

2009

# "The best we can with what we got": Mediating social and cultural capital in a Title I school

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“The Best We Can With What We Got”:  
Mediating Social and Cultural Capital in a Title I School

by

Jarin Rachel Eisenberg

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Keywords: No Child Left Behind, Minority Students, Low-Income, Resources, Teacher-  
student Relationships

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### **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mom and dad, who believed in me even when I did not believe in myself. They have sacrificed to give me this opportunity and have always appreciated the person that I am. Thank you for supporting me, loving me, and always telling me things would be ok. I feel honored to be able to share this accomplishment with you and look forward to the many we will share in the future.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first and foremost like to acknowledge my committee members for their ongoing dedication and support throughout this project. Dr. Maralee Mayberry, you were one of the main reasons I wanted to study education. Thank you for your time and patience. I would not be writing this without your support throughout the past four years. I learned from you how to handle situations and how to carry myself —skills that will last me a lifetime. One of the best experiences I have had throughout this process was being able to discuss ideas with you, thank you. Dr. Tomas Rodriguez, thank you for taking a chance on a random student who showed up at your office talking about Title I. I feel honored to have been mentored by you. Your constant words of encouragement fueled me throughout this process. Every time I left a meeting with you I felt like I could conquer the world, thank you. Dr. Elizabeth Vaquera, thank you for your time and your open door policy and most of all thank you for reading all my first drafts. I would also like to thank my two dearest friends Branimir Cvetokvic and Amy Elizabeth Daniels. Branimir, thank you for always looking over my drafts and allowing me to bounce ideas off of you. If we can make it through this process, we can make it through anything. The best for us is yet to come. Amy, thank you for your support. A girl could not ask for a better friend. I look up to you and cherish the friendship we have built, thank you. Last, I would like to thank the teachers and students who welcomed me into their school and allowed me to tell their story.

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**“The Best We Can With What We Got:”**

**Mediating Social and Cultural Capital in a Title I School**

**Jarin Rachel Eisenberg**

**ABSTRACT**

This study examined teachers’ perceptions and attitudes of Title I students at an urban elementary school in which over 90% of the student population receives free or reduced-priced lunch. Using participant observation and in-depth interviews, this research analyzed three avenues for Title I students to acquire cultural and social capital at school: material and non-material resources, language acquisition, and the building of positive teacher-student relationships. In order to analyze these avenues, this study explored the following questions: How do teachers talk about and perceive Title I students? Do their attitudes and the images constructed from these perceptions impact students’ ability to build positive teacher-student relationships? Do these perceptions and attitudes impact students’ opportunities to build social and cultural capital? Do the resources afforded to students aide the acquisition of cultural capital? What expectations do teachers have for students’ language usage and do these expectations hinder the acquisition of cultural capital? These questions guided my data collection process and analysis on how social and cultural capital operates within a Title I school.

This study found that students attending Sherwood did not have access to quality material resources such as books and computers. However, they did have exposure to non-material resources such as nutritional programs that provided students’ avenues to



acquire cultural capital through dominant cultural experiences. Students' acquisition of Standard English was another avenue for students to acquire cultural capital. Teachers at Sherwood held different expectations for African American students and Spanish speaking students. African American students were constantly corrected when they did not speak Standard English by white teachers. In contrast, Spanish-speaking students were not corrected because teachers did not view their language as a disruption to the class. My findings suggest that African American students did not know why Standard English was important. Thus, it is likely that they did not learn how to activate this form of capital to their social benefit. In contrast, the cultural codes Spanish-speaking students were perceived as of higher value and incorporated in the school. Last, this study found teachers' perceptions of Title I students did not always hinder their ability to form positive teacher-student relationships, but may have helped these relationships to form because of teachers' perceptions of students' home life. Throughout this study, I explored the strategies and obstacles faced by Title I teachers and students as well as how these affect the acquisition of cultural and social capital.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

“Title I schools are in high-poverty areas and these have a tendency to be associated with what people believe are low-performing students with discipline problems. What people do not know is that these children *can* learn and they *do* learn!”

Ms. Fern, Title I Facilitator

Educational interventions in the United States have gone through various transitions in response to public policy. The implementation of the 2000 *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) by the Bush Administration encompasses a variety of educational policies including a reform of Title I. Title I policy was originally constructed in 1965 in an attempt to equalize educational opportunities. The historical narrative of Title I targets “at risk” students of which a large percentage are African American. Recipients of Title I services are typically characterized as being poor and disadvantaged socially, culturally, and physically (Stein 2001). Title I was originally intended to provide additional educational support to schools through federal funding to better assist students in reading, math, and language. The policy acknowledges that students who come from low socioeconomic family backgrounds have more difficulties achieving in school compared to white-middle-class students. Though the intention behind Title I policy is to assist low-income students achieve greater success in school, some studies have found that there are negative consequences (Stein 2001; Meier and Wood 2004).

Studies show that the language used by policymakers in defining a Title I student has a negative impact on teacher expectations and, as a consequence, has perpetuated a

system where Title I students are consistently being placed in lower-tracks within the educational system (Oakes 1985; Stein 2001; Meier and Wood 2004). Students' in lower-track levels may not be able to build positive teacher-student relationships or may not have access to quality resources, which interferes with their opportunities to acquire social and cultural capital at school (Oakes 1985; Vanfossen, Jones, and Spade 1987; Meier and Wood 2004; Kozol 2005).

Data from this study comes from a Title I school located in an urban inner-city area. This study focuses on the perceptions and attitudes that teachers have of Title I students and how these perceptions and attitudes influence students' ability to acquire social and cultural capital. Through participant observations and in-depth interviews, I examine the following questions through the social and cultural capital framework: How do teachers talk about and perceive Title I students? Do their attitudes and the images constructed from these perceptions impact students' ability to build positive teacher-student relationships? Do these perceptions and attitudes impact students' opportunities to build social and cultural capital? Do the resources afforded to students aide in the acquisition of cultural capital? What expectations do teachers have for students' language usage and do these expectations impact the acquisition of cultural capital? These questions provide information on the ways in which social and cultural capital are mediated in a Title I program.

### **Research Focus**

In Chapter 1, I examine the type and quality of resources students at Sherwood Elementary have access to. This is important to my study because providing students access to key educational resources such as computers and books is one way students can

acquire cultural capital at school (Lareau 1989). I found that learning materials such as computers, books, and even pencils were of poor quality at Sherwood. However, students did have opportunities to acquire cultural capital through exposure to various dominant-cultural experiences such as a healthy eating program and the Westbridge Middle School band. Availability of learning materials and exposure to select dominant-cultural experiences are different forms of access to cultural capital. The lack of quality learning materials appeared to hinder students' academic achievement and acquisition of cultural capital. On the other hand, the exposure to non-material resources such as dominant-cultural experiences, provided students opportunities to build cultural capital at school.

In Chapter 2, I explore the expectations teachers have for students' language usage and how these expectations influence students' acquisition of cultural capital. The majority of the students at Sherwood speak a non-standard form of English; which I call "at home language." Some teachers were consistently correcting African American students when they did not speak Standard English, while other teachers did not. Both the racial and educational background of the teachers appeared to be relevant when examining differences in the language expectations they had on the students. There are two main findings in this chapter. First, I argue that white and African American teachers often held contrasting views concerning language usage for African American students. Second, all teachers, regardless on their race or educational level, in general held different expectations and different attitudes toward Spanish speaking students in comparison to African American students.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the perceptions and attitudes teachers have of Title I students. I was interested in the perceptions and attitudes teachers have impact teacher-

student relationships. I discuss the various obstacles teachers and students encountered in building positive teacher-student relationships and the strategies they employed to fulfill students perceived needs. I also investigate how the perceptions teachers have of their students and their families are impediments to building teacher-student relationships and to students' acquisition of social capital.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Capital and Education**

According to Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) social capital is the “expectations for action within a collectivity that affect the economic goals and goal-seeking behavior of its members, even if these expectations are not oriented toward the economic sphere” (p. 1323). In this study, I consider different forms of social capital available to Title I students in relation to the educational system. I also explore how the educational system has the potential for promoting or impeding the acquisition of social capital. In particular, I examine social capital as it pertains to opportunities students may or may not have to build positive teacher-student relationships. Having defined social capital, I will now illustrate the impact it can have on student achievement in school.

