also served as a crutch by virtue of quitting could easily happen, and he would escape chastisement by the people who were closest to him. Thus, he carried the burden of perseverance without the familial support, which some adolescents
are accustomed. It was hard for me to imagine his home literate life due to his frequent change of residences and lack of stability. I had to come to realize that although his home literate life may have been drastically different from my own, his home life did not conform to family/social norms and schools may have categorized Martez’ experiences as invalid and damaging leading to a disenfranchisement of Martez. While they rarely admit as much, educators often misunderstand students’ street life experiences and fail to use such opportunities to examine street life as a vehicle for triumph. Street life is often associated with marginalized minorities, specifically African American males, which portray African-American males as inferior and deficient. Deconstructing street life is necessary to improve the trajectory for students’ whose backgrounds are rooted in street life, and as a component of critical theory, deconstructing dominant stereotypes are a plausible approach to school curriculum. Through the lens of cultural responsiveness, Ladson-Billings (2009) urged teachers to legitimize students’ real-life experiences as part of the school curriculum; furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2016) suggested that teachers care about their students, embrace a commitment to high expectations, and incorporate students’ cultural and social experiences. Martez needed a teacher to consider culturally responsive pedagogy in order for him to understand that his home experiences were moments of tension, yet opportunities for advancement. To a degree, the teacher did not acknowledge factors outside of school that threatened Martez’s chance at success.

Martz described the culture of Bethune High School as “raw, it’s like a lot of stuff happens there that is very hood.” Martez used his knowledge of street life to describe his school. He saw himself and his experiences in congruence with the culture
of his school, which may explain his commitment to continue to attend the school. Conversely, Martez’s comments that his school was pointless to attend was due in part to the lack of academically challenging environment.

As the interviews continued, Martez’s mediation with the lack of familial support further piqued my curiosity. I also wanted to address his choice to remain silent when discussing his home environment. Although I did not want to offend him with my persistence, the desire to learn more about his home literate life was worth the risk. I asked Martez to elaborate on his home literate life; he described it as such:

*My home literate life consisted of the streets. I had to learn how to survive at an early age. My mother has been addicted to drugs all my life, so I learned about drug addictions and drug dealers’ businesses very early. I learned from my brothers and sisters how to be defiant and do what I want. Nothing at home that I learned was good really. The only valuable thing I learned at home is that family needs to stick together.*

We then talked about his experiences specific to literacy. During his years as an underclassman, he did not feel challenged by the literacy curriculum. He wrote in response to an interview question, “My literate life is great. I understand readings very well. I’m able to write essays and receive back good grades. I’ve never had a problem with not understanding or not being able to read something.” Despite Martez’ confidence in his reading comprehension and writing abilities, it was not until he reached his senior English class that he found the work more meaningful and helpful. Martez was specifically grateful for his improved writing skills after taking the course.
I see myself as I learned from it. I learned from having to read about stuff like that. I mean, as far as when it comes to the curriculum, I don’t think the curriculum challenges most students. Or if it does, I don’t feel like it challenged me like that. Sometimes I was like it was easy, I don’t have to do that because it’s too easy. But some kids, it was too hard. I mean, as far as me and a curriculum, I feel like I learn some stuff from it, and some stuff, it’s just like it was okay, like I didn’t have to put in effort to learn about it or to do something like to write about it or describe it, basically. However, in Mrs. McWaters’s class, it was . . . I’m not going to say it was hard, but it was challenging, but it actually helped you. Especially when we read Canterbury Tales or Beowulf, it was very interesting. It was some stuff in there that you just think about. It’s just like the vocabulary, it expanded your knowledge on certain words, and kind of helped you out a little bit, especially when it came to me going to college. As far as me being a college student now, it helps me a lot, as far as what to start and how to start, stuff like that, stuff I probably didn’t even know before. I can definitely say being in her class, it definitely helped me a lot, opened up my eyes to real-life situations and how to put that with my mind and what I want to write about.

It appears that Mrs. McWaters’s twelfth grade British Literature class served as the gateway to graduation at Bethune High School. Martez appreciated having to navigate this class, and because he passed the course, he felt a sense of pride and accomplishment. In some ways, Mrs. McWaters’s class was culturally responsive because she held high expectations for students to exercise their full academic potential.
On the contrary, the Eurocentric British Literature curriculum that Mrs. McWaters was required to teach did not reflect Martez’s culture in any way, and it made it difficult for Martez to identify with the content within the curriculum. He said, “I don’t know if I felt a personal connection, I know it was heroic and people always tried to help others, dealing with Beowulf.” He drew conclusions about the theme of heroism, but he did not relate it to his own life. Why had Martez been forced to learn European cultural norms? Even though the content was not relevant to Martez, he was able to garner relevance through the learning process in which he engaged. When one considers 21st century literacy instruction, the practices in which all students engage should be useful so that they may reach their individual capacity (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007). In Martez’s case, the form of critical literacy that he experienced was an exploration of self-concept that led to his individual accomplishments and his view of self in relation to writing and communicating his ideas.

Even though Martez benefited from the experiences of Mrs. McWaters’s twelfth grade English course, he reflected on the totality of his literacy experiences:

*Like I wasn’t learning nothing, or like I already knew it, or maybe the teacher could try a little harder. But at the same time, it’s like what do the teacher do, because there’s some students in the class know it or they know what to do, and there are some kids that don’t. You’ve got to find that line in the middle where you’ve got to strategize for. Because it was boring. It was boring. I mean, it was just like, it didn’t have my attention. Or the teacher probably didn’t have my attention, or they probably didn’t even care. So if they didn’t care, then I didn’t*
care. So I wouldn't do it. I'd focus on something else or talk to somebody else or just walk out of class. Anything. I don't know. But I just wouldn’t focus.

It is important to note that Martez recognized the vitality in teachers having the content knowledge and pedagogy to reach students in ways that promote excellence in all children. Additionally, he sympathized with teachers’ difficult job to reach students on different cognitive levels, but he still expected teachers to find a strategy to reach the students. He expected his teachers to go the extra mile.

In this excerpt of Martez’s narrative, the theme of care arises but as a transactional experience between teachers and students; moreover, Martez emulated the teacher’s absence of care, a contributor to deficit thinking, by a blatant disinterest in the work, the teacher, or the class. Because urban schools do not have homogenous classrooms, it is important for teachers to use a variety of strategies to engage students. Unfortunately, Martez’ felt his teacher did not employ strategies necessary to reach the varying cognitive levels, multiple student interests, and diverse life experiences of the students in the class. The teacher’s failure to engage resulted in the students’ failure to connect with the content, ultimately resulting in Martez’s apparent disengagement. Because of the teacher’s inability to use care pedagogy to reach her students, it appeared to Martez that his teacher made little effort to engage students. Larson (2003) would argue that teachers in Martez’ school life underteach, which is both oppressive and dangerous. An abundance of underteaching for marginalized students have important consequences for the broader context of continued academic structures that maintain the learning gap for students of color. Although Martez spoke highly of his twelfth grade
literacy experience, he felt that as a college gets more difficult, he would feel the effects of the inadequacies of his high school literacy curriculum. He explained, “But I know in the long run, I'm going to come across something that's going to be really hard, because I probably don't know what I should have learned in high school.” Consequently, it is essential that teachers use a caring pedagogy analogous with culturally responsive pedagogy in order to avoid students’ feelings of alienation that may eventually lead to a disassociation with mainstream school.

