DISSERTATION

IN THEIR WORDS: LIFE STORIES OF NATIVE BORN, AFRICAN AMERICAN

WOMEN ENROLLED IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

IN THEIR WORDS: LIFE STORIES OF NATIVE BORN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ENROLLED IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

This narrative inquiry revealed the life stories of six native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college. The researcher incorporates her story when describing how she selected her topic of inquiry and why it is important for practitioners and policy makers to hear the voices of African American women learners enrolled in community colleges. The ways of knowing literature (Belenky, et al. 1986; Goldberger, 1996) and literature about African American women learners served as a theoretical backdrop for this inquiry.

The researcher employed a culturally sensitive research approach recommended by Tillman (2002) for studies involving African American participants. This method combines critical theory and feminist theory and places the participants' individual and shared cultural knowledge at the center of the inquiry from conception to final write up.

An interpretive framework of persistence, transformation, and connection emerged inductively during analysis. The researcher used this framework to offer recommendations for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers. The researcher recommends establishing a professional development program for new faculty promoting connected learning as defined by her participants, developing a re-entry keystone program to support students in working through their issues about learning, implementing a peer mentor program between first and second year students to support continued personal growth in both groups, and increasing funding for research, programs, and services for students with disabilities. The researcher is aware that while her study highlighted life stories, struggles, and successes of African American women learners enrolled in a community college, further research in this area is warranted. The researcher recommends conducting additional qualitative studies to learn more about the experiences and life stories of African American women learners in the community college system. Also recommended are qualitative or mixed methods studies with first semester and last semester students to assess self esteem and personal growth of African American women learners.

The researcher believes that this inquiry offers practitioners and policy makers an opportunity to listen to African American women's voices and their recommendations for a connecting learning environment.

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CHAPTER 1: INQUIRY BACKGROUND

My Journey

As I reflect on myself, living in the world with others, I am aware that my affinity

for the qualitative side of life has always existed. My interest in the mysteries of lives has

been lifelong (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2006). I begin my inquiry with stories

from my childhood, move to myself as a mother, friend, and partner, to myself as a

therapist/counselor, and finally myself as a researcher. I conclude this reflexive piece and

researcher perspective with a summary indicating that if I stayed true to myself,

qualitative research, in particular Narrative Inquiry was the natural choice for me and my

research.

Childhood.

I remember being a child watching the world around me and wondering not only

what was going on but how and why. I have been curious about people, their stories,

experiences, ways they do things, and culture as long as I can remember. I recall

watching National Geographic on Sunday evenings after dinner at my grandparents'

house and wishing I could crawl into the television to be with the people on the screen so

that I could see how they saw and experienced the world. I had the same feeling as I read

through the National Geographic magazine. The pictures always captivated me and to

this day I am able to clearly see some of the images in my mind. Together these images

created stories, the stories of people including their culture, values and way of life.

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Looking back, what is fascinating about this desire to learn about people from the inside out is the contrast in my life where my culture and heritage were not honored. I grew up with little knowledge about my family's culture and customs (except for a few food dishes). In fact, Spanish was used as a secret language to speak about things that the children were not supposed to know. I learned Spanish by listening to the secrets. Today, I am able to understand Spanish but have great difficulty speaking. Perhaps it was because of this familial denial of our culture, customs, and heritage that I was drawn to the world of others.

My first experience with life stories occurred when I was a small child. My grandparents' best friends were an Italian couple, Sally and Tony. My grandfather met Tony while working on plumbing jobs for the University of California. Tony and his wife Sally are no longer with us but one of the things that I carry with me from our relationship is the art and importance of storytelling. Tony was the consummate storyteller. No matter how many times I heard excerpts from his life story, they never grew old. In fact, as I grew older, the stories only deepened in meaning and influence in my life. Tony's story was one of human experience. The story of Tony's life included coming to America alone as a child and his adventure in Ellis Island, later New York and his journey to and life in California, a story of surviving and thriving. While my grandparents did not share many stories with me when I was a child, through their relationship with Tony and Sally, they introduced me to a lifelong love of life stories.

My grandfather died February 7, 2008 at ninety two years of age. Over the past few years, I noticed a change in our visits. He began sharing his life stories. The stories included travels, family, even stories about his childhood and his natural math abilities.

These stories added a new dimension to our relationship. My grandfather was instrumental, through his relationship with Tony, in introducing me to life stories and in his later years he took up the art of storytelling. I thank him for that.

My journey continued in third grade when a girl from England joined my class. My teacher assigned me to be her buddy and help her work through the differences between American English and English in the United Kingdom. Gillian and I became best friends in no time. I remember that one of the things I liked most about our relationship was hearing stories about her life in England, eating different foods, hearing different words, and just seeing how Gillian and her family lived. It was almost as if I was able to step into one of the National Geographic pages and get a brief glimpse of the English culture, customs, and language through my relationship with Gillian, her family and their stories.

I have never lost my desire to see how people view and experience the world through their stories. I have a diverse group of friends from different cultures and backgrounds. (Interestingly, my husband is English). I believe that these differences have rounded out my life and I feel enriched by these relationships. It is important for me to have relationships and experiences with individuals unlike myself so that I step outside of my comfort zone and widen the lens that I use to look at the world, people, and issues.

Myself as Friend, Mother, and Partner.

My two best friends happen to be native born, African American women. Over the years these incredible women have shared excerpts from their life stories with me. Each life story is unique with its own twists and turns. One of the women maintained her voice, in spite of life, and maintains a powerful voice today. While the other woman lost

her voice and had to work hard to regain it and become the strong and amazing individual that she is today. Through my relationships with these two incredible women, I have grown and been transformed by their stories of strength, perseverance, and self respect.

As a mother, I feel that it is my job to open the doors to the world for my son through exposure and experiences with varied peoples. I am aware that as with clients, I am co-creating with my son and that through our relationship, the stories will emerge, our story. In addition to exposure to other peoples, stories, ways of life, customs, and cultures, it is also important that I impart compassion and empathy as a stance in life.

I strive to be open to all people. In my role as therapist and college counselor I never know who will walk through the door. I am aware that I, like everyone else, carry my stories, issues and judgments with me however I strive to keep my eyes open to those in front of me. It is their uniqueness that I am there to serve, not my experience with someone else who they remind me of. This openness is hard to explain. However my hope is that by example in my daily life, my son will also maintain this stance in his life.

I try to carry this same openness to all areas of my life including in my relationships with friends, family, and my partner. At times, it is easier to maintain openness to those we are less connected to than those who play an integral part in our personal lives. I find that our intimate experiences and ongoing expectation of ourselves and those in our inner circle make it difficult to be open to hear their stories with compassion and empathy. This is the ongoing work of my life.

Myself as Therapist/Counselor.

As I reflect on myself as a child and how I am very similar today in my desire to seek out others and learn from them, it is not surprising to me that I chose therapy and

counseling as a profession. I have always been a good listener with the ability to listen with all of my being. I am aware of the room, my mood before, during, and after a meeting, the lighting, the other person, what they are wearing, how they are sitting, and the tone that they are using. I also have the ability to remember what was said in a previous meeting the next time I see that person again. As soon as a client or student sits down, I am reminded of all that transpired in the previous meeting and most of all, the narrative that they shared with me in the process of co-creation.

As a therapist/counselor, I believe in the healing power of stories. There is a tremendous transformative power in reworking the stories of our lives that we have become stuck in. I have worked with many clients and couples on working through or reworking stories around abuse, illness, shame, anxiety as well as other issues. As a community college counselor, I work primarily with native born, African American women students as they rework the stories of their lives that pertain to education and the role of education in their lives. For many of my students their stories hold power over them. Through reworking their stories they are able to experience educational success, at times for the first time in their lives. This transformation shapes the rest of their life stories.

In my role as a therapist, one of the most freeing and important things that I discovered was that we are always in connection with others and the world around us. I had a clinical supervisor that taught me about intersubjectivity. Without going into detail, this has to do with the fact that both the client and therapist are creating the reality. If there is something going on with me in my personal life, it is present in the room with my client and all of their issues. Additionally, all of my issues and judgments are present

when I am sitting with a client. This realization has allowed me to honor my experiences and feelings when sitting with a client in a very different way than I had originally been taught. I have learned that there is no objective observer. We are all in relation and thus interacting subjectively. This knowledge has broadened my awareness of my dynamics with all who I engage in my life.

Myself as Researcher.

As a researcher who had the choice to research a phenomenon (the personal) or look at trends (data), I chose the personal and life stories. My research stance is not unlike my stance in life. I am interested in the stories of others to illuminate their inner world. While I am interested in phenomena, I am most interested to see it emerge from individuals in their own words, their stories. As with the rest of my life, I realize that it is through relationship that the stories of my research participants emerged. Without relationship and all that it entails, there would only be words. Just as with therapy, the research interviews were affected by, amongst others, my mood, clothing, physical stance, facial expressions, and judgments and they were all present in the room and therefore part of the interviews. When researching individuals or groups of people, there is no sterile environment that produces perfectly clean information or data.

My goal as a researcher was to see my participants through their eyes and hear their stories through their voices and be open to what unfolded. Essential to this goal was acknowledging myself and what was going on with me so that I could be as open as I was able.

Journey Summary.

As I review these excerpts from my life story, along with other experiences and my way of being in the world, I see that narrative inquiry is not only a research methodology but a way of life for me. Through my work and interactions with others, I engage in narrative inquiry daily. In my reflective moments, I sit with these experiences and collected stories and reflect upon their impact on me. My collected stories which include mine as well as those that I have been witness to remind me of a rich quilt with variations in texture and color. The stories, like the quilt, together make the whole of my life.

My inquiry began with a brief but powerful part of my life story that shaped my journey leading me to my research project, the subject matter, researcher perspective, and method of inquiry. I am reminded that my inquiry and my personal role in it has led me to more than a superficial passing interest in my topic and study (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003, p. 271). My interest is ongoing and stems from both my personal and professional lives. I place my reflexive story at the beginning of my inquiry to highlight the use of self in narrative inquiry and thus my study. The importance of self in narrative inquiry reminded me to "continually reflect upon the role of self throughout my inquiry and into the final product" (p. 271). African American women play a prominent role in my personal and professional lives and they were the focus of my inquiry.

Dissertation Layout

My inquiry was a research study using narrative inquiry to illuminate the life stories of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college.

Included in my dissertation are twelve chapters that together provide a detailed view of my inquiry. Chapter one begins with my journey and research perspective followed by a proposal layout, theoretical background, focus of inquiry and its significance, and potential limitations. Chapter two includes a review of literature relevant to my inquiry. Chapter three consists of my plan of inquiry, inquirer paradigm, inquiry design, and analysis approach. Chapter four details the method and analysis for my inquiry. Chapter five presents a brief overview of my inquirer process for selecting the layout of the six participant chapters. Chapters six through eleven present each of my participants' stories. My dissertation concludes with chapter twelve and my inquirer thoughts and recommendations for additional research.

Theoretical Background

My inquiry explored the life stories of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the historical context for African American women in higher education. Also included is an introduction to the women's ways of knowing literature that served as a theoretical backdrop for my inquiry.

There has been an increase in the number of historically underrepresented individuals enrolling in higher education. These individuals are underrepresented due to a lack of access based on their racial or ethnic background, socioeconomic class, or sex (Zamani, 2003). It is projected that by the year 2050, members of so-called racial and ethnic minorities will make up the majority of students in college (Zamani). While access to higher education has been granted, many institutions continue business as usual regardless of their student population and how its needs may shift over time.

While African Americans have been historically banned from higher education institutions in many states, the community college currently serves as a gateway for many African American students. According to Zamani (2003), about half of all undergraduate students who enroll in community colleges are students of color. Approximately two-fifths of African American students are enrolled in community colleges with the majority of these students being women (Zamani). Despite these numbers, Caucasian students enrolled in community colleges are more likely to obtain a two-year degree than African American students. The literature highlights several variables that may be related to the success or lack of success of African American women students. The literature also affirms the importance of assessing the educational perspectives that African American women hold in order to support and expand upon learning environments that foster their success (Zamani).

According to Rosales and Person (2003), African American women students negotiate challenges beyond other students which may affect them emotionally, psychologically, and culturally. Additionally, African American women struggle with many variables as they strive to achieve their academic goals. Included in these variables are isolation and oppression, competing cultural values, and systematic racism (Rosales & Person). African American women often report feeling ignored and isolated by their higher education institutions (Moses, 1989). Rosales and Person concluded that it is imperative for institutions to respond to African American women and their characteristics, experiences, and self-perceptions. Zamani (2003) agreed and recommended that institutions pay more attention to the educational, social, and political positions of African American women learners.

Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky et al. 1986) presented groundbreaking qualitative research focused on women, their acquisition and processing of knowledge, lived experiences, and messages about education. While this research added the voice of women learners to the vast body of literature focused on learning theory, native born, African American community college students were not included. My inquiry was designed to add the voice of a growing population of community college students, native born, African American women to ways of knowing research. A detailed overview of ways of knowing literature is presented in chapter two and served as a theoretical backdrop for my inquiry.

Focus of Inquiry and its Significance

Purpose of Inquiry.

The focus of my narrative inquiry was on capturing the lived stories of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college in their own words. The purpose of my narrative inquiry was to explore and illuminate the lives and learning experiences of African American women through their stories. Narrative inquiry involves continual modifications (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In alignment with the intersubjective nature of narrative inquiry I amended my analysis to best fit the data and the life stories of my participants. I used a modified version of analysis incorporating the tenets of Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al. 1998) and Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005).

After reviewing relevant ways of knowing literature, I realized that the voices and lived experiences of native born, African American women were missing from those presented by Belenky, et al (1986). While the authors of the original ways of knowing

research published a second book (Goldberger, et al, 1996) that included essays about a more diverse population of women, there still remained the absence of research on native born, African American women learners. There was even less mention of community college students. This absence, combined with more than ten years of professional experience working with native born, African American women led me to my topic of inquiry. The "most trustworthiness of knowledge comes from personal experience rather than pronouncements of authorities" (Belenky, et al., p. 112-113). It is my personal experience that I drew upon in designing and conducting my inquiry and it is the personal experience of my participants I sought to gain through their stories.

My inquiry was based on my personal interest in the life stories of individuals and my professional experience as a community college counselor. One goal of my inquiry was to build upon the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) by adding the voices of native born, African American women learners.

Research Questions.

The focus of my inquiry was on illuminating and understanding the life stories of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college, the role of education in their lives, and their approaches to learning. With the following research questions, my inquiry began the process of adding the voice of the native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college to the literature, thus providing practitioners with an opportunity to incorporate the needs of African American women learners in community college programs and services. Based on the literature, I developed one overarching research question with two subquestions that guided my narrative inquiry. The research questions for my inquiry were:

1. What are the life stories of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college?

   a. What are the stories of the role of education and learning in the lives of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college?

   b. What are the stories of the ways of knowing of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college?

Significance of Inquiry.

After reviewing the literature, I had an idea of what I might discover. However, as Josselson and Lieblich (2003) asserted, I did not know what I would discover and what the final analysis of the data (stories) would reveal.

As a narrative inquirer, using myself as an instrument, I encountered life stories of native born, African American women learners enrolled in an urban community college that expands the ways of knowing research conducted by Belenky, et al in 1986. My inquiry highlighted disability issues for a majority of my participants. Their experiences varied and ranged from physical disabilities, learning disabilities or both physical and learning disabilities. This was an unexpected finding and warrants further research. Practitioners and researchers rely on the literature when developing programs. The voices and life stories of my participants are valid and theirs and other stories like theirs need to be heard by those who are interested in developing comprehensive programs to meet the needs of African American women learners. As mentioned by my participants, another benefit of the results (stories) of my inquiry may be reflected in additional African American women coming forward and sharing their life stories.

Limitations of my Inquiry

The limitations of my study included those common to narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin 1990; Creswell, 1998). Given that the instrument was the inquirer and the process was intersubjective, the findings were specific to the relationship developed between me and my participants. Narrative inquiry provides a snapshot of the participants' life in one space, time, and relationship. It is possible that a different inquirer and time in the participant's life may have elicited a different story. Furthermore, another inquirer may have brought a different lens and thus developed alternative themes and interpretations from the participant stories.

Chapter Summary

Chapter one of my dissertation provided a context for my inquiry. I included my reflexive journey to my inquiry, dissertation layout, theoretical background, focus of inquiry and its significance, and potential limitations. This chapter is designed to set the stage for the remainder of my inquiry. Chapter two will provide a review of the literature relevant to my inquiry and African American women learners and their ways of knowing.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature on two main themes including ways of knowing and African American women in higher education and their self perceptions as learners. As Josselson and Lieblich (2003) affirmed, it is essential to clarify what is important in the context of prior knowledge, what new knowledge the researcher is seeking, and the plan of discovery. My literature review is designed to highlight prior knowledge and is organized in the following manner. I begin with a review of literature on ways of knowing followed by an in depth description of procedural knowing or connected and separate knowing. My review then highlights literature on African American women in higher education and concludes with a summary of the two main themes.

Ways of Knowing

In the early years of psychological research focusing on development and learning, women were excluded. As a result models developed by theorists such as Piaget (1965, 1973), Erikson (1968), and Kohlberg (1984) were based on the voice and lens of boys and men. Developmental models and ways of knowing were formed based on only one side of the gender pool. This was common practice until Gilligan (1977) researched and documented women's voices.

Gilligan (1977) pioneered research designed to illuminate the nature of women and their experiences. Through listening to women's voices, Gilligan connected self and

an ethic of caring and contradicted Kohlberg's (1984) model of moral development based on a separate sense of self and an ethic of justice. Gilligan was one of the groundbreaking theorists who widened research and theoretical possibilities to include the effects of gender and socialization on the construction of self and knowledge.

Gilligan (1977) conducted a qualitative study with women and proposed an alternative sequence for the development of women's moral judgment. Gilligan proposed that there was a relational predisposition in women's thinking and that it did not impede their development. Rather, it demonstrated a different development. This relational bias includes feelings of empathy and compassion which differs than the traditional split between thinking and feeling. Gilligan asserted that this bias reflected a different social and moral understanding than that previously included in developmental theories. According to Gilligan, women struggle with a conflict between self and other as a central moral dilemma. These suppositions led to the inclusion of women's voices in developmental theory and shifted the lens from one of a deficit model to one of inclusion. Gilligan argued for an expanded conception of adulthood that would integrate women's voices into developmental theory.

Gilligan continued research on women's development and expanded to ways of knowing or acquiring and processing knowledge. Gilligan (1982) and Lyons (1983) developed definitions for ways of knowing used in later research. Gilligan and Lyons used separate and connected to describe experiences of the self as autonomous (separate from others) or as in relationship (connected to others). The separate self considers others as it wishes to be considered, whereas the connected self "responds to others in their terms" (Lyons, p. 134).

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Belenky, et al. (1986) furthered Gilligan's (1977, 1982) and Lyons' (1983) work with a qualitative study where they interviewed 135 women to gain information about their learning experiences. Following Gilligan's path, Belenky, et al.(1986) listened to women's voices and challenged the dominant paradigm of the nature of truth, reality, knowledge, and one's relationship with the surrounding world. The goal of their research was to expand awareness of women's development using women's voices and personal experiences as the foundation for knowledge development.

Belenky et al. (1986) revealed five epistemological positions including silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing that arose from the stories of their participants. Silence is a position of not knowing. Silent knowers experience themselves as "mindless and voiceless, and subject to the whims of external authority" (Belenky, et al., p. 15). Goldberger, et al. (1996) described Silent knowers as focused on concrete experience with little awareness of the power of language (p. 28). Received knowers gather and reproduce information and rely on external authorities (Belenky, et al., p. 37). Received knowers are often dual thinkers and view knowledge as outside of the self (Belenky, et al., p. 37). Subjective knowers value internal authority and knowledge is perceived as intuitive and personal (Belenky et al., 54). Procedural knowers live in the realm of discourse and evaluate and create knowledge (Belenky et al., p. 88). For the procedural knower, the content of knowing is central (Belenky et al. p. 95). Belenky, et al. found a split of knowledge development with this position, separate knowing and connected knowing. Constructed knowers use both separate and connected knowing forms in an integrated procedure that allows them to honor their self and worth while integrating objective and subjective knowing (Belenky et

al., p. 134). The five positions are interconnected with the structure of self and the affects of class, culture, gender, and power relations on that self (Wright, 2000). It is important to distinguish between the way of knowing or epistemological position and the type of knower who primarily uses one position. For example an individual may be a connected knower but find themselves in the position of separate knowing when faced with an environment that only supports this position.

While Belenky et al. (1986) identified five epistemological positions. The main focus of the ways of knowing literature was on procedural knowledge and the two associated procedures, separate knowing and connected knowing (Belenky et al. 1986, Goldberger, et al. 1996). These two procedures refer to the relationship that the knower has with the object of knowing. In other words, knowing refers to how an individual approaches learning and how they approach the material that they are learning about. The following section provides a detailed description of each of these procedures beginning with separate knowing and then connected knowing.

Separate Knowing

Separate knowing is the preferred way of knowing in the dominant American culture. It is aligned with the scientific paradigm and is not only prevalent but expected in most higher education settings. Separate knowing includes the examination of the object of knowing with a critical eye (Belenky et al., 1986). According to Elbow (1973), the separate knower plays the doubting game and employs objective and impersonal standards. Underlying the doubting game is the concern with the soundness of the position being presented (Elbow). Consequently, separate knowers have an adversarial stance toward new ideas even when the ideas are aligned with the knower's position

(Clinchy, 1996). The typical mode of discourse for separate knowers is argument as they engage in rational debate in order to judge the truth of a claim (Clinchy). According to Clinchy, separate knowers generate arguments that compete with a given position in search of flaws beneath the surface.

Separate knowers learn best through explicit formal instruction detailing how to adopt a certain lens (Clinchy, 1986). In procedural knowing, knowers learn to use the other's frame of reference (Belenky et al.). For instance, the separate knower would use a theoretical framework as a lens to examine an idea or subject. This becomes the objective frame of reference used. In addition to adopting the other's frame of reference, Separate knowing requires self extrication or a weeding out the self (Clinchy, 1996). It is also important for the separate knower to measure the material against objective standards. Separate knowing is important as it allows us to criticize our own as well as other people's thinking (Clinchy).

Connected Knowing

Unlike separate knowing, connected knowing is not accepted or preferred by the dominant American culture. This is particularly so in American higher education institutions. As Goldberger (1996) asserted, connected knowing is a mode of knowing historically undervalued in American schools, professions, and workplaces. While many individuals utilize both separate and connected knowing procedures in learning, those with an inclination for connected knowing often feel left out, less than, or like they just can not do it (Belenky et al., 1986).

As with separate knowing, connected knowers learn to use the other's frame of reference. However, for connected knowers, this occurs through the lens of another

person rather than through a theoretical framework (Clinchy 1986). According to Elbow (1979), the connected knower plays the "believing game". Connected knowers begin with the question, what do you see, as it is important that they gain an understanding of the vision in the other's head (Clinchy). The focus is on experiences or ways of seeing (Belenky, et al. 1986). Connected knowers also ask, what in your experience has led you to that point of view. They seek meaning and aim to understand the validity of the information presented. Belenky, et al. described this process differently; unlike separate knowers who use criticism of notions, people, or events, the connected knower can criticize a system but only in the system's terms and according to the system's standards. Clinchy (1996) provided a clear example; connected knowers enter into stories beyond the limits of their experience and attempt to make meaning out of narratives that at first, make little sense.

Connected knowing is based on the notion that the trustworthiest knowledge comes from personal experiences rather than the claims of those in authority positions (Belenky, et al., 1986). As a result, for the connected knower, the truth is grounded in firsthand experience. According to Clinchy (1989), connected knowers intentionally bias themselves in favor of what is being considered to try to get inside and become intimate with it. Elbow (1973) calls this suspending disbelief. According to Elbow, connected knowing requires self insertion rather than removal of the self to obtain objectivity. The connected knower adopts this perspective which requires both thinking (reasoning, inference) and empathy (Clinchy). Connected knowers invoke a unique focus on the aspects of the object that characterize connected knowing. This involves putting one's own views aside so that they may see the logic in the idea. Clinchy concluded that

connected knowers begin with an interest in the facts of other individual's lives then gradually shift the focus to their ways of thinking.

Connected knowers begin with a premise of connection (Gilligan, 1982). For the connected knower authority rests on the commonality of experience rather than on power or status as is the case with separate knowers (Belenky et al., 1986). According to Clinchy, (1996) connected knowers are genuinely interested in another's experiences and they utilize collaborative explorations to gain knowledge and look for the story behind ideas. As a result, the voice of connected knowing is narrative. According to Clinchy, growth occurs through the sharing of stories. An essential part of this process is connected conversations (Clinchy). Such conversations are based on active listening and incorporate thoughtful consideration of the other's position. Through mutual sharing, a group of individuals has the opportunity to create a "vision richer than any one individual could have achieved alone" (Belenky, et al., p.119). Connected knowing involves both thought and feeling. As Noddings (1984,) asserted, it "entails generous thinking and receptive rationality" (p.186). According to Clinchy, connected knowing builds upon subjectivism and as a result, connected knowers have an appreciation for subjective reality. In connected knowing, it is important to refrain from judgment. Fully developed connected knowing requires that one affirm or confirm the subjective reality of the other (Clinchy, 1996).

Limitations to the original ways of knowing research.

The original ways of knowing research conducted by Belenky, et al. (1986) purposefully included women of different ages, ethnic and class backgrounds from urban and rural communities with varying degrees of education. While the participants were

from varying backgrounds, the majority were of European American descent. The goal was to obtain the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds and to uncover "the common ground that women share, regardless of background" (Belenky, et al., 1986 p. 13) and their experiences related to family and school. The five knowledge positions revealed as a result of this study captured some of the major ways women process knowledge. While the stories highlighted the difficulties the women faced as they came to think of themselves as knowers and learners, class, race, and ethnicity were not discussed or analyzed for their relationship to ways of knowing (Goldberger, 1996). Furthermore, forces of oppression and privilege were not addressed in the research. Later research on ways of knowing acknowledged the need for inclusion of diverse women's voices.