Social capital is about having access to resources, the quality of those resources, and the ability to stay connected to those resources (Portes 1995). For example, a student who attends a school in an inner-city area may not only have access to fewer resources such as computers and teachers who are experienced and knowledgeable, but he or she may also have fewer ties to middle-class norms and individuals who have connections to social resources (e.g., networks through which norms are created that advance economic prosperity) that would be beneficial in the job market or to obtaining higher education

(Putnam 1995). The social networks inner-city students have access to often have less value in mainstream society and, more importantly, in the labor market and the academic world. Acquiring social capital is related to the quality of the social networks that an individual is a part of or has access to and is, therefore, key for academic and career advancements.

Social networks are “assortments of individuals who maintain recurrent contact with one another through occupational, familial, cultural, or affective ties. In addition, [social networks] are intricate formations that channel, filter, and interpret information, articulate meanings, allocate resources and control behavior” (Portes 1995: 219). In other words, social networks are ways people transfer information, resources, and social norms. The more diverse a network is, or the degree of multiplexity of the network, the more likely it becomes that members of that social network will benefit from job resource information and business know-how. Multiplexity, in regards to social networks, is “the degree to which it may be composed of persons with differing social status, linked in a variety of ways, who play multiple roles in several fields of activity” (Portes 1995: 222). The diversity of a social network also allows for institutional overlap providing members of the network many avenues of resources from which to draw upon. Take the same example of the student attending an inner-city school. This student’s social network is most likely going to be comprised of individuals who are of the same socio-economic status and who perhaps come from families living in the same area for generations. This area, because of poverty and other social factors, is likely to have been isolated socially and economically from areas that are more affluent. Community isolation is typically related to the quality of the social network that this student belongs or has access to

because the network lacks multiplexity; the possibility of gaining access to social capital through other networks also is decreased due to isolation. Social networks are therefore an important component to access valued social capital.

Schools have the potential to provide resources for students to acquire social capital. However, poor and minority students not only enter the educational system with less social capital than middle-class white students, but also have fewer opportunities to build social capital once they are in the system. Tracking is one mechanism schools employ that may impede a student's ability to acquire social capital. Poor and minority students are overrepresented in low-tracked classes (Finley 1984; Oakes 1985). More importantly, students labeled as low-track typically stay in that same track year after year. Therefore, low-track students are not able to, or provided the resources to, expand their social network. The integration of low-track students with high-track students would increase the potential for gaining social capital of the former as these would experience, first-hand, the norms and expectations that reflect middle-class norms, which are important for social mobility. In addition to norms and expectations, the label "less than" and "not capable of" placed on poor and minority students in low-tracks lowers teachers' expectations and may influence the teacher-student relationship (Finley 1984; Oakes 1985). Because of this, teachers might not provide the social resources at their disposal to low-track students, which in turn may impede the potential for poor and minority students to acquire social capital (Oakes 1985; Monkman, Ronald, and Theramene 2005).

Providing opportunities for students to build social capital is important because "increased social capital can ameliorate the effect of lower incomes and reduce the likelihood of dropping out of school" (Monkman et al. 2005: 10). This is crucial because

students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to drop out of school than those of middle-class backgrounds (Meier and Wood 2004; Monkman et al. 2005). An argument can be made that, in practice, NCLB has a negative effect on building social capital for poor and minority students.

NCLB's emphasis on standardized testing has amplified the practice of sorting students into different tracks. Poor and minority children are disproportionately placed into low-level curriculum tracks such as remedial or vocational classes, which influence the expectations and norms inside the classroom (Oakes 1985). For instance, teachers are more likely to hold the expectation that low-track students are going to behave poorly (Stein 2001). This expectation of "poor behavior" becomes the norm in low-track classes. In opposition to this, high-track classes such as Advanced Placement and Honors classes or college preparation courses, are comprised of students who are not only expected to behave in a proper manner, but behavioral expectations are secondary to academic expectations. If a student in a high-track class were to act out with disruptive behavior, the teacher and peers would likely correct the student's behavior because it would not be conducive to a positive learning environment. In this case, having access to teachers with high expectations and belonging to a diverse social network reconditions the student to the tastes and norms of the middle-class. This is one of many benefits of a high-track course and is a way for building social capital (Goddard 2003).

### **Cultural Capital and Education**

According to Madigan (2002) cultural capital can also relate to the "cultural practices or dispositions a person acquires often through disguised or hidden ways that realize profits in the economic field primarily through ensuring academic success"



(p.121). This is an important concept in helping to understand why children from different social classes have different levels of achievement in school (Monkman et al. 2005). The more familiar a person or family is with middle-class norms, tastes, and values, the more cultural capital one possesses. Though cultural capital passes down through the family, the educational system can also expose students to it. Cultural capital is different from social capital in that social capital refers to a person's social network whereas cultural capital is a person's knowledge of and acquisition of dominant cultural codes, behaviors, and dispositions (Bourdieu 1973). Because the educational system centers upon the culture of the dominant status group, it continues to perpetuate and reproduce existing disparities between those with cultural capital and those without. Though educational attainment typically increases economic opportunities, for many, the educational system also hinders opportunities. Specifically for the poor and minorities, the lack of valued social capital in the schools may trap students in their existing sphere with limited opportunities. Similarly, students who do not possess the dominant culture's knowledge and norms have a more difficult time in school grasping information (Driessen 2001).

Educational research shows a positive relationship between parental involvement in the child's education (both at home and in the school) and the child's academic success (Lareau 1989; Lee and Bowen 2006). According to Lee and Bowen (2006), one of the reasons children from low economic backgrounds have less cultural capital than children from a middle-class background is differences in parental relationships with the educational system. Working-class parents may be less involved in their child's education due to economic circumstances (i.e. multiple jobs, non-flexible jobs, etc.), not having the

education necessary to help their child complete homework assignments, and previous negative educational experiences that leaves them feeling uncomfortable with the educational process (Lareau 1989). Lee and Bowen (2006) state that due to the circumstances working-class parents face, they are less likely to “gain the social, informational, and material rewards gained by parents who enact the school involvement roles valued and delineated by school staff” (p. 198). This not only results in working-class parents not acquiring cultural capital from the school to pass along to their children, but also less involvement; which in turn makes them more likely to be viewed by teachers as not caring about their children’s education. All this may negatively affect the performance of these children in the classroom (Lareau 1989; Lee and Bowen 2006).

Obstacles and constraints that working-class families face combined with the set standards of the educational system often result in unequal educational opportunities for these families. Cultural capital is important to this study because it means acquiring the dominant cultural codes and dispositions needed to succeed in the educational system might not be available to students from low-income backgrounds from their family or their community. This leaves the school as the primary source for students to acquire cultural capital.