Based on this description of Martez’s lack of focus and subpar student engagement strategies, I thought to ask Martez about any changes he would have liked to see in the literacy curriculum. He responded:

That’s a good question. I think I would say what I said, add more technology, and more stuff as far as up-to-date. Being like I went to another high school briefly, too, so you see a difference in a way with the other curriculum, but I’d definitely say current issues and stuff that’s happening today, not like stuff that happened in the 1800s or 1900s, like a long time ago. But definitely more up-to-date on what goes on in the world, maybe having a current issues class or an individual law class, really make kids want to be interested about coming to class.

More technology learning. Make sure every assignment deals with critical thinking, but it’s also hands-on, it’s fun and attention-grabbing so that kids won’t wander off trying to figure something else out, everything else but the assignment.

Martez gave insights to educators of a more engaging, technology-enhanced, current event, critical literacy curriculum. He was not pleased with the antiquated texts that did
not address more pertinent world issues. Martez’s voice speaks volumes to students’ intuitive capacity to understand their needs when it comes to matters of their educational experience. The problem persists with educators’ hegemonic ideologies of dominance and knowledge that excludes students’ engagement in the content they learn and the processes by which they learn it (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Martez concluded that if educators were to consider student views of learning and curriculum, students would be more interested in attending class. This is especially true for literacy curriculum and the narrow conceptions of appropriateness of mandated texts.

As Martez discussed changes he would like to see in the literacy curriculum, he also pointed out the absence of critical literacy. Evidence of this absence is communicated in his response, “I can’t really think of teachers that really wanted you to ask questions or encourage you to debate the text with another student.” This idea that the text is always right reinforces the dominant cultures position of power and limits marginalized students scope and exposure to multiple interpretations of a text. Furthermore, it denies the fact that texts are never neutral.

Ms. Ariel: Bold and Beautiful

Ms. Ariel was a delightful young woman full of vibrancy and pizazz. She was also a full-time college student at a university, majoring in early childhood education. She lived at home with her dad and commuted to school. While in high school, she was adamant about attending Bethune Cookman University, but she later found out the news of her father’s cancer. Therefore, she decided to remain close to home and attend a local university. In college, Ariel did not have much free time because she juggled school and
a part-time job. Despite her busy schedule, Ariel maintained a 4.0 grade point average (GPA). Her extreme focus on her dreams led her to enroll in college in the summer semester directly following her high school graduation in May 2017. She felt it was best to continue her studies without any breaks. She admitted that she was a procrastinator, so it was important for her to get her priorities together by starting college right away.

In high school, Ariel was a stellar student enrolled in numerous advanced placement courses. Her studious mindset and commitment to excellence helped her to become salutatorian of her high school class. Throughout high school, she was often asked to speak or sing at school programs. She was well spoken and confident, characteristics that made her a natural public speaker. Overall, Ariel’s story is one that exudes positivity and commitment to representing her alma mater well.

As I listened to Ariel’s story, I could not help but think about how the participants in this study all went to the same institution, but some of their stories were polar opposites as if they attended three different schools. I did not expect their stories to be exactly the same because I value their differences as social beings; however, I did not realize such differences may have been due to the separation imposed upon them by the structural inequity within the school. A factor that contributes to the structural inequities is students are typically placed in ninth grade courses based on standardized assessment scores and special education designation, and they follow the same academic track throughout their entire school time. Due to limited resources and lower enrollment, academic tracking creates mini schools within one school, and the same teachers interact with the same students through the duration of high school. Ariel was the only
participant who enrolled in accelerated or advanced placement courses, and it was intriguing that her experiences may be interpreted as more positive, challenging, and uplifting. For example, Ariel expressed her experiences with much delight, “we were exposed to a lot of texts…we’ve always written papers and essays”.

Multiliterate

Initially it was difficult to define Ariel’s literate life because it was multifaceted, and I did not want to box her expressions and experiences into one literate category. Therefore, multiliterate was the most appropriate term to use, and I was careful not to minimize Ariel’s literate life by this description. Ariel forged social relationships with her peers as well as teachers; she loved to write and valued her experiences with print literacy. Ariel was generally successful academically as evidenced by her college grade point average of 4.0 and salutatorian honor from high school. Considering all of these literacy skills at play, she exuded a sense of self-awareness, intrinsic motivation, and confidence. It follows then that Ariel’s multiliterate life consisted of interpersonal literacy, print literacy, academic literacy, and self-literacy. Ariel’s narrative is laden with multiple forms of literacy that operationalize the story of her in and out of school experiences. Ariel’s story starts with a major event in her life, “The Transition”:

*My parents were separated during that time phase. I just stayed and went home from my father in one house and my mom in another. I was young, so I didn’t have a chance to pick; I was going back and forth a lot. That’s what threw me off tasks, like schooling. I didn’t know. I was migrating so, I didn’t know whether Bethune High School was home or not. I was like, if I got comfortable, I didn’t
I don’t know if I’d be there forever. I stayed of course, at Bethune because I loved it and I was like, I don’t want to go back now that I’m here in at this school. It was just my parents were separated, but now that I’m 18, I’m at an age to choose now. Well, my dad had health issues, so what helped me navigate was that I had to learn how to be very flexible with coming home and going to school. I was going with my mom to school; I would have to get up in the morning and go all the way to the other side of town to his town area. I had to learn how to be very flexible, but basically it came to an end to where I was like, “I want to stay with dad because I liked the school I’m at now.” So, it was hard, but I found balance, I found security, I found a school that I’m proud to be a part of. I found balance.