Ways of Knowing and Sociocultural Diversity

Gilligan (1977) turned up the volume to include the voice of women in research. Belenky, et al. (1986) furthered this work and included voices of women learners. A decade after their first publication, Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky (1996) published *Knowledge, Difference, and Power, Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing*. In this publication, Goldberger, et al. addressed criticism that their original work was conducted primarily with European Americans and could not be generalized to all women. The included essays built upon the original ways of knowing research and provided a broader perspective including women from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This section focuses on two essays relevant to my inquiry and African American women. First I provide an overview of research conducted by Goldberger

(1996) that included a diverse sample of participants and second, an essay by Hurtado

(1996) on feminists of color and ways of knowing writings.

In the introduction to *Knowledge, Difference, and Power, Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing*, (Goldberger, et al.1996), Goldberger acknowledged that the five positions or ways of knowing revealed in the original women's ways of knowing research, are not distinctively female and may be expanded upon or modified with the inclusion of a more culturally and socioeconomically diverse sample of women and men (Goldberger, 1996). Goldberger expanded upon the original ways of knowing research in a qualitative study focusing on women of color. This qualitative study was conducted with four participants including, a South American born women, now a citizen; a Chinese American, business women and entrepreneur; an African American woman tenured in the college where she teaches; and a Native Alaskan woman health worker from a small village. A main finding of this study was the realization that women of color must function in a white world. This research revealed pain, anger, and confusion that accompany acculturation and illuminated the power of dominant culture to impose ways of being and knowing on individuals from minority cultures and immigrant groups (Goldberger).

Goldberger (1996) asserted that individuals construct narratives of self and other, gender, family, authority, and truth that evolve with encounters of new ideas and situations. For bicultural individuals such as women born into a genderized, racist, and classist society, identity development is compounded with divided loyalties and double consciousness (DuBois, 1961) or multiple consciousness (King, 1988). Gender, class, or race alone can not provide an adequate lens for understanding ways of knowing for

women of color (Bing & Reid, 1996; Goldberger, 1996). However, as Banks-Wallace (2000) articulated race, ethnicity, and class significantly influence people's ways of knowing.

Goldberger's (1996) research began the expansion of ways of knowing research to include women of color from diverse backgrounds. The sample used was small and Goldberger recommended continued research in this area to include additional voices to the ways of knowing body of work.

Special ways of knowing.

Hurtado (1996) provided an overview of feminists of color theorizing on the production of knowledge. Hurtado asserted that while some "mechanisms of knowledge production" (p. 373) overlap with women's ways of knowing, others are specific to women of color. Hurtado focused on women of color who deal with a multi group membership perspective and sought to gain insights into this world of learners and examined five mechanisms including anger, silence/outspokenness, withdrawal, shifting consciousness, and multiple tongues.

Hurtado (1996) pointed out that "being poor, of Color, and a woman results in daily experiences that create a systematically different relationship to knowledge. Thus leading to special ways of knowing; multiple consciousnesses" (p. 372). Hurtado explored knowledge production and acquisition identified in writings of feminists of Color and assessed overlap between these processes and those mentioned in women's way of knowing. People of Color have multiple social identities (Hurtado). These are defined by society and culture, are socially constructed, and fluid. An individual's social identity may coincide with or contradict one's personal identity. Personal identity is

comprised of psychological traits and characteristics that lead to uniqueness (Tajfel, 1978, 1981). Social identity is subject to structural forces like race, class, and gender. Tajfel (1981) stated that social identity directly affects knowledge construction and processing particularly when societal values of the various aspects of one's social identity are in conflict. An example of this phenomenon would be the social identity of a middle class, African American woman. The larger American society values the class, race, and gender aspects of this individual differently and thus, all of this needs to be negotiated within the individual in their acquisition and integration of knowledge (Tajfel). According to Hurtado, it is imperative to acknowledge this phenomenon and the multi group memberships individuals negotiate on a daily and situational basis. The dominant belief about ethnicity in America is assimilation into the dominant mainstream is the desired path for diverse populations (Hurtado).

Hurtado (1996) focused on successful ways that individuals deal with multiple group memberships and the ways knowledge is generated within the restrictions defined by these memberships to rise above them. Multiple group membership makes many women of Color "relative knowers" (Hurtado, p. 378). Relative knowing refers to the understanding that knowledge may be socially and politically constructed. According to Hurtado, for many women of Color not to assume the role of knower may lead to annihilation. The challenge is to know what you know and to be able to avoid the consequences of that knowledge while being true to your self (Hurtado). Anger experienced by women of Color, can lead to blocking or facilitating access to knowledge. Fordham (1993) asserted that the "unbridled ferociousness" exhibited by young women of Color is not often channeled into academic success or challenging institutional

oppression (p. 381). Rather it turns inward or works against these women. According to Fordham, many young women of Color are labeled as being aggressive, competitive, driven, motivated.

According to Hurtado (1996) the multi group identity experienced by women of Color requires them to develop multiple voices. This notion furthers the women's ways of knowing study that was concerned with women developing a voice. Hurtado pointed out that many women of Color struggle to develop a voice that is representative of the complexity of all the groups they belong. The struggle for them is to make all voices harmonious while staying true to themselves. According to Hurtado, it appears that there are two strategies: silence or outspokenness. Silence is a powerful tool when harnessed and may act as an effective form of camouflage. Silence may be used as a strategy that women of Color use to learn about the world and gain access to information (Hurtado). For centuries, white women have used silence to learn about the world of men (Hurtado). Silence on the other hand has hurt many women who did not use it effectively (Hurtado & Stewart, 1996; Ostrander, 1984). Outspokenness is another effective tool that works especially well for individuals who are not anticipated to speak (Hurtado). Both are strategies that may be employed in the attainment and demonstration of knowledge (Hurtado).

Hurtado (1996) referred to a shifting consciousness where individuals shift from personal perception to group perception while simultaneously perceiving multiple social realities. This ability leads, for many women of Color, to knowledge without language to effectively express that knowledge (Hurtado). Hurtado added that shifting consciousness refers to knowledge that is derived through sensory and unconscious and conscious

processes. Sandoval, (1991) referred to this phenomenon as differential consciousness. Hurtado asserted that the ability to shift consciousness is manifested in an ability for multiple voices. Individuals with this ability see both sides of an argument simultaneously (Anzaldua, 1987; Anzaldua, 1990; duCille, 1994; Harris, 1990; Harris, 1993; Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981). For many women of Color, knowledge is relational where what is true in one context is not necessarily true in other contexts (hooks, 1984; Davis, 1981).

Hurtado (1996) defined a sixth epistemological position or way of knowing; subjugated knowledge. Subjugated knowledge is that which is temporarily suspended in order to resist structures of oppression and create opportunities for transformation. This is often referred to as "border consciousness or as the in between consciousness" (Hurtado, p. 386). Hurtado synthesized theory written by feminist's of Color and concluded that social construction of group membership is solely based on the enforcement of political power. This led Hurtado to the conclusion that all knowledge is political. Social identity is molded by race, class, and gender and determines what access individuals have to knowledge and how one comes to perceive oneself as a knower (Hurtado).

It is important to deconstruct ways of knowing by examining differences across racial and class lines and to consider women who have been "systematically oppressed due to their race" (Bing & Reid, 1996, p. 192). These women have been silenced by a lack of access to education, financial resources, and other types of social power. According to Bing and Reid, it is essential to examine "silencing of women of color" (p. 192).

Hurtado's (1996) account of feminist theorists of color further supports women's ways of knowing research with women of Color. It also proposes the inclusion of a sixth way of knowing, subjugated knowledge to address the unique position that women of color find themselves.

Ways of knowing summary.

This section provided an overview of the women's ways of knowing research and its historical foundation in Gilligan's (1977) work. The inclusion of women's voices in developmental and learning theory is crucial to the success of women learners. The following section focuses on the population I selected for my inquiry, African American women. This section will provide a review of literature on African American women in higher education.

African American Females in Higher Education

"We are lived by the stories of our race and place"

(Mair, 1988, p. 127)

My inquiry focused on African American women enrolled in a community college. While the literature does not specifically focus on this population, it does present the history of African American women in higher education. Additionally, the literature describes several factors that may affect African American women's perceptions of themselves as learners. To provide a theoretical backdrop for my inquiry, I present a review of the literature in these two areas. This section begins with a historical overview of African American students in higher education and then transitions to societal factors and characteristics that may influence African American women learners including systematic racism, diversity, isolation, values, and assimilation.

The Diversification of Higher Education

As previously mentioned, there has been an increase in the number of historically underrepresented individuals enrolling in higher education based on racial or ethnic background, socioeconomic class, or sex (Zamani, 2003). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that minority students were approximately one-quarter of all undergraduates in 1989-90; in 1999-2000, that figure grew by 8 percent, to more than one-third, and is anticipated to continue to rise (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). As reported by Zamani, African American students equaled 10.2 percent of the public undergraduate population in 1989-90. It is projected that by the year 2050, members of so-called racial and ethnic minorities will make up the majority of students in college (Hobbs & Stoops, 2000).

Many believe that education is accessible by all. However, according to Zamani (2003), there remains unequal representation of African American women in higher education. Surprisingly, according to Nitiri, (2001), approximately two thirds of African American undergraduates are women. Zamani projected that African American women will receive all baccalaureate degrees awarded to African Americans by the year 2097. Despite increases in this population, higher education remains socioeconomically stratified (Zamani).

For many students, community colleges are the entry point to higher education. As a result, these institutions have the most diverse populations in higher education (Zamani, 2003). According to Zamani, about half of all undergraduate students who enroll in community colleges are students of color. Approximately two-fifths of African

American students are enrolled in community colleges with the majority being women (Zamani). Despite these numbers, white students are more likely to obtain a two-year degree than African American students. The literature presents several variables that may be related to the success or lack of success of African American women learners. According to Zamani, it is important to assess the educational perspectives that African American women hold in order to support and expand upon learning environments that foster their success.

African American students are less likely to persist and achieve their educational goals than their Caucasian counterparts (Cross & Slater, 2001). While there are many factors that contribute to this phenomenon, Myers (2002) contended that the retention and success of African American women is related to the number of African American women on campus. Howard-Hamilton (2003), concurred and reported, campuses with a critical mass of African American women create a less stressful environment for these students. While this may be true, Myers asserted that African American women enrolled in institutions that take a generic approach to such students are less likely to succeed.

Variables affecting African American women.

Rosales and Person (2003) presented several issues and variables that affect many African American women enrolled in higher education as they strive to achieve their academic goals. African American women negotiate challenges beyond other students which may affect them emotionally, psychologically, and culturally (Rosales & Person). Included in these challenges are issues due to isolation and oppression, competing cultural values, and systematic racism (Rosales & Person). Due to their unique challenges, African American women often feel ignored and isolated by their higher

education institutions (Moses, 1989). Rosales and Person concluded that it is imperative for institutions to respond to African American women and their characteristics, experiences, and self-perceptions. Zamani (2003) agreed and recommended that institutions pay more attention to the educational, social, and political positions of African American women.

As Moses (1989) asserted, African American women are in the unique position of belonging to two marginalized groups. Zamani (2003) furthered this notion and added that African American women in higher education live at the intersection of two types of oppression: racism and sexism. According to Moses, this dual oppression leads to isolation from others who experience single oppression such as African American men and other women (St. Jean & Feagin, 1998). In addition to isolation, this dual oppression often leads to the invisibility of African American women in higher education (Zamani).

Zamani (2003) pointed out that African American women have been more hindered by race oppression than sex oppression. Zamani further stated that historically, African American women have never been permitted to attain higher levels of status than white women in the American society and the American education system. African American women have consistently been held back while white women were allowed to grow and become an integral part of society. The education of African American women followed the same rules. For over two hundred years, the formal education of African American women was not widespread (Zamani). This historical framework for African American women in higher education provides an undercurrent that hinders access for many women today.

While many African American women have more access and opportunity than their ancestors, others still struggle with the systematic oppression previously mentioned. Zamani (2003) called for a paradigm shift to understand the impact of the multidimensional oppression of gender and race. Beyond race and gender, African American women need to be seen as the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and unique women they are (Zamani). According to Collins (2001), African American women differ in their experiences, backgrounds, appearances, demographics, occupations, and beliefs. Further uniqueness is represented in the diversity amongst African American women in their age, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, visible and invisible disabilities, and family responsibilities (Rosales & Person, 2003). They are however, united in their struggle to be accepted and respected members of society with a valid voice. African American women experiences vary greatly even though they have a shared heritage (Greene, 2000).

According to Schwartz and Bower, (1997) African American women may experience social disadvantages beyond race and gender including cultural disadvantages leading to isolation and alienation. Rosales and Person (2003) stated that African American women experience internal and external pressure. That pressure stems from living in a society that is neither inclusive nor accepting. This pressure is at the core of their perceptions of themselves. Additionally, this pressure is present as they begin to negotiate the world of higher education. Identity development and intellectual development as well as transitioning into, through, and out of college are all part of the process that leads to a healthy or otherwise college experience. Critical to the success of

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these women and their dealing with this pressure is a support system of peers and role models to encourage them as they enter higher education.

African American women, like many other students, enter higher education at different stages of their lives. These students balance responsibilities and multiple roles, leadership within the family, extended family, and community (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Included in the multiple roles that African American women balance are primary caregiver, primary financial support of the household, spouse or life partner, single parent, role model for younger siblings, and community member (Rosales & Person, 2003). Rosales and Person claimed that African American women need support inclusive of their academic, social, cultural, economic, career, interpersonal, and intrapersonal needs. As Rosales and Person reflected, African American women have a myriad of needs consistent with their diversity and it is imperative that they receive support as they address these needs.

Howard-Hamilton (2003) asserted that African American women may find themselves assimilating into the larger culture to find support systems and fight feeling ostracized. Many colleges have a one size fits all approach to African American women. This not only ignores within group differences but by ignoring these differences, stifles the dialogue that could be empowering. According to Howard-Hamilton, this single minded approach to support of African American women often leads to their lack of success in higher education.

Matthews-Armstead (2002) reported that for African American women, self concept and perceptions of connectedness were important factors in decisions to pursue higher education as well as persist toward achieving their educational goals. Women with

a self concept that incorporated notions of self-directed, self-reliant, and competence were more likely to pursue higher education than women who did not possess such self concepts (Matthews-Armstead). African American women, who feel empowered and who have a belief that they have the power to resist negative influences, are more successful than other students.

African American women in higher education summary.

It is clear from the literature that while African American women are enrolling in greater numbers than ever in history, they are less successful than other women learners. It is imperative that the voice of African American women learners reach higher education so that the societal variables that affect their success be identified, addressed, and supported. Only then will African American women have true access to higher education and achieving their academic goals.

Chapter Summary

In chapter two I presented a review of the literature relevant to my inquiry. The literature review included two themes, ways of knowing and African American women in higher education. This chapter was designed to provide a theoretical backdrop for my inquiry. I began my inquiry where the literature concluded. The ways of knowing body of literature expanded upon Gilligan's (1977, 1982) work which highlighted women's development. Belenky et al. (1986) and Goldberger et al. (1996) conducted research with women learners on the acquisition and processing of new knowledge. Goldberger (1996) and Hurtado (1996) added the voice of diverse populations however native born African American women were not studied as a group. Success rates for African American community college students are lower than their Caucasian counterparts. As Zamani

(2003) asserted, it is important to assess educational perspectives that African American women hold in order to support their learning and to create learning environments that foster their success. The literature presented several factors that are potential barriers for African American women learners as they strive toward their academic goals. Issues include but are not limited to oppression, racism, lack of access, and issues related to multi-group identities. It was important for me to begin with the literature however while it serves as a backdrop and starting point for my inquiry, I looked to my participants and their life stories for their truths. In chapter three I provide a detailed view of my inquiry design including method of inquiry and analysis.

CHAPTER 3: INQUIRY DESIGN

Method of Inquiry

"The narrative inquiry process is a voyage of discovery to an unknown place."

(Josselson & Lieblich 2003, p. 261)

Just as the story for my narrative inquiry began, I designed an inquiry process that would take me, my participants and the reader through a voyage of discovery. During my inquiry, I used the literature, my prior experience, and the emerging stories of each participant as a guide and as a result did not know where the journey would end. I began my inquiry where the literature concluded.

Inquirer Paradigm

In conceptualizing my inquiry including the problem I wanted to address, the participants, and the purpose of my inquiry, it was important to map all aspects so that I could then decide on an appropriate method of inquiry. I knew I wanted to add to the ways of knowing literature by including the voices of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college. I have worked with this population for the past ten years and feel that their experiences as well as approaches to education and learning are important, should be heard, and included in the tapestry of voices of women learners. The original women's ways of knowing research (Belenky, et al. 1986) was based on a qualitative study. Given that I wanted to build upon this research, I also

selected a qualitative research method for my inquiry. There were several issues that I grappled with as I began the developmental stages for my inquiry.

I am not African American. As a result, it was important for me to conceptualize "cross race and outsider" (Tillman, 2002) issues including what it would be like to study a population that I love to work with but that I do not "belong" to. I have never had a difficult time working as a counselor with African American women however my inquiry was different. I wore the hat of a researcher which brought a new dimension of privilege and potential distance to the relationship. Based on potential research issues, I looked for culturally sensitive approaches to qualitative research in addition to the feminist perspective which guided the original women's way of knowing research to develop a framework for my inquiry.

I turned to Tillman (2002) and her recommendations for a culturally sensitive research approach specific to African Americans as a guide in conceptualizing my inquiry. Tillman's approach combines both a critical theory and feminist theory foundation while embracing Dillard's (2000) endarkened feminist approach to research. According to Tillman, culturally sensitive research acknowledges ethnicity and position in the culture as central to the process. Also acknowledged are the varied aspects of culture as well as their diverse historical and contemporary experiences. Key to a culturally sensitive research approach is the placement of African Americans and their individual and collective knowledge at the center of the inquiry. Tillman defined culture as a "group's individual and collective ways of thinking, believing, and knowing including shared experiences, values, forms of expression, and behaviors" (p 4). Tillman pointed out that "shared cultural knowledge" (p. 4) is not a singular world view.

A central theme in culturally sensitive research is the issue of whether the researcher possesses the cultural knowledge to accurately interpret the experiences of African Americans within the context of the phenomenon under study (Tillman, 2002). On a personal level, I am very familiar with the women's ways of knowing literature and issues of women learners as well as the struggle of voice development for women. As previously noted, I am not African American and I do not have direct experience living in the community that I explored. As I mentioned, I have more than ten years of direct experience providing personal and academic counseling for African American women. During these sessions, students have shared their lived experiences, success stories, and issues related to community, learning, family, as well as issues with society that affect them in their daily lives. I also have several years of volunteer experience providing emotional support for primarily African American clients dealing with HIV/AIDS at community centers located in urban areas populated predominantly by African Americans. These two experiences provided an insight into the stories, people, and community that I sought to gain more in depth information about. I feel that due to these experiences, I was able to be sensitive to the participants of my inquiry during analysis and interpretation of their stories. It also helped me incorporate their perspectives while being conscious of my own experiences and biases. It is this insight and connectedness to the community that may have assisted me in the uncovering and discovering of the multiple realities and experiences of native born African American women (Tillman). Co-constructing analysis and presentation of an inquiry is essential to a culturally sensitive approach (Tillman). As a result, I actively engaged my participants during all phases of my inquiry to ensure that the cultural standpoints of African American women

were present. As Tillman explained, it is important to use self-defined experiences of African Americans throughout the research process as well as to maintain the cultural integrity of participants.

Tillman (2002) used Dillard's (2000) six assumptions for endarkened feminist epistemology to synthesize the culturally sensitive research approach.

1. self-definition forms one's participation and responsibility to one's community;

2. research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose;

3. only within the context of community does the individual appear and, through dialogue, continue to become;

4. concrete experiences within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the "matrix of meaning-making";

5. knowing and research extend both historically in time and outward to the world: to approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness;

6. power relations, manifest as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., structure gender, race, and other identity relations within research. (Dillard, p. 672–677)

Dillard's (2000) definition of endarkened feminist epistemology includes a reality based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought with a cultural perspective located at the heart of the research. Included in this cultural perspective are the culturally constructed socialization of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions of African American women (Dillard, p. 662). As recommended by Tillman (2002), I was guided by Dillard's six assumptions in designing and implementing my inquiry, developing research questions, developing interview

questions, conducting the interviews, as well as analyzing and interpreting the data.

Finally, the preceding assumptions served as an underlying foundation for every aspect of

my inquiry from conceptualization to completion.

Theoretical Framework

Once my inquirer paradigm was established, I turned to a research methodology

within the qualitative paradigm. Based on the fact that I had selected a culturally sensitive

approach combining feminist and critical theory, my inquiry fell into the postmodern

realm of philosophy and research. According to Creswell (1998), postmodernism

includes the family of theories concerned with the conditions of today and in the multiple

perspectives of class, race, gender, and other group affiliations.

As Creswell (1998) asserted, qualitative researchers maintain a set of beliefs or

assumptions that need to be addressed prior to determining the methodology for a study.

As a researcher, I acknowledged my beliefs and assumptions and that they played a

significant role from the beginning with conceptualization of my inquiry and to the end

with the final write up. Creswell asserted that the first assumption is ontological, dealing

with questions of reality. Reality may be objective or subjective. In my inquiry, reality

was subjective and based on each participant and the inquirer. I engaged my participants

in a co-constructed reality where I facilitated their reflection and supported them as their

life stories emerged. Given that reality for my inquiry was subjective, I am aware that

another inquirer with different participants may have generated alternative stories (data).

The second assumption is epistemological and deals with the relationship between the

researcher and intended topic of research (Creswell). I fully immersed myself in my topic

of inquiry as I met with my participants and worked with my students at the community

college. As previously mentioned, I engaged in an intersubjective process with my participants as their life stories emerged. The third assumption is axiological involving the values of the researcher. My values were present throughout my inquiry and influenced the selection of my topic, participant pool, conceptual framework, methods of analysis and presentation or final write up of my participants' stories. My inquiry focused on life stories, which is related to my therapeutic stance and belief in the transformative nature of story telling. The fourth assumption is rhetorical leading to the use of first person in my dissertation (Creswell, 1998). I elected to use first person throughout my dissertation. This was not intended to create an informal dialogue with the reader. Instead, it was intended to share my journey and excerpts from my life story as a compliment to the life stories of my participants. The fifth assumption is methodological, defining the process of inquiry and the emergent or inductive method used for inquiry design and revisions (Creswell). All of my assumptions or beliefs led me to narrative inquiry as a method. I have previously stated that narrative inquiry is not only a qualitative method but a way of life for me. Relying on my training as a therapist, I engaged in an inductive process throughout my inquiry. Professionally and as an inquirer I valued the opportunity to engage in an inductive, reflective process.

My inquirer paradigm along with the consideration of Creswell's (1998) five assumptions, my area of inquiry, and my participants led me to narrative inquiry as a methodology. I was interested in the lived experiences and stories of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college. Narrative is a method of eliciting stories and facilitates the understanding of "storytelling as a social and interactional practice in which tellers and audiences engage in meaningful construction

and reconstruction of experience" (DeFina, 2003, p. 368). DeFina's definition confirmed the use of narrative inquiry to achieve my research goals, life stories of native born African American women enrolled in an urban community college.

One of the early and significant contributions to the development of narrative inquiry occurred when Connelly and Clandinin (1990) published an article. Connelly and Clandinin conceptualized narrative inquiry based on John Dewey's (1938) notion that life is education. Narrative inquiry is the study of the "lived experience or lives and how they are lived" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) established the educational importance of narrative inquiry as a research methodology that brings "theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived" (p.3).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) defined narrative inquiry as coming from the perspective that human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Individuals' daily lives are shaped by stories of who they are, relationships to others and their past related to their life story. Story is defined by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) as a portal through which an individual enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry is the study of experience as story and is a way of thinking about experience. Researchers using narrative inquiry as a methodology "must adopt a view of experience with story as the phenomena under study" (Connelly& Clandinin, p.477).

Connelly and Clandinin (2006), referred to three commonplaces of narrative inquiry including "temporality, sociality, and place (dimensions of inquiry space) that together are unique to narrative inquiry" (p 479). These commonplaces provide the

inquirer with a framework for narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin recommended that all three commonplaces need to be explored simultaneously. Temporality in narrative inquiry refers to the belief that events under study are in temporal transition (Connelly & Clandinin). As an inquirer, I remained conscious that events and individuals have a past, present, and future and that everything is in process and transition. The past events shared by my participants significantly impacted their lives. I am also aware that if I interviewed these same women five years from now, their stories and the events that were shared may be less or more significant in relationship to their larger life story. Sociality in narrative inquiry refers to a focus on personal conditions as well as social conditions at the same time. As an inquirer, I acknowledged my own personal conditions including feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions and looked for them in my participants' stories. Social conditions refer to environment, surrounding factors and forces. During my inquiry, I was conscious of the environmental factors and forces influencing each interview. Holding the interviews at Berkeley City College seemed to help participants feel comfortable and provided a natural flow into building a relationship with me as the inquirer. Another form of social condition is the relationship between the participant and the inquirer. I attended to the relationship between myself as inquirer and each participant, particularly in establishing rapport during the interviews. Place in narrative inquiry includes specific concrete, physical boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry takes place (Connelly & Clandinin). Place includes the environment where the inquiry takes place as well as where events in the story take place. As an inquirer, I was responsible to my participants and I worked to ensure that they were as comfortable as possible in the interview environment. In conceptualizing and

completing my final write up of my participants' stories, I remained conscious of place within each story as well as across my participants' life stories.