In conclusion, it is important to study how social and cultural capital operate within a Title I school because it allows researchers to better understand how the educational system provides or impedes on students acquisition of these forms of capital. Previous literature provides knowledge of how the educational system does not always produce an environment where low-income minority students have access to social and cultural capital. However, this study explores the ways in which students may have

greater access to dominant cultural codes and social networks by examining students' access to or lack of access to, material and non-material resources, language acquisition, and teacher-student relationships.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Methodology**

I collected the data in this study through participant observations and in-depth interviews at a large urban inner-city elementary school located in the Southwestern part of Florida. Sherwood Elementary (names of places and individuals in this study have been changed) is classified as a “Renaissance” school by NCLB standards. “Renaissance” is the label placed on schools when over 90% of the student body receives free or reduced-priced lunch. The majority of Sherwood’s student population during the summer was comprised of African Americans and Hispanics. During the time I spent at Sherwood, I only saw five white students. The racial and ethnic composition of the student population during the summer program was similar to the student population during the regular school year. According to the information provided on the school district’s website, African Americans make up 58.96% of Sherwood’s population, Hispanics are the second largest group making up 28.31%, whites make up 7.71%, and multi-racial and Asian students account for 5% of the student population (Hillsborough County Public Schools).

The observations and interviews for this study took place over the summer-school session held at Sherwood in 2008. Sherwood’s summer program is for students held back a grade level or recognized by a teacher as in need of extra assistance in reading or math. The goal of the summer program was to help students obtain the educational skills

needed to succeed in the upcoming school year. There were approximately 200 students in attendance over the summer, approximately 25 teachers, and 1 administrator working for the program. The majority of the teachers were white and female whereas the majority of the teacher's assistants were male and African American. I do not know if the racial/ethnic composition of the teachers at Sherwood during the summer was representative of the teachers during the regular school year. In addition, the teachers and administrators I observed formed a self-selective group of teachers (not every regular schoolteacher chooses to work in the school during the summer); unfortunately, I do not have information on the reasons why they were working during the summer, which may affect the data I collected for this study. In addition, teachers over the summer did not have the pressure of getting students prepared to take a standardized test; this may have influenced the type of atmosphere I observed. In other words, I may have witnessed a more relaxed atmosphere where teachers were able to give students one-on-one attention because they did not have the constraints of teaching to a standardized test.

### **Setting**

Going to Sherwood I drove over the train tracks that borders the school and passed by a convenience store where I frequently saw men and women who appeared to be homeless sitting outside and asking for change. Across the street from the school, there is a large apartment complex with many tattered blinds and broken windows. The complex advertises the ability to rent an apartment by the month; this is representative of the transiency of the neighborhood.

Before I started my observations for the day, I signed-in at the front office. Sherwood's front office was decorated with mural of a bear (the school's mascot) painted

on the office wall. The desk and tables in the lobby matched the mural with figurines of bears lined on them. When you walk in, a sign proudly states that Sherwood's goal was to become one of the best schools in the nation. Leaving the front office and walking towards the cafeteria, one can appreciate math equations and vocabulary words posted on columns and doors. Inside the cafeteria, a bulletin board displayed artwork and essays written by students about African American history. Walking out of the cafeteria to the play area you will see a blacktop with two basketball hoops without nets. Beyond the blacktop there is a large open field that is mostly dirt and sand with a few patches of grass spread out.

There was a limited number of classrooms available for usage over the summer due to some of the rooms not having any air-conditioning. The majority of the classrooms I observed shared similar conditions. The doors were usually tattered with exposed pieces of wood where paint used to be and piles of dust and candy wrappers lay in the corners of the rooms as if someone did not finish cleaning. I cannot be certain whether the classrooms appeared this way because Sherwood was in transition from one school year to the next, or if this was the normal order of things.

### **Participant Observation**

As a participant observer, I wanted to understand the meanings associated with being a Title I student from the perspectives of teachers, administrators, and the students themselves. I paid particular attention to the interactions that took place among students, students and teachers, and teachers amongst each other. I set out to examine the forms of social capital that were being mediated through this summer tutoring program at Sherwood Elementary by paying particular attention to teacher-student relationships.

The following questions guided my observations: How do teachers talk about and perceive Title I students? That is, what images of Title I students do they construct? What connections do teachers have to students? Do teachers have set expectations and goals for these students? If so, what are they? How do teachers talk about the students amongst themselves; is there a particular image of a Title I student that appears in conversations? I also focused on the ways teachers were instructed to work with students and how those instructions were carried out. All this was useful to understand whether, and if so, how, the structure of the program constructs an image of a Title I student. For example, what types of administrative constraints were teachers under?

Participant observation is the appropriate technique to gather this data because it let me see the student-teacher environment. I observed a small group of teachers and administrators and their interactions with the students in a well-defined social setting, the tutoring program. This type of social setting was important to my study because it allowed me to form relationships with teachers and staff working at Sherwood during the summer program. I attended Sherwood three days a week for eight weeks. I spent the majority of my time with 11 teachers. Typically, there were three to four teachers assigned to a group of students. Sometimes these teachers worked in shifts and sometimes they were all present for the whole day. In accordance with their representation in the school, the majority of the teachers I worked with were white and female and most of the teacher's assistants male and African American. The number of students per group was between 10 and 27, with the average group about 15 students. Students were grouped by the grade they were in the previous school year. The assistant

principal was present throughout the summer program and routinely stopped into classrooms to check on progress.

All of the teachers and administrators were informed that I was there to conduct research on Title I. My role in the tutoring program varied. Some days I was assigned to a classroom that needed extra help; sometimes I chose a group to observe and spend the entire day with them. Other days I would spend the mornings with one group and the afternoons with another. The students and teachers quickly knew me as Ms. J. Inside the classroom I took on any role the teacher asked me to, from reading to students, conducting a lesson, passing out papers, to organizing classroom materials.

This organizational setting allowed me to first establish and then maintain close relationships with teachers and students. By establishing a relationship and spending a significant amount of time at the site, I was able to build trust with the participants in the program. The trust that I built over time with teachers increased the chances of them talking openly with me about sensitive issues concerning Title I students (Gray, Williamson, Karp and Dalphin 2007). The themes and topics that emerged from my observational data guided the construction of in-depth interviews with teachers and administrators.

### **Interviews**

I conducted in-depth or conversational interviews with teachers and administrators who took part in this program. During the eight weeks I was at Sherwood, I conducted 11 formal interviews (see Table 1). Table 1 lists the interviewees and their roles at Sherwood Elementary. I conducted each of the interviews individually during school hours. The fieldnotes I gathered during my observations at Sherwood guided the interview questions.



Although each interview was slightly different from one another due to their conversational form, the following questions were common to all: Do you think there is a meaning associated with being a Title I student? What is your stance on students speaking Standard English? Do you have any stories or experiences you can share with me about your Title I students? Can you tell me about your interactions with your students' parents? Is there anything about Title I you think I should know or would want people to know? Though these were broad questions, they allowed teachers and administrators to tell me, in their own words, their stories and experiences working with Title I students. In addition, the questions gave respondents the freedom to construct the identities of their students according to their interpretation.