I was not expecting Ariel to share such an intimate story of her home environment. This story emerged late in our data collection phase, but in analyzing the data for life episodes and building chronology, this event seemed to mark a significant exposition to her narrative. Despite the turmoil associated with the separation and eventual divorce of her parents, Ariel used the opportunity to manage such crisis and prevail. She accepted her connection to high school as a determinant to make pivotal life changes. Drawing from these conclusions, Ariel constructed meaning in order to make the decisions to live with her father due in part to the bond she garnered from school. She felt a sense of belonging. Ariel’s experiences are in alignment with research by Edwards, McMillon, and Turner (2010) because she exemplified qualities of determination, strength, and resourcefulness as evidenced by her ability to transform her struggles and find purpose in school while navigating the trials of life. These attributes confirm a legacy of success for
African-American students and reject generalized deficit narratives that are too often sustained for explanations of school and life experiences for students of color. Ariel then elaborated on the transition process from one school to another:

_Bethune High School was a great outlet to me because I was transitioning from a neighboring school district because it was more of a culturally based school, more diverse. Coming to where predominantly my color and it wasn’t so diverse. It was a great experience; it taught me a lot; it taught me a lot about culture and how to be diverse within my own color and to just be myself. The transition process taught me. It just helped. I had to adapt from a new lesson culture wise, like curriculum and rigor and changing from their AP classes to like my whole learning style changed. Just making sure my credits transferred from preinternational baccalaureate to the new school was a challenge for me when I moved from one district to the other. But it wasn’t hard; it was very efficient. I needed help; there was help offered. I had great teachers. I had great relationships with them, and I would talk to them. Other things were very easy, and it was very smooth, it was a proper transition because they knew my situation._

I then asked Ariel how she saw herself in relation to the culture of her former high school:

_It’s a positive culture, I’m loved by so many people who cared for me and with my own community who are my same complexion of color. I’m learning with my same race and it just shows a positive environment, and when I need help, I have_
someone for encouragement and it’s fair. And I’m thinking about others before myself, and I’m in a comfortable school environment. Being able to connect culturally and to admire my culture and to share the same knowledge with my culture, to be around my culture is what made me the person I am today. The faculty and staff are very nice. It’s just a positive and conducive environment for me to learn in. It was just so many opportunities that were there. We helped one another. It goes to show you that it doesn’t matter which school you attend, you get an opportunity everywhere you go.

A major concern during this transition was the assurance that her credits from the preinternational baccalaureate program would transfer to the new school. As an understanding of Ariel’s academic literacies, this concern elucidated Ariel’s drive to achieve success and take full advantage of her educational experiences. Similarly, evidence of Ariel’s interpersonal literacy skills was maximized within this new school environment by a number of factors. Ariel learned to make the best out of any situation, and she felt a deeper connection to her new high school. She was grateful for the opportunity to be in school with peers to whom she identified with culturally. Ariel realized diversities within the African-American racial group had the potential to either divide or unite her peers. The epiphany realized by Ariel supported the views of Brown and Brown (2012) on cultural and social differences among one racial group, and the potential dangers of not honoring those differences in research and educational practices for African Americans.
Additionally, an overall communal tone in this new school and a collective purpose of goodwill and concern for others was prevalent. These findings challenge earlier research in sociocultural theory that did not fully address a broad perspective of power structures within cultural relationships among teachers and students (Hill, 2011), whereas literacy as social practice acknowledged power relations, group dynamics, and social interactions among cultural groups to aide in knowledge construction (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Hill, 2011). Ariel’s interactions with her cultural group and positive learning environment at the school reinforced a critical literacy framework that is rooted in literacy as social practice. Ariel felt this opportunity to engage at a school with her cultural group was critical in unifying African-American students. Unifying encounters are expressed through her literacy experiences:

*We did a puppeteer in Dr. Duncan’s accelerated American literature class, and that helped me with my literacy skills. I remembered that play from Dr. Duncan’s class because we came together in unity, and we performed in front of the whole entire school for all the grade levels. We showed the camaraderie we had for one another. We established a very close relationship with our teacher when we wrote that play.*

This was a memorable experience for Ariel indicated by her emphasis on “whole entire school”. She found satisfaction in the idea that she was able to perform for all of her peers. She was able to build a sense of community away from home to achieve academic success and unity. For Ariel, her community of practice existed among her peers, and as a key pillar of culturally responsive pedagogy, the cooperative nature of the
class’s puppeteer allowed her to engage in social interactions of motivation and problem solving (Gay, 2010). Ariel’s experiences affirmed the research associated with culturally responsive pedagogical principles by using cooperative learning to establish group norms collaboratively, exercise student choice in roles, and execute multimodal evidence of learning.

I was delighted with the connections Ariel was able to make with school content, along with the personal relationships she fostered. I probed Ariel about the particularities of Dr. Duncan’s teaching style. Ariel obliged:

*Dr. Duncan’s style was more intimate. She kept everything real . . . she dumbed it down so that we could understand it. I always had a hard time understanding poetry. When I analyzed the poem, I had trouble with it. She taught me how to chunk it down, annotate it. Even though you feel like that’s too much to do, she made it seem so simple to me. The way she taught, she enhanced my learning skills when she taught me how to analyze poems better. Every poem that we read it had something to relate to our real-life experiences, and it helped connect with them.*

Dr. Duncan’s teaching style provides evidence of a familial relationship between teacher and student because of the intimate approach to appeal to students’ real life and relevant academic needs. The intimate relationship was not only between teacher and student, but also between students and texts. As a tenet of critical literacy, students in Dr. Duncan’s class analyzed poetry by deconstructing the texts to gain a more in-depth
understanding. Ariel compared her print literacy experiences in Dr. Duncan’s class with her senior advanced placement teacher, Mr. Whitney:

_In Mr. Whitney’s class we read a poem about insects, and it did not relate to my life at all! I wondered what the poem was actually about. I definitely did well in Mr. Whitney’s class because I took what I learned from Dr. Duncan’s class and applied it to Mr. Whitney’s class. Even though there were some poems that we read in that class that I didn’t like, I still used the same concepts to chunk it down and analyze it more to just see if it would relate. Just because it doesn’t relate to me that doesn’t mean it didn’t relate to others because we all have different meanings in life and what it refers to. The type of texts that I would say that I read throughout high school. Literature was very nice. We were exposed to a lot of texts, and I would say British-Saxon texts. Mr. Whitney is someone who taught me British texts and that has been very helpful now and the stuff I picked up now in British Lit. Brit Lit that helped me—it was very rigorous; it challenged me in interpreting poems better and studying the background of it. He exposed that to us._

While Ariel did not relate to all texts read in Mr. Whitney’s class, she was able to transfer skills used in a previous literature class to expand her knowledge of a variety of literary genres. This provided exposure to several authors’ perspectives or views of the world, along with an examination of multiple cultures through literature. Assumptions of culturally responsive literacy are the ability to understand the world through the word (Freire, 1970/1998) and a promotion of cultural awareness (Gay, 2010). In Ariel’s case,
she had a chance to become more culturally aware of the world around her through reading and analyzing contextual and literal meanings of print texts.

*I wouldn’t change anything about the curriculum at Bethune High School because it challenged me enough. I had a great experience at Bethune, and I think the curriculum challenged me to become a better thinker. I had great teachers, and overall, I had a great experience there. I wouldn’t change the curriculum at all because it put me to the test. I did a lot of work, too. I figure hard work did pay off because I’m doing the same thing in college. We did research papers and essays, and we always had to do like 5 to 8 pages. Why are we doing 5 to 8 pages almost every two weeks or poems and other stuff that we would read? And now that I’m in college, I get more research papers than ever.*

In the discussions of Ariel’s print and interpersonal literacy skills, I wanted to explore what fostered her commitment to academic literacy. Ariel explained:

*I would definitely say my commitment and my dedication was some factors. I was committed to do my best and make sure, besides my title of salutatorian or not, I made sure that I did the best as a student that I can especially when it came toward the end. I wanted to make sure my commitment toward the school was there, I made sure I got active. So commitment, being a great student, exemplifying a true student, showing your leadership as one of my factors. Being able to connect cultural wise. Huge cultural change and to admire my culture and to share the same knowledge with my culture, to be around my culture is what made me the person I am today. The leadership, positive environment; I didn’t...*
have any conflicts with anyone. Dedication, I was dedicated, I was passionate, 
High school wasn’t bad for me!