To engage in narrative inquiry is to operate from a set of ontological and methodological assumptions (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry requires "evidence, interpretative plausibility, and disciplined thought" (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 485). I was aware that it was essential for me to think narraratively throughout my inquiry so that the final write up would "reflect the temporal unfolding of people, places and things within the inquiry, the personal and social aspects of inquirer's and participant's lives, and the places in the inquiry" (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 485). Throughout my inquiry I remained conscious of addressing the three commonplaces as part of an inductive process. Qualitative research, specifically narrative inquiry was a good fit for my inquiry into the stories of native born African American women enrolled in an urban community college and led to an active process of co-creation between myself as inquirer and my participants.

Inquiry Design

My inquiry was guided by one overarching research questions and two sub questions. These questions lead to inquiring into the storied lives the of native born, African American women community college students as well as their preferred ways of knowing. I selected a method of inquiry based on a culturally sensitive research approach that combines feminist and critical theory perspectives and the underlying assumptions of narrative inquiry proposed by Connelly and Clandinin (2006). Combined, these formed my inquiry guide and led to a model of conducting two in depth interviews with participants. Tillman (2002) supported the use of interviews and referred to them as a

potential culturally sensitive approach to research social, political, economic, and educational factors that affect the lives of African Americans, especially in educational settings.

Participant interviews, combined with my notations in an inquirer's journal provided the data to answer my inquiry questions. I used a method of analysis that provided a holistic view of the participants, their stories and their lives. "Interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003 p. 67) I collected data in the form of life stories through in-depth interviews. I focused on the content of these life stories to illuminate native born African American women enrolled in an urban community college. The stories were told in various formats where time and space were not necessarily sequential. Some were told in order of importance to the larger life story (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In other cases stories were told sequentially from childhood to present. While the structure of the interview may have revealed unique characteristics not present in the content, the main focus of the data and my analysis was on content. My participants and their individual and collective knowledge were at the heart of the data for my inquiry.

Participants.

According to Creswell (2003), purposeful sampling allows the inquirer to select information rich participants and leads to the best understanding of the research problem or questions. As a result, I used purposeful sampling to identify participants for my inquiry. This process allowed me to select participants with the voices that best addressed

the lived experiences of native born African American women, thus providing rich narratives.

Participants for my inquiry were native born African American women enrolled in an urban community college. I considered many factors when deciding what population to focus on. I began with the ways of knowing literature and the fact that while African American women had been studied; their heritage was mixed with some participants born in other countries, some born in rural areas, and others in urban areas. Whether someone is native born or born in another country affects their stance in the world. These two groups of individuals may differ in culture, values, norms, and may have a different experience or reaction to living in the American society. There may be different lived experiences due to ongoing oppression in the American society or possibly due to a link to ancestors who were enslaved in America. As a result, their ways of knowing or voice may differ. There may also be a difference between the experiences of individuals who live in rural areas versus urban areas. I have had several students over the years move from one area to the other describe qualitative differences in the way that they were welcomed or not by society and whether they felt supported or not by their new community. Five of my participants were born and raised in urban areas. One participant was born in Louisiana and moved to Oakland, California at nine years of age, in the sixth grade. This experience is detailed in chapter eleven, Nanny.

For my inquiry, I was interested in native born, African American women living in urban communities. I have worked with many community college students living in urban communities in the greater San Francisco bay area in California and it was my goal to include the voice of these women in the ways of knowing literature and to provide an

avenue for practitioners to hear from the women that they serve. Beyond the need for greater in the ways of knowing literature, there is an absence of community college students. Community colleges represent the gateway to higher education for many African American women. This often leads to transgenerational changes regarding perspectives about education and the role of education in their lives. As a result, it was important that I focus at this entry point in my inquiry.

I selected the Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS) program at Berkeley City College in Berkeley California as the gateway to contacting potential participants. EOPS is a student support program that provides one-on-one counseling, tutoring and other support services for first generation college students who may also be educationally and financially disadvantaged. The EOPS program had over four hundred students enrolled in 2006-2007 and approximately half of them were African American. The majority of the African American students in EOPS were women. I selected this program with a large concentration of African American women to broaden my chances of reaching potential participants.

I requested that the EOPS coordinator, as the gatekeeper send out an invitation to participate in a study letter (Appendix A) on my behalf. This letter was sent to all 157 native born African American women enrolled in the EOPS program. Included in the letter was an invitation to participate in a study designed to gather stories from native born African American women enrolled in a community college about the role of education and learning in their lives. The letter detailed that participation was voluntary and that any information shared during the interviews would remain confidential. It also explained that each participant would have the opportunity to see a transcript of their

interviews and comment for clarity and accuracy. Also included was the expected time commitment from participants to participate in two sixty to ninety minute interviews.

The selection criterion for participants was on a first response basis. The response rate was lower than I expected. However the letters were sent during summer session and many students take summer session off. Approximately two weeks after responses started coming in, I began contacting potential participants. At this time, there were eight responses. I contacted respondents by telephone and/or email and attempted to schedule the first interview session and verbally inquired to make sure they met the parameters of being a native born African American women. I attempted to schedule with potential participants up to three times prior to moving to another potential participant on the response list. The non-responding potential participants were taken off the list. I progressed through the list until I scheduled four interviews. I was unable to successfully reach the other four respondents. I was concerned that I would only have four participants. However two additional respondents arrived, separately, at my office door inquiring about my study. They mentioned that they had received a letter in the mail. I inquired whether they met the parameters of my intended population. Both of these potential participants affirmed they were native born African American women. I scheduled each of these respondents for their first interview before they left my office. My goal was to have a pool of participants so that I could conduct an in depth inquiry while at the same time reaching saturation. I anticipated that I might interview up to eight participants to reach a point of saturation (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Saturation occurs when the interviews conducted elicit stories where the themes are repetitive Holstein & Gubrium). After interviewing the first six participants, I began seeing repetition of

themes. At this time, I decided to continue my inquiry with six participants rather than adding additional ones.

The timeline for the interviewing or data gathering was dependent on respondents for the first round of interviews. It also depended upon my participants for the completion of the second interviews. The invitation letters were sent out in June, 2007 and my first interview was in early July 2007. My last first interview was conducted in early August, 2007. I began my second interviews at the end of September, 2007 and finished in late October, 2007. Scheduling second interviews with participants was much more difficult as students were enrolled full time at the college. Therefore they had more time constraints than they did during the summer. I successfully completed five second interviews. I tried repeatedly to reach the sixth participant however her phone number was disconnected and she did not respond to two different mailings. I then discovered that she was no longer enrolled in Berkeley City College. I discussed the predicament with my methodologist who suggested staying with the number of participants that I had and reporting results on all six participants.

Interview Site.

I selected Berkeley City College in Berkeley California as the site for my inquiry and as a representative site of an urban community college. I purposefully selected the community college where I was employed based on my participant population. As previously mentioned, I am not African American. As a result of outsider issues leading to potential barriers in gaining full access to participants and rich narratives, I felt that it was important to conduct my inquiry where I am a known entity. I have been employed as a counselor for the past seven years at Berkeley City College. I am not in a position of

power over students at the college, Rather I am in the position of being an advocate who supports student success by working with them on achieving their potential and goals. I was aware that some participants might have been reluctant to share their stories in any depth with someone who they would continue to see on campus. However, I did not encounter this problem with my participants. I was also aware that I needed to have heightened consciousness regarding confidentiality issues. As a result, I was very careful to keep confidentiality amongst participants. While each participant knew that I was interviewing other women, they did not know who they were. I am trained as a marriage and family therapist and have experience working in settings where boundaries became blurred. It was my intention to maintain clear and transparent boundaries so they were not blurred. I was successful in being conscious of and maintaining clear and transparent boundaries throughout my inquiry.

I received support and consent to use Berkeley City College as the inquiry site from the President of the college. The President received a copy of the participant invitation letter and a cover letter detailing the timeline and target population for my inquiry. It was important that the Berkeley City College President knew that my inquiry was going to be conducted with the safety and interest of the student participants as the highest priority. I discussed participant anonymity with the President and assured her that the results of my inquiry would not be used for anything other than my inquiry.

I did not conduct interviews in my counseling office at Berkeley City College. Rather I scheduled time in a private room on campus designed for faculty and staff use. I scheduled time specifically for the purpose of meeting with my inquiry participants. While comfort of my participants was important, it was also important that they were

clear that I was an inquirer during these sessions, not a college counselor. I believe that conducting the interviews at Berkeley City College added to the comfort level of participants due to its familiarity.

Interview Protocol.

I contacted potential participants based on the previously mentioned criteria by telephone and/or email. During this initial contact, I described my inquiry and confirmed their interest in participating. I then reviewed confidentiality and the use of the data and results of my inquiry. Additionally, I emphasized that participation in my inquiry was voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time.

Once a participant agreed to participate, I scheduled an interview at Berkeley City College. There were no gatekeeper issues at this point as I scheduled the time and place myself. If a participant did not want to or was unable to interview at Berkeley City College, I would have worked with them to identify a mutually agreed upon alternative place. However, all of my participants stated they were comfortable meeting at the college. It was important that the interview was conducted in a space that was comfortable for each participant while being free from distractions and interruptions.

Two in-depth interviews with six native born African American women enrolled in a urban community college generated the data for my inquiry. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. The purpose of the second interview was to follow up on the first interview and address questions, issues or provide clarity. In the initial face-to-face interview, I reiterated that I was a graduate student working on a narrative inquiry for my dissertation. I also reiterated the focus of my inquiry and emphasized the confidential nature of the interviews and results for my inquiry. I requested that each

participant sign a consent form (Appendix B). At that time I explained that each participant would have a pseudonym and asked them if they preferred a name. During this process, I confirmed their willingness to participate in two separate interviews lasting up to ninety minutes each and explained that the interviews would be digitally recorded using a small digital voice recorder. I encouraged participants to ask questions and actively engage in the inquiry process and restated that participation was voluntary and may end at any time. Upon completion of the first interview, I scheduled the second interview. Between interviews, the recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber. I provided the transcriber a copy of each digital recording and she transcribed each recording and sent me a copy of the transcription. I provided each participant a transcribed copy prior to the second interview. Participants had the opportunity to review transcripts for errors, omissions, or additions that should be made to the text. After each participant reviewed the transcripts and provided comments, I listened to the recordings and read the transcripts for accuracy prior to beginning analysis.

My goal in each interview was to act as a facilitator for the telling of my participant's lived stories. I used an interview guide with open-ended questions designed to encourage stories as a loose frame during the first interview (Appendix C). However, I kept the interviews unstructured and as "free flowing exchanges" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 263). I engaged in an emergent method for interviewing and as a result, not all inquiry questions were asked of every participant. Instead, the interview followed the participant and their stories.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for my inquiry began with the selection of the topic of inquiry and the selection of participants. My participants were at the center from conception through design and continued to be central throughout my inquiry process. As a culturally sensitive inquirer, I attended to and was mindful of all elements necessary in conducting an ethically sound inquiry. Included in these elements were issues of ensuring that the participants and their perspectives, cultural experiences, and values were honored and remained central to my inquiry. Also included was the issue of power related to my role as inquirer and what that may have generated with participants. Paramount to my inquiry was the voice and stories of each participant. As a result, I was cautious in eliciting their voices, listening to them, and not censoring them. I was responsible to each participant and I worked to honor their trust.

Josselson and Lieblich (2003) referred to ethical issues specific to qualitative research. One issue is the heightened awareness about ethical issues. To ensure that I was engaging in an ethically sound inquiry, I continued to maintain an inquirer's journal detailing my thoughts, experiences, and feelings on topics like the relationship between myself as inquirer and the participants. Other issues that I remained conscious of and maintained a journal on included participant confidentiality, the possibility of triggered memories during or as a result of the interviews, and the representation of participant stories and lives in the final text. I discussed issues of confidentiality with inquiry gatekeepers as well as participants. The purpose of my inquiry was transparent to both gatekeepers and participants. Each participant was informed that their participation was voluntary and that they may withdraw from my inquiry at any time. Participants were

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asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B) prior to the commencement of their first interview. To ensure confidentiality, I asked each participant to select a pseudonym to be used during final write up. To further ensure confidentiality, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with original recordings destroyed upon completion of my inquiry. Recordings and transcriptions were kept in a locked location only accessible by me and only used for my inquiry. Any time an inquirer engages their participants in their lived stories, there is a possibility of triggered memories that may bring up emotional issues. For my inquiry, I had professional counseling resources available for immediate referral in the event that any participant was faced with triggered memories. I would have referred students to free on campus personal counseling provided by a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist or to an outside agency. However, this did not come up for any of my participants. Finally, I represented my participants' stories in a culturally sensitive manner in the final text to ensure accuracy and completeness while honoring each participant.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is defined as determining the truth of a study and refers to credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). I employed two methods to establish and ensure trustworthiness of my inquiry including, member checking and reflexivity. I conducted member checking with each participant, after each interview session, and transcription. This was important to my analysis as it ensured that each participant was an active part of the process while confirming that their stories were represented in an authentic and ethical manner. Member checking or informant feedback is a method to ensure trustworthiness of the data while allowing participants to share their

feelings about their experience during the study (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). I provided each participant a copy of the unanalyzed transcript and requested that they reviewed it for accuracy and clarity. I discussed my general interpretations and reviewed the transcript with each participant. My goal for sharing interpretations was to include my participants in the process, giving them the opportunity to make corrections to the transcript or the story and what they were trying to convey. It was important to me, as an inquirer, that I presented the story of each participant in an accurate manner.

I used reflexivity during my inquiry process to assist me in becoming clear of who I was as an inquirer and about my biases, prejudices, and preconceived notions. Throughout my inquiry, I maintained a journal which allowed me to process my personal values, beliefs, and biases as they pertained to the topic of my inquiry. Self reflection was essential as I analyzed and interpreted participant stories and lived experiences. I continued to use a reflexive journal throughout the remainder of my inquiry and recorded personal reflections during each interview. This process allowed me to continually process myself (inquirer) as an instrument in the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Analysis Approach

In narrative inquiry, the interviewer is the tool (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As a result, analysis begins in the interview as the interviewer is engaging the participant and wrapping themselves in the story being revealed. As the interviewer experiences the story, they are analyzing the story as well as the body language of and tones used by the participant, gauging comfort level with the questions and the overall process (Lincoln & Guba). As a narrative inquirer, I too engaged in this active form of analysis during each interview. Following the interview, I recorded my observations, feelings, and reactions in

field notes. Once each interview was completed, they were transcribed. I then spent considerable time reviewing the transcriptions as well as listening to the digital recordings. (Riessman, 1993). My goal during the analysis phase of my inquiry was to look for meaning and themes that emerged from the transcribed interviews.

Initially, I planned on conducting a Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al., 1998) of each interview, looking for themes in the context of the whole as well as other parts of the stories. In keeping with the inductive approach to my inquiry, I shifted my approach after beginning formal analysis and listening to and reading transcripts. I found that I wanted more than what Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al.) could provide me. As a visual learner, I was drawn to Situational Analysis and the use of mapping as a method of conducting analysis. Neither of these techniques was a perfect fit. As a result I used a modified version of mapping essential to Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005) with the foundations of Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al.). Upon reflection, combining these two approaches worked well for my inquiry.

My modified analysis method began with the tenets of Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al., 1998). This allowed me to narrow down some overarching themes based on the interviews. I also used Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al.) to analyze for earliest memories related to learning or education. After reading, listening, and re-reading the transcripts, I realized how important the earliest memories and stories of learning were in the larger context of my participants' life stories as learners. Once I was very familiar with each transcript, I utilized the principles of Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005) which included a reflective process of listening, reading, and visualizing the stories

in maps to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships amongst all elements in my inquiry.

Holistic Content Analysis.

I used a modified version of Holistic Content Analysis as described by Lieblich, et al. (1998). In this approach, "the life story of a person is taken as a whole, and sections of the text are interpreted in the context of other parts of the narrative" (Lieblich, et al., p. 12). This holistic approach was a good fit for my inquiry and goal of exploring the stories of native born African American women enrolled in an urban community college. Lieblich, et al., confirmed the use of the holistic approach with this type of inquiry, "The holistic approach is preferred when the person as a whole, that is his or her development to the current position, is what the study aims to explore" (Lieblich, et al., p. 12). The holistic content oriented approach aims at drawing out the implicit content by asking about the meaning that the story or section conveys (Lieblich, et al.). Another use for holistic content analysis is to describe individual traits as they are displayed during the interview.

I followed a process based on Lieblich, et al.'s (1998) description of the Holistic Content Analysis. First, I read each interview transcript several times until a pattern emerged in the form of foci for the entire story. Second, I documented my initial impressions in writing. I paid special attention to contradictions in terms of content or mood by participants during the interview and noted them in my analysis.

Not only are early memories important to Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al., 1998) but as I began my analysis, I realized that they were the central foci that framed each of my participants' stories as learners. As a result, I analyzed for earliest memories

around learning or formal education experiences. In each case, these seemed to be emotionally significant to the life stories as a whole and had a profound impact on my participants and their perceptions of themselves as learners.

Early memories are at the core of Adler's psychological theory (Adler, 1956). According to Adler, memories are always emotionally significant and there are no chance memories. Early childhood memories were particularly significant for Adler who believed that they displayed the individual's basic view of life. I analyzed for first memories around learning which were unique amongst my participants. In every case, I analyzed the transcripts for the earliest memory chronologically however in most instances, they were not the first memories narrated. It was clear that each of these childhood memories played a significant role in the larger life stories of my participants.

In addition to earliest memories as a theme, I followed all major themes from the beginning to the end looking at their evolution. I then analyzed these themes with a modified version of Situational Analysis and visually displayed them in situational and relational maps.

Situational Analysis.

In addition to Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al., 1998), I used a modified version of Situational Analysis described by Clarke (2005). Situational Analysis seeks to analyze a particular situation of interest through the consideration of the most significant elements in that situation and their relationships (Clarke). According to Clarke, the fundamental assumption in Situational Analysis is that everything in the situation both creates and affects most everything else in the situation. By using maps, the inquirer seeks out what is present and what is missing in the data (interviews). The maps

illuminate sameness and differences across the interviews as well as within each interview, pointing to contradictions (Clarke). This approach was a good fit to add to Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al., 1998) for my inquiry. In fact, Clarke referred to Situational Analysis as a supplemental approach that adds a relational and visual dimension to traditional methods of analysis.

While Clarke (2005) detailed the use of three different types of mapping in situational analysis, I selected to use one method, situational mapping. Situational mapping focuses on all aspects of a situation or inquiry and provides a relational analysis. According to Clarke, the situation is the unit of analysis and understanding its elements and their relation is the primary goal. Maps are "visual representations and may provoke us to see things afresh" as they assist the researcher in asking questions and providing answers from the data (interviews) (Clarke, p. 30). Clarke referred to mapping as "analytic exercises" that assist the researcher in analyzing more deeply (p. 76). The process of mapping and noting also allows the inquirer to see "sites of silences" by looking at what is present but unarticulated (Clarke, p. 30).

As Clarke (2005) pointed out, central to Situational Analysis is mapping. I was drawn to the concept of mapping for its holistic potential and found it to be an effective way to document, visually, all important themes or aspects of my participant's life stories. In the vein of following the inductive narrative process and following the data, I did not follow situational analysis as detailed by Clarke with three separate types of maps, rather I took the central tendencies and modified my analysis method. I engaged in the same process for each participant.

First, I completed a situational map for each transcript. This process allowed me to easily see the themes and all aspects of the interviews for each participant as well as across participants. One aspect of Situational Analysis is taking themes out of the situational map and mapping relationships and components of each theme. I then constructed two additional maps per participant. I constructed a second map on the participant as a learner. Given that the focus of my inquiry was stories about learners and their approaches to learning, I felt that it was important to visually map this arena. I constructed a third map for each transcript focusing on personal growth. This was a theme that was present in all of my participant's stories. These three maps allowed me to see the similarities and differences amongst my participant's stories while keeping their whole stories intact. Once the initial situational maps were completed, the next step was relational analysis of my inquiry and associated elements. In each of these maps, I followed situational analysis and drew lines to depict relationships amongst elements of a situation. According to Clarke (2005), relational analysis is the major work if situational analysis and through relational mapping the inquirer is able to decide which stories to pursue. I was clear when I was conceptualizing my inquiry that I wanted to maintain the integrity and wholeness of my participant stories. At the same time acknowledging that I needed to look at themes and relationships amongst elements within the themes, even in a broad sense. Modifying Situational Analysis mapping allowed me to do just that.

Writing up My Inquiry

Final representations of analysis and interpretation include a combination of narration and inquirer perspective (Creswell, 1998). Initially, I was not certain as to what method I would employ in writing up my analysis and participant stories. This

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uncertainty came from the knowledge that I wanted the process to unfold inductively. I am aware that the possibilities were open to me as a narrative inquirer and may have included a chronological picture of the lived experiences represented in participants' stories, or a camera like experience where the focus or lens goes in and out again highlighting certain themes (Creswell). Based on my participants and their life stories, as well as the themes that emerged, I used a camera like experience in my write up of each participant's stories. While creating the presentation, I remained aware of the audience, my participants, and myself as a researcher whose goal was to conduct an inquiry that was thoughtful, ethical, and that accurately depicted the lived experiences and stories of native born African American women enrolled in an urban community college in a culturally sensitive manner. The final write up of my analysis and interpretations presented in chapters sixth through twelve combine quotes from interviews as well as my thoughts, experiences, and theories developed as a result of the interviews and analysis.

Chapter Summary

Conducting a narrative inquiry allowed me to engage in a co-constructed process with my participants. The result was rich life stories as learners. This inductive approach to research allowed me to continually engage in a reflexive process and shape my inquiry as well as my analysis based on my participants, interviews, and resulting stories. Throughout my inquiry process, I employed Tillman's (2002) culturally sensitive approach while being conscious of the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry. In chapter four, I provide an overview of the results of my analysis and inquiry.

In the following chapter I provide an overview of the results of my analysis and inquiry. In this chapter I present an overview of the inductive process and what unfolded.

I also present the overarching themes that emerged during analysis. Finally I provide an

overview of the answers to my research questions

CHAPTER 4: UNFOLDING LIFE STORIES

"Understanding of storytelling is a social and interactional practice in which tellers and audiences engage in meaningful processes of construction and reconstruction of experience." (DeFina 2003, p.368)

Introduction

I sat in the garden one late October day analyzing transcripts full of life stories. It was sunny, warm, (in California) and the leaves were changing colors. The wind was blowing slightly. I was mapping interviews and reflecting on the stories of transformation shared by my participants. A Monarch butterfly flew around and inside the umbrella at the table where I was sitting, over my head and then off into the garden again. It drew my attention to the Metamorphosis that a butterfly goes through during its life and the great journeys of migration that many partake. The Monarch is so delicate yet has incredible strength and drive to carry out its destiny. Similarly, each woman that I interviewed has incredible strength to carry on in their journey regardless of what many might see as obstacles. I continued thinking about the women and their journeys as the Monarch spent the morning in the garden with me flying near and then off to the salvia in bloom. I was honored that the Monarch was sharing the morning with me just as I am honored that each of the six women in my inquiry were so open in sharing their life stories and journeys as learners with me.

I found that like the interview process, analysis became an intersubjective process where my participants and I engaged in dialogue about themes and reviewed transcripts.

This co-analysis approach was a natural follow up to our interviews and was aligned with my inquirer stance. I also found this process necessary in following Tillman's (2002) recommendations for a culturally sensitive inquiry. During analysis themes emerged directly from my participants' life stories. Rather than conducting an analysis that involved critiquing the life stories or imposing my views and biases, I selected an interactive co-analysis with my participants to ensure a culturally appropriate and sensitive inquiry. I shared my ideas and thoughts with each participant and asked them to share their impressions with me. In the final write up, I engaged in a subjective approach when deciding what to include and exclude. I was guided by my intention to provide a holistic view of each participant and their life stories as learners while including excerpts related to my research questions and the overarching themes found throughout each story. I used the overarching themes as well as minor themes related to research questions as an interpretive framework. Combined, they provide a comprehensive window into the life stories of my participants.

An Inductive Process

Narrative Inquiry involves an inductive process requiring the inquirer to adapt to what unfolds. I found that I, as inquirer, and my expectations went through adapted to what unfolded during my inquiry.

The intended population for my inquiry was native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college. My goal was to include women who were raised in an urban setting. All but one of my participants was born and raised in the urban bay area. This participant, Nanny, moved to the bay area at the age of nine in sixth grade and has lived in the bay area since. Her story is detailed in chapter eleven. Another

goal was to include African American women who are native born. While all of my

participants were native born, during the interviewing process two of my participants

shared their mixed ancestry. Their stories are detailed in chapter six and chapter nine.

Despite their mixed ancestry, both women identify as African American. After thinking

about how this affected my inquiry, I realized that it really did not change anything. In

fact, each of these women described situations in their life stories where not only did they

identify as African American but others in their lives viewed them as such. In further

thinking about mixed ancestry, I recognized that African Americans like so many other

individuals whose families have lived for many generations in America have mixed

ancestry. So while I was originally planning an inquiry of African American women as a

'pure population' I realized how naive I was given our history in America and in

particular African American history. During analysis, I found these women's stories were

similar to those of the women who were not from mixed ancestry. As a result, I have

presented their stories as part of the larger tapestry of African American women's stories.

Questions and Answers

My inquiry was guided by one research question and two sub questions. Based on

the literature, I had an idea of what stories might be uncovered however I was

overwhelmed by the openness and candidness shared by each of the six women that are

my participants. I witnessed these amazing women as they entered into their life stories

through an open and reflective process. The life stories uncovered during my inquiry

included stories about childhood, family, community, experiences in school, issues of

learning or physical disabilities, struggles with addiction, the ebb and flow of life, and

finally, accepting oneself.