**Table 1**  
**Study Participants**

| <b>Participant's Name</b> | <b>Title</b>                     | <b>Race/Ethnicity</b> | <b>Highest Degree</b> |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Mr. Donald                | Teacher's Assistant              | African American      | Teaching Certificate  |
| Mr. Nome                  | Teacher's Assistant              | African American      | Teaching Certificate  |
| Mr. Issac                 | Teacher                          | African American      | Bachelor's Degree     |
| Ms. Jones                 | Assistant Principal              | African American      | Ph.D.                 |
| Ms. Rodriguez             | Teacher's Assistant              | Hispanic              | Teaching Certificate  |
| Ms. Leslie                | Teaches Gifted                   | White                 | Bachelor's Degree     |
| Mr. Kast                  | Physical Education               | White                 | Bachelor's Degree     |
| Ms. Vane                  | Teacher                          | White                 | Bachelor's Degree     |
| Ms. Fern                  | No Child Left Behind Coordinator | White                 | Bachelor's Degree     |
| Ms. Bates                 | Teacher                          | White                 | Bachelor's Degree     |
| Ms. Evan                  | Teacher                          | White                 | Master's Degree       |

### **Position of the Researcher**

The interpretations of observations presented in this study reflect my understanding of the participants and the events I observed. Though I employed systematic inquiry to carry out my study, I must acknowledge my racial and ethnic position as a researcher and the influence it may have had on the interpretations and interviews conducted. As a white female conducting research in a school that is low-income, African American majority, I may have had heightened awareness or promoted

stronger reactions to some events over others. For example, the majority of the students did not come to school with backpacks or pencils. Students not having this resource stood out to me because growing up I always got a new backpack and supplies for each school year as did other children in my school and community. In addition, I sometimes walked away from interviews with the impression that white teachers felt more comfortable discussing Title I issues involving race and social class than did the African American teachers. Although I cannot be certain, it may be that some teachers felt they were protecting students from the researcher, in this case, a white privileged female. They may have believed that I did not have the knowledge of their life experiences outside of school, including their economic, social, and political circumstances.

In order to minimize effects of my presence, I made sure that my appearance, including my attire, was appropriate to the setting. Towards this goal, I did not wear any jewelry, I wore only muted make-up, and my clothes were not recognizable name brands. Additionally, I attempted to gain the trust of the teachers by participating in some of tasks that may typically fall onto them. Specifically, on many occasions, I cleaned the cafeteria, organized bookshelves, and made myself available to many other tasks that helped to ease the teachers' workloads such as passing out papers and taking over lessons when the teacher needed to step out of the room. Despite that I consciously made efforts to become a part of their school, I recognize that I am still an outsider and that this may have influenced the data illustrated in this study.

## Chapter Three

### **“Why Doesn’t Anything Work?” Resources in a Title I School**

*I walked into Ms. Vane’s 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom at 8:30am and scanned the room until I found her sitting in front of a computer in the back. She looked very flustered and this was very unusual for her. Usually by the time I arrive the students are working on their morning math assignment. This morning some students were coloring, some reading, but not organized as usual. I asked Ms. Vane what was going on and she replied, “Nothing works! Why doesn’t anything work?” I asked her if I could help her in anyway and she replied, “I stayed up late last night putting together an assignment for today and I emailed it to myself so that I could print it out for the students. As usual nothing works. The copy machine is still broken so I can’t print anything for the students. So now I have to copy it from my email and change the assignment so that we can all do it without a copy for everyone. I even brought my own copy paper because I knew we wouldn’t have enough. (Fieldnotes: June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008)*

The lack of resources at Sherwood Elementary was a reoccurring theme. Most of the data for this chapter comes from field observations and informal discussions over an eight-week period. Whereas the primary source of information for this thesis comes from personal interviews with teachers and administrators in the school, the current chapter uses fieldnotes and sociological interpretations of what I witnessed. Below I analyze my observations of the Sherwood tutoring program and conversations with school personnel. I examine these narratives for their potential contributions to cultural capital acquisition of Title I students.

### **Cultural Capital and Educational Resources**

As stated by Madigan (2002), cultural capital is the “cultural practices or dispositions a person acquires often through disguised or hidden ways that realize profits

in the economic field primarily through ensuring academic success” (p.121). I examined the material resources students at Sherwood have access to such as books and computers and the quality of those resources. In addition, I also illustrate some of the strategies Sherwood’s administration employed to provide students with non-material resources such as dominant-cultural experiences they may not experience to at home or in their community. This is important to my research because most of students who attend Sherwood enter the school system with less cultural capital than middle-class students. As I mentioned above, schools tend to organize themselves around middle-class norms and values and thus reward students who possess the cultural codes of dominant status groups (Lareau 1989; Madigan 2002). However, students can acquire cultural capital from their school. For students who come from low-income families and are more likely to live in areas that may make it harder to access and acquire cultural capital, their academic success may depend on the ability of schools to provide students with avenues to acquire valued capital (Driessen 2001). The following data demonstrates the types of material and non-material resources students at Sherwood have access to and how this impacts their ability to acquire cultural capital at school.

### **“Can We Keep These Books?” Lack of Learning Materials**

The lack of learning materials at Sherwood was very noticeable. I consistently witnessed the absence of the most basic needs to run a classroom on a day-to-day basis. Pencils were one example of this. The pencils that were supplied to the teachers, and in limited supply at that, were constantly breaking when pressure was applied to them. Because of this, students were always moving back and forth between their desks and the pencil sharpener. The constant movement caused a distraction in the classroom and

frustrated many of the students, especially first and second graders who had writing assignments twice a day. The constant usage of the pencil sharpener created noise disruptions. Teachers had different reactions to this every day occurrence. Ms. Vane would adjust her voice to talk over the sharpener and would apologize to the students for the frustration. Ms. Evan would get frustrated with the constant asking to use the pencil sharpener and on some occasions would adamantly say “the pencil sharpener is off limits!” Her command left some students sitting at their desks, looking around appearing as if they were wondering how they were to get their assignment completed without an operational writing utensil.

Research indicates that lack of resources in the classroom contributes to teacher-stress and is associated with teacher burnout (O’Donnell, Lambert, and McCarthy 2008). According to O’Donnell et al. (2008), “low-income schools tend to possess specific factors that lead to higher stress levels” (p.153). Therefore, while the lack of quality pencils is important to both teachers and students, for teachers this is significant because they have to deal with the frustration of many students. Teachers’ time and attention is focused on policing the sharpener or dealing with noise distractions instead of the academic task the students are trying to complete. In situations like this one, it becomes important to examine the educational contexts within both students and teachers work. The question becomes, what demands and expectations are placed on teachers and what types of resources and tools do they have to meet those standards? The first and second grade classrooms that I observed did daily writing activities with the goal of improving the handwriting skills. Because pencils were constantly breaking, it appeared that the

focus of the lesson then became the frustrations over the pencils, and not improving writing skills.

The students I observed at Sherwood did not come to school with pencils, pens, or notebooks; nor did the majority come to school with backpacks. This means that the need for the school to supply these resources is intensified. Because the school could not meet some of those needs, teachers responded by individually purchasing resources for their classrooms. Two teachers told me that they spend over \$500 per school year on supplies for their classroom, but that they can only write off up to \$200 on their taxes. This is an example of teachers using their own resources to improve the educational contexts in which they work. The first day of summer classes, I observed Ms. Evan telling her students about the money she personally put into her classroom and the difference between her resources and the ones provided by the school:

Look around the room. I spend my own money on all the nice things in this room. The nice smelly soap you guys use, I bought at Bath and Body Works; it's really good soap. You only need one squeeze to wash your hands. If I find out that people are using too much soap then I will stop buying it and I will let you use the nasty smelling soap that the school provides. Second, all of the board games in this room, I purchased with my own money. They are expensive, so let's keep them nice. Same goes for the books, I bought all the books so let's make sure we keep them nice or we won't have access to them anymore.