Not only did Ariel have strong academic literacy practices, but she also had an innate 
sense of determination as expressed through her passion and commitment. She lived a 
self-literate life that promoted excellence in all facets of her life. These forms of 
multiliteracies connect to importance of honoring students varied literacy practices during 
the educative process. From Ariel’s perspective, her teachers honored her varied literacy 
practices and designed learning opportunities that allowed her to exercise her multiple 
forms of literacy. The considerations explained here support culturally responsive 
pedagogy by validating interpersonal relations and varied teaching practices to foster 
quality teaching and learning (Gay, 2010). Beyond this, a multidimensional approach to 
teaching encourages use of varied instructional strategies that are informed by the 
contexts and lived cultural experiences of students (Gay, 2010).

Connected Stanzas of Experience

As participants shared their lived stories of past, present, and future, there were 
some similarities and differences in their experiences. Similarities and differences in 
their narratives were noteworthy of exploration because all participants attended the same 
high school, although it seemed Ariel, as she shared her story, attended a different school. 
I considered that Ariel was the only participant whose courses were exclusively 
accelerated or advanced placement. Due to the master instructional schedule at Bethune 
High School, students enrolled in accelerated or advanced placement courses were all in 
the same courses, and the students enrolled in the general education courses were in
classes together. Hence, certain teachers were with certain students, and the interactions between students from various academic levels were limited to social interactions in the hallway, cafeteria, school events, and other school common areas. For example, in some situations a student who is a member of the accelerated track could have the same English language arts teacher for three years in a row. This occurrence may limit the diversity of thoughts and perspectives coopting in the classroom. This could be a culturally, socially, and academically dangerous situation that postulates positions of difference and separation among students. It may also reinforce an elitism position among an already marginalized population of students.

All of the participants emphasized the importance of establishing relationships as vitally important not only for academic improvement, but also for their social well-being. Specifically, Mark commented, “especially more one-on-one connections…actually put in an effort to get to know students.” Mark described the importance of building relationships along with the other participants. Ariel stated, “I have great relationships with them (teachers)…and other things were very at ease…because they knew my situation.” When teachers build relationships with students, they develop an understanding of the students’ social and cultural identities. With the knowledge of students’ social and cultural identities, teachers use this as pedagogical capital to make the learning process relevant to students (Gay, 2010). Participants’ belief in relationship building as the center of the literacy learning process makes students more inclined to connect openly with content when it is relevant to their everyday lives. These findings related to constructivism because students engaged in social interactions to construct
meaning throughout their school experiences. Nieto (2017) concluded that teachers who make the time and effort to build relationships with students help students negotiate academic spaces, proclaim their identities, and extend beyond their current often limited realities. When teachers build intimate relationships, teachers become sociocultural mediators (Diaz, Flores, Cousin, & Soo Hoo, 1992; Nieto, 2017), ultimately impacting the ways in which the participants construct meaning of their world as it relates to the words of printed text.

With little variance, the participants expressed that their high school literacy experiences prepared them for college level work. Martez stated, “I felt I was prepared...and opened up my eyes to real-life situations.” Mark stated, “I guess some of the teachers prepared me for college work.” Ariel stated, “I was definitely prepared.” Even though some of the content was not particularly relevant to their ethnic backgrounds, they found relevance in the process of reading the texts for analysis and conveying the analysis through writing. Because literacy practices should prepare students to reach their full potential (Edwards et al., 2010), Martez’s and Mark’s narratives describing their literacy experiences before taking Mrs. McWaters’ Senior English class were devoid of meaningful literacy tasks that fulfilled their academic literacy potential. Mark commented, “I didn’t appreciate the hard work at first…. but now I wish I had it (literacy tasks) from all my years instead of just that one or two years”. Mark recognized that engaging and rigorous learning tasks were important in order to be prepared for the next phases of life.
I also asked the participants to describe what literacy meant to them. Their various definitions are shown below:

Mark’s definition of literacy: “I don’t want to get too deep. Just reading, English,

Martez’ definition of literacy: “I think literacy means reading enrichment. Yeah,
reading. That’s it.”

Ariel’s definition of literacy:

*Literacy just means to me to be able to read and write and to comprehend and to have a proficiency in writing reading, and what you’re being taught to comprehend knowledge in a specific area in which you are familiar with. Just being able to have knowledge and the possession of knowledge.*

The students described rather limiting definitions of literacy. The participants all reported that literacy encompasses some level of reading. Their minimalized definitions of literacy contradict the descriptions of their academic experiences expressed through their stories. Their narratives capture and convey divergent forms of interpretation and methods of expressing their varied literacy practices. This contradiction of understanding literacy is due in part to the narrow conception of acceptable forms of literacy when recognizing, discussing, and defining what it means to be literate alongside standardized narratives of literate school experiences. When considering literacy as social practice or sociocultural theory (Street, 1984), as discussed in the literature review, the participants narrow understanding of literacy addresses not only the need for an expanding definition of literacy, but also a broadened level of awareness of varying forms, methods, and
systems of literacy on the part of students and every stakeholder in the greater school community.

As a culminating exercise for participants, I asked each of them if they were willing to write an “I am Poem” about themselves and ways in which they viewed and read the world. Table 4 displays these poems.