After conducting my modified version of Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, et al., 1998) and Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005) and enacting Tillman's (2002) framework for a culturally sensitive inquiry, I discovered stories that answered my research questions. In this chapter I provide an overview of the answers. The main question that guided me inquired about the life stories of native born African American women learners in an urban community college. While the life stories were unique from woman to woman, there were three overarching themes that were consistent across the stories. In the next section, I provide an overview of the overarching themes followed by a summary of the answers to my sub-questions about learning and ways of knowing.

Overarching Themes

The overarching themes emerged from my participants' words and life stories. While these themes were used by individual participants, they are interwoven across the six life stories. Each theme holds individual importance to my participants and is represented in their life stories in a unique manner. Following a process where the themes come from my participants' words rather than being imposed was important for me as an inquirer conducting a culturally sensitive inquiry. During analysis, I confirmed my initial thoughts with participants. I also asked them to identify patterns or themes they discovered as they read their stories. My participants' individual and collective culture remained at the center of my inquiry from design to final write up and it is this individual and collective culture that is present and evident in their life stories as learners. The three overarching themes that frame these life stories are persistence, transformation, and connection. I begin with formal definitions to provide a common understanding of each

theme and the terminology. These definitions are followed by an overview of how they pertain to my participants as a group.

Persistence.

Persistence refers to a steadfast adherence to course of action that is continued despite difficulties, opposition or discouragement (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Two of my participants used persistence or perseverance to describe the fact that they continued to work towards their goals in spite of opposition and discouragement. For the majority of my participants the fact that they persisted in spite of adversity is success. Achieving their goals will be the icing on the cake. All six women learners struggled with issues at one time or another. Each shared excerpts from their life stories depicting a time when they were turned off from learning or "off track".

One participant shared a life story with minor struggles that could have escalated into larger barriers. It was evident that these struggles provided powerful opportunities for her to learn about herself and what she needed to succeed to achieve her educational goals. In summarizing her story, Vanessa mentioned that she seemed to have a "pretty straight road" to where she is today. While she identified the ease in her story; she acknowledged that for many, their stories are different. As an example Pam, Desiree, and Samantha's life stories as learners began with difficult beginnings and continued that way for many years. In all three cases, these women strived to overcome limitations due to learning disabilities and for two of the women, physical disabilities as well. All three of these women expressed feeling "different and isolated" throughout their stories as learners. Only today, as adults, have they found learning environments where they can persist and be successful for the first time in their lives. Two women, Tiffany and Nanny

had positive and supportive beginnings as learners. Each of these women shared stories of going "off track" leading to a loss of self. They attributed their return to self in part to their spiritual beliefs and in part to their solid foundations and up bringing. Only one woman, Vanessa persisted from high school straight into college. The other five women in my inquiry had breaks that spanned years. For Nanny, the break lasted thirty five years. It is remarkable that these women not only found their way back to themselves as learners but have persisted through discouragement, opposition, and other barriers that would stop some in their tracks. Each woman has undergone a transformation as part of their process.

Transformation.

Transformation refers to an act or process that changes the outward form or appearance, character, or condition (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Samantha used the word "transformation" when she described her shift from being "shy and self conscious" as a learner to being "incorrigibly outgoing". One of the areas that I mapped was personal growth. I found that each woman experienced personal growth leading to a transformation in their self esteem as learners as well as their approaches to learning and education.

Some of the women experienced more than one transformation over the years. For instance, Desiree, Samantha, and Pam transformed from children eager to learn to quiet, shut down, and isolated shy learners. Not only did their character change but their desire to learn and voice was lost at an early age. As previously described, Tiffany and Nanny experienced a loss of self and interest in learning as well. Their first transformation occurred in high school where peer pressure led them off track.

For each woman, the most significant transformations are the recent ones they experienced since enrolling in community college. Each woman has experienced a transformation with regards to their perceptions of self as learners and perceptions of others. Tiffany, Samantha, Vanessa, Nanny and Pam mentioned transformations in their character and shifting from being "shy, wanting to hide and not wanting to be noticed to outgoing, active participants in their learning process", with a desire to help others or serve as role models. For example, Tiffany has grown from a self proclaimed "out of control" loud person to one who is able to deal with situations with a cool head and disposition. She has also become a mentor for other students and youth in her community where she promotes education. Nanny's experience includes a transformation from being a quiet, fearful "older" student to one who is open, a mentor and not afraid to ask questions or sit in the front of the class.

One element that was consistent throughout every life story and assisted in promoting each woman's transformation was connection with others and their learning environment.

Connection.

Connection refers to the act of connecting which includes the state of being connected as a causal or logical relation, sequence, or fact (Merriam-Webster, 2005). It also refers to a relation of personal intimacy as in family ties or friendship (Merriam-Webster).

Connection was a universal theme in each life story. Not only was the word connection used frequently by each participant but they also referred to it in the same context. Each woman spoke of connection with emphasis and emotion.

In each story, the women mentioned needing connection with their learning environment and community. It was apparent that not only do these women learn through connection but they thrive on it. In descriptions of a good instructor, every woman mentioned the need to feel connected to their instructors. They also mentioned that they did not want instructors who thought they were better than them and put themselves on a pedestal, rather they wanted instructors to be part of the group engaged in learning. Two of the women experienced a connected learning environment in elementary school with teachers who they felt cared about their students as learners. For example, connection was evident in Nanny's story as she described her country schoolhouse in Louisiana. Unlike Nanny, Tiffany did not experience connection in a learning environment until she reached the community college. As several of the women described, connecting to the material "makes learning easier" as does an active learning environment with "real life" examples. All six women found connection essential to their success as learners.

Of all three themes, connection was the most pervasive and prevalent in the life stories of my participants. It was clear that each of the overarching themes were present in the life stories of the women who were my participants. It was fascinating to see how each theme was revealed in their stories.

Additional Themes and Answers

The overarching themes frame the women's life stories as a whole. In addition to these, there were minor themes related to my research questions. The minor themes are the role of education, stories about learning, and ways of knowing stories. In the next section, I provide an overview of these themes.

Role of education.

In each interview my participants shared stories full of messages and experiences. Each participant shared stories they believed to be related to their current views about education and its role in their lives. It was fascinating to see the multigenerational messages play out in the stories as my participants passed them on to their children or grand children.

Several of my participants shared stories about grandparents and in some cases great grandparents who imparted messages about education. Nanny, Pam, Desiree and Tiffany shared stories linking their present educational opportunities to African American history. They recalled messages from their grandparents about the history of African Americans and the fact that they did not always have the "freedom to learn". "Reading a book was banned". Desiree mentioned that her great grandfather was a slave and was not allowed to read. Education was only for the few and Higher Education was a distant dream, if even a notion. These four women carry these historically based stories with them and have passed them on to their children and grandchildren. One participant mentioned, while she may have not always taken advantage of the educational opportunities afforded her; "she is now" and encourages others to take advantage of them as well. Pam shared a story about her great grandfather who returned to school at the "age of eighty three to complete his high school education". She was so impressed by him and feels that there are "no limitations".

Three women shared stories about a lack of support to continue their education from their community. For these women the negative messages led to inner struggles and internal drives to succeed. Desiree shared stories about when she was a sixteen year old

girl and a mother. She did not receive any support for continuing her education. Upon

reflection, Desiree was disturbed by this lack of support. She also shared a story of being

told that her "son would never amount to anything because he was African American".

Tiffany shared a story about high school when a teacher verbalized racist comments and

an expectation that she and her African American female friends were only "good for

hanging out on the street corner". According to Tiffany, her daughter also received a

similar message only a few years ago. Samantha shared a story about her extended family

waiting for her to fall on her face. While these three stories are different each woman

expressed that they were left with the desire to overcome others' expectations. These

messages and lack of support have also led to a desire to work within the community and

support other women in pursuing their educational goals.

Each woman shared the role education plays in their life. All of the women felt

that "education leads to success". One participant stated that "without education, you

have nothing". For each woman, education led to personal development. Education also

led to negative and positive feelings, struggles and successes. Regardless of their history,

every participant equated education with the "road to success". Success for my

participants did not only mean financial and economic success but for some, "a way out".

Desiree shared a story about individuals getting educated, "leaving the community and

never looking back". Samantha mentioned the practical aspect of education and that it led

to "increased life skills".

Stories about Learning

I inquired about stories of learning and learning experiences. I asked my

participants to look back through the years for early stories. Memories came flooding

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back and each participant shared excerpts from their stories as far back as preschool. With each participant, I looked at early experiences as a learner. They shared a powerful story from childhood that shaped who they became as a learner. In some cases these were positive stories that shaped what they need in a learning environment today where as other instances were negative and also shaped their current beliefs about learning environments.

Every woman shared excerpts from throghout their educational experiences. They also shared their learning styles. All but one mentioned that they were visual and hands-on learners. Vanessa stated that she was a "visual, hands-on, and auditory learner". Based on their learning preferences each woman told stories about learning experiences that were successful. Along with these excerpts, they shared their needs in an instructor and learning environment. In addition to stories about learning styles or preferences, four women told stories focused on learning or physical disabilities. In these stories themes included struggles of ability versus disability, categorization, breaking through barriers and increased self esteem about their abilities as learners. These women all shared a deep understanding of what they need to succeed. As previously mentioned, in some instances, these came from positive learning environments in their formative years while others are a result of experiencing unfavorable learning environments. Regardless, with each woman, there was the notion that they would not stand back any longer but would go after what they need to succeed.

I inquired about the role that being African American played in their lives. The responses of my participants varied. Two of the participants mentioned they thought that being an "African American woman, versus a man, was a plus as far as education was

concerned". They suggested that social support for African American women was more prevalent than for African American men. Pam mentioned that there are many "support programs for African Americans, especially compared to the 1970s". She recalled her mother struggling when she attended the University of California, at Berkeley while working at the same time. Pam also mentioned that she thought there was more support for African American women to "pursue their education" and less support for African American men. Two women shared stories about institutional racism and oppression in school. Two women shared stories of internal prejudice in the African American community based on skin color. While the other women felt that there was no difference between them and any other woman attending college. I also inquired about whether they felt things were different for African American girls today. Pam and Vanessa mentioned that they felt there is "more support for African American girls now". Pam provided the example of "assistance programs for pregnant teens to continue their education and receive parenting support". She remarked that "this type of support was not available for young girls when she was in school". Desiree asserted that "youth today have more information and more choices which makes things more difficult for them". She also mentioned that youth today are "growing up faster" but did not attribute any differences between African American girls and any other girl in school.

My participants shared a consistent message for younger students who are pursuing their education as well as those in their communities. The universal message from was that "we didn't always have this opportunity and it is important to take the opportunity to better oneself and work towards your goals". Another message was that there is "nothing to stop you but yourself today". One participant urged youth to "make

the right choices in life regardless of the support or lack of support" that they receive.

"You can succeed".

Ways of Knowing Stories

Given that one goal of my inquiry was to build upon the original ways of knowing research, I contextualized my interpretations in the framework presented in the literature (Creswell, 1998).

I was struck by the universal preference for connected knowing present in each of the women's stories. As referenced in the women's ways of knowing literature (Belenky et al. 1986; Goldberger et al., 1996), my participants expressed that they seek to gain an understanding of the vision of others. Over and over again, there were examples of connected knowing in my participants' stories. Tiffany mentioned needing an instructor who was "willing to share what they are thinking visually" so she could see it. Each participant shared stories of learners who need to make connections. Desiree's story of connecting current to past learning is a great example of connected knowing. As was Tiffany's stories about using role playing in her head to work out a problem or understand a concept. Vanessa mentioned the need to "get inside and look around a subject to really learn it". Tiffany referred to the notion of using both "feeling and thinking" when learning. One consistent element in the stories was that authority rests in the group that was engaged in learning. It was important for the instructor to be part of the process rather than being removed and seen as an authority. My participants mentioned using collaboration to explore an issue and gain knowledge. The mere fact that they were told something was not enough. I was amazed by the profound preference for connected learning environments. I thought that a majority of my participants might share

this preference; however I did not expect all of the women to share such a strong desire for a connected learning experience.

I am aware that my participants, as African American women hold multi-group memberships. As referenced in the Goldberger (1996) and Hurtado (1996), several of my participants described anger, ranging from silence to outspokenness, and feeling withdrawn. Tiffany and Nanny both shared stories describing how anger can block out learning. Both of these women's stories as learners began with strong foundations. In spite of their beginnings, they found themselves "off track" and derailed. In each of these stories, the anger turned inward was related to their drug or alcohol use. While they both returned to school, each woman mentioned feeling angry about situations they encountered in their early years as learners. Desiree expressed anger about the political nature of knowledge and the fact that you "need to know the right people" to get help, access, or to succeed. With each participant, I noticed a shift in their perceptions as knowers as well as their entitlement to an education. Tiffany, Samantha, and Nanny revealed stories detailing shifts from silence to outspokenness and then back to themselves and their true voice, strong and grounded.

Many of my participants expressed denying parts of themselves. This led to a lack of voice that was representative of all the groups they belong. My participants shared stories of isolation, oppression, and systematic racism leading to feelings of being ignored or isolated. It was not until they began confronting these issues head on were they able to come back to who they are and their preferred way of knowing.

Each woman in my inquiry is unique, intellectual, spiritual, and an emotional being. Once they came back to themselves as learners they found it essential to support other women. Many act as role models encouraging others as the enter higher education.

Chapter Summary

Chapter four provided an overview of my participant's life stories as well as the overarching themes and minor themes that served as an interpretive framework. While this chapter presented an overview, chapters six through eleven provide a more detailed look into the lives and life stories of the six women participated in my inquiry.

CHAPTER 5: RECONSTRUCTING LIFE STORIES

In the following six chapters, I present the life story of each woman who participated in my inquiry. I am presenting their stories individually to honor them and their uniqueness as well as the wholeness of their life stories as learners. Chapter four provided an introduction to the life stories told by my participants and introduced three overarching themes that ran though the stories. The following six chapters provide further detail and a deeper look into each of the women's lives. You will meet my participants in the order that I conducted each first interview.

Each of the following six chapters begins with a West African symbol. These symbols resulted from the inductive approach that I employed during analysis and throughout the entire process of my inquiry. I felt that the written words in the transcripts described the life stories one dimensionally, in words. While this format provides one type of presentation, I felt that by only providing my audience with a narrative was insufficient. I wanted to provide a more holistic view of my participants. Given that each woman is multi-dimensional I began to look for another representation for their life stories as learners.

During analysis I could hear my participants' voices and picture their faces and expressions in my mind. While I was in the midst of analysis, the Berkeley City College Black Student Union gave me a thank you card for supporting an event. The card had a rooster on the front and inside the card described the significance of the rooster in African cultures. This sparked my search for African symbolism that I could offer as an

additional representation of each life story and woman in my inquiry. I realized that all of my participants were native born with families that had been in America for several generations. As a result, many of their ancestors were brought to America as slaves and probably from West Africa. I then researched West African symbols. I found Adinkra symbols from Ghana which symbolize virtues and folktales and are passed down through generations (Willis, 1998). While the symbols are from Ghana as are the translations, the images are used in other West African countries as well (Willis).

Once I found the Adrinka symbols, I met with each participant and explained my frustration and quandary. I then presented the idea of using a symbol to add dimension to their stories for the reader and also for me as an inquirer. I received overwhelming enthusiasm to include the West African symbolism in the final presentation of their life stories. Every participant that I spoke with was very excited and immediately selected a symbol that represented their life stories and them as learners. One participant mentioned that using the symbol "connected her with her story and with her past, coming full circle". The use of symbols in the representation of the life stories connected the knowing of each participant to the present while acknowledging the historical contexts of their individual and collective pasts. The inductive approach of narrative inquiry allowed me to engage my participants in a co-analysis and to include them in the final representation and write up of their stories.

The format for each of the following six chapters is the same. I begin by introducing each woman and her chosen symbol as it relates to her life story as a learner. Then I lead into her life story and her earliest memories. The next section shares excerpts

from her story as a learner followed by details of her personal growth. Finally each

chapter ends with a view of the overarching themes specific to her story and a summary.

CHAPTER 6: DESIREE
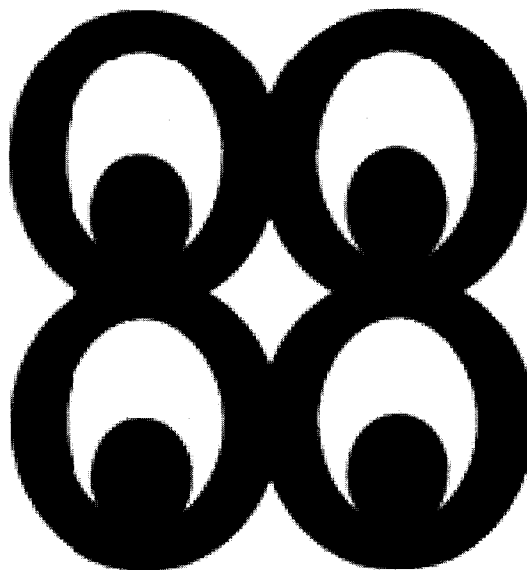
MATE MASIE

"What I hear, I keep"

(Willis, 1998, p. 128)

An introduction to Desiree

When you first meet Desiree, she comes across as a quiet and shy individual. She comes alive when talking about issues such as learning and access to education. Desiree feels very strongly that everyone deserves equal access and support for achieving their educational goals. She is introspective with regards to her experiences which may contribute to a perceived quietness. The West African symbol Desiree selected is a symbol of "wisdom, knowledge and prudence" and translates to "what I hear, I keep" (Willis, 1998, p. 128). Desiree stated that this image "jumped off the page" at her. This symbol represents taking others, their words, and actions into considerations (Willis). I could not have chosen another symbol that would better symbolize Desiree's life story and her stance in life.

Desiree's life story is filled with mixed messages about her learning abilities and frustration from feeling boxed in. Her story is about a learner who overcomes others' perceptions and barriers. Presently, Desiree continues her journey with one step in from of the other never letting obstacles stop her for very long. Her life story is filled with inclusion and exclusion being placed in categories and breaking out of them and ultimately, overcoming messages about her as a learner and her abilities. While she spoke of being "tired of the fight", Desiree never gives up. She is determined to reach her goal of becoming a lawyer. Desiree's life story is full of conflict and contradicting messages and begins with her early years.

Desiree's Life Story and Earliest Memories

Desiree's earliest memories of school and learning had a profound affect on her.

She recalled first through third grades in elementary school as part of her earliest

experiences in education. For Desiree, learning occurred at home with her mother and

school was a place for fun, a social experience. While Desiree stated that she only

remembered her first grade teacher as being "kind of mean", she remembered more

details beginning with second grade. Desiree shared experiences about the beginning

chapters of her story as a learner.

> I just remember in second grade…the teacher didn't call on me.
> Well, there weren't a lot of African American students in the class.
> And that's what I remember. And so I don't remember learning
> anything. I remember in first grade, she was older (the teacher) and
> she seemed kind of mean. And then I just remember the room
> always being dark.

Desiree described herself during these early years as "shut down" and

"overlooked". She shared an excerpt that shaped her opinion of the perfect learning

environment and perfect teacher.

> I remember in third grade the teacher was different. She was
> younger. I just remember she was one of the teachers that, she
> would hug her students and she was really nice. I will never forget
> her.

From third grade on, Desiree told stories that were similar where learning was not

the focus but relationships and socialization was what "got her through".

> In elementary it was just fun… (School), it was fun. I was finally
> put in a special class (special education). I really…I can't really
> say it was a lot of learning. I mean, to me my learning was my
> mom going over my spelling words and helping me with that. That
> was the learning part.

And then junior high school…I remember that's when I really
started loving math. I know that even now that my math would
have been stronger if I had the right teaching.

At the end of high school, Desiree met with her special education team to discuss

her future and her goals. During this meeting, she was told that she could not take

criminal justice classes because of her learning disability. She ignored this advice and not

only took, but passed her criminal justice class at a community college. When discussing

her learning experiences at the community college, Desiree referred to confusing

messages about learning expectations in English. English is the subject that Desiree

struggles with most though she has come to an understanding and a new way of

approaching the subject.

So trying to understand how the instructor wants it, the different
patterns of writing. I'm like okay, but this is almost like law (there
are different ways to interpret things). And that's what I love. So I
kind of compare English with law so I get through it. It's weird.
And especially that I have a so-called learning disability.

And then recently…my English teacher started talking about
different English writings and different words it's like it all
depends on what book you use… You know, to write your paper.
And it's like okay, now I really understand why I couldn't get
certain things done in English.

And that's one thing I've learned; it has nothing to do with what
I've learned. It's how the teacher wants you to write. So it's like all
the stuff that I was taught, it's like I'm starting all over again when
I have a new instructor.

… (with every new teacher) I've got to figure out their writing
style. Even ask questions as far as …what books do you want me
to look at to have your writing style.

Desiree went from a learner who 'things were done to' to one who is

empowered and proactive about her learning process. Her stories about learning

and her self esteem started shifting after she began attending community college.

Desiree as a Learner

Desiree's life story as a learner is overshadowed by her learning disability. She was placed in special education classes in fourth grade and remained in special education classes through high school. Desiree's biggest issue as a learner was not the disability itself rather confusion surrounding it and the notion of being boxed in or categorized as a result of it. She felt that barriers were being placed around her due to her learning disability and did not feel that she received help on how to be successful and work with it. As a result of her experiences Desiree does not like the idea of categorizing people for any reason. Desiree's experiences left her with feelings of separateness as a learner, as well as a desire for connection with others and validation of her abilities. In spite of the imposed constraints placed upon her due to her learning disability, Desiree has been successful in completing classes that she "was not supposed to" because she "wouldn't be able to pass them". Desiree came away from her experiences over the years with the notion that "the education system sets individuals up for failure and that only if you know the right people will you be successful". She stated that her special education team recommended that she use a tape recorder as an accommodation for her learning disability when she attended community college. While this recommendation was meant to be helpful, Desiree stated that she is not an "auditory learning" and as a result "listening to the tapes did not help". Instead, Desiree declared that she is a "visual and hands on learner". Experiences like this solidified her belief about the system setting individuals up for failure and left her feeling very discouraged. Desiree shared excerpts from her story.

I was told I had a learning disability kind of throughout school. But
I was never told what the learning disability was. I was never told
what I needed to do to help me.

...and I was told because I had a learning disability, I couldn't take
certain classes." It was kind of discouraging; from being told I had
a learning disability and not understanding what my learning
disability was. And it just...it stopped me from doing a lot of
things.

Desiree's experiences led her to "sweeping her learning disability (under the

carpet)" and ignoring it. She mentioned being "tentative about doing new things" because

she was not "clear about her learning disability" and what it really meant to have one.

Once she entered community college, Desiree learned more about learning disabilities.

...as I started learning more and more about learning disabilities,
that for some people it's like ... I won't say retarded or something
like that, but similar to that. And I just have a different way of
learning.

Desiree received conflicting messages over the years. As previously mentioned

she felt like many of the messages boxed her in. Desiree has experienced tremendous

personal growth has been successful in working around or working through constraints

placed on her. She was determined that her life story as a learner would not include

giving up and surrendering to living in a box. Desiree shared her philosophy and

determination about being boxed in.

And I know with some people that certain things get to them and
that was one thing I couldn't let get to me, or I would have failed if
I would have really listened to certain people.... Because they
were telling me I was an auditory learner and I'm like, I can't sit
down and really listen to tapes, I have to be hands-on. To me, I
didn't apply to some of the stuff that they told me that I had a
learning disability in.

I was just like you can't tell me I can't do something and I know
that I can do it, regardless of what is being written down on paper.

Growing up, Desiree felt that she received support from family members but felt that she did not receive what she needed within the education system. The message that she received as she was growing up from family was, "… you have to go to school. You have to finish, regardless of how long it takes." Desiree recalled a family member who she views as a role model. This person took "one class for fifteen years" and is now a Nurse. Desiree found motivation in hearing her story. Her motto is, "One class, keep on going".

When we were discussing Desiree's life story as a learner, she mentioned that she would title it, "beyond what people think about education" She reported feeling that people "do not always realize what others go through in school" and believes that her story is not the "ordinary story".

Desiree has come full circle in her story and now has a positive attitude towards learning and herself as a learner. However, she still feels that the "education system is not designed to assist people" in succeeding. Desiree spoke of connecting past learning with present learning as a way to keep her motivated and moving forward. She also mentioned that while she does that now, "it did not happen at a young age".

> …as a whole, a learner, I feel good because I had the opportunity
> to be around a lot of different people teaching me different things
> in my life. And even though some of the stuff they were teaching
> me I didn't understand at that time, I can go back and something
> might happen or I'll think about what they said at that time. It falls
> into place.

> …So that's kind of what keeps me going. I'm like- oh, somebody
> said that and then I remember who said it or the conversation. I
> might not remember when it was, but I can remember and connect
> it.

The perfect learning environment for Desiree is one that is interactive where students are valued for their input as well as their differences. Desiree asserted that a good learning environment "values individuals for who they are" and does not put them into categories that may or may not fit. Finally, a good learning environment includes an instructor who is not on a pedestal and rather part of the learning process.

> An environment that takes everybody's ideas and puts them in a pot to consider. People have different views. Instead of one view, a world view. And we're learning together, as one. It's like nobody is right because cultures and values are different. But we're still human beings and so we're the same. Nobody is better than the other.

> ...an instructor that's...I guess a student instructor that's learning, too. So they won't think that they know everything. That they're still learning. Or if the instructor doesn't put their self on a pedestal just because they have a degree, I'm the teacher, you need to just listen and hear what I say and don't take consideration with what the students have to say in the class.