Though Ms. Evan was the only teacher that I heard explain to the students about the money that she put into her classroom, almost all of the teachers told me that they used a portion of their own funds to supplement classroom materials. Some teachers attributed the lack of resources to the school's "almost nonexistent" Parent Teacher Association (PTA). As one teacher's assistant explained, "We don't have a lot of parents that participate in helping the kids to learn... We have a PTA but it's a low budget PTA

and we do what we can to fundraise and stuff in our area.” Another teacher told me, “We have a non-existent PTA. Well, if you count the teachers who are a part of it, then I guess it does exist.” This teacher is saying that the PTA at Sherwood only exists because of teacher participation. On a similar note, Ms. Evan describes how the lack of a PTA affects her on a day-to-day basis:

It’s nearly impossible in the course of a day between planning and trying to make all of your copies and the stuff that we have to do at our school, they have PTA parents at the more wealthy schools in the same district. It amazes me that there are kids whose parents’ do all their stuff for them and volunteer. We don’t have that so I do everything myself in the classroom.

In many ways teachers and administrators at Sherwood try to compensate for the resources parents cannot or do not provide to their children. The availability of these resources is critical in a Title I school like Sherwood, where the overwhelming majority of the student population comes from low socio-economic backgrounds. Students’ limited access to resources such as books and computers at home makes the resources at school even more imperative to students’ acquisition of cultural capital. However, students’ access to books beyond textbooks at Sherwood appeared to be limited. In the classrooms I observed, other than the textbooks, the teachers supplied from their personal funds the majority of the books. One example of this is Ms. Vane’s classroom where she had a wide variety of books that were from her personal collection. Ms. Vane’s class consisted of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders who were very enthusiastic about reading. Her students were allowed to read a book of their choice when they completed their assignments. These students were very anxious to get to the books and Ms. Vane would have to remind the students repeatedly not to stock pile books in their desk or to read them unless they were working on a reading assignment. Students’ enthusiasm for reading was also



evident in Ms. Evan's 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. Ms. Evan allowed students to check out books for one week as long as they promised to bring them back. The majority of the students took advantage of this policy. Ms. Evan told me that she thought it was important that the students finish reading a book they have started because most of the students do not have books at home. She felt it was important that her students be able to read books outside of class time. In other words, in this setting, individual school personnel needed to intervene to enhance the lack of resources that the school and home were not able to provide. This is an example of how teachers help students gain access to cultural capital when the students' home and/or the students' school cannot provide sufficient avenues for doing so.

#### **“I Want My Own Computer!” Lack of Technological Resources**

Another area of concern at Sherwood was the access to technology. Each of the classrooms I observed had at least three computers and the school had a computer lab consisting of 27 computers. Whereas this appears as an optimistic picture of the technology both in the classroom and in the school, it was the quality of the computers, in most cases, that made them unusable to the students. The only classroom that I witnessed which had functioning computers was Mr. Issac's. His classroom had five functioning computers which were used as research tools for students' science projects. In Mr. Issac's classroom, students were required to get into groups of four, pick a planet of their choice, and use the internet to find out what that planet looked like and to find five facts about that planet. This scenario was not possible in the other classrooms I observed or in the computer lab. Of the 27 computers in the computer lab, only 10 were in working condition.

The lack of functioning computers caused a stressful situation one morning as I accompanied Ms. Vane's class to the lab. Her class consisted of 25 students who had not had an opportunity to use the computer lab all summer because the school reserved it for classes focused on reading exercises. When Ms. Vane's class arrived, it quickly became obvious that there were not enough working computers for each of her students. Placing two or three students per computer was the only option. This did not go over well with some of the students because they did not want to share computers. As one 1<sup>st</sup> grade girl said, "I never get to play on a computer. I don't have one. I want my own!" Access to technology and basic skills pertaining to computer use such as typing, navigating the internet, and familiarity with commonly used computer programs such as Microsoft Word, are critical to apply to college and/or for career opportunities. These types of skills are examples of knowledge that students will be expected to have in order to attain success in school and work. The lack of exposure to these resources, both in terms of quality and quantity of the computers, was an impediment to students' acquisition of cultural capital at Sherwood.

It was clear from my observations that the students expressed interests in acquiring the dominant cultural codes needed for success, such as reading books and using computers. However, there were important limitations in the extent to which the school could provide the environment and resources for students in order to activate this type of capital.

According to Lareau and Weininger (2003), schools can provide students with access to cultural capital by providing a learning environment with valued educational resources. Low-income students might not be familiar with educational resources such as

computers, but through the school, students can acquire the dominant status skills needed to succeed. Fostering an environment where students can become acquainted with valued forms of capital such as literature, music, language, and other dominant status skills exposes students to cultural codes that they may not get at home or in their community. Therefore, students who attend Sherwood do not enter the educational system possessing dominant forms of cultural capital and the school's limited ability to provide the quality resources needed to help compensate for a student's family background further impedes a student's ability to acquire cultural capital. However, as I explain below, Sherwood does attempt to compensate for their lack of material resources by exposing students to other cultural experiences.

#### **“What Is This Green Thing?”: Exposing Students to Cultural Resources**

The administration at Sherwood was aware of the lack of resources in the school and the need to compensate with other types of resources and experiences. For example, the assistant principal, Ms. Jones, explained that one of Sherwood's goals is to expose students to a variety of cultural experiences:

Schools in higher socioeconomic districts have daily exposure to cultural experiences that our students do not. We have to take our students outside of the school and the neighborhood to experience these things or bring people into the school to expose students. We have to put effort into this while other schools have it on a daily basis.

Sherwood used different strategies in an attempt to provide students with different avenues for dominant cultural capital acquisition. At Sherwood, I observed two explicit strategies.

One of the strategies Sherwood employed was to expose students to different types of foods. Sherwood did this by bringing in a weekly nutrition program called

“Healthy Choice.” The goal of this program was to inform students how to make healthy choices when making decisions on what types of food to eat. The program did this by passing out food pyramids, showing movies, and having stretching and exercise demonstrations that students could do at home. The class lasted 30 minutes where the last 10 were dedicated to exposing students to a new healthy snack they might have never seen or tried before. On one of the days, the healthy snack of the week was “ants-on-a-log.” Ants-on-a-log consisted of a stick of celery with cream cheese topped with raisins. The snacks were on tables for the students to try, but most of the students were reluctant to taste them. The “Healthy Choice” instructors asked Mr. Kast and I to eat one so the students could see it was edible and would not be afraid to try it. One student said, “What is this green thing? It looks gross!” Another student said, “I don’t want to try it.” A fourth grade student added, “Where do you buy this stuff called cream cheese?” Many students would take a bite of the food and then spit it out and throw their snack away in the trash. A few students did enjoy the snack. For example, one student said, “When my mom and I go shoppin’ I am gonna ask her to buy some of this stuff.”

The second strategy to build cultural capital through non-material resources I witnessed at Sherwood was when the Westbridge Middle School Band came to put on a concert for the students. The band was predominantly African American and in the zoning area where students at Sherwood would attend middle school. The band director spoke to all Sherwood students about joining the band when they entered middle school. He said, “This is a great way for you guys to stay busy over the summer and do something positive.” The band played the national anthem and a few hip-hop songs that were popular at the time. The students danced and sang along to the music and, at the end

of the concert, the band director asked some of the band members to stand up and talk about their instrument and to play a short solo for the students. He then invited any 5<sup>th</sup> grade students who were going to be attending Westbridge Middle School the following year to stay after and meet some of the band members. The students at Sherwood received the band with enthusiasm. Many of the students were familiar with some of the songs the band played and seemed to enjoy the time to sing and dance as they listened to the band. Having knowledge of dominant forms of music and musical instruments is one way students can acquire cultural skills that may open up avenues of upward social and occupational mobility (Lareau and Weininger 2003).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter highlights two different forms of cultural capital: material and non-material resources. The lack of school material resources such as pencils and computers appeared as impediments to students' acquisition of dominant cultural capital. This also appeared to be a source of stress for teachers. One strategy teachers employed to improve the resources available to them and their students was to purchase their own books, games, and other supplies needed in the classroom. These resources provided avenues for students to acquire cultural capital and improve the educational context within which they are learning.