Table 4

Participants’ Original Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Martez</th>
<th>Ariel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I am” Poem</td>
<td>I Am Martez Harris</td>
<td>I AM Poem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am my own, a one of a kind</td>
<td>I look at myself as a future leader</td>
<td>By: Ariel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wonder will the time will ever come</td>
<td>I want to embrace being an African American Man</td>
<td>I am excellence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hear the advice and criticism</td>
<td>I see the examples</td>
<td>I am exceptional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to be the example</td>
<td>I want to be the example</td>
<td>I am of understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am my own, a one of a kind</td>
<td>I looked at my education</td>
<td>I am knowledgeable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I pretend to be the examples</td>
<td>experience as Lacking</td>
<td>I am deliberate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel the time moving, leaving</td>
<td>I Am a Freshman College Student</td>
<td>I am an acquaintance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I touch the ones to come after</td>
<td>I have a different view on life</td>
<td>I am acquired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry it won’t make a difference</td>
<td>My perspective on education has changed</td>
<td>I am an opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cry for the less fortunate</td>
<td>Only thing I want to do now is become an Educator</td>
<td>I am not futile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am my own, a one of a kind</td>
<td></td>
<td>I am opulence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand things happen for a reason</td>
<td>Seeing a difference in Education changed me</td>
<td>I am sufficient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say you receive more when you give</td>
<td>I am happy to learn and be engaged in college classes</td>
<td>I am blessed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I dream about being the example</td>
<td>I couldn’t see myself anywhere else</td>
<td>I am determined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to cause change</td>
<td>Today I feel that I must have a degree to succeed</td>
<td>I am capable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hope to fulfill</td>
<td></td>
<td>I am abundant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am Mark</td>
<td></td>
<td>I am confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I am happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I am my future!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Today world is drastically changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>This world is demanding that one be educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I will graduate from a 4-year college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I will teach and help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I will succeed in my life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants’ poems display themes of resilience, hope, individuality, and confidence. In Martez’ poem, he states “graduating from a Title I school was difficult” this affirmation relates to the theme of resiliency. Resiliency is defined by Howard and Johnson (2000) as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (p. 323). Further, Martez reconciled with the notion that a valuable education is essential to his success in life as indicated by his words, “I must have a degree to succeed . . . I will graduate from a 4-year college”. Thus, despite the presence of adversity, Martez finds ways to manage his setbacks to increase his likelihood to prosper. Mark writes in his poem, “I am my own, a one of a kind”; he embraces himself as an individual that strives to leave an impact on others. Similarly, Ariel’s style of writing in choosing to repeat “I am” in every line, affirms her self-awareness and self-esteem that contribute to her collective identity; furthermore, the repetition confirms a powerful message of individuality in which she is divergent from all others by firmly stating and standing as “I”. Ariel’s poem relates to one tenet of academic resiliency which is self-belief or confidence in the abilities to achieve (Martin & Marsh, 2003).

These poems serve as urban-framed poetry that highlights the talents and gifts of the participants. The lines in the poems depict a level of expectancy for their lives; furthermore, they are committed to the work required to achieve their goals. The participants speak greatness into existence through their poetry. Abt-Perkins (2011) asserted that inspiration is difficult to find in underfunded schools and communities with economic and emotional hardships. The poems of these participants refute this research
by Abt-Perkins (2011) with a reverberation of inspirational comparisons and declarations of success.

These findings also related to the theoretical framework for this study. Constructivism as a wide-reaching epistemological view in this study suggests that participants’ narratives directly reflected the understanding of the world through a social lens. The findings are connected to sociocultural theory in that the participants, through their poems and narratives, described the social and cultural connections to their literacy experiences. It is through their detailed stories of their home and social environment and descriptions of multi-literate, music literate, and street literate individuals that correlate with sociocultural theory. Additionally, when participants commented on their specific literacy experiences, Martez and Mark specifically discuss an expectation of students not being able to question texts or the curriculum. While critical literacy encourages such questioning of the dominant curriculum, Mark provided recommendations that aligned with critical literacy theory. Mark stated, “Students at Bethune are blinded by social media and teachers should help students manage the content on social media”; here Mark recognized the need for students to engage in learning tasks that assisted them with viewing social media with a more critical lens. Moreover, culturally responsive pedagogy as a theoretical lens for this study linked both sociocultural theory and critical literacy theory. By this understanding, literacy experiences did not exist in a vacuum detached from participants’ cultural and social contexts. Whether it was Mark’s musical experiences, Ariel’s public speaking opportunities, or Martez’ challenging home environment, participants described literacy experiences in contextual ways that provided
meaning for their lives and this counternarrative. The findings indicated participants felt teachers’ ability to build relationships and express care were necessary actions in the educational process which support the assumptions of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Summary

An answer to the research question: How do African-American high school graduates from a low-income urban community school describe their high school literacy experiences? elicited varying descriptions of the participants’ high school literacy experiences. Martez, concluded that most of his literacy experiences with the exception of his twelfth grade year, consisted of disengagement and boredom. He felt the literacy tasks were not worth his time as indicated by his tendency to frequently walk out of class. Martez, did find worth in his senior English class and developed writing skills that prepared him for college. As for Mark, he described the adjustments he had to make in order to keep up with the workload of literacy assignments along with his ability to use his resources to conquer such a strenuous workload. Along these same lines, Ariel engaged in analysis of various texts to gain deeper understandings. Ariel appreciated the relationships she established as a result of engaging in literacy tasks that encompassed group work and performance.

In reference to the second research question: How do African-American students perceive the ways in which their literacy experiences were culturally responsive by addressing their varied literacy practices? The participants in this narrative research study had a difficult time conceptualizing the connections between their varied literacy practices and literacy experiences within school. Students were able to draw conclusions
about the culture of the school and its alignment to their own culture, but they did not describe a direct alignment with the literacy experiences of the curriculum to their culture. In participants’ explanation, few similarities between their own culture and their school literacy experiences were noted. Specifically, participants related to curriculum texts on a more macro level, which consisted of participating in the learning processes associated with literacy tasks.

On the contrary, participants did not find the literacy experiences of which the curriculum required related to their individual cultural or social lives. Their stated perceptions of their personal or varied literacy experiences and their view of the world garnered a limited linkage to literacy experiences in the classroom. In Mark’s case, music was the way in which he viewed the world, understood others, and recognized differences. By contrast, he was unable to conceptualize music’s use in the classroom to enhance his literacy experiences. He felt when he did see his teachers attempt this correlation, it minimized the expansiveness of music and overlooked the different genres of music. His teachers typically focused on one genre of music, rap, with the ill-informed assumption that all African-American children like rap. In Martez’s case, he commented on the outdated literacy curriculum that reflected cultural issues of the dominant culture with little consideration for his varied literacy practices. He also noted that he did not read much about the contributions of African Americans. In Ariel’s case, she realized some of the texts did not relate to her culturally, but that the texts may have related to other students. She also learned to use her voice as leverage for navigating the dominant
curriculum, and teachers did create opportunities for her to use her print and academic literacy skills to build confidence.

The findings also revealed tenets of resiliency theory, which was not a part of the theoretical lens for this study. As an unintended consequence of a discussion of literacy experiences, participants shared stories of their determination to thrive and connections they made with teachers and mentors who played a role in their success. This relates to the tenets of resiliency theory by protective factors present in order to mediate risks that may be associated with the participants in this study due to their demographic data (Williams & Portman, 2014). For the participants, the protective factors were supportive adult relationships. It would be unethical for me to ignore the evidence presented in participants’ data because the data emerged as critical to the participants’ social and academic development.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Hey Black Child
Do you know who you are
Who you really are
Do you know you can be
What you want to be
If you try to be
What you can be

Hey Black Child
Do you know where you are going
Where you’re really going
Do you know you can learn
What you want to learn
If you try to learn
What you can learn

Hey Black Child
Do you know you are strong
I mean really strong
Do you know you can do
What you want to do
If you try to do
What you can do

Hey Black Child
Be what you can be
Learn what you must learn
Do what you can do
And tomorrow your nation
Will be what you what it to be
- Countee Cullen

Poetry served as the metaphorical backdrop for this study. Poets use their
knowledge and talent to manipulate the intricacies of language, style, and formats to
create beautiful depictions of life’s emotions. Just as poets use the powerful tool of poetry to convey meaning, this study used narrative structures to understand the literacy experiences of African-American students. Varied forms of poetry exist and appeal to the distinctive styles of the poet, and various forms of literacy assisted the participants in this study to construct meaning of their lives and the world. As lines of poetry include figurative language to convey meaning categorized in a collection of lines termed stanzas to create the overall voice of the speaker in the poem, as do the words of individual participants to generate a body of narratives to convey an understanding of the participants’ experiences.