When discussing whether being African American impacted her experiences and story as a learner, Desiree mentioned that she does not see things "that way". Desiree's story began with an encounter with her second grade teacher who did not call on her. She mentioned that there were not a lot of African Americans in the class. This led me to believe that she felt that part of what occurred was linked to the lack of African Americans. However later, when Desiree spoke about the current generation of African American girls, she mentioned:

> I guess the way that I was taught, I don't see the color. It has nothing to do with the color. I mean, I know it's harder for this generation. I wouldn't say African American girls. It's just this generation. They have a lot. They see a lot. They hear a lot. So their expectations are just way out there.

At this point in our dialogue, Desiree informed me that while she identifies as African American, she has a mixed ancestry which led to her world view. Desiree spoke of her ancestry.

> Mine is different... my father is Italian and Creole and even for me growing up, my hair was down to my back and it was like, oh, she's dark-skinned. But even within the African American community as far as the color thing... I was taught that from slavery, when you're lighter you're better. Well, I'm not lighter and I'm not darker; I'm in the middle...and Native American Indian in my mother; her grandmother was full-blooded, her grandfather was a slave. And my grandfather, her father was born in 1901. So it's like certain things for me are... it's kind of different in a sense; because I look at it all.

Desiree mentioned that she "looks at it all". She also stated that because of her mixed ancestry, she looks at things through a lens that incorporates all of the cultures present in her. She is aware of the oppression and racism her ancestors faced however tries to look beyond that in her life. Desiree returned to issues of differences and segregation when she shared a story of how the city that she lived in was integrated until there was an "illegal hit at a High School football game". The illegal hit "landed an African American boy in the hospital; he was paralyzed". According to Desiree, the boy was considered good enough to continue playing in college or professionally. Desiree shared a story that split her community along race lines. Not only was she confronted with segregation but saw it happen in her community right before her eyes.

> And it was an illegal hit. And then after that it separated. And I just remember it ... everybody talking about it. Because the boy was paralyzed from the waist down. And he was supposed to go to pro. So. And they said it was racial. So it just wasn't the same...wasn't the same after that.

Desiree mentioned that in ninth grade, her whole world changed. Her life story includes trying to break through barriers and lines drawn in the sand. Desiree continues her fight today and helps others break through the political barriers of access to knowledge and education.

Personal Growth

Desiree's life story as a learner includes a process of growth and increased self esteem. Contradiction and internal conflict are an ongoing theme in her life. Desiree overcame "barriers" including being a single parent at sixteen years of age. Other barriers included being boxed in a category due to her learning disability, issues of integration and segregation in her community, and finally a lack of support to pursue her education and career goals. Central to Desiree's process is her development and increased self esteem and self trust. She continues in spite of "others" and their messages that left her feeling discouraged and confused. Desiree shared a story of young mother (who dropped out of school) with community support for motherhood but a lack of support for her as an individual who deserved personal growth and education. The main message was that she was "doing the right thing" by having her son.

> Becoming a mom. I had my son in…the eleventh grade. Yeah. I
> had him in eleventh grade. "And when I look back now, a lot of
> people thought I was doing what I was supposed to do. Because
> they just…I was never asked about school. I was never asked did
> you finish? Like they already knew I finished. I look back and I'm
> like (there are) a lot of people who didn't even ask questions. Like
> okay, I know she's doing the right thing. Because they saw me
> with my son. They never asked about school. They knew I was
> doing the right thing with my son. But they didn't know I wasn't
> doing the right thing with getting my education. A kid growing up
> (referring to herself)…

> One time I was told…well, you're a teenage mom; you're a
> statistic. Your son is not supposed to make it till he's 18. And I'm
> just like…that's not going to happen to my son.

While she shared her story of frustration about the lack of support around education, Desiree mentioned that she probably would not have received more support for continuing her education if she was not a young mother. People were not necessarily discouraged from going to school but in her community they were on their own if they did.

> The community that I grew up in, it was just about being together
> and helping each other survive. So the education part was not
> there. It was just basically survival. I mean, it had space. But … it
> was basically people just went to school and … a lot of people
> didn't understand how to go to school and stay in school. So just
> basically survival. If you made it to the educational part, you made
> it.

As previously mentioned, Desiree feels that the education system is only for those who are connected and that if you do not have connections, it is not likely that you will be successful. She stated that she grew up when she realized how the education system was set up with built in barriers rather than supports. She has been working as a work study student in the Berkeley City College CalWORKs (California Welfare to Work student support program) office for the past year. In this position, Desiree acts as an advocate for CalWORKs students. She shared a story about a learner "growing up" and learning the system.

> …as a student assistant I have learned the way that colleges work
> …just learning the political part in the process of education…it
> does not connect. And it is not helping. That's the big thing that
> stands out for me… It seems like you are set up to fail unless you
> hook up with the right people. And that's just amazing. That's
> when I found out I was a grown-up, seeing how politics plays a
> key role in education.

...and dealing with these programs that are supposed to help you,
that don't help you. Or the people that work for the program. They
don't understand. They're not telling you...how to help people.

Desiree had such conflicting experiences and messages throughout her

educational career. We spoke about the role of formal education in her life. Desiree

responded that she tries to ignore the role that formal education had on her life.

... I don't look at it that way. Because I feel if I looked at it that
way I'm not going to go further; I'm going to let it hold me back
So I just say now is my time.

Desiree continues her journey as a learner. While it has not been easy, she has not

given up and continues with one foot in front of the other.

Overarching Themes

Persistence.

Desiree shared a life story as a learner framed by barriers that she has consistently

overcome. Her drive for persisting is amazing and according to Desiree is from deep

inside. She mentioned that she "cannot explain it but there is something inside" that keeps

her going. While she has become discouraged at times she has not let it stop her for very

long. Desiree's internal drive does not allow her to do anything but persist. As with many

students, persistence for Desiree is 'showing up' and continuing her journey.

Transformation.

Desiree has undergone a couple of transformations as a learner. She went from

being a child eager to learn to one who was shut down. During this period, she lost her

voice and trust in her learning abilities. Desiree's self esteem and belief in her abilities as

a learner have increased as a result of her experiences in community college. The biggest

shift seems to be going from a shy individual who was reactive to one who is not only

proactive but who actively advocates for others. As Desiree learns more about the education system and the political nature of accessing knowledge, she continues to grow and become more grounded. Her convictions not only feed her hunger for knowledge but also increase her desire to advocate for others. Desiree has found her voice.

Connection.

Connection is not only a word for Desiree but a way of life. This was evident when she described processing information by building upon previous learning with current learning. Desiree's story is full of connection lost and then found. While things changed as she began connecting with her peers socially, she was left with a lack of connection educationally. Desiree described her idea of a perfect learning environment as interactive and where connected learning is the norm. Through her advocacy for students and student rights, she connects with other students as well as people in her community. She does not want to be one of those people who "found education, succeeded, and never looked back". Desiree's goal is to maintain connection and support others in their journey.

Chapter Summary

Desiree mentioned that her story is not "ordinary". I wonder how many women's life stories as learners are in fact similar and filled with barrier after barrier like Desiree's. I suspect that Desiree might be surprised to find that many women have stories with similar themes and experiences. Desiree is not willing to let others and their messages control her life, rather she strives on toward her goals, "one step at a time". Desiree's story is a powerful example of loosing voice and then finding it again. Today, Desiree's voice continues to gather strength.

CHAPTER 7: TIFFANY

SANKOFA

"return and get it"

(Willis, 1998, p.188)

An Introduction to Tiffany

Tiffany is a perfect example of the notion that one should not judge a book by its cover. On first impressions, Tiffany may appear loud and 'in your face'. This is merely a mask that she wears for others (or to protect herself). As you get to know Tiffany, who she is at her core and how she views life, the images previously described are incongruent and melt away. For many Tiffany only shows her mask and few have the privilege of seeing her without it. I was one of the lucky ones and am honored to have seen Tiffany and experience her reflective moments as she shared her life story. Tiffany was the only participant that I was unable to meet with more than once as she changed her contact information and transferred to another community college. As a result, I selected a West African symbol based on our only meeting, Tiffany's story and what I was left with after our meeting. I selected a symbol that translates to "return and get it" (Willis, 1998, p. 188). The image is a symbol of the importance of learning from the past (Willis, p.188). Tiffany expressed many times during our meeting the importance of learning from her experiences and her past. I think that Tiffany would agree that this symbol is a good fit for her story. Tiffany shared how important education is to her.

> Education means a lot. It's very important. It's ... It's real
> important. It's a way to stay positive; it's the way to focus on life.
> It's the way to ... because without education you can't really do
> anything.

Tiffany's Life Story and Earliest Memories

Tiffany returned to school when her daughter was in ninth grade. Like many women, she set aside her goals to focus on her daughter. Tiffany was a single parent. She is currently 52 years of age and has five grandkids. Tiffany's early years in education

included working hard, overcoming judgments, prejudice and racist remarks about African Americans.

Tiffany's earliest memories spanned back to preschool and focused on her experiences as she began her life story as a learner. In these early excerpts from her story Tiffany focused on the process and manner in which learning occurred rather than her environment. When she discussed her learning preferences today, she hearkened back to these early memories.

> Preschool, learning the ways. How to focus. How to listen. That's all you have to do in preschool. Then, in elementary school it's to expand reading, writing. Arithmetic."

> In math, in grammar school (elementary school) we used to use noodles and beans, and dry stuff to help us count. And it was easier. And if you put them together how many do you have? It was really easy that way...something to help you visualize it.

The focus of Tiffany's story changed when she described middle school. It shifted from stories about learning in school to learning through life. Tiffany spoke of dealing with peer pressure "whether you are going to stay on the right track or if you are going to fall through the cracks..." She shared a life story focused on life learning more than formal learning through education. Tiffany learned by experience and uses the same method when supporting younger students, community members, her daughter, and grandkids. Tiffany remembered her grandmother who lived to be a hundred years of age using this method with her and her cousins when they were growing up. Her grandmother was a big part of Tiffany's life and acted as a powerful role model. Tiffany described her life teachings with her daughter.

> Every day I tell my daughter look around you. Always look. Look at your surroundings. I said after you look at your surroundings,

then go somewhere and sit by yourself and think if I was in that
position what would I do to come out of it?

...when my daughter was coming up I took her out on the streets
and I let her see. I said when you don't go to school, when you
don't do what you're supposed to do, when you hang out with the
wrong people and you don't have any goals, this is what you're
going to be doing. I said you're going to be sitting there either in
the park, you're going to be abusing drugs, you're going to be
shoplifting, you're going to ... I even took her to the jail. You're
going to be here. Now, if you choose the right way to go you can
go to school. And then I took her to Macy's. You could have a job.
I let her see the difference. And then I told her—make a choice.
You make the choice. I'm not going to make the choice for you;
you're going to make the choice yourself.

Tiffany described a type of connected learning where she looks around and then

sits with herself to make decisions. She learned this method from her grandmother. In

addition to stories about her grandparents, she shared stories about her father and how he

continued teaching her about connected learning. Tiffany mentioned that her father was

her best friend. Tiffany described her thoughts on learning.

You step into the situation and look at it from all angles. Everyday
is a learning experience; every day you wake up and go outside
into the world you're going to learn something...you learn
something every day; something new every day you learn.

Using role playing, engaging in reflection, and analyzing situations not only

describes how Tiffany learns but also how she lives. Tiffany revealed her story about

when she was "off track" and her internal process before she decided to take charge of

her life again.

I was out there on drugs and stuff. I was out there. But I was sitting
there, the last time I took drugs. Everybody went to the hamburger
stand and everybody was eating. And I was the only one that didn't
eat because I didn't have any money. Because I used drugs.

And I sat there and I was like this has to stop. I don't have no
money because of drugs. Come on, I've got to leave this alone. So

after that day I was like…I left all the people I used to hang with
alone, and they were like okay, there she goes with her stuck-up
butt. Well, I wanted to better my life.

Tiffany's life story as a learner began with a strong foundation and support for

learning. It is that foundation that she builds upon today.

Tiffany as a Learner

Tiffany's story as a learner began with her foundation. She did well in elementary

school and enjoyed learning. Tiffany received support from family members who shared

messages about the importance of continuing her education. She waited a long time

before returning to school. As a result she is focused and desires a learning environment

where everyone wants to learn.

> I don't have time for mess. My goal is to get my bachelor's in
> business. So if it takes me the rest of my life to do it, that's my
> goal.

Tiffany mentioned that she is a "slower learner" and that she needs a quiet

environment to learn. She was very specific when describing how she learns and what

she needs in a learning environment to be successful.

> I'm a really slow learner. And it takes longer for me to
> comprehend it. And then you have a teacher that's trying to help
> you, but then you have students in the back that's distracting her
> where she has to say, "be quiet." So it's kind of …frustrating.

Tiffany learns by watching and then reflecting on what she has learned. She also

learns through experience and lives by the motto, "everyday is a learning experience".

Tiffany asserted that she needs to be "seen, listened to and valued" by her instructors. She

added that the "hands on learning" she experienced in her early years was very effective

and related it to the community college where she feels that students might be more

successful if instructors included more hands on activities, especially in math. She

associated these activities to "something to help you visualize it".

> That's how I learn everything. I watch every ... I watch my
> surroundings. I learn from watching other people do things. And
> then I go and I analyze. When I'm by myself I'll think about it.
> Okay, so how would I do this? How would I do that? And mainly
> getting out there, experiencing different things is my learning tool.
> I have to feel it in order for it to ...sink in.

Tiffany shared stories about spending time with the youth in her neighborhood

and church community. She tries to be a positive role model and provide a safe place for

them to share things they do not feel safe telling their parents. Based on her story, I

suspect that Tiffany may have appreciated someone like her who cared enough to help

her stay on track. Tiffany sees herself as always learning. She also sees herself as a

teacher and learner.

> In my experiences as a learner is I deal with a lot of things. I work
> in the church, and I deal with a lot of the kids. And I learn new
> things from them every weekend...they show me new dances...at
> my house, they all come over...on Friday nights they'll sit
> there...and then I tell them-okay, come on; let's sit in here and
> talk. Okay, tell me. Everybody goes to a different school, and
> whatever they can't talk to their parents about they share with me.

> I learn from them and I try to teach them. I have the opening ear. I
> listen to them. And try to guide them in the right way. And it has
> been successful. One little girl, it was like she repeated the seventh
> grade I think twice. And I looked at her. I said, You're 14. You're
> in the seventh grade. Come on, now—what part of the picture is
> not clear. Leave the boys alone. Get into your right grade. Come
> on. The boys are going to be there. Half of them can't spell dog or
> cat." So come on. And it's an experience working with teens. I like
> to work with the teenagers. Keep them, focused.

Tiffany recalled a story about her community college business teacher who uses

role playing in her classes to demonstrate appropriate behaviors for customer service. She

told one story when this technique was successful in figuring out how to deal with irate

customers. Tiffany mentioned that she has difficulty "believing with out seeing and that

role playing helps her see things in action".

> For my learning style, I sit there and I just analyze it. And I role-
> play it (in my head). And I think about it. Okay, if I was in this
> situation how would I deal with it? If I was a CEO and my profit
> just went down. How can I boost my profit? What could I make, or
> what could I do to bring this up? To get the public's attention and
> make my money come back. I mean, sheesh, that's how ... that's
> the way you have to do.

Personal Growth

Tiffany used a phrase that symbolizes her personal growth, "life equals learning".

Tiffany's growth included coming back to the roots of her grandmother's messages after

getting off track. She shared a story where she allowed peer pressure to steer her in the

wrong direction. Tiffany has experienced personal growth in several areas. Tiffany

mentioned that she has mellowed since enrolling in the community college. She

described herself as being angry when she first enrolled. Based on her previous

experiences in educational institutions she did not expect to be in a supportive

environment. As a result she was ready for a fight.

Not only did Tiffany see her personal growth but her instructors also noticed her

growth. Tiffany shared an excerpt from story where her Business instructor shared her

perceptions of her growth over the past two years.

> She said (Business instructor, "I remember when you first came
> here, you were making growling noise." And she said, "You were
> the tiger up on the hill." And I looked at her. And she said, "Now
> you are the cat that's sitting in its own little basket and relaxed."
> And I said, "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" And she said,
> "Oh, girl; it's a good thing".
>
> I feel my temper has... Because when I used to first come here, my
> temper was just outlandish...but now I'm mellower; I have
> mellowed out a lot. It goes through one ear and out the other ear.

Tiffany's story as a learner included "choosing the wrong path" due to distractions. Her journey has included increased awareness of her surroundings, reflection and returning to herself and her earlier messages about the importance of education. She used the term perseverance to describe her journey back to the right path. Tiffany has experienced increased self control and self esteem over the years. She mentioned that her most significant growth has been in the past two years. Tiffany has grown emotionally and has worked through her anger and temper leading to the ability to work through issues in a positive way. This is a whole new way of being in the world for Tiffany.

Peer pressure can be either positive or negative. Tiffany shared stories of negative peer pressure as an adult at the community college. As part of her growth process, Tiffany has determined that she does not have time for negative peer pressure. Tiffany views everyday as a "learning experience" and an opportunity to put into action what she has learned. She internalizes lessons learned by teaching others and giving back to her community is important to Tiffany. She expressed feeling that there are too many negative messages and influences that African Americans face to make it alone. Tiffany shared stories about being treated differently because she is African American. She also described racist messages she was told when she was in high school. These messages angered her but also pushed her to excel and prove that they were wrong. Tiffany's anger seemed to be related to how she has been treated because she is African American by others, especially teachers. An excerpt from Tiffany's story describing messages she has received over the years.

> I've been an African American woman in school from
> kindergarten all the way up. I have been through a lot of … things.
> But I think now, looking back on everything I've been through I'm

calmer now. I'm learning more how to control my temper, how to deal with people better and how to ignore the negative vibes, and the negative situations. So it's making me a better person.

I had a teacher who told me that all black women and all black men...all black women were going to stand on the thing... this was in high school. That the only thing we were good for was to stand on the corner.

And all black men, the only thing they were good for is to sell dope and to beat on women. And I looked at her. And it made me so mad. It made me so mad. I went home and I told my parents, I said oh, I'm going to prove that's wrong about me. She can say it about anybody else. But I'm going to prove her wrong about me. And when she came back, she came to our graduation. And when she seen all of the African American girls that she told us and we graduated and we were walking off with our diplomas. I did it just like this in her face, I said—bam, I'm not one that's going to stand on the corner. But you have a good day, anyway. Closed my diploma up and went with my parent and went on out to dinner.

As I previously mentioned Tiffany feels that it is very important to give back to her community and support other African American women to achieve their goals. She expressed that she did not agree with the teacher who made the racist remarks to her and her friends. These remarks only propelled her to prove the teacher wrong. Tiffany stated that for many African American women, they react differently and take the negative messages and expectations to heart.

There are a lot of black African women that ... women of other races have said that to and some of us are weak. They don't ... they're not going to fight back. They're just going to believe that they're not going to amount to anything, and they're going to go do the things like sexual encounters or selling their bodies or being in abusive relationships because people have told them that.

They don't have the strength to say no, not me. You've got to be messed up. Because when the teacher told me that sheesh, I went home and told my daddy, I said, "She got me messed up." And I did whatever I needed to do. I was steady shooting; reports into all my teachers. I will graduate. If you think I'm not, watch me. And I did. I graduated.

Tiffany expressed that her family was always very supportive of her achieving her goals. She mentioned that she thought this was how she got back on track and continues today. Tiffany also mentioned that not everyone has supportive families and that may be a contributing factor in their "giving in".

Overarching Themes

Persistence.

Tiffany's life story as a learner is one of perseverance and persistence. She described instances where she went off track however more than once she managed to return to herself and her solid foundation. While she went "off track", she returned stronger and more committed than ever. One factor that seemed to boost her persistence was the racist comments by her high school teacher. The ironic part of Tiffany's story is that it is possible that if she had not experienced such overt racism and reacted with anger, she may have stayed off track. Currently, she serves others in her community and encourages them to persist and continue to work toward their educational goals and to ignore negative people and energy.

Transformation.

Tiffany went through one major transformation. She has transformed from a "tiger", as her instructor mentioned to a "cat". She still exhibits a lot of energy and passion however she handles herself in ways that are more effective. Tiffany's reaction to the institutional racism and peer pressure she faced was anger. At times her anger burst out at others while at other times it was turned inward. Her story of using drugs and giving in to the expectations of others is an example of her anger turned inward. Tiffany mentioned that she is now calmer, stronger and does not let negativity into her life. For

Tiffany, her connection to her past and family values help grounded and provide inner strength while supporting her as she continues to move towards her goals.

Connection.

Tiffany mentioned that she is a "hands on and visual learner". She is also a connected knower who needs to see things in her mind and make connections for learning to occur. Tiffany asserted that she needs an environment that is "focused on learning". Without connection to her instructors and the material she is learning, Tiffany struggles as a learner. Connecting to her community is also important to Tiffany. She is especially committed to connecting with the youth in her community and supporting them to continue or get on "the right track". Tiffany expressed that the youth keep her energized and that this keeps her connected to her past and keeps her on the right track, moving forward.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented Tiffany's story as a learner. Hers is a story of perseverance, overcoming obstacles and societies' expectations. While Tiffany has faced many barriers, she has and continues to succeed. At the core of Tiffany's life story as a learner is her connection with herself and messages from her family. Tiffany is not only very determined but she is a survivor and will achieve her goals. In the next chapter I present Vanessa and her life story as a learner.

CHAPTER 8: VANESSA
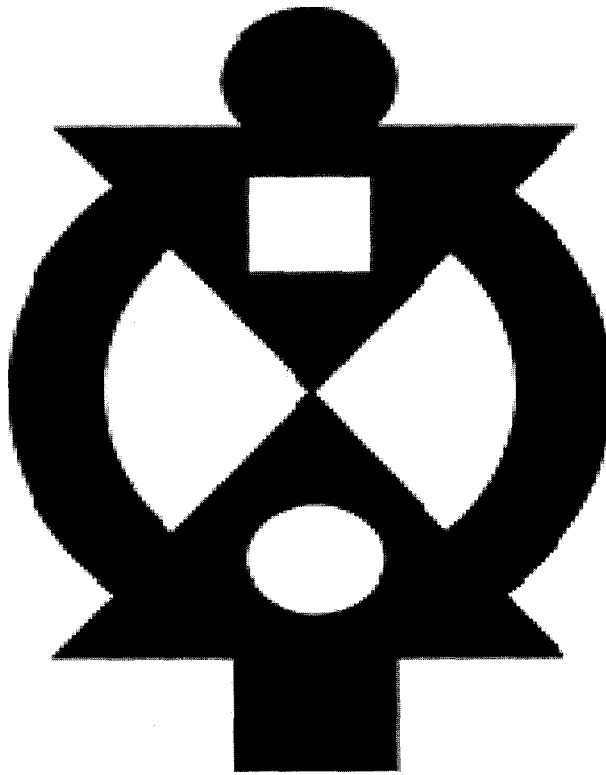
BOA ME NA ME MMOA WO

"Help me and let me help you"

(Willis, 1998, p. 203)

An Introduction to Vanessa

Vanessa is a petite woman with bright eyes and an equally bright smile. She is the youngest woman in my inquiry and is twenty years of age. Vanessa has a quiet demeanor and comes across as very serious and tentative. Vanessa selected a West African symbol that translates to "help me and let me help you" (Willis, 1998, p. 203). This symbol signifies "cooperation and interdependence" (Willis, p. 203). Vanessa shared a story of ease in her education process but also a realization that it is not easy for everyone. Along with this realization came a desire to help others. She expressed a deep desire to help others achieve their goals and success. Vanessa was the only participant in my inquiry that continued her education from high school to community college without a break. Her serious and tentative stance came and went during our interviews. She mentioned that she thinks she comes across as "very business". Vanessa shared experiences and stories that depict a woman whose life story as a learner centers around connection, positive learning experiences and support for education. Vanessa described herself.

> I'm very ... I see myself as very business. Very organized. I love
> to get educated about anything. I want to be involved. That's me,
> wanting to be involved in things that can help me and also help
> others.

Vanessa's Life Story and Earliest Memories

Vanessa not only remembered her early experiences in school but also an early message about education that she currently lives by. Vanessa recalled her mother saying "doing well in school equals doing well in life". According to Vanessa since age five, "education has been the thing." She mentioned her mother as her main support around

education and achieving her life goals. Vanessa told a life story full of ease however she also shared her struggles during transition periods in school. Vanessa provided a synopsis of her experiences in school.

> As I can remember, school has always been great for me. I had a mom that encouraged me to do well in school, so I woke up everyday on time to go to school. I always had supportive teachers, teachers that actually cared to help me all throughout school...I had such encouraging teachers I just wanted to do well throughout my whole life and without that I wouldn't be here now, still trying to do school.

While Vanessa recalled messages about education from when she was five years of age, the first excerpt she shared from her life story is from second grade and focused on her favorite teacher Miss Kelly. "She was very inspirational." Her second favorite teacher, Ms. Brooks pushed Vanessa to succeed. According to Vanessa, she was "very supportive and made sure her students learned everything". These excerpts framed the rest of her experiences including what she currently feels is important for a positive learning environment.

> My favorite teacher was Miss Kelly; second grade. She was very inspirational. She would go out of her way to have parties after school, give us ice cream and take us on great field trips.

> My second favorite teacher was Miss Brooks (third grade). She got on me when I couldn't do my multiplication, and kept me in from recess and gave me extra packets to learn how to do my multiplication. And she worked with my mom to make sure I understood everything.

While Vanessa mentioned that school had always been great, she shared a story about middle school that presented a different view and described her struggles transitioning from elementary school to middle school. According to Vanessa, she went from a very supportive elementary school experience to middle school where she had to

learn to be more independent. After further exploration, Vanessa revealed that the transition from elementary school to middle school with different teachers and classes was "stressful". She mentioned feeling "left out". In eighth grade, Vanessa reported feeling "better" and more connected. Vanessa shared a synopsis of her years in middle school.