Exposing students to dominant culture experiences are also examples of how Sherwood provides students with avenues for building cultural capital. Introducing students to the Westbridge band before they enter middle school may begin the process of heightening students' interests in this extracurricular activity, which may in turn have potential to increase their cultural capital. Furthermore, by being a member of the band

and obtaining the skills needed to play an instrument, students can potentially turn the cultural capital they acquired through this activity into social profit by using their skills to get into college or by obtaining some type of recognition (Lareau 1989). In addition, by exposing students to foods they may never have seen or tried before, Sherwood is giving students dominant culture experiences that allow them to make healthier food choices, which is also exposing them to middle-class knowledge and norms.

According to Lareau (1989), just acquiring the cultural codes needed for educational success does not provide an individual with a social advantage. An individual does not automatically receive benefits from simple exposure to cultural capital; rather an individual must effectively activate their cultural resources. Though the school had good intentions by providing exposure to dominant-culture experiences, teaching students how and why to use this knowledge and to draw on their experiences to their social advantage is perhaps just as important as exposing students to resources. In other words, the school attempted to provide students with dominant culture resources, but this may have only a limited effect if the students do not learn why activating this form of cultural capital is important. This research does not allow me to speak of Sherwood's success in helping students to turn these experiences into social profit. However, the fact that the administration at Sherwood made a conscious decision to bring in outside resources for their students shows that they understood the importance of exposure to dominant cultural codes.

## Chapter Four

### “What Did You Say?” Language Negotiation in a Title I School

*Ms. Evan's, a 30- year- old white teacher, stands in front of her class of both fourth and fifth grade students. She asks them individually to go around the room and tell everyone what the Fourth of July stands for and what their plans are for the upcoming holiday. Ms. Stevens , a young white teacher, sits on a desk to the side of the room and chimes in with “It's ok if you don't know what it means but try your best.” Mr. Kast , a 30 year old white PE instructor, sits at Ms. Evan's' desk with his hands behind his head. The first student to speak is Mark, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade African American who is known by the teachers to come from a good home because his mom bothers to pack him lunch everyday. Mark says, “Fourth of July means independence. Me and my family are finna go to Church, den have food.” Ms. Stevens replies, “What did you say?” Mr. Kast then speaks, “Is that even English?” Mark, not seemingly unphased by the remarks, perks up in his chair, bobs his head back and forth and replies in a higher pitched tone than before: “My family and I are going to go to Church and then to have dinner.” Mr. Kast replies, “Why don't you just talk like that!” (Fieldnotes: June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)*

### Language Usage

In this chapter, I examine the expectations teachers and administrators have for students' language usage and the impact these expectations on students' acquisition of cultural capital. As I began my observations, I noticed that teachers' stances and attitudes toward students who did not speak Standard English varied depending on the teachers' race and educational background. First, I define Standard English and “at home language.” Next, I classify teachers' and administrators' expectations for language usage using three distinct categories: those who felt Standard English was not important, those who felt students should only speak Standard English, and those who felt that code switching was important for students' success in school and in the community. Then, I

examine teachers' different expectations for African American language usage as opposed to Spanish among students. I analyze these data within a cultural capital framework.

### **Standard English and “At-Home Language”**

There were three main types of language usage at Sherwood Elementary: Standard English, “at-home language,” and Spanish. First, Perry and Delpit (1998) define Standard English as “the variety which forms the basis of printed English in newspapers and books, which is used in the mass media and which is taught in schools” (p. 210). Standard English is what the majority of the teachers (and especially white teachers and administrators), spoke at school, and subsequently would try to get their students to use. Second, teachers and administrators would often refer to African American students' language as “at home language.” In academic literature, “at home language” is commonly referred to as Ebonics, Black English, or African American Vernacular. African American students and a few African American male teacher-assistants spoke this language. It is important to note here that African American students do not solely speak “at home language.” In the summer program, I observed five white students who spoke “at home language,” similarly to the African American students. From what I witnessed, white students did not segregate themselves. Instead, they were proactive about interacting with their African American and Hispanic peers. Third, there was a large population of Hispanic students at Sherwood, but for these students, the expectations of language use were markedly different from the expectations for African American students. In this chapter, I examine what it means to teachers and administrators for their students to speak or not speak Standard English, as well as variations in expectations for



different groups of students. I demonstrate how speaking a particular language is associated to cultural capital.

First, I want to differentiate between Standard English and “at home language.” According to Rahman (2008), Standard English is more than just the most dominant and accepted form of speech. Standard English is “speech that does not contain stigmatized forms or features, noticeable characteristics of a region, lower social class, or ethnic group” (Rahman 2008:145). Based on this perspective, Standard English is perceived as accentless and historically thought of as the exclusive domain of educated whites. Over time, members of different ethnic groups have become part of the middle-class and have come to use Standard English (Rahman 2008). Standard English is the type of language white teachers and administrative staff used at Sherwood Elementary. This concept is important to my study because it is the accepted form of language at Sherwood even though it is not the language most commonly used by the students.

For the purposes of my research, I will refer to the language African American students spoke as “at-home language.” “At-home language” is what the majority of the teachers use to explain what African American students are speaking and in what contexts it should be spoken. Though I refer to the African American students’ language with this concept, there are several ways the literature names and defines “at home language.” According to Perry and Delpit (1998), Black English is “a dialect of English, spoken by descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States, which has its own grammar and rules of discourse” (p. 228). Rahman (2008), states that African American English (AAE) and African American Vernacular (AAV) are similar in that they are both defined as a “nonstandard variety consisting of features that occur in other nonstandard

varieties, as well as distinctive grammatical and phonological features” (Rahman 2008:145). These definitions are all relevant to my research. Though I choose to not define what the African American students spoke by any one of these terms, my analysis is framed using the theoretical framework of Rahman (2008) and Perry and Delpit (1998). I will refer to what African American students spoke as “at home language” because this best represents the perception of their language by the teachers at Sherwood Elementary.

### **Speaking Out: Teachers’ Expectations of Language Usage**

In my interviews with teachers, teachers’ assistants, and an administrator, I asked them to tell me how they felt when students did not speak Standard English and what their stance was on correcting students. From this question I was able to gather a series of common terms used by teachers and an administrator that are associated with speaking or not speaking Standard English. For example:

**Table 2**  
**Characteristics Associated with Standard English Language Usage**

| <b>Not Speaking Standard English is:</b> | <b>Speaking Standard English is:</b> |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Dumb                                     | Appropriate                          |
| Gangs                                    | Correct                              |
| Ghetto                                   | Educated                             |
| Ignorant                                 | Expected                             |
| Inner City                               | Possibilities in Life                |
| McDonalds                                | Professional                         |
| Not Respected                            | Proper                               |
| Slang                                    | Respected                            |

These terms came up in interviews with five white teachers who had a Bachelor’s degree or a Master’s degree, one African American administrator with a Doctoral degree, and two African American teachers’ assistants described above (see Table 1). Racial and educational differences were apparent when I analyzed my observations and interviews:

white teachers consistently corrected students whenever they spoke a word or sentence that was not Standard English, whereas African American teachers did not. My observations also revealed that these teachers discussed their dislike for misspoken grammar in front of their students. I frequently heard the white teachers respond to students “at home language” usage by saying, “Was that even English?” “Why do you keep talking like that?” “Where do you learn that?” or “What did you say?” These responses sent to students the same message —the way you speak is incorrect and therefore, not acceptable. Interestingly, many of these students know how to speak Standard English. Students know that “What did you say?” is not a question because their teacher misunderstood them or did not hear them but a question that requires the student to repeat their previous statement in the standard form. Speaking Standard English in response to a teacher saying, “What did you say?” was a code students could turn on.