The literacy experiences of the participants in this study are noteworthy because they are considered low-income students from an urban community who attended a high school labeled “failing” by the Georgia Department of Education for a number of years. The participants in this study were able to negotiate structural, academic, and personal challenges in order to achieve their goals; therefore, their experiences are worth exploration. More importantly, an exploration of narrative lives of marginalized African-American students will contribute to the larger body of counternarrative research in the field for African-American students. The following research questions guided this study and the analysis of findings:

1. How do African-American high school graduates from a low-income urban community school describe their high school literacy experiences?
2. How do African-American students perceive the ways in which their literacy experiences were culturally responsive by addressing their varied literacy practices?

Through in-depth interviewing to answer the research questions, the findings indicated confirmation of research in the field that advocate for culturally responsive pedagogy and critical literacy as viable frameworks for the education of low-income urban African-American students.

This chapter presents a summary of findings that are relevant to the scope of this study. In doing so, I will compare these findings to the body of related research discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. After a discussion of the findings, I will then provide implications for practice for the larger context of curriculum and instruction that promote excellence for students from diverse backgrounds. Also included are recommendations for advanced research in the field and an acknowledgement of this research study’s contribution to the existing body of research.

Summary of Findings

This narrative study uncovered the perceptions of African American recent high school graduates’ literacy experiences. These findings revealed an interplay between participants’ narratives where commonalities emerged: a mediation of varied literacy practices to construct meaning, importance of building relationships, and an overall feeling of preparedness for literacy work in college. These commonalities will be referred to as common stanzas of experience. Within the common stanzas of experience individual lines in the larger narratives do reflect specific participant experiences as they
relate to the significance of findings discussed in Chapter 4. The varied literacy practices among participants helped to shape an understanding of their past, present, and future. The findings also suggested that participants felt building relationship with teachers and peers fostered increased engagement in literacy. Participants also expressed contentment in their views of preparedness for college level literacy work. This research adds to the existing body of research on African-American students’ varied literacy practices as useful during the creation and implementation of curriculum in today’s schools (Broderick, 2014; Cope & Kalantzis, 2010; Kinloch, 2010, 2011). This study contributes African-American students’ perceptions of their individual needs in order to feel more connected to school literacy content to the existing body of research that recommends culturally responsive pedagogy as a means to engage students of color (Gay, 2002; 2010; Scherff & Spector, 2011).

Varied Literacy Practices

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed their literacy practices in and out of school. Varied literacy practices for participants were categorized based on the ways in which they viewed the world. The findings of the study are relevant because they add student narratives to the body of research. These participants are marginalized students who come from urban low-income communities and defeated social and structural barriers. They used their multiple forms of literacy to manipulate dominant school literacy practices.
Music Literacy

Mark’s literacy practices consisted of music, and through the lens of music, he was able to engage in social interactions with peers, understand human differences among various cultural groups, and accomplish life goals. The aim of the study was to understand the ways in which participants’ literacy experiences shape their understanding of the world and respond to their culture. In Mark’s case, his literate understanding consisted of a comparison to music. Through music, he was able to construct meaning for his life throughout school. These findings confirmed Kinloch’s (2012) assertions that the literacies that students of color from urban communities bring to school are valid and should be considered in the pedagogical practices of educators. Furthermore, the findings also supported Kinloch’s (2010) views of music as a modality of learning. Findings also confirmed the need for a wide scope definition of literacy for American schools (Kalantzis, Cope, & Fehring, 2002; Kinloch, 2010; Pyo, 2016).

Street Literacy

Martez’ literacy practices consisted of a variety of “street life struggles”. He learned the codes of meaning for the streets in order to survive. These findings are important because Martez experienced difficulty transferring the codes of meaning he learned from his street life to the codes of power and structure of school. This addressed the goal of the study, which was to gain educators’ acknowledgment of students’ culturally situated literacy practices as viable contributions to the literacy curriculum. Martez’s culturally situated street life literacy practices were not interrogated by his in-school literacy assignments. These findings supported research in the field from Wood
and Jocius (2013) that confronted the hegemonic literacy framework that designates appropriate forms of literate expression based on the dominant culture and fails to consider culturally situated literacy expressions of students from other ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, participants in Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s (2008) study attended an underperforming urban school much like the school in this narrative study. Students from Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s (2008) study engaged in critical literacy projects that compared canonical texts like *The Odyssey* to popular culture film like *Godfather*. Students within the study critiqued dominant canonical texts and divergent texts related to the cultural lives of students in order to understand their own literacy practices as meaningful (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

**Multiliteracy**

Ariel’s varied literacy practices consisted of multiple forms of literacy in order for her to construct meaning of the world. The findings chronicled Ariel’s multiliterate conception of knowledge via interpersonal literacy, academic literacy, print literacy, and self-literacy. The aforementioned findings are linked to the aim of this study by contributing a counternarrative to the grand-deficit narrative of literacy proficiency as it relates to African-American students. Ariel possessed a strong sense of self-literacy that allowed her to construct meaning not only of her life, but also of her identity and roles within the larger context of society. Additionally, her skills in academic and print literacy provided her access to the dominant curriculum, which resulted in academic excellence. Research outlined by Jackson and Cooper (2007) disputed conventional
measures of literacy attainment for African-American students, and embraced alternate literacy practices for knowledge construction, identity, and social interactions.

Summary of Participants’ Literacy Practices

In summary, the varied literacy practices of the participants in this study contribute to the existing body of research that values literacy practices of marginalized students in the conceptualization of teacher pedagogy and school curriculum (Gay, 2010; Kinloch, 2010; Nieto, 2017). Despite research suggesting a need for an expansive definition of academic literacy (Kinloch, 2010, 2012; Street, 2003), the participants’ simple definitions of literacy coincide with the current views of academic literacy within schools. It was no surprise that students initially defined literacy as merely reading, writing, and possessing knowledge.

Building Relationships

An additional commonality between findings was the importance of building relationships among teachers and peers. This finding related to the purpose of this study by exploring the perceptions of participants’ high school literacy experiences. Students’ perceptions indicated that building relationships was a critical component of student learning. Compared to research in the field, building relationships is a significant approach to culturally responsive pedagogy and a vehicle to bridge the leaning gap among students of color (Gay, 2010; Scherff & Spector, 2011). Gay (2010) discussed care pedagogy at the center of learning for students. Thomas (2013) conducted a study that analyzed teacher practices and concluded that culturally responsive teachers build community in the classroom to motivate students. Overall, these findings confirmed the
collective position of Cope (1997), Howard (2001), and Jackson and Cooper (2007), who considered student perceptions of school literacy valid and necessary to the advancement of African-American students.