> I didn't enjoy middle school as much. I didn't do well my sixth grade year. I don't know if it was the teacher, or if we had too many teachers or something. My experience of having different classes…So I didn't switch into it as well…until eighth grade, I finally stated getting A's and B's again. I met a lot of friends; I met a friend that's still my friend till today…that's the only experience I really got out of that (middle school), was finding friendship.

Things seemed to get back on track for Vanessa later in middle school. However she also experienced a difficult transition from middle school to high school. Once again she was able to get back on track after an adjustment period.

> In high school I had a turning point. For some reason I was doing really bad, and then I turned around and started getting straight A's. The turning point happened because I started communicating with my teachers more, going to see my counselors more, and doing things like that. So connecting more.

Vanessa was selected for a student support program where she received one-on-one academic counseling and career counseling. She also got involved in a work experience program and had the opportunity to take college classes. Through her involvement in this program, she was able to be more connected and engaged in her educational experience.

> I was motivated in high school to start taking college classes earlier because you get a heard start…High school was a good experience, taking classes there, taking six classes there and one class in community college.

While she struggled with the transition from middle school to high school, her next big transition from high school to community college went smoothly. Upon reflection, Vanessa felt that taking college classes and becoming familiar with the college environment ahead of time, helped her with this transition. Her story continued at community college where Vanessa stated that she "learned a lot". She spoke about her involvement at the community college. "I've been so involved with the community and I got involved with student government and the transfer center, and just so many things". When asked about events that stood out in her community college experience and that have added to her story, she mentioned events that involved bringing diverse groups of students, staff, and faculty together. "What brings us together is what really stands out to me." Community building is important to Vanessa. According to Vanessa, a good learning environment is characterized by a "place people connect to others and share experiences".

Vanessa is currently completing her lower division transfer courses in Psychology. Even though Vanessa shared excerpts from her life story as a learner that included few struggles or minor set backs, she is very aware of herself and what elements are essential for her success.

Vanessa as a Learner

Vanessa described herself as a "visual and auditory" learner. She is self motivated and stated that if she does not get something, she studies it "over and over until she understands it". In describing a good learning environment, Vanessa mentioned that she has to have "contact and connection with her teacher". She also needs to be connected to her learning community and fellow students. While she is internally motivated, Vanessa

thrives on feedback. She mentioned that the best way to learn is "one-on-one" and she prefers "small classes and an interactive learning environment".

It is important to Vanessa that she is in a learning environment where "learning is the focus" and distractions are limited. She was very descriptive when sharing her notion of a good teacher. According to Vanessa, a good teacher is one who is "in control of their environment; they challenge, teach, and support their students". Additionally, Vanessa feels that a good teacher has to "know what they are doing and get students involved". Ultimately, she feels that teachers "must care, actually care". She spoke of an English teacher at the community college who engaged her in an active learning process. This was a new experience for Vanessa. She was very touched that a college instructor cared in this way. Vanessa described her experience.

> He stands out. He's a really good teacher. He made us...think of a way of teaching really differently. He asked us to think about all our...school experiences and what we gained and what we will want to gain from our school experiences. He made me think about school very differently. He wanted to know how he can better other student's experiences and how he can teach better.

Vanessa's story as a learner centers on connection to what she is learning, her instructors, and her community. Regardless of whether it was an excerpt about elementary school, middle school, High School, or Community College, it was evident that connection is essential for Vanessa to have a positive learning experience. As previously mentioned, she needs an environment and instructor that is engaged but also has control of the learning.

> They have to have control of the environment. It can't be noisy and distracting. It has to have control...they (instructors) have to know what they are doing...and also get you involved. Not somebody just lecturing you. You have to have contact...a quiet good environment.

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...I want a teacher who...wants to do it. Not just...I don't want the teacher who is just there for the money. Actually caring. Actually caring about the information. Actually caring that we (students) are getting the information.

Vanessa believes that "doing well in school will lead to success in life". Consequently, she also believes that "if you're not doing well in school you're not going to do well in your life." Vanessa expressed that she bests learns in one-on-one experiences. She stated, "I feel more direct." It is important for her to get support and feedback informing her how she is doing. Vanessa not only desires connection but wants the teacher to have a connection with all their students. "That's what I really need, connection." She described being self motivated to learn new things.

I'm a quick learner. So when you teach me something, I look at it and I pick up on it really quick. And if I don't get it really quick I take it and I study it, and study it, and study it over and over again until I locked it.

Vanessa has taken into consideration all of her learning experiences and formed her opinions of what constitutes a good learning environment. In addition, she has used her experiences to grow as a learner.

Personal Growth

Vanessa was shy and withdrawn when she first enrolled in the community college. Now she is actively involved in the community and student government. She has grown into a student who not only values community but who is an active part of it, a leader. Being very active in the college and helping others enhances Vanessa's learning experience by keeping her engaged. It was Vanessa's realization about her need for connection that propelled her growth.

...having connections with things was a big turning point for me growing as a learner and is essential to success.

Vanessa reported that being African American did not have an impact on her life story as a learner. She acknowledged however that in other places in America, African American students have different struggles than other students. She also mentioned that historically African Americans struggled to receive an education. Vanessa feels that "being an African American woman in school is like any other person. She reported "feeling just like every other person, any other human being".

Vanessa's goal includes becoming a counseling psychologist; "I want to one day...hopefully I'll have my own business, trying to help the homeless, giving them psychological support". Vanessa's life story as a learner and her goal of helping others is deeply connected to the symbol she selected.

Overarching Themes

Persistence.

While she has experienced some road bumps, Vanessa has always persisted. While these road bumps during key transition periods in her life as a learner led to increased stress and struggle. Vanessa, she never considered another path. Continuing her education was what she was going to do, no matter what. Vanessa attributed her strong desire to be educated to her mother and her messages about education from her childhood. This strong foundation assisted her in persisting through difficult times as a learner and propels her to continue to work towards her goals.

Transformation.

According to Vanessa her biggest transformation has taken place within the past two years. During this time she formalized her thoughts about learning environments and

realized what she needs to succeed. For the first time she engaged in a reflective process that she found valuable in assisting her in defining her needs and desires as a learner. Prior to being a community college student, Vanessa's voice was nonexistent. She described that she found her voice and is now able to advocate and support other students. Finding her voice is a significant transformation and has allowed her to externally express and pursue her need for connection in her learning environment.

Connection.

At the heart of Vanessa's story as a learner is connection. It is evident from her story that during transitional times when she did not feel connected to her teachers or community she struggled. In high school and at community college, her connections to her instructors and community fed her desire to succeed and excel. Vanessa shared excerpts from her story about learning environments and instructors that were caring, actively engaging and that valued students as part of the learning process. All of these elements are essential for Vanessa to feel connected and successful. The learning environment for Vanessa goes beyond the classroom and includes students, staff, and faculty. All of these individuals are essential to Vanessa's connected world. She mentioned feeling that "everything needs to be in place" for her to feel good and learn.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented Vanessa and her life story as a learner. In one of our last meetings, Vanessa shared her favorite statements from her transcripts. "Education is the most important thing in my life...you couldn't do anything without education. A person can't survive without being educated." She felt these were strong statements and accurately represented how she feels. The most important element present in Vanessa's

story is the need for a connected learning environment. It is evident from her story that

Vanessa would not be successful without connection. I am sure that she is not the only

student who this is true for. In the next chapter I present Samantha and her life story as a

learner.

CHAPTER 9: SAMANTHA
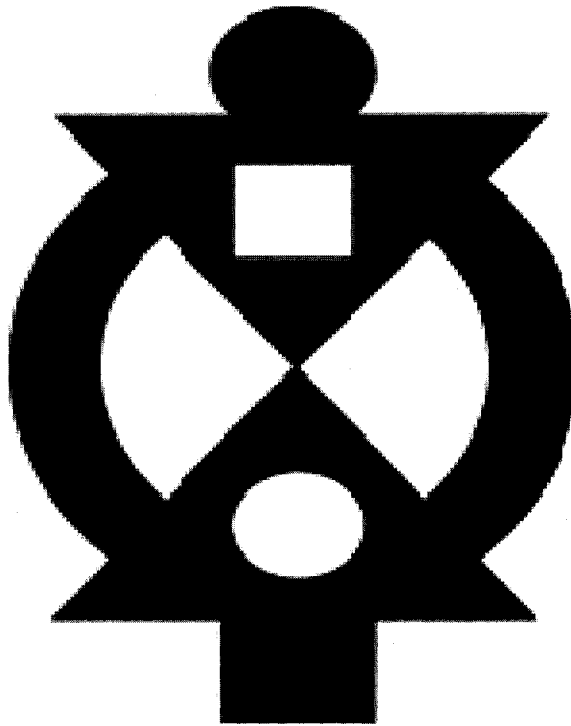
BOA ME NA ME MMOA WO

"Help me and let me help you"

<div align="right">(Willis, 1998, p. 203)</div>

An Introduction to Samantha

Samantha has one of the warmest smiles that welcomes you as you enter Berkeley City College. She is full of life. Samantha's energy fills a room and her zest for life is contagious. She selected a symbol that when translated signifies her existence, "help me and let me help you" (Willis, 1998, p. 203). Samantha lives by this stance and the interdependence represented by this symbol (Willis, p. 203). She returned to school after eighteen years to practice what she was preaching to her children. Samantha's life story as a learner is full of ups and downs and includes a life long struggle with a learning disability as well as a fight to fit in and to be "normal". Samantha mentioned that she is now at a place where she values education and is not only preaching to her children but living what she preaches by pursuing her dreams and educational goals. Samantha shared some thoughts about education.

> Everyone needs an education, whether they think so or not.
> Because you can't do anything without education.

Samantha's Life Story and Earliest Memories

Many students have life stories that include struggle and secrets. This is how Samantha's story as a learner began. One of the earliest memories Samantha shared from her life story included discovering her father's "secret". She discovered that her father could not read and that he was dyslexic. Samantha recalled driving around San Francisco with her father and reading street signs and building signs at six years of age.

> So one day when I was younger, I was six. I was learning how to
> read and my father was like, "what does that sign right there say?"
> We lived in San Francisco. And I thought it was a game, like I'm
> his big girl and he is trying to teach me this. And I so worshipped
> my father, so much. So all day I kept reading all the signs and there

was this one sign on this building that said, "No colored allowed."
And I thought you can't color in that building. I was six! What did
I know?

When we got home later I went to bed. And I got up to go to the
bathroom and I heard my mother. Their door was closed and my
father was trying to read. And I'm like...what is going on? So I
used the bathroom and came back. And I'm still listening at the
door. My mother was trying to teach my father how to read.

At age six, Samantha discovered her father's secret and had her first experience

with segregation and institutional racism. For a six year old, a sign indicating that one

could not color in a building was much less of an issue than it was discovering that her

father was unable to read. Samantha recalled that this "threw her for a loop".

I'm thinking that parents are just born knowing stuff. Because
they're parents, that's what they do. And it threw me for a loop. I
did not know my father couldn't read. I didn't know what dyslexia
was. I was six. This was like...1976. And I was the only one that
knew that my father couldn't do certain things. But I don't let him
know that I know.

While Samantha did not know it at the time, this experience sent a powerful

message to her about fitting in and keeping secrets about one's ability to learn. This was

Samantha's first experience of institutionalized racism though she mentioned that she had

no idea at the time what the sign meant. As Samantha was growing up, society was

changing. Today, segregation is no longer the norm however racial issues still thrive.

Samantha shared that while she identifies as African American, she has a mixed

ancestry. Her father is African American and her mother is Mexican American. She

expressed that she has struggled over the years with her identity. She is frequently asked

what color she is and expressed that she never knows how to answer. She also mentioned

that she never really knew where she fit in, not only in society but in history. She

frequently asked herself the question, "who validates my accomplishments" and "what is my history".

Samantha's feelings of confusion about where she fit in continued for several years. Her struggle has not only been over where she fits in due to her mixed ancestry but also due to her learning disability. Samantha's early memories from school focused around instances that pushed her to the outside, validating her feelings that she is not "normal" but different. Samantha did not share any positive excerpts from her early years in school.

Samantha shared excerpts from her life story about humiliation and isolation. She was taunted by other children and humiliated by teachers. Samantha told one story from third grade where she asked her teacher to be excused to go to the bathroom and the teacher replied, "no". She remembered that she was unable "to hold it" and had an accident. The teacher brought up the incident the following day. Samantha was upset about something and the teacher told her that her "accident was the day before and she had nothing to be upset about that day". Samantha reported that the teacher said this in front of the entire class. She remembered that she was "horrified and wanted to crawl in a hole". This was the only story Samantha shared about a teacher in elementary school. She expressed "that was pretty much how it was" and that she did not recall any positive experiences. Samantha expressed that her experiences with teachers and other students led to her "shutting down, loosing her voice, and becoming shy".

> I was bigger than all the rest of the girls, taller. I was thinner, then,
> three kids go. But I would get talked about. "You got big feet."
> You Sasquash, you this, you that…You know, all the stuff that
> kids say because they're cruel and they don't know any better.

Samantha also recalled that due to experiences like these, she stopped

participating in class. Unfortunately this lasted until just two years ago when she enrolled

in community college.

> ...I didn't like people looking at me. I didn't like people...because
> when you raise your (hand) and ask the question, everybody looks.
> Who? Who is asking the question?

> I was withdrawn, I didn't know. I thought I was just being lazy. Like I
> didn't push myself enough to learn. Even as I got a little older, before I
> even knew what it was.

Samantha's story continued. She mentioned that she missed out on her education

as a child. Samantha was so focused on other students and her feelings of inadequacy and

difference that education was the last thing on her mind. By the time she got to high

school Samantha stated she was "disinterested and behind in her knowledge". She

mentioned that she thought it was because she was "lazy".

> When I was in high school I wasn't interested in learning anything.
> I didn't want to do anything. I'm all like, "why do we need
> school?"

> I didn't know I had a learning disability until later. "I just thought,
> you know, I'm being lazy. That's why I'm not getting this like I
> should."

Samantha has since discovered that not only is she not lazy but she can succeed in

school. For the first time in her life, Samantha openly acknowledges that she has a

learning disability and accepts herself as a learner with potential.

Samantha as a Learner

Samantha is a mother of three adolescents. Her family including her partner and

three children are at the center of her life. She frequently referred to them when sharing

her life story as a learner. If it was not for her kids, Samantha may not have returned to

school. She shared a story about a family meeting where she was espousing the virtues of education when her son pointed out that she was the only one not in school. He added that she was "preaching something that she was not doing".

> I got everyone together for our family meeting, which is a weekly thing. And I said nobody in this house is not going to be going to school. And so my son, being the smart alec he was, stood up and said, "Well, mom; you're the only one not going to school, how can you preach to us about staying in school and you're not practicing it by going to school yourself?"

Samantha struggled in school as a child and did not find her preferred learning environment until her first year at a community college when she took an American Sign Language course. She mentioned that the perfect learning environment for her is a "deaf environment where there is constant eye contact". Samantha described herself as a "visual learner". In addition to an environment that meets her visual learning style, Samantha needs one where she feels "connected and involved".

To foster learning, Samantha needs an instructor who "stops and works with students and lets them question things". She shared stories about teachers who had blinders on to their students' situations. According to Samantha a good instructor is one who allows students to "be involved in what is going on and takes into account that everybody isn't the same and learns differently". She commented that a good instructor is "not the expert, not too robotic and needs to be open".

Samantha is very clear about what she needs in a learning environment. Growing up, Samantha always struggled in school and she was distracted from learning with her increasing feelings of isolation. This was not the only reason she struggled to learn. Samantha told a story about when she realized that she has a learning disability.

...and I didn't know I had a learning disability until later. I just thought, you know, I'm just being lazy. That's why I'm not getting this like I should. And one day somebody told me how to get somewhere and it took me so long because I went the whole totally opposite direction of the directions that they gave me. And I was like, man. I didn't have anything written down, it was just my brain was just reversing everything. And I was like...and when I finally caught it I'm all like, "Man, what's wrong with me?"

Samantha has been tested now and knows she has dyslexia. She shared a story about how she approached work prior to a formal diagnosis. She explained that she "memorized everything so she would not make mistakes". Samantha stated that she "worked extra hard so no one would know" her secret. Samantha's process of discovery occurred over time.

When I would go to a new job and they would explain how they want thing done. The whole time they were talking my brain was working, repeating what they're saying in my head. So when I sat down that there was less questions as possible for me to say, "Excuse me, can you explain that again?"

Then as I got older, I'd be like, "Excuse me, I didn't understand what you said; can you explain that again?" So then it started becoming verbal instead of it just being in my head. And it helped me a lot, because I was able to process. It's not like I kicked the dyslexia out, but I didn't let it take over my life. I didn't say, "Okay, I know I got this learning disability and I know my limitations."

I knew what I could and couldn't do, but I tried every day to go above and beyond that because I didn't want to be labeled as being dyslexic, or having something wrong or something. And so it was a process for me.

Samantha expressed that she had several strategies to make sure no one knew she had a disability. When she first enrolled as a community college student, she adapted some of her strategies from the work world to her new learning environment. Samantha has changed her approach over time. She shared her approach with her daughter.

Samantha told excerpts from her story where she used her experiences to support her children as learners and their growth. According to Samantha, her daughter has "similar learning issues". She recommended different strategies to assist her in succeeding.

> And I had to tell her, you know, if you need some help, you need to get some tutoring done, you need to get somebody. Pay attention to the person in class that is always asking the questions and that's always turning their papers in on time; that's who you want to sit next to. She said, "Why? I said, "Because if you have a question they have no problem helping you." Because that's how it was for me.

Based on her experiences, Samantha is able to support her kids. She is keenly aware of her children and their approaches to learning. Samantha mentioned that she tries to see where their strengths and weaknesses are so that she is able to help them. She tries to assist her children with deciding what approach and strategies for learning work for them. Samantha expressed that she uses this same strategy when mentoring students at the community college.

Personal Growth

Samantha's personal growth has occurred on many levels. Initially she was a shy, shut down, and angry learner who thought school was useless. Presently, as an adult learner she is outgoing, open to new experiences, and is proactive. Samantha has accepted her disability and no longer tries to hide it. Samantha expressed that she feels relieved.

> Until I started coming to BCC, I was a shy person. And, now look. Anytime you see me I'm talking. I'm laughing...my self esteem was shot.

> I have learned to challenge myself and say okay, I'm not going to always be the person who knows what's going on. And I can project that to as many people as I want; it's still not going to make it true. Which has helped me.

Because now I don't feel like the know-it-all. I'm learning just like
everyone else, and that's why we're all in this particular room. To
learn. Nobody is better than anybody else. And you're not going to
be sent off into the corner if you don't know an answer to
something. So that has really helped me. Because before I would
be like man, I'm in class, I'm in college. I'm this age. I need to
know some of this stuff. But nobody ever truly knows. That's why
we're all here. And especially when I see people older than me in
class. So now I really feel much better.

During the past two years, Samantha has become more comfortable as a learner.

She mentioned that with each success she feels stronger and more confident. Samantha

shared her experience and development into a student who helps others.

There has been a huge shift to where stuff would make me feel self
conscious before and now it doesn't. I feel better, now that I'm not
a shy person.

I was a shy person. But then once I started coming here
(community college) and the first person that I helped, I was like
well, you know I could help you with that...and so then I just
flourished into this person that wants to help everybody. And that's
why I started taking sign language, because this is for people who
have no voice of their own for somebody to help them. And that's
what I do. And so now every time you see me I'm laughing and
telling people where to go, what to do, help them.

Samantha is now a student who tells herself "I can do it". She expressed that she

"feels the best she ever has about herself". Her increased self esteem as a learner has

transferred into her overall life. Samantha shared one of the most important milestones in

her development when she shared a story about working as a work study student in

student services. She discovered her name on an honor roll list she was typing.

The first time I got on the honor roll I lost my mind! I was excited
that I had gotten on the honor roll, because I had never been on the
honor roll since I was really young. And to be on it after so many
years ... I was like, oh my god...this is really working for me. And
it just made me want to do more. It made me want to buckle down
more.

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During our meetings, Samantha spent a lot of time telling me stories about how she balanced life, children, having a partner, and school. She shared details of how she had to organize her shopping, laundry, and cooking. When Samantha began school there were only limited changes as the rhythm at home was already running smoothly. Samantha stated that this really helped and highly recommends organization to other students. She mentioned that she has not always been organized and that when she was younger she "ran around like a chicken with its head cut off". In describing a chapter for her life story and experience in community college, Samantha said she would call it "Juggling. Juggling you and everything else." For Samantha one of the biggest challenges was balancing "kid interaction" with everything else. She stated that "even though you're doing all this, if you have no interaction time with the kids all this is useless". To "psych" herself up for coming back to school, Samantha had a message she told herself. It is the same message that she shares with other students.

> women have been doing stuff above and beyond for a lot of years,
> so I can do this. We just need to juggle the time schedule.

Samantha spoke of taking care of herself better and as a result having more energy and time for her kids and helping others. She lived with fear for years of people finding out she had a disability. Finally acknowledging and accepting this part of herself has helped her in all parts of her life. She expressed "I don't feel so jittery all the time". Samantha was so worried about what people thought or what they were going to say that it made her nervous, "like a Chihuahua all the time". Samantha expressed that now she feels more like a "German Sheppard", ready for anything.

Overarching Themes

Persistence.

Persistence is a core thread running through Samantha's life story as a learner. In spite of having a learning disability she has found ways to succeed at first in the work world and now in higher education. While she took a break from formal education, Samantha has had a life long process of learning and challenging herself. Persistence ahs been a way of life for Samantha. Currently as a community college student every success whether it is passing a test or seeing her name on the honor roll keeps her going. Samantha shared a story of struggle in her math class. While she became frustrated she was determined to continue and not let this one class "hold her back". Samantha is well on her way to achieving her goals.

Transformation.

Samantha's life story as a learner is filled with transformation. Included in her transformation are realizations of her father's secret, working through emotional issues related to her learning experiences, acceptance about herself as a learner, and empowerment as a learner. Samantha grew up with secrets about her father and for years kept secrets about her own learning difficulties. Until she realized that she had a learning disability, she thought she was lazy or unable to learn. Her experiences in school angered her and emotionally. That anger combined with fear of people discovering her secret is how she lived for years. Samantha has grown into a learner who accepts herself for who she is. She has worked through her anger issues and no longer lets it keep her from striving towards her goals. Samantha believes she is a learner and teacher now and lives

by the motto, "each one, teach one." She feels that she can help others and stated that if "I can do it, anyone can".

Connection.

Samantha grew up in isolation however expressed that she wanted more, something else. She has realized that connection is what she needed all those years. A connected learning environment where she engages with fellow students and instructors is what she needs to thrive. It is unfortunate that it was not until she took her first American Sign Language class that she realized what she needed in a learning environment. However it is also fortunate that she took that class and is continuing her journey. Outside of the classroom, Samantha's community of students is equally important to her and keeps her energized and engaged in the learning process. She loves helping others, making connections and seeing other people change and succeed.

Chapter Summary

Samantha titled her life story as a learner, "from beginning to end; we need to find a middle ground". When reviewing her story, she was amazed at how far she has really come and valued the reflected process she engaged in during our interviews. Samantha shared some thoughts about the process.

> Reflecting on experience doing interviews and reflection in life…
> So it's a good thing to look back and say, "Man, I have come a
> long way." It makes you feel empowered. It gives me more hope. I
> feel like I'm closer than I was before.

Samantha's story is about a learner who transforms from being shut down and isolated to one who embraces her whole self and is thriving. For the first time in her life, she is comfortable with who she is. She mentioned that she feels fortunate that she came back to school and has had experiences that have 'changed her whole life".
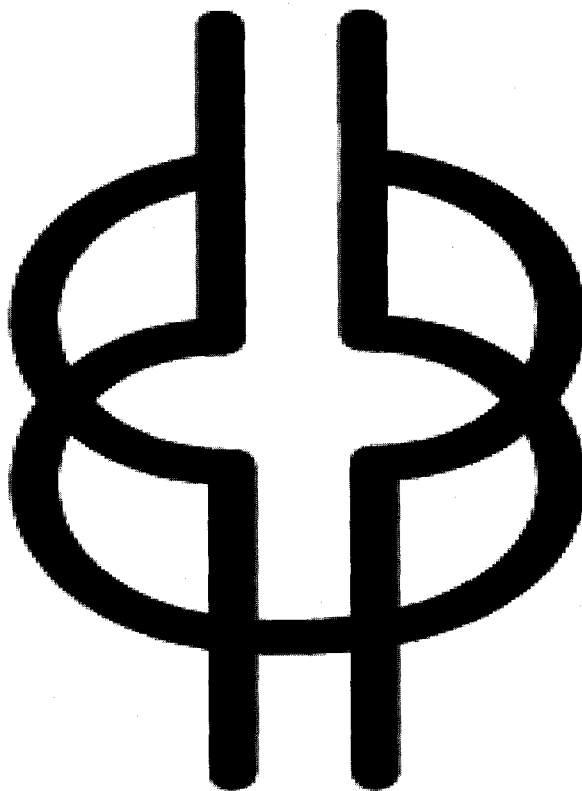
NYANSAPO

"wisdom knot"

(Willis, 1998, p. 164)

An Introduction to Pam

Pam has a beautiful and open face with a great smile. At times she comes across as shy and very serious but she has the ability to enjoy herself and laugh at life. Her quiet demeanor perpetuates an air of wisdom and thoughtfulness when she speaks. The West African symbol Pam selected, translates to "wisdom knot" (Willis, 1998, p. 164). This image refers to the notion that "a wise person has the capacity to attain a goal" (Willis, p. 164). While this symbol refers to wisdom, I was struck by the inclusion of intelligence and patience in its meaning. Pam is very intelligent and has only recently acknowledged this part of her. Patience and introspection are also central aspects of Pam's character and are evident throughout her story. Pam described herself.