As I described earlier, Mark would sit up straight, bob his head, and have a higher pitched tone. Like Mark, most of the students “turned on” this code in response to teachers’ negative reactions to “at-home language.” This behavior raised the question: Were there variations in teachers’ expectations for their student’s language usage? Below I describe three different sets of expectations that I encountered at Sherwood Elementary. These differing expectations are possible reasons why students do not speak Standard English unless prompted to do so.

### **“I Don’t Think It Matters”: Teachers Who Do Not Expect Students to Speak Standard English**

Two African American male teachers’ assistants worked very closely with African American male students. These teachers’ assistants, very well known individuals

in the school and the community, spoke “at-home language.” Mr. Donald, one of the assistants, is known as the ‘grandfather’ of this small African American community; he not only grew up in the area, but still lives there. Mr. Nome, also a teacher’s assistant, coaches football in the community, and he lives in the area as well. Unlike the teachers, these two men did not correct students when they did not speak Standard English and expressed to me that they “thought some teachers over-corrected students.” Mr. Donald, explained, “Some teachers correct too much, some always have somethin’ to say about somethin’.” The African American students, especially males, looked up to these two men, confided in them, and perceived them as successful. If these teachers can speak “at home language” and still be successful then maybe students do not see the way they speak as incompatible with success and choose not to speak Standard English unless it is required of them. Similarly, Mr. Nome did not hold the expectation that his students should speak Standard English. He believed it did not really matter:

I don’t think, I um, I don’t have the best grammar. Being raised up talking that way it is hard to break. Saying things like um Ebonics, how would I say uh, get out of thurr or get hurr. Something different like that. Instead of putting thangs in there, instead of saying it regular, we might say it different. I don’t think it matters.

Mr. Donald and Mr. Nome represent one perspective of language usage at Sherwood. As I will discuss later, this perspective evinces an educational divide amongst teachers at Sherwood in regards to language usage. Other teachers felt that the only language that should be spoken was Standard English.

### **“We Don’t Want People Thinking They Are Dumb”: Standard English Only**

White teachers at Sherwood held opposing views to Mr. Nome and Mr. Donald. White teachers felt that Standard English is the only appropriate language and made sure to correct students whenever they did not speak Standard English. For example, Mr. Kast,

a white teacher commented, “They need to understand that in some settings there is a certain language that is appropriate and then there is an at home language. We don’t even refer to it as an at home language, it is not appropriate here.” Similarly, Ms. Evan, a white teacher, stated, “I think that it is really important that they speak Standard English so that people can understand them, that they annunciate their words correctly. If we’re speaking English, there is only one English language. Of course there are a lot of dialects, but only one proper way to speak.”

To the white teachers there is only one acceptable way of speaking; which is not the language that the African American students bring from home. In my observations, I failed to hear any of the white teachers explain to the African American students why they were correcting their use of language. However, in my interviews with teachers they explained to me the importance of Standard English for students’ future career opportunities. As Mr. Kast explained, “When they go out in the real world and want to get a job, if they have a job interview, they are going to need to be able to speak Standard English.” It appeared that African American students did not know the importance of speaking Standard English or the type of impact it could have on them as far as their future academic and career opportunities are concerned. Because the white teachers failed to communicate these ideas, the question can be asked: Are students learning to associate the way their white teachers want them to speak as “Standard English” or are they just associating it with “white English”? In other words, do African American students realize that Standard English is necessary capital in the business world, or do they think that Standard English is just the way “white people” speak?

This is also one example of how the types of cultural capital African American students bring to school is not valued, not just by the white teachers, but by the institution as a whole. I think the case can be made that African American students are not being “defiant” when they do not speak Standard English, but they perhaps are resisting the dominant cultural codes their teachers and school are trying to impose on them. If African American students do not know why it is important to learn Standard English, other than it being important for school assignments, then why would they choose to speak that way over the way the way their family, peers, and community members speak (i.e. people who are just like them)? Furthermore, by constantly correcting African American students when they speak “at-home language” in schools, institutions are discouraging “expressions of personal and ethnic identity” (Rahman 2008:142). Therefore, African American students are not necessarily resisting educational standards of achievement, but rather enacting language codes that are valued in familiar settings outside of school. Also, just as “talking black” carries significant meaning both for group identity and an out-group perception, “talking white” also carries meaning. Ogbu (2004) states that minority students’ language is closely tied to cultural identity, therefore students’ who stray from this identity by speaking Standard English are more likely to be viewed by their peers as “fake.” According to Rahman (2008) and Carter (2004), African Americans who talk white may be marginalized in their community, and this often takes away from a person’s “realness” or is seen as “selling out.” Though the perspective of language usage by the white teachers seemed to be the most outspoken, Ms. Jones, the African American assistant principal, recognized the importance of acknowledging the benefits of “at-home language” and Standard English to African American students.

## **“It Is Important To Code Switch”: Acknowledging the Importance of “At home Language”**

In my interview with Ms. Jones, the African American assistant principal, she expressed her views on students speaking Standard English. Unlike the teachers’ assistants and the white teachers, Ms. Jones acknowledged that “at-home language” and Standard English both hold value:

I think it is important that we help kids understand that there is a difference. It’s ok we don’t want to minimize the language they use at home or in the inner city because that is very important; that’s part of surviving in the community, being able to speak the language in the community but it is also part of surviving in the workplace to able to speak that language [Standard English] as well.

Ms. Jones acknowledges that the “at-home language” some teachers show such distaste for is a very important tool for the community and for group identity. “At home language,” in this sense becomes a form of “black” cultural capital. As Prudence Carter (2004) has pointed out, black cultural capital “signifies in-group allegiance and preserves a sense of belonging” (p. 47-48). Carter (2004) uses this term in reference to resources, codes, and symbols of low-income African American youth. Students use clothes, language, and interests to identify with their racial or ethnic group. According to Carter (2004), the style, tastes, and language of these students is a non-dominant form of capital in society, but in their community and social groups, it is essential. The cultural makers displayed by the African American students are not the dominant cultural makers associated with white middle-class values and are less valuable even though they serve a very real purpose and value to African American students. As Ms. Jones had understood, African American students not only have to be able to “fit in” with their community but also maneuver their way through the educational system that has different expectations

for them. What is interesting in this study is that the different expectations held by teachers served a purpose in facilitating the development of students acquiring the ability to “code switch.” Code switching in this sense, is having the knowledge and the ability to speak “at home language” and Standard English and knowing where and when it is appropriate to use each of these languages to maximize social profit.

As I demonstrated previously, teachers had opposing sets of expectations for African American students. Therefore, it is not surprising that students holding two different standards of language use acquire the ability to code switch. Ms. Jones shares her experience with code switching:

It is very difficult at times. I grew up in a very poor area and I used to speak and I still do at times, I'll speak the neighborhood lingo, but it was very difficult for me to switch over to board room type of grammar or the standard grammar when I started going into the business world. I had to make a conscious effort and at times I still do have to make a conscious effort because it's so typical of me or so easy for me to speak slang or what it is you want to call it. Even in my home life, my kids speak two languages; they speak Ebonics and they speak proper grammar or our standards as far as the business world is concerned.

For Ms. Jones, code switching is about using language as a tool. She does not suggest that African American students should dismiss their “at home language” and solely speak Standard English. She recognizes that for African American students, there are two languages, and that each of these languages has its purpose and its value. For the African American students in this school that come from low-income background, Ms. Jones believes the ability to “code switch” is essential to opening up career opportunities.

These three perspectives on language usage highlight the different forms of cultural capital that take place at Sherwood Elementary. The more dominant cultural capital a student possessed (e.g. Standard English), the more likely a student was to get the label of a “smart” student (Carter 2004). In the case of African American students and



teachers at Sherwood, there appeared to be disconnection between the value teachers and students placed on different language codes. One way of possibly bridging the gap between white teachers and African American students would be to open up communication concerning language between the two groups. This way, students not only learn why Standard English is a valuable skill for them to have, but teachers may also have a better understanding of the importance of group identity for minorities and the value it holds in their community. Further, African American students' role models at Sherwood (i.e. African American teachers) may need to take part in helping African American students obtain the dominant cultural codes needed to expand their opportunities and networks, especially those related to education and careers. If African American students had a set of consistent expectations that acknowledged the value of code switching, they may have a clearer idea of what types of languages are appropriate for school and what types of languages are appropriate for home and in their community.

#### **“It’s Different for Them”: Expectations for Spanish Speaking Students**

The expectations for Spanish speaking students to learn Standard English were very different from those for African American students. This was evident in three significant ways. First, some teachers thought that Spanish speaking students “want to please their teachers more than African American students.” Ms. Vane, a 25-year old white teacher, explained that Spanish-speaking students “want to learn the language and do things to please you. African Americans are more defiant in their actions.” This perception was common amongst white teachers at Sherwood. Second, teachers allow Spanish-speaking students to sit in small groups and speak Spanish with one another. The teachers did not correct these students nor did they tell them that what they were speaking

was “at-home language.” For example, in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, I observed four Spanish speaking girls sitting together and carrying on conversations in Spanish while they did their work. Two of the girls appeared to be very proficient in Spanish and Standard English, one of the girls could speak some English but predominantly spoke Spanish, and the fourth student spoke Spanish and English very well but from time to time would ask her friend how to say a word or two in English. I never observed any of their teachers (this particular group had three teachers, all white) tell them to stop speaking Spanish or correct them. However, I did witness a teacher ask one of the girls how to say “The Fourth of July” in Spanish. Third, teachers were overly conscious about not correcting Spanish-speaking students when they misspoke because they did not want to discourage them from speaking and learning a new language. For example, Ms. Rodriguez said, “If you consistently correct them it’s going to instill the fear in them and then they will shut down and they won’t want to speak at all.” Similarly, Ms. Vane stated: “If they [Spanish speaking students] think, ‘oh well I’m doing it wrong,’ they’re not going to ask to try and learn it the correct way – they just won’t speak. I feel that reiterating is the correct way, they’ll hear it and then they’ll try to practice it.” Spanish speaking students also had an “at home language” and a school language just as the African American students do. Both of these groups share commonalities such as: they both need to acquire Standard English for educational and career success purposes and they both also use language as a group identifier in their community. So, why are the expectations so different for Spanish speaking students and African American students?

One difference is the concern for the student – how the student would feel if he or she were corrected. This is different from the white teachers’ attitudes toward African

American students. Whereas it is important not to minimize the difficulty of learning a new language and speaking it in front of peers, it is also necessary to highlight the different expectations and leniency teachers have concerning language use for Spanish speaking students as compared to African American students. Second, two African American students speaking “at-home language” would be considered a disruption to the class. On the other hand, two students speaking Spanish is seen as beneficial to the students and a way to make them feel “comfortable” in their environment. This is an example of the institution allowing some groups to display their cultural codes even if they are not the dominant ones, but not allowing others to do so. While there is a language barrier present between speaking Spanish and speaking Standard English that is much different from speaking “at-home language,” both groups are learning a language and learning where it is appropriate to use. Perhaps, there is a difference in expectations because teachers do not see learning Standard English as a second language for African Americans. Another possibility is that teachers view Spanish as a “real” language in its own right whereas teachers perceive “at home language” as slang or as the dialect of uneducated, underclass African Americans in the United States. Whatever the reasoning may be, the difference in interactions between teachers and Spanish speaking students, and teachers and “at-home language” speaking students could make one group of students feel more welcomed in the school than the other.

### **“Why Should We Expect Any Less Of Them?”: Teaching Cultural Codes**

At Sherwood Elementary there was a language struggle. This struggle was acted out between the white teachers and the African American students, but underneath, there was a racial and educational divide on this topic. School personnel with a BA degree or

higher (including the African American Assistant Principal) felt that students should learn Standard English because it is imperative for future careers. As Mr. Kast, a white teacher explained, “We don’t want people thinking they’re dumb. Didn’t your teachers do that to you [teach Standard English]? Why should they be any different? Why should we expect anything less?” This statement refers to the business world’s reliance on Standard English which serves as a justification for schools instilling this skill in students. During my observations, it was apparent that the white teachers wanted to give this skill of speaking Standard English to African American students, but from what I witnessed it was not clear to the students why it was important for them acquire this form of cultural capital. African American students were essentially mocked by their teachers for the way they spoke. For example, teachers asked students, “Where do you learn that?” In this way, they are indirectly judging and mocking their home life and not valuing other forms of cultural capital learned within the family.

Teachers who felt that Standard English was the only appropriate language held Spanish-speaking students to a different set of standards. Teachers did not correct Spanish students when they did not speak Standard English out of concern for how the student would feel to get corrected. In addition, teachers incorporated Spanish into the classroom by asking Spanish speaking students how to translate a word or phrase in English into Spanish. This is an example of teachers and the institution showing preference or validating one group’s cultural codes over another. Furthermore, as Ms. Vane stated previously, white teachers seemed to view Spanish speaking students as more willing to “please” and less “defiant” than African American students. This perception of Spanish speaking students may also have contributed to the difference in

language expectations in comparison to African American students because teachers already view Spanish speaking students as being more aligned with dominant cultural norms.

Insofar as Sherwood Elementary is a Title I school, there are no students from a middle-to-high income background for the Sherwood students to interact with and gain access to more valued forms of capital. Teachers and administrators do have a responsibility to instill experiences that students can pull out of their tool kit to help them succeed in the working world but, in the process, they appear to diminish African American students' cultural codes in comparison to Spanish speaking students. As teachers in this study have pointed out, learning Standard English is important for students to advance in school and for career opportunities. It appears that white teachers insistence on African American students speaking Standard English is one avenue that teachers are trying to pass on to their students the dominant cultural codes needed for success. However, teachers at Sherwood did not seem to appreciate the value of "at-home language" for African American students as clearly as they did see the importance speaking Spanish and Standard English had for Hispanic students.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) state that as a result of a family's "location in the stratification system, students and their parents enter the educational system with dispositional skills and knowledge that differentially facilitate or impede their ability to conform to institutionalized expectations" (p.23). Though students at Sherwood may not enter the educational system with knowledge of dominant cultural codes, they are able to acquire those skills at school. Most African American students at Sherwood seem to know how to speak Standard English but it appeared that teachers were not explaining to

the students why this skill was valuable and how it could be used to their benefit. In other words, students were not learning why to activate this form of cultural capital they were acquiring in the school. For Spanish speaking students, the teachers gave them the opportunity to acquire Standard