These findings also support research in literacy as social practice. The concept of literacy as a social practice affirmed that literacy is inseparable from social interactions and cultural processes (Au, 1997; Street, 1984). Participants in this study generated meaning through their social interactions with their peers during cooperative grouping, class discussions, and extracurricular activities. In the discovery of an individual’s literate life, concept development, cognition, and creativity are acquired through personal connections made to texts and social interactions between peers and teachers in the classroom (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006; Perry, 2012; Street, 1984).

Academic Literacy and Preparedness for College

Even though students experienced instances of connecting to the content, the overall experience was not a deep personal connection to the literacy curriculum at their school. However, participants were able to benefit from the literacy curriculum due to the cognitive processes in which they engaged. They attained various analytical literacy skills that helped them read texts, deconstruct texts, write analyses, and generate peer-discussions to create masterpieces of understanding. These findings are relevant to the purpose because despite the lack of relevance to their personal lives, through the processes of analysis they were prepared for the next phase of their lives. Essentially,
participants in the study expressed their success in college was due in part to the learning processes in the latter part of their high school literacy experience.

These findings are connected to Keiler’s (2011) study of urban students who had struggled academically, then received exposure to high quality instructional experiences that actively engaged students, focused on understanding rather than memorizing, and facilitated a belief mindset in students’ potential to succeed. Keiler (2011) concluded that students in the instructional program excelled beyond teachers’ expectation and thrived academically. Additionally, the findings of this study relate to a study in a senior English British literature course where the teacher of African-American students fostered critical literacy by analyzing and critiquing dominant literary texts (Dyches, 2017). This analysis was particularly relevant for students who aspired to attend college because colleges required students to conduct analyses of canonical literature, so the study revealed that when analyzing literature, culturally responsive pedagogy and critical literacy were frameworks that allowed students of color to connect to the content (Dyches, 2017).

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for pedagogy that needs to shift practices in the delivery of the dominant curriculum, as well as appreciate students in and out of school literacy practices. Specifically in urban schools, students face significant institutional, structural, linguistic, and social barriers that have the potential to limit their possibilities. It is critically important that pedagogy designed to address the dominant curriculum interrogate these barriers to maximize students’ potential. The participants in the study reported that it was not popular to question the text, and they did
not see a reflection of themselves in curriculum texts. Because of these findings, a shift to a more culturally relevant pedagogy that uses critical literacy to teach students alternative ways of analyzing and navigating the dominant curriculum is necessary. Wood and Jocius (2013) provided practical strategies for teachers to implement: (a) choose a variety of texts that reflect students’ lives and the dominant culture; (b) analyze texts for common critical themes, such as power, race, equity, and gender; and (c) engage students in identifying quests for social justice to enact change in their communities.

The participants in the study described their literate lives and the many ways in which they viewed the world in order to overcome their challenges in and out of school. These findings emphasize that an appreciation for students’ in and out of school literacy practices is crucial to help students feel more connected to all facets of school. Honoring students’ varied literacy practices extend beyond traditional ideas of literacy. Teachers must consider bridging the academic literacy in schools to the sociocultural lives and experiences students bring from the home and social literacy environment (Gay, 2010). It would not be appropriate to list an array of strategies for teacher practice because that would homogenize African-American students’ needs and interests as they relate to their varied literacy practices. Further, teachers should remain open to a variety of multimodal forms of literacy representation when providing literacy related tasks to students.

Recommendations

As an extension of this narrative research study, I recommend an investigation of teachers’ perceptions related to the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy and critical literacy. Since this study was about student perceptions of experiences in an
urban low-income school labeled “historically failing” by accountability standards of achievement, it would be equally informative to understand teachers’ perceptions of their experiences in these same schools. In an exploration of teacher’s perceptions, I recommend that this future study observe actual classroom practices. A perception study comparative to evidence-based classroom practices would assist teachers in determining their current state of reality to improve the practices in which they employ when teaching students of color enrolled in urban low-income schools.

As an additional recommendation to enhance this narrative research study, I recommend that the researcher engage in an ethnographic study of the same participants as participant observer by following students on their journey throughout college. In doing so, the ethnographer would discover the ways in which the participants use literacy practices to navigate college curriculum and college life.

Limitations

A limitation for this study was the researcher’s position as an educator at the school where students graduated. In my capacity as an instructional coach, I was never the teacher of record for any of the participants in the study. However, I do acknowledge my position of power within the school, and I continually addressed the issues that could arise in the participants’ comfort with sharing their stories of lived experience. I reassured students that information we discussed would not be traced to their identities and encouraged the participants to be as transparent as they were willing to be.
Final Thoughts

Through conducting this narrative research study, I genuinely bonded with the participants and developed a personal connection with them and their stories. This personal connection allowed me to honor their perspectives on how they view their life and how they view their literacy experiences. Even more intriguing for me was participants’ unique propensity to achieve success in spite of their individual confrontations with academic and personal struggles. Due to this innate desire to exceed expectations of deficit, this narrative study confirmed my views on the obligation of scholars of color to contribute success-oriented narratives to the existing body of research about African-American students.

At the conclusion of this study, I contemplated instances when adults precipitate deficit narratives, yet find it difficult to navigate similar life struggles in which these participants experienced. The participants surmounted institutional and social barriers to gain access to college. Not only did they make it to college, but they excelled beyond measures and looked good while doing it! This research is important to the larger context of the current educational landscape. Regardless if we want to face reality or not, schools will continue to grow in diversity, and we must as educators utilize culturally relevant practices to address needs of children of the next generation. If we ignore students’ beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about their experiences in school, we will cause students to detach from school. My final thoughts are to encourage researchers in the field to continue to interrogate the narrow definitions of literacy and the Eurocentric story maintained in public schools.
REFERENCES


Boykin, A. W., & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research to practice to close the achievement gap*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.


Rader, L. P. (2016). *The effects of social promotion and high-stakes tests on high school completion* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Database. (UMI No. 10031850)


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
Wednesday, July 5, 2017

Ms. Marcia V. Wingfield
1301 Mercer University Drive
Tift College of Education
Macon, GA 31207

RE: Becoming All That I Can Be: Narrative Analysis of African American Students’ Literacy Perceptions and Experiences in an Urban Title 1 School (HI1706179)

Dear Ms. Wingfield:

On behalf of Mercer University’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 26-Jun-2017 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with Federal Regulations 31 CFR 56.110(a) and 45 CFR 46.110(b) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) 6, 7 per 63 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 05-Jul-2017. The protocol expires on 04-Jul-2018. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:
Initial Application use of audio recordings and interviews.

NOTE: Please report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and ALL accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our Satisfaction Survey and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

Ave Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIM,
Associate Director of Human Research Protection Programs (HRPP)
Member
Institutional Review Board

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization’s (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice."

Mercer University IRB & Office of Research Compliance
Phone: 478-301-4101 | Email: ORC_Mercer@Mercer.EDU | Fax: 478-301-2329
1301 Mercer University Drive, Macon, Georgia 31207-0001
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
BECOMING ALL THAT I CAN BE: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS’ LITERACY PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES IN AN URBAN TITLE I SCHOOL

Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators
Marcia V. Wingfield, M.Ed., B.A., Doctoral student, Mercer University – Tift College of Education, Curriculum and Instruction, 3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, 404-428-6534, Marcia.V.Wingfield@live.mercury.edu
Dr. Wynetta Scott-Simmons, Ed.D., Ed.S., B.S., Faculty Advisor, Mercer University – Tift College of Education, 3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, 678-547-6582, SCOTTSIMMONSWA@mercy.edu

Purpose of the Research
This research study is designed to understand African American recent high school graduates’ perceptions of their high school experience as it relates to literacy acquisition.

The data from this research will be used to add culturally-derived personal narratives to the body of research that will stand as rich counter-narratives that challenge the accepted grand deficit-narrative about African-Americans and their literacy proficiency.

The results will be used in a dissertation study that explores the perceptions and experiences as related to literacy of African American recent high school graduates.

Procedures:
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to engage in a series of in-depth interviews in which you will discuss your experiences throughout high school as it relates to literacy.

Your participation will take approximately two hours, between two to four times in a six week period.

Potential Risks or Discomforts
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study. However, if discomforts arise the principal investigator will ensure necessary precautions are taken to protect your physical, social, emotional and psychological welfare.

You may stop participating in this study at any time.

Potential Benefits of the Research

Mercer IRB
Approval Date   07/05/2017
Protocol
Expiration Date   07/04/2018

Rev. January 2017   Page 1
There are no guaranteed external benefits of this study. However, participation in this study may benefit you personally because it will offer you the opportunity to reflect on your high school experience.

Overall, this study will help education professionals understand students’ perceptions and experiences as it relates to literacy practices and literacy curriculum.

Confidentiality and Data Storage
Your name and identity will remain confidential throughout the research process. During the in-depth interview, you will be audio recorded using a digital voice recorder. The principal investigator will take copious notes throughout the interview process. You will be allowed to review the transcripts of the audio-recorded interview data. All written data and principal investigator notes will be stored in a locked file cabinet. The interview transcripts will be stored on a password protected computer. Marcia Wingfield and Dr. Wymetta Scott-Simmons will have access to the raw data. All data collected during the research process will be stored in Dr. Wymetta Scott-Simmons’ office for three years after the completion of the study. All audio recordings, copies of notes, and other related documents will be destroyed following the three-year minimum requirement for keeping raw data.

Participation and Withdrawal
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. As a participant, you may refuse to participate at any time. To withdraw from the study, please contact Marcia Wingfield (Marcia.V.Wingfield@live.mercer.edu) or Dr. Wymetta Scott-Simmons (SCOTTSIMM_WA@mercer.edu)

Questions about the Research
If you have any questions about the research, please speak with Marcia Wingfield (Marcia.V.Wingfield@live.mercer.edu) or Dr. Wymetta Scott-Simmons (SCOTTSIMM_WA@mercer.edu)

In Case of Injury
It is unlikely that participation in this project will result in harm to subjects. If an injury to a subject does occur, he or she may be seen at a medical facility of his or her choice. All expenses associated with care will be the responsibility of the participant and his/her insurance.

Audio or Video Taping
Audio-recorded interviews will be used for analysis. The audio files will be stored in a secure location. All audio-recorded files will be labeled using pseudonyms, so they cannot be linked to your identity. Your signature on this form grants Marcia Wingfield permission to record you while you participate in the above-referenced study.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University’s IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair, at (478) 301-4101.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

Research Participant Name (Print)                       Name of Person Obtaining Consent (Print)

Research Participant Signature                           Person Obtaining Consent Signature

Rev. January 2017

Page 2
APPENDIX C

PERMISSIONS TO REPRINT
(For Table 1)

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From: Marcia V. Wingfield  
Sent: Thursday, March 15, 2018 2:37 PM  
To: McFarland, Joel  
Subject: Permission to Use Table

Greetings,

I am a current Mercer University Doctoral Candidate. I am requesting permission to Figure 1. Percentage distribution of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity: Fall 2004, fall 2014, and fall 2026 retrieved from t https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cge.asp  
Please forward permission of use to this email address.

Thank you for your time.  
Marcia Wingfield

From: McFarland, Joel <Joel.McFarland@ed.gov>  
Sent: Thursday, March 15, 2018 2:45 PM  
To: Marcia V. Wingfield  
Subject: RE: Permission to Use Table

Hello Marcia,

Thank you for contacting NCES. Our reports are not copyrighted and are available for public use. Case-by-case permission is not required. Please feel free to use the figures and content as you see fit. Our suggested citation for the report is below.

Best regards,  
Joel
From: Marcia V. Wingfield [mailto:Marcia.V.Wingfield@live.mercer.edu]
Sent: Thursday, March 15, 2018 2:30 PM
To: Dasher, Jordan <jdasher@gosa.ga.gov>
Subject: Request Permission to use data
Importance: High

Greetings,
I am a current Mercer University Doctoral Candidate. I am requesting permission to use the following graphs retrieved from the K-12 Public Schools Report Card in my dissertation.
1. Georgia graduation rate by race/ethnicity.
2. Georgia graduation rate by other subgroups.
3. Percentage of retained students in Georgia by race-ethnicity and gender.
Please forward permission of use to this email address.

Thank you for your time.
Marcia Wingfield

From: Dasher, Jordan <jdasher@gosa.ga.gov>
Sent: Thursday, March 15, 2018 3:03 PM
To: Marcia V. Wingfield
Subject: RE: Request Permission to use data

Hi, Marcia –
The graphs/data on the Report Card is public and can be exported and used without issue. Thanks for checking!

Jordan
Jordan Dasher
GA•AWARDS, Research and Data Specialist
Governor's Office of Student Achievement
952 East Tower - Twin Towers
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
404.803.2529

(For Figure 6)

Hi, I wanted to use your image universe as text in my dissertation. But I need your permission to do so.

From: Amy Casey <amyecaseywrites@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 15, 2018 9:08 PM
To: Marcia V. Wingfield
Subject: Request confirmation: use of material in dissertation

11:55AM
Universe as Text

Hi, Marcia! You are absolutely welcome to use any of the content on my blog as long as you cite me! My full name is Amy E. Casey, and I am the author of all the content on the website. Thank you!

(The above represents the conversation that I had with Marcia over Facebook messenger on 3/15/18. Her question is in regards to my blog available at www.universeastext.com. I have given my consent for her to use any material from the website as long as attribution is given. –AEC)