> Outgoing, friendly. Very supportive. I'm the kind of person that
> goes to bat for other people when I see they have been wrong
> doing, even if I'm not involved. If I see wrong ... vigilante.

Pam's Life Story and Earliest Memories

Pam's life story as a learner included tremendous hardship from the beginning. She shared her early experiences which affected later learning and tainted her life story as a learner. She titled these early excerpts, "hard beginnings".

> ...when I was younger I had petite mal seizures. I had spinal
> meningitis when I was a baby, and that was the result...I had
> seizures. It gave me a learning disability. I only hear in one ear. I
> needed glasses. I sat in the back of the class; they (teachers) knew
> none of these things.

The previous excerpt set the stage for Pam's story as a learner. Her story is filled with physical disabilities (some known, others hidden) and undetected learning disabilities. Pam described how she felt during her childhood.

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I really didn't have a great childhood. My mother was great, but
the outside environment was not great, and not only that, I felt so
different from everybody else that it was hard to concentrate on
school or even care about it. I never wanted to be there. I totally
hated school. And it wasn't about the learning actually. Which is
kind of sad. It was more about the people that I had to deal with
every day. Children are horrible. They are really mean.

It started off really shaky as a child. And I pretty much hated
education, learning, reading. Just hated it. I still don't like reading.
Unless it's something that I really want to know about.

Pam expressed deep frustration regarding her early experiences in school. She

mentioned feeling isolated and different. Several times she shared that she could not

figure out why things were so bad all the time and why she was so different.

...If it had been caught early that I had a hearing problem, that I
needed glasses, that I was a hands-on and visual, not audio learner,
maybe I would have been a little bit better when it came to high
school. I would have known things. I was lacking so much
information. And not only that, there was no kind of counseling
support. Somebody to talk about what I was going through.

Pam's story continued to unfold as she described her very restricted diet due to

allergies to artificial preservatives and additives. For Pam, these restrictions not only

meant eating well but missing out on things like "school lunches, food at amusement

parks, Easter and Christmas" treats and more importantly being like the other kids. She

shared that all of these disabilities and restrictions affected her emotionally as a child and

mentioned that it contributed to her "feelings of inadequacy and isolation". "I used to

think I was retarded and I just didn't understand why I was so different." Pam stated that

"these kinds of things weighed heavy on me as a child." Pam's story continued.

...By the time I got to high school I had been so focused on what I
was lacking that I missed out on the education I should have been
getting. And then it made high school really tough for me, and I
dropped out.

Pam mentioned that she and her mother struggled financially when she was growing up. She recalled that her food allergies meant that her mother had to spend more on food for "fresh and if possible organic produce". "Cheaper, packaged foods filled with preservatives" were not an option. Pam expressed feelings about how hard it was for her and her mother and relayed that she felt "responsible for some of the hardships". By the time Pam reached high school, she had outgrown her food allergies. However new struggles arose around fitting in and having no money. Pam summarized part of her story about high school.

> Me and my mom went through a patch while I was going to school
> where we were really, really poor. And it was during my high
> school years. And it wasn't just being what I was going through
> that made me feel … because by then I was out of my allergy
> problems. But then we had being poor and not being able to look
> like everybody else at school. Wearing the same pair of shoes all
> the way through high school. The same four outfits all the way
> through high school. We had a really bad patch, for like five years.
> My mother couldn't buy me any clothes. Everything I had was
> somebody given me. All of that was in the way of my learning.

Pam's story resumed, as did her feelings of isolation until she entered the Job Corp. She mentioned feeling included and "normal" for the first time in her life. "I was treated like everybody else." Pam stated that the Job Corp was the "beginning of my future". Pam was nineteen years of age. In the Job Corp she went to school everyday, got her GED, and learned personal "responsibility" as well as life skills.

> I got my GED while I was there. And it actually showed me
> responsibility. The learning that I did there actually made me
> appreciate learning and finding out information because it was fun.
> I never felt left out.

> I didn't feel such like an outsider. As far as that I felt like I was
> like everybody else. I was normal, finally. I didn't have seizures
> anymore. I didn't have to worry about the candy and the artificial
> thing anymore.

Pam lived in survival mode for so many years that nurturing herself is not

something that comes naturally for her. Pam expressed that during the Job Corp she

finally felt "normal and fit in". However she later mentioned that she never learned "how

to nurture herself". Pam recalled being treated like a "tomboy" because she was not

feminine. She revealed that she thought the reason for her inability to nurture herself was

because she lived in survival mode for so long. Throughout her childhood, her mother

focused on her "health and safety and tried to keep her from being depressed". Pam

mentioned that as a result she never "learned how to be a girl". Pam expressed that she

"was stuck in the middle somewhere and it was awkward for a while."

> ...They considered me to be a tomboy, but I wasn't into sports and
> stuff. I just wasn't girly. And that's because I think all of that time
> my mother was so worried about me being accepted and not
> feeling. She never focused on making me a girl and making me
> feminine. So once I got out of that (allergies) I fell into another
> part of life, being around my friends who get dressed up and put on
> makeup. I still don't wear makeup. These are the things that are
> nurture, not nature. And I never got that.

Pam still prefers dressing androgynously though she mentioned that sometimes

she likes "dressing up for church or to go out". She stated that it makes her "feel pretty".

Pam no longer takes other's judgments into consideration. "It's gotten to the point where

I really don't care what other people think of me." Pam has grown into a woman who

knows who she is and no longer lets others judge her. Pam mentioned that she would title

her story, "Knowing Who I Am".

Pam as a Learner

Pam's emotional struggles have been just as difficult, if not more so than her

disabilities. She experienced humiliation and felt like and outcast from elementary school

through high school until she dropped out. Pam had support from her mother to learn but there were too many barriers. Survival was the name of the game and education and learning were not on Pam's radar. Over the years Pam struggled to figure out who she is without all the barriers. She expressed that she now knows who she is and feels that there are "no limits".

Pam has succeeded in spite of struggling with physical and learning disabilities and is currently working on her nursing school prerequisites. She explained that she is a "visual and hands on learner". As an adult, Pam has a strong desire to learn. Connecting learning with real world application eases the learning process for Pam.

> I'm hands on. I like examples. If I can associate whatever theory or concept you're trying to show me with real life, I can totally understand it. The only subject that I have that is first nature to me is math. It's not something that I ever had to learn.

Pam has reflected on her educational experiences and is very clear about her desires and expectations of learning environments. The most important element for a good learning environment is "valuing diversity". Pam experienced extreme cruelty due to being different. She was adamant that valuing diversity was critical. For Pam, diversity included "diversity of ability, socioeconomic background and thought". Pam shared what she likes about her current learning environment, the community college.

> I like the fact that people not only embrace but respect other people's cultures and beliefs. On the street if you have a religious conversation it could actually go to blows. But here at school you can actually have a conversation. I have actually done this; I had a conversation that actually got a little heated but never went anywhere after that. It was just like okay, thanks. That was your opinion that was mine. And I respect yours.

In addition to a learning environment that respects differences, Pam feels that it is important for instructors to have an open stance when they are in the classroom. Pam

shared a story of two instructors with different approaches. One has a "quick pace" but also has a "reviewing pace". Another instructor has a "slower pace" though acknowledges that "all learners are at different places". This instructor "gave you leeway to move forward and then other people to move at a slower pace". Pam described that it is critical for instructors to "respect students differences and adapt" accordingly.

> A perfect instructor understands that everybody is not at the same place in their life, in their learning, in their capableness of learning ...we're all different. They also have the ability to individually help each student with their curriculum.

For the first time in her life, Pam is attending school because she wants to, not because it is required. She looks at everything with her eyes wide open and has developed a strong inner core. She mentioned that she has "actually learned how smart she is. She believes that she has "always been really smart".

During our meetings, Pam spent quite a bit of time reflecting on her family and the support she has received over the years. Pam recalled that her whole family was into education. Her mother (who she stated was "very intelligent") is the only one in her family who attended college. Pam shared some excerpts about her family's role.

> My whole family. My mom was the only person who went to college out of my aunts and uncles and grandparents, and great-grandparents. But the were all into education. My grandfather was the biggest role model for me. Because at 83 years old he went back to school to get his high school diploma. To me that meant that no matter where you are in life you can always learn more. And you can always better yourself. And grandfather...as old as he was, still did it.

> My mother was serious about education. She's like, even if you cannot walk into a college and take classes, you can pick up a book. You can go to the library for free and get a library card and learn everything you want to. And seeking information. She said stupid people don't seek information. She was like...I don't care

how good your grades are; if you are seeking the information then you are an intelligent person.

Pam's current chapter in her story as a learner is very different than previous chapters. Pam stated that she is "enjoying learning for the first time in her life". She has realized that not only can "she do it" but she is "smart". She stated that family members constantly "call her now asking how to spell something". This is a new role and identity for Pam. She spoke about her shift.

> I've had uncles, cousins that tell me, "We did not think you were going to make it." Because when you were a child you rebelled a lot. Against anything. And I was bad. I stole cars. I sold drugs. I even prostituted myself for a while. And all of this was, I think, my trying to find a group to fit into. I wish I had never done any of it. But on the other hand, I'm grateful that I did because I think it shaped me into the person that I am today. I'm stronger for it.

Pam appreciates her new identity within her family. More importantly she has thoroughly enjoyed getting to know this part of herself, the learner within.

Personal Growth

Pam shared a story about her changing relationship with family members. Pam has experienced tremendous personal growth particularly in her perceptions about her abilities as a learner. The first half of her life was spent reacting to others, feelings of isolation, and shutting down. She has grown to appreciate herself and her abilities. For the first time in her life, Pam believes she "can do anything". Pam shared her current stance on learning.

> I love learning for learning and getting all can get. Getting A's, not just passing grades. And being able to answer questions if asked.

> I think the reason, well it was a little bit of a lot of things. It was the timing in my life; it was being more determined to get to my goals. It was the teachers around me. My co-students, who really want to learn too. A lot of everything. I was finally in a student

friendly place and an education friendly place. So it was more about learning instead of graduating.

Pam's struggles are not over. She currently suffers from Rheumatoid Arthritis. Her flare ups come and go. Pam expressed that at times, the pain distracts her from learning. Pam shared how she deals with having Rheumatoid Arthritis.

> ...it's been challenging, but it hasn't defeated me. I have learned how to put it aside. I've learned how to leave the classroom and get in a quiet corner somewhere and believe it or not, it's not that hard in this place to find a quiet corner. And just meditate for a second. Go back to class, and I'm focused. It's been challenging. But like I said, it hasn't defeated me.

Pam shared a story of multigenerational support for her as an individual and for pursuing her education. Her family was a significant part of her life story as a learner. It is the solid foundation and support that she receives from her family that propels her to continue her journey. Pam spoke about a simpler part of life.

> My great-grandparents actually raised me. Which I think a lot of my intelligence comes from them, too. It's what I called old world intelligence. They come from a simpler part of life, and sometimes a simpler part of life can have benefits. Just on if you live more ... if you live simple you have less problems. And they taught me a lot about character. About your word. My grandfather used to tell me all the time, "If your word means nothing then you mean nothing." Don't make promises you know you cannot keep. My grandfather was the best man alive.

Pam's great grandfather became a Muslim during the Harlem Renaissance. She spoke about her relationship with him and her great grandmother. These two individuals were powerful role models for Pam. She mentioned that her great grandfather played a significant role in Black history and was portrayed in a film by Spike Lee about Malcom X. She was amazed to find out that her grandfather, a photographer, was a historical figure. Pam recalled that 10,000 people came to his funeral and she remembered being

overwhelmed and amazed that "this little old man", her grandfather was so important.

Pam's grandparents were very important to her and her development.

> My grandfather (great) taught me how to be full of character. How to be a good person. My nanna…who was the strongest woman I ever met. She taught me how to be a good woman and a good wife. Nanna and grandfather are the only married people that I have ever met that were one person. Their fights always ended in laughter, which very seldom did they even have a fight.

> My grandmother, their daughter taught me how to be a feminine woman. And my mom taught me how to be educated and intelligent, and strong. My mother is a very strong person. So between them I turned out to be a pretty good person. They definitely shaped me.

> You need to get the love from somebody. And that's why I am so grateful that I have such a close extended family—because having my great-grandfather there, and my uncles, and my cousins helped me to not just lay with any boy that tells me I'm beautiful and they love me. Because I know I'm beautiful and I know I'm loved.

> I went through it, though. I was one of those girls looking for love in all the wrong places. I was just fortunate to have people around me that loved me and showed me on a constant basis. Even when I was wrong, or bad.

> They made me what I am today. And I enjoy that person. I like me.

Pam's family was critical to her development. They provided her with a strong foundation to build upon. As a learner, Pam's experiences were humiliating and isolating. She reported feeling that with out her family "making her who she is today" she would not be in school or working to achieve her goals.

Overarching Themes

Persistence.

Pam's story is one of persistence. It is not only present in her story as a learner but her life story as a whole. She described her biggest challenge for her as a learner

currently as her physical disability, rheumatoid arthritis. Regardless of her history in

school, struggles with low self esteem, or thoughts that she could not learn, Pam persists.

Pam attributed her ability to persist to her family and strong foundation and the open

learning environment that she is in today.

Transformation.

Pam's development as a learner has taken time. Unfortunately as a child she did

not have a chance due to all of the barriers she faced. Finally as an adult she has

discovered who she is; a smart woman. Pam mentioned that when she was younger, she

had questioned whether she was "retarded". She has experienced a tremendous

transformation and now believes she is intelligent and can do anything. This self

confidence and increased self esteem has flowed over into the rest of her life.

Connection.

Connection is central to Pam's life story. However until recently she did not

experience connection in a learning environment. It appeared instead in her stories about

family and the multigenerational child rearing that she experienced. Currently things have

shifted for Pam and connection is more and more important to her learning. She

described that she is a connected learner who needs to "connect what she learns to real

world applications". She shared that this is a "new discovery and has occurred over the

past two years". Pam continues to develop as a learner as does her connection to her

learning environment.

Chapter Summary

Pam mentioned that today as an African American woman there is "nobody

stopping you" and that there are "no limitations". This was not so for the majority of

Pam's life as a learner. Limitations and barriers led to missing out on developing a love for learning and gaining knowledge. Pam mentioned that her mother supported her to learn not for the sake of grades but for "knowledge itself". Today, as an adult learner, Pam loves to learn and is always seeking knowledge. Pam shared, "there's nothing in front of me but my education. So I have more focus, more enthusiasm and more excitement about it." In the next chapter I present Nanny and her life story as a learner.

CHAPTER 11: NANNY
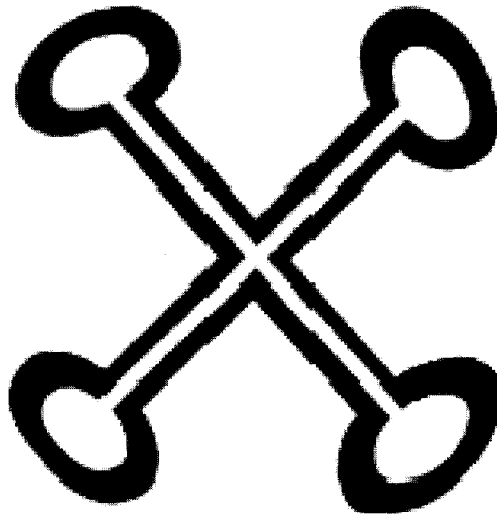
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"God never dies, therefore I cannot die"

(Willis, 1998, p. 162)

An Introduction to Nanny

Nanny is a vibrant woman in her mid fifties. She reported that fellow students think she is at "least ten years younger". Despite her physical disabilities, Nanny exhibits more energy than many half her age. She is a student, mother, grandmother, and her community is at the center of Nanny's world. Nanny selected a West African symbol that translates to "god never dies, therefore I cannot die" (Willis, 1998, p. 162). This image symbolizes the immortality of the human soul (Willis, p. 162). Nanny spoke of God and her spiritual beliefs often as a source of inspiration that keeps her going in spite of physical disabilities, loss, and the stress of living a full life. Her spiritual beliefs are at the core of her existence and are ever present in each decision or action she takes in her life. Nanny described herself.

> I see myself as caring, giving, always ... kind of putting others
> above myself and helping others. So I see myself as just an overall
> giving, caring person. Trying to help anybody I can, whenever I
> can. "If I can't help anybody, why am I here?"

Nanny returned to school after 35 years. She is a mother of three, spouse, and grandmother. She has been involved in student government, mentors other students regularly, and is very involved in her community whether it is at the community college, church or in her neighborhood. Nanny has done a lot of soul searching over the years and has grown into an individual who cares about herself and others.

Nanny's Life Story and Earliest Memories

Nanny was born in Louisiana and moved to California when she was nine years of age. She shared excerpts from her life story in Louisiana fondly. Initially Nanny was raised by her grandparents and lived in a house with fifteen family members. She came

away from her time in "the country" with a strong foundation and a sense of community.

Nanny shared her early memories of a one room schoolhouse.

>My early years in school were growing up in a one-room
schoolhouse back in the country (Louisiana), where we had first
grade...we didn't have kindergarten. But first grade through sixth
grade and I would say that I truly enjoyed school. I love spelling. I
was in the spelling bee; I came in second place. I never forget that.
And always helping people, even from a young age. You know, the
teachers. Always helping the teachers. I found them always calling
on me to help others with spelling, or whatever they needed help
with. And just having such a wonderful time as a child growing up.
Getting to know what school was all about. We had home studies.
My grandmother was a big inspiration in my life in my early years
in school she taught me how to read from a book called "Dick and
Jane." "Fun With Dick and Jane." I still remember to this day.

Nanny's life story included strong community foundations. As a child Nanny's

community included her large extended family and her entire neighborhood.

>...even with 15 people in the house, she was always there to help
me with my studies. And I still remember sitting there with her and
my grandfather and them teaching me how to read and telling me
the importance of learning how to read and just sticking with
school. Because without it there was nothing.

>We were a community. Back there we had the saying that it takes a
village to raise a child. And while I experienced that no matter
where I went and what I was doing when I got home ... just
walking along. I was the type of person who I liked to walk along,
chase butterflies, look at the flowers, and pick berries. And if I was
taking my time they would call my grandma. Or she would call
somebody down the road and they go...oh, I see Nanny; she's over
here, looking at the flowers, or picking flowers, or doing this.
"Your grandmother is waiting for you," and sure enough she
would be standing on the porch.

Nanny's transition from Louisiana to California was made especially difficult by

fellow students in her sixth grade class.

>From Louisiana to here was a big transformation. When I got to
sixth grade ... oh God. It was the cruelest experience in my life. I
never thought that people would be so cruel. When I started there,

the girls were mean. They didn't know me; they didn't allow
themselves a chance to get to know me. They would literally, some
of them would throw things as the teacher, eggs or whatever. And
it was so bad. We were having ... I'll never forget the graduation
we were having. Someone literally just spat on me. That was so
gross. We went to graduation practice, and I was sitting there with
this evil look on me that day, like if I find out who did it ... I
wanted to really beat them up. And that wasn't me. But that
brought out a bad side in me.

Nanny's life story includes "living through Jim Crow", sanctioned segregation
and institutionalized racism. While she was "used to" prejudice and racism, she had never
experienced prejudice within the African American community. She could not believe
that "African American people could treat other African Americans that way". Nanny
shared her story about internal prejudice and discrimination within the African American
community.

It was very different (California). The people here were to
themselves. And the children thought they were so much better
than we were, because we came from the country. It was hotter
there and our skin was darker than theirs, and they were like oh,
they're so black, they're so dark. Geez, we're all black; you're just
a lighter version of me, but we're all still black. I couldn't believe
it. The verbal abuse...and a lot of them wanted to fight my
brothers.

At nine years of age, Nanny was faced with a huge transition. She was in a new
school, community, and family. Nanny not only reunited with her mother but also joined
an established family with half siblings and a new stepfather. Nanny shared her story
about being influenced by peer pressure and the introspective process she engaged in.

When I was in elementary school I made A's and B's and all of a
sudden there was this peer pressure and this big drop in my life
when I became a teenager. When I was in high school I really in
school. I got caught up with this group; really fell by the way side
and wasn't interested in going to school, and take classes like I
should have been.

I started really looking at my report cards and examining myself, and seeing that I was a much better person than those grades that I was bringing home. And my mom, who was working hard raising six children, and my stepdad…they were really disappointed in me. I was disappointed in myself, because I knew that I had come from a very good background.

I left Berkeley High School and I went to the continuation school here in Berkeley. And there I got a grip on my life, and I started to focus on what I wanted in my life. So I started changing things around and really studying, reading which was my passion and I even got a job there. My grades came up drastically, and I was so impressed, knowing that I could do the work; that it wasn't because I couldn't do it, but just that I had peer pressure.

Nanny shared that later in her life she experienced peer pressure again and turned to alcohol and drugs. Once again Nanny shared the reflective process she engaged in that brought her back to her roots and herself.

I was always a thinker. I was always a reader. And I would sit and think about the things my grandparents had taught me. I would reflect back on my life when I was growing up in the country, and how well I had done, and knowing that the things that had been instilled in me as a child I had strayed away. From all of the things that I had really been taught. And I was not doing the things I promised my grandparents that I would continue to do when I came to California. It was just a drastic change in my life.

I made the wrong choices in life. And I was just grateful to have gotten away from the people that I was hanging with, and to make the right choice and to realize that without the proper education that there was nothing that I could do.

Not only did Nanny's grades drop in High School but she turned to alcohol in an attempt to deal with all of the issues she was struggling with. Nanny mentioned that reuniting with her mother was difficult.

And me getting to know my mom again; I guess I was scared to really talk to her, because she had been raising three other children here in California and I didn't know how to go and approach her, and to talk to her. So the problems I started having … I would get

with people and oh, if you get a drink you'll be okay. So I just thought that that was the thing to do.

Nanny came back to school two years ago after a thirty five year break. She returned after entering recovery and reestablishing her relationship with herself. Nanny spoke about change and returning to school.

> ...and I realized for myself this is not the life, Nanny, for you; this is not the person who you are. You are a much better person than this; you know that you can go to school; you can get a great education. But you have to want it for yourself. So when I realized that, I decided to make a change. So all those things, and the people that were there and placed in my life really helped me pull myself back from where I had to realize that education was the greatest thing that I could ever have in my life, and if ever wanted to make a change in anybody's life I had to do it first for myself so that I can tell the other people about the things that I have been through and how they could make a change in their lives, and be better people.

Nanny described her fear about returning to school and enrolling at the community college was almost unbearable. She shared her internal thoughts from when she first enrolled as a community college student.

> To be there in class with all of the young people, I kept hearing this voice going, "Oh, you're going to be in class; you're not going to know anything everybody is going to know everything. So why even bother to go?"

Nanny faced many barriers over the years and has overcome them. A recent barrier was the fear she felt upon returning to school. Her fear was that she would not be able to do it.

> Coming back to school and getting in class, and sitting in the back of the room and not wanting teachers to call me, because it was over ... I think about 35 years that I had been out of school. But the fear of coming back to college and not really knowing all the math that I should have...

...coming back and trying to bring that back after all the drugs and
alcohol it was really hard. Because it just wasn't there. And I was
not retaining. And there was a point that I really wanted to give up,
but something inside of me just kept pushing me to just go ahead
and just hang in there. Don't give up.

Nanny experienced segregation and institutional racism at a young age. She

recalled her grandparent's messages about education and how they linked opportunity to

a history void of opportunity for African Americans. Nanny shared her memories of

segregation and how they serve as a foundation for her drive to achieve.

Seeing myself as an African American in school has really helped.
Because I remember the time when African Americans could not
read, write, or were able to pick up a book. And now that we have
the opportunity to do it, for me it's a great lesson to be able to just
go. Go to any library, go anywhere and just know that you have the
freedom to read, to do whatever you want to do and not be afraid
anymore that someone is going to say hey, you can't read; you're
not supposed to read...reading is against everything that we stand
for. You know? It has given us the opportunity to be able to not
only read but to write books, to express ourselves the way we feel
through whatever has gone on in our lives.

So it is letting me know that as an African American woman I can
do anything that I want to do with my education. School is the
ticket; it's the tool for me to better myself, to help my
grandchildren better themselves in life. And anyone else that wants
to better themselves in life.

As a child Nanny experienced a strong sense of connection in her community

while living in a segregated world. Nanny recalled African American history and how

education was banned. As an African American woman today, she sees "nothing holding

her back and only opportunity ahead of her".

Nanny as a Learner

As a learner, Nanny has experienced ups and downs. Nanny described herself as a "visual and hands on learner". She stated that she was always a "reader and a thinker". "I love visual aides".

> I love all of the tools that are available, because there is no ... They all work for me. They all work. And I'm a hands-on person as well.

As an adult returning to school after thirty five years, her biggest challenge included overcoming fear, "learning the strategies", and retaining information. She titled her journey as a learner "From Failure to Success".

> You know, fear is the key to trying to destroy all of us. But you don't let fear overcome you; you overcome fear by getting that book, by getting into that knowledge.

Nanny expressed that an interactive learning environment is best for her. She shared that she learns more when she is "able to work with others". Nanny recalled sitting in groups to discuss readings.

> Sitting in groups in a circle and going around the circle and just sharing things from the book that you got out of it. You get one thing. Somebody else gets something else. It really helps to hear everybody's different points that the people pull out from the book to help bring the story together for you.

In order to be successful, Nanny realized that she needs to "close off from the world" to learn. She also needs to "read and re-read material sometimes many times" to retain things. She sees herself as a "learner and a teacher" at the same time as she teaches other students how to succeed. Nanny finds group work very helpful to her learning. She mentioned that it helps her to "hear other's ideas" and that it stimulates her learning and allows her to "expand on upon her understanding".

As a learner I find that I have to close myself off to the world; turn my telephone off... I have to lock myself away from everybody. And being out of school so long, it's a little bit harder for me to kind of grasp. I may have to read and re-read, and re-read something. And then I take notes when I'm going through. Either I mark up my book and just highlight those things that stick out to me, that I know. I don't know; I just know that this is going to be on the test, or the teacher may be asking this. And I just love to be by myself, to be able to get a book, to focus.

Nanny's notion of a perfect instructor is one who "interacts with their classes, shares information, is patient, and who encourages students at all levels and abilities".

I like the instructors that interact with the class. We're all sharing with one another, and they have patience, they don't rush you when you're in the middle of talking about something; they let you finish what you're going to say. Just taking out the time with the students, realizing that this person may need more time than that person. Because I'm one of those people that kind of ... when I talk I sometimes need a little more time to express myself, and I'm still learning to express myself.

Nanny mentioned that the best instructors are "really a part of the class". More important than different ways of teaching, is when instructor takes the time to "get to know their students" and engage them, providing extra information.

That participates. Interacts. You know, it's kind of like they went from being the instructor to one of the students with us, and just kind of interacted. And it's really something that we need more of. I understand the roles of teachers and the rules that they have, but sometimes they can kind of set aside their titles, I'm a teacher, but today I'm going to interact with you and go around. And we did that a lot when I first came in, and that's a part that helped me to open up.

Nanny mentioned that for the first time she learned that there can be "multiple right answers". She expressed relief in discovering that particularly with literature there are multiple answers.

There's no wrong or right answer they would tell me, so you're
opinion is your opinion—and everybody is entitled to their
opinion. So it really helped, because I always had this fear that,
everything I say, it may be wrong, it's going to be wrong, it's not
going to be right. And I lost that.

Nanny's experiences as a learner have been challenging. Currently she feels

confident about her learning abilities and has worked through her anxiety about "being

good enough to compete with young kids".

Personal Growth

Nanny summarized her personal growth. "My whole life is a transformation, it

has been challenging." She has transformed over the years in many areas of her life and

has come to a place of wholeness and acceptance. Nanny mentioned that she had to

"focus on her self and change her life to be able to help others". She actively embraced

growth in an effort to get where she is today. Community is at the core of Nanny's life

and includes her family, school community, church community, and neighborhood.

Nanny described being "depressed, fearful and short tempered" at times. She also

shared stories about and persevering, as well as respecting, caring, and giving to herself

and others. Nanny has grown into a learner who has found her voice and is able to

express herself; "no more holding back". Nanny tells herself and others she mentors

"Don't ever give up, don't let fear overcome you". Nanny shared her thoughts about her

personal growth.

The growth is being able to recognize what I was going through
and being able to make that change, and to just move on forward.
And right now it's not to look back at the negative part of it, but to
realize that I've overcome that and now I'm able to help someone
else when they come to me to make a change in their lives.

There were a lot of turning points in my life. I think my first
turning point started with realizing who I was at that time.
Growing up, raising a family, involved in the drugs and the alcohol
and realizing that I could not help myself, so therefore I could not
help my children. So in order to be able to help myself I had to
make a change within myself. Then I can give to my children and
to others.

After I realized that I had to find out where I had to go in order to
make these changes. And my grandfather's words came back to
me. We were a very spiritual family, a Christian family. We grew
up in the church. And I could hear his voice so plainly, saying to
me, "Whatever you do, when you get to the big city don't let the
bright lights and the big city fool you; it's only a big city.
Whatever you do, just stay with Jesus. Always go to church.
Remember what we instilled in you." And that for me was a
turning point in getting back on track.

Nanny's family and early beginnings in Louisiana planted seeds that continue to grow within her. She consistently returned to herself and to these early messages when she went off track. Currently Nanny continues to strive for her goals.

Overarching Themes

Persistence.

Nanny's strong foundation from her grandparents and foundation from Louisiana have propelled her through life and led to her persistence. Even when she went "off track" she returned to herself, her foundation, and her spirituality. Nanny shared an early message that she shares with other African American students at the community college.

There was a time when we could not study and now we have this
opportunity to go ahead and get any book that you want to read
and to be anything that you want to be in life. And don't let life
pass you by; just go ahead and strive to do all that you can do.

According to Nanny, there is "no one holding you back but yourself".

Transformation.

Over the years Nanny experienced more than one transformation. Nanny went from a child eager to learn to one who was torn down and distracted by her peers. She mentioned that her life would have been very different if she had not moved to California. She also mentioned that she is grateful to be where she is today and on the other side of things. Nanny has grown over the past two years. She has overcome her fears and is eager for the next learning experience.

> I have changed a great deal since I've been here. I really have.
> There's no fear of learning, there's no fear of going forward with
> my dreams. I mean, I am ready to be challenged even to the
> greatest level of education.

Overcoming her fear and becoming more confident in her learning abilities has fed Nanny's connection with her community and other learners.

Connection.

Nanny's need for connection and relationship is present throughout her life story. Her life began with connection in Louisiana where she learned the importance of taking care of others and community. Nanny's foundation continues today with a preference for a connected learning environment where students and the instructor work together in a quest for knowledge. Nanny's need for connection is also present in her overwhelming desire to mentor and support others in her community whether it is at the community college, her church or neighborhood.

Chapter Summary

Nanny titled her life story as a learner "from failure to success". She has experienced challenges over the years but her story is full of growth and success. Currently she is on the road to success.

I say the world is my oyster, and I can just go open it up and
whatever pearl, it's mine. I am just so encouraged. I am just living
every minute of it. And I'm enjoying every minute of it.

This excerpts sums up Nanny's stance about the remainder of her journey as a

learner. In the following and final chapter of my dissertation I share my inquirer thoughts

and recommendations for future inquiries.

CHAPTER 12: INQUIRER THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The beauty and challenge of narrative inquiry is in the honoring of each individual as well as their shared cultural knowledge.

Introduction

A few years ago, I enrolled in a student development class as part of my doctoral program. In this class I had the opportunity to re-read Gilligan's (1977, 1982) work. I was struck by the fact that the voice of my students, African American women, were missing from the literature. As I began delving deeper into the collected ways of knowing works (Belenky et al. 1986, Goldberger et al. 1996), I realized that they were still missing and their voices were not being heard. At the community college we strive to serve all of our students and their needs. Practitioners turn to the literature for guidance when developing programs and services. Likewise policy makers use the literature as the underpinnings for policies leading to state and federal funding, strategic goals, and programs. The literature on African American women learners exists however the community college student is rarely, if ever included. While many of my students transfer to a four year university their path is very different than those who enter a four year university straight from high school as are their stories as learners. Practitioners, need to listen to the voices of those they serve get to know who our students are and then develop programs to meet their needs. My journey as a counselor, practitioner, and most of all as a learner has brought me to a place where I am keenly aware of my students' stories as learners and how they impact their lives.

My inquiry included six native born African American women enrolled in an urban community college. As practitioners, we are aware that from college to college our demographics differ. What we sometimes loose site of is that our students' life stories as learners also differ as do their needs for support. There were three overarching themes that emerged from my participants' life stories and included persistence, transformation, and connection. While these themes ran across the stories, they were represented in each story in a unique manner. Through their stories and emergent themes, my participants articulated their needs and recommendations for practitioners and policy makers. If practitioners listen to the voices of the women in my inquiry and others like theirs, they may be better equipped to support them on their path to success.

Summary of Findings

One of the major findings in my inquiry was the uniqueness of each woman's experience and story as a learner. As researchers and practitioners alike it is easy to think of students in terms of groups whether it be re-entry students, transfer students or the many other classifications that are commonly used in the Academy. While these classifications are useful in addressing the meta-level groupings of our students, there are other elements that add to their uniqueness.

I began this journey with the goal of adding the voices of native born African women enrolled in an urban community college to the larger tapestry of women learners' voices. While I have met my goal, I realized that their voices are as varied as the women. Starting with the similarities, I turn to the overarching themes that framed my analysis. Persistence, transformation, and connection are all prominent elements of each of the women's stories and inductively emerged as an interpretive framework. It is interesting

how each theme plays a unique role in my participant's life stories. For instance each woman told stories of persistence and overcoming an obstacle to their success. Additionally, all of the women except Vanessa shared stories about how institutional racism or internal prejudice within the African American community served as an obstacle to their success. These experiences of oppression blocked them from focusing on themselves as learners and their goals. Several of the women were raised with a strong and supportive foundation that they were able to return to when the found themselves straying off their path. For Nanny, Tiffany, and Pam this foundation was deeply rooted in African American history and the fact that African Americans were not allowed to "even pick up a book" at one time. All three of the women shared stories and messages from their grandparents and great grandparents that stressed the importance of using the opportunities afforded them. Holding on to the historical context and bringing it into their current lives today strengthens their resolve to not only persist but excel.

The same uniqueness is present in how transformation and connection stand out as themes in each story. Every woman in my inquiry has undergone transformations over the years. I was struck by the depth and breadth of personal growth reported by my participants since enrolling in a community college. The two women who stand out are Samantha and Pam. Each of them questioned whether they had the ability to learn and if they were "retarded or lazy". These women endured early years as learners that were about anything but learning or acquiring knowledge. Instead they learned how to shut down, feel humiliated, and isolated. In each case they struggled with disabilities however it was the humiliation instilled by other children and teachers that led to their lack of desire to learn. For Pam her learning disabilities were combined with physical disabilities

which led to even greater struggles. Samantha and Pam have grown into learners who feel empowered, accept all of themselves, and who are determined to achieve their goals. As Pam stated, there are "no limits".

Connection was the one word that I heard the loudest as I listened in the interviews and analyzed the transcripts. It is at the heart of who these women are as learners and human beings. Connection was important to my participants both within the learning environment and within the larger community. My participants stressed the importance of connected learning environments where instructor and student alike engaged in an active learning process and quest for knowledge. Connection with the material being learned and applied learning that links material to the real world was also important. Once my participants felt more secure as learners, the campus community and fellow students became more important to them. They have grown into advocates for others who have not found their voices. Connection is also at the heart of my inquiry and the women's ways of knowing literature.

Life Stories and the Literature

The women's ways of knowing research concluded that the majority of women learners are connected knowers (Belenky, et al, 1986). I expected to find that perhaps a majority of the women in my inquiry might fall in line with those in the ways of knowing research however I was surprised to find that all of them are connected knowers. Every story included a need for a teacher to be part of the group and connected to their students in an interactive and joint search for knowledge. None of them expressed that they viewed their instructors as the end all and be all of knowledge. In fact, many of the women mentioned that it was important for their instructors to value their students as

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learners and validate them and their learning process. To that end it several of my

participants stressed the need for a learning environment where learners are seen as

unique with different learning abilities. For the women in my inquiry learning begins and

ends with a premise of connection. Every story included a preference for group work and

using collaborative explorations to gain knowledge (Goldberger, 1996).

As Goldberger (1996) found, prominent in my participants' stories were pain,

anger, and confusion. Goldberger linked these experiences to the oppression of the

dominant culture and the imposed ways of knowing in the Academy. In some instances I

found this to be true however perhaps due to the high percentage of women with learning

or physical disabilities, I was not able to ascertain whether the anger, isolation, and

confusion was due to issues related to having a disability or if it was due to cultural and

racial issues. I recommend additional research comparing groups with and without

disabilities might provide some clarification.

Hurtado (1996) mentioned that women of color struggle with multi-group

membership and associated anger, withdrawal, and ranges of voice from silence to

outspokenness related to this multiple association. I found that multi-group membership

impacted the women in my inquiry. Evident in three of the women's stories was the

pendulum affect that Hurtado referred to, swinging from silence to outspokenness and

then back to a center and powerful voice. As a therapist, I have seen this phenomenon

with clients who lost their voice for a variety of reasons. I do not see it as unique to

women of color but anyone whose voice has been silenced. The special ways of knowing

that Hurtado mentioned and the associated multiple identities was also evident in all of

the life stories. I found that for the women with mixed ancestry, there was an additional

layer of confusion and questioning of where they fit in. On the other hand, Desiree who

has both mixed ancestry and a learning disability abhors the idea of categorization of any

kind. It was clear throughout her story that her world view is based on commonness

rather than differences. Hurtado called women of color relative knowers. She asserted

that the anger experienced by women of color either led to blocking or facilitating

learning. In my participants' stories where blatant racism and oppression were present

both extremes are clearly present. For these women, initially they were blocked by their

anger however today the have worked through their anger and use their experiences as

well as the history of the African American as a learner to propel them forward. Tiffany's

story of the "tiger" and "cat" are a perfect example of the unbridled ferociousness that

many African American women experience or are labeled with. Tiffany, Nanny, and

Samantha were initially blocked by their anger but now they have harnessed it and use it

for their benefit. Hurtado mentioned the development of multiple voices. The women in

my inquiry were initially silenced by their learning experiences and have only recently

found their voices. I did not find that they had yet developed multiple voices. Hurtado

discussed the political nature of knowledge. I was struck by Desiree's story and her

assertions about the political nature of knowledge and access to knowledge. Desiree has

only recently found her voice and it continues to grow as does her outrage about this

issue. She is determined to assist other African American women overcome the political

issues blocking access to knowledge.

Rosales and Person (2003) asserted that African American women were more

successful on campuses where there is a critical mass of African American women. I

found it interesting that none of my students mentioned the need to be around other

African American women. Perhaps the fact that they are enrolled in a diverse school with a fairly large population of African American women plays a factor in this phenomenon. Instead of mentioning this issue, the women in my inquiry focused on the need for connection with other students as whole, not just African American students. Each woman in my inquiry shared stories on three levels including the emotional, psychological and cultural aspects of their lives. Many of the women shared stories that led to feelings of isolation, humiliation, and depression. Also included were stories about being ignored by educational institutions. Stories along this theme were prominent and weighed heavy on the women in my inquiry. They stressed the need for a learning environment that validates its learners. Even though African American women share a common history, it is important to remember they are unique as are their life stories. As a result institutions and practitioners alike need to listen to and respect their individual and group voices. As Howard-Hamilton (2003) pointed out, not all African American women learners are the same. As a result, it is important that institutions do not use a single minded approach as it diminishes their chances of success.

Recommendations for Practitioners

My participants had several messages for practitioners however their most detailed and definitive was about the learning environment. The six women in my inquiry are yearning for a learning environment where instructors view students as important and valuable to the learning process. This validation is important and fosters increased self esteem about their learning abilities. It was apparent from my participants' stories that learning environments that do not validate or value the learner as an individual are harmful to them. My participants universally felt that a connected learning environment

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is important. A connected learning environment goes beyond an instructor who cares about their students. Rather it is about the learning community at large where students are connecting with others in interactive situations within the classroom as well as in activities throughout the college. According to my participants, a connected learning environment encourages students to engage in a learning process where they can relate what they are learning to the real world and their lives. All of the women in my inquiry mentioned they found this approach to learning most effective and that they retained more information with this method. It is critical that as practitioners we listen to our students and engage in dialogue across the college about pedagogy and student needs so that our colleges are success centers for all learners.

Although I recommend further study with native born, African American women enrolled in urban community colleges, there is sufficient evidence presented in my inquiry to suggest several recommendations for practitioners and policy makers. My first recommendation is to implement ongoing professional development for new instructors about pedagogy. As faculty, we are hired for our knowledge in our areas of study as a result many instructors have their first teaching experiences on the first day of class. Dialogue about pedagogy is not only beneficial but if it includes student voices like those in my inquiry it will take us one step closer to fostering success in native born, African American. Based on my participants' stories, I recommend stressing active learning and connected learning as previously defined.

My second recommendation includes developing freshman or re-entry student programs that support students as they reflect on their life stories as learners. It was evident from my participants' life stories that their early memories had a profound affect

on their lives as learners. Providing students with an avenue to engage in a similar process and allowing them to share stories about their earliest memories and how they impact who they are today as learners may increase retention of first semester students. Such programs might incorporate courses, workshops, counseling, and peer support to engage students in the learning process early on. My participants' stressed the need for a connected learning environment. A keystone program may increase student engagement and persistence. Additionally, capstone experiences where students are encouraged to reflect on their lives as learners and growth over time might also be useful. My participants' reported that the reflective process they engaged in during our meetings was beneficial and provided them with a view of their growth since enrolling at the community college.

My third recommendation is to establish formal peer mentoring with second year students as mentors for first year students. Such a program could be linked to a class for re-entry students or could stand alone. As previously mentioned, each of my participants' has experienced personal growth and transformation during their enrollment at community college. As part of this process, they expressed a strong desire to advocate and support other students as they strive to achieve their goals. Formalizing a program for peer support would empower students to advocate for others and foster a connected learning environment.

My fourth recommendation would be to expand funding for research and programs and services for students with disability. My participants shared stories with a high degree of physical and or learning disabilities. Increasing awareness and outreach to students who might have learning disabilities is only one element. If there is insufficient

funding for supportive services, outreach is ineffective. Based on my participants' life stories this is an area that needs to be addressed.

Recommendations for Future Inquiries

I was amazed when I discovered that four out of the six women that participated in my inquiry had learning and or physical disabilities. I did not expect to find this. I invited one hundred and fifty seven women to participate in my study. It is possible that the women who came forward to participate in my inquiry were eager to tell their stories because they had experienced such tremendous growth as learners over the years. However another possibility is that there is a similar percentage of disabilities in the larger population of native born, African American women enrolled in an urban community college.

My recommendations for further research includes conducting additional narrative inquiries, a phenomenology, or an ethnography of African American women learners in the community college system to inquire about the prevalence of learning or physical disabilities. I wonder if there is a difference in the number of African American women learners with disabilities versus other groups of students.

I also recommend additional qualitative studies with African American women learners in the community college system inquiring into their lived experiences or life stories as learners. My inquiry only chisels a small opening in the larger window of these women and their unique life stories as learners. Additional studies looking at African American women learners enrolled in a community college and their life stories or experiences as learners would strengthen the data and further assist practitioners and policy makers in supporting their success. One area that I would be interested to learn

more about is the early experiences and memories of African American women learners. I found that early memories and experiences had a profound affect on my participants' and their self esteem as learners. Additional qualitative studies in this area might be beneficial not only to community college practitioners and policy makers but also K-12 practitioners and may lead to programmatic changes or professional development activities.

Finally, I recommend qualitative studies that compare first semester African American community college students and last semester African American community college students. I recommend assessing self esteem and personal growth of these two groups of students. Alternatively, a comparison of active and connected learning environments with traditional learning environments would also be interesting. In this study, looking at student success in these different learning environments might lead to useful conclusions for practitioners and policy makers.

Engaging African American community college students in further research can only strengthen our abilities as practitioners to support them and their journeys as learners.

Some Last Thoughts

Not only was my inquiry process an intellectual journey but also a spiritual one. I view spirituality as a way of life that cuts across religion. I also view it as what guides me in my life and how I interact with other human beings. I feel it is important to honor others and their experiences while also validating my own. In my daily life as a counselor I strive to work in a manner that acknowledges others' stories and how they impact their lives as learners. It is this acknowledgement that allows me to connect with my students

where they are in their journey. My inquiry allowed me to delve deeper than I ordinarily have the time, into the life stories of six amazing women. I feel that through my journey I have developed a deeper understanding and compassion for not only these women but my students as a whole. I also feel renewed and more connected to my work as a result of my inquiry. As a result of my inquiry, I am not only more vigilant with regards to issues of oppression within the college community but I have engaged students more in dialogue about issues related to power and oppression in their lives as learners. It was the individual and collective life stories of African American women that I focused on in my inquiry. The unexpected benefit of embarking on this journey as an inquirer has been the broadening and deepening of my perspective with all of my students.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I shared more of my journey as an inquirer as well as my thoughts about my findings. Also included are recommendations for practitioners and further research. Enacting Tillman's (2002) recommendations for research with African American participants provided a strong foundation for me to build upon and led to an inquiry rich with life stories. As part of my culturally sensitive approach, I held my participants and their individual and collective knowledge at the center of my inquiry from conceptualization to final write up. I returned to Tillman at each step to ensure that I was being mindful of my participants and their experiences and including historical and contemporary issues as well as their self-defined experiences in the final presentation of their life stories. Enacting a culturally sensitive approach assisted me in conducting an ethical and sound inquiry that produced rich stories with strong recommendations for

practitioners and policy makers and it was a perfect fit for my inquirer stance, chosen topic, and my participants.

I thoroughly enjoyed conducting my inquiry and getting to know the six women who were my participants. My relationship with these women has grown over time and many of them check in with me to update me on their life stories as learners. Our journey together continues.

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APPENDICES
Appendix A
Letter of Invitation to Participate in Inquiry

June, 2007

Dear EOPS Student:

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study through Colorado State University's School of Education. The purpose of this study is to gather stories about the role of education and learning in the lives of African American women who are native born in the United States, residing in an urban area, and enrolled (part time or full time) at Berkeley City College.

If you agree, you will be a participant in 2 one-on-one interviews. The first interview will last 90 minutes. The second interview will last 60 minutes. You will be asked to tell stories about your life experiences in education. All interviews will be conducted at Berkeley City College in a private office. The interviews will be digitally recorded and then transcribed.

You will receive a transcript of the first interview prior to the second interview. During the second interview you will be asked to clarify information you have provided in the initial interview.

The records of this study will be kept private. All transcripts will be maintained in locked file. Recordings will be stored in a password protected digital file on the researcher's personal computer. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings which will be erased at the end of the study.

Your pseudonym, rather than your name, will appear on all transcripts and study write ups. Any writings that are published will not include information that will make it possible to identify participants.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and there are no known risks or benefits from participating. If you decide to become a participant, please contact the Co-principal researcher, Tina Vasconcellos by telephone or email using the information shown below.

Tina Vasconcellos
Co-Principal Investigator
510-981-2836
tina.vasconcellos@colostate.edu

Clifford P. Harbour, J.D., Ed.D.
Principal Investigator
Associate Professor and Program Chair
Community College Leadership Program
970-491-5425

APPENDIX B
Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: In their Words: Life Stories of Native Born, Urban African American Women Enrolled in a Community College

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Clifford P. Harbour, J.D., Ed.D., Associate Professor, School of Education, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, 80523 Tel: 970.491.5425 E-Mail: cliff.harbour@colostate.edu

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Tina Vasconcellos: 510.981.2836; email: tvasconcellos@peralta.edu.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH? We are asking you to participate in this study because you have been identified as an African American woman, native born in the United States, residing in an urban area, and enrolled (part time or full time) at Berkeley City College. If you agree to participate in the study, we will ask you about your stories in two private confidential interviews. Each interview will last up to 90 minutes. You will be asked open ended questions and to tell stories from your experiences in education and the role of education and learning in your life. You will also be asked to tell stories about your method of learning.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY? This study is being conducted by Tina Vasconcellos at Berkeley City College. Tina is a doctoral student at Colorado State University and is conducting this research as a part of her doctoral dissertation. Tina is the Co-Principal Investigator in this study. Cliff Harbour is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at Colorado State University. Cliff is Tina's dissertation advisor and is the Principal Investigator in this study.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY? The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore and illuminate the lives and learning experiences of African American women through their stories. Participants will be interviewed to capture the lived stories of African American woman, native born in the United States, residing in an urban area, and enrolled (part time or full time) at Berkeley City College. Private, individual, face-to-face interviews will be conducted, and transcript data will be analyzed to identify emergent themes reflected in the participant's stories. The interviews will be open-ended and in-depth to discover the unique, layered experiences and allow the participants to discuss relevant and perhaps unanticipated topics related to the role of education and learning in their lives as well as their approaches to learning. A Holistic Content analysis and interpretation of the data will be applied.

Page 1 of 3. Participant's initials _____ Date _____

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST? The study will take place at Berkeley City College in Berkeley, California. The study is scheduled to run from May 1, 2007 to December 31, 2007.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO? This study will collect data through an analysis and interpretation of interview transcripts. If you agree to participate in the study we will interview you in private at a date, time, and location that we both agree upon. You will be asked to participate in a follow-up interview. Your identity and the identity of your institution will remain confidential.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? There are no known reasons why you should not take place in this study.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS? There are no known risks or discomforts to you if you participate in this study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

WILL I BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? There are no known benefits to you if you decide to participate in this study.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY? Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME TO PARTICIPATE? The only cost to you for participating in the study will be the time needed to conduct your interviews. We estimate the first interview will take approximately one and half hours and the second interview approximately one hour.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?
The information that you give will be seen by the Principal Investigator, Co-Principal Investigator, and a professional transcriber. Selected excerpts from your interviews may be reviewed by the members of my dissertation committee. They may also be included in my dissertation or incorporated into journal articles or conference presentations. In all such cases, pseudonyms would be used to identify you and your institution.

CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY? We are unaware of any reason why your participation in the study would be ended once your interview begins.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? No, you will not receive any compensation for taking part in this study.

Page 2 of 3. Participant's initials _____ Date _____

WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH? The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS? Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the principal investigator, Clifford P. Harbour, at 970-491-5425. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Meldrum, Human Subjects Administrator at 970-491-1553. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take *with you.*

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?
Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing three pages.

_____   _____
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____   _____
Name of person providing information to participant   Date

_____
Signature of Research Staff

Page 3 of 3. Participant's initials _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C
Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Stories have beginnings, middles, and endings. I am interested in hearing your stories about the role of education in your life, messages about education, and about your approach to learning.

1. Everyone has a life story. Can you tell me a bit about your life as a student?

2. If you were to write the story of your experiences in school, what would the chapters be?

3. As you look back over your experiences as a community college student, what are some of the events that stand out?

4. How do you see your experiences as a learner fit into your life story?

5. How would you describe the role of education in your life?

6. Can you tell me a story about you as a learner?

7. How would you describe the perfect learning environment? Instructor?

8. Can you tell me the story of being an African American woman in school?

9. How would you describe the role of community, family, and friends in your story about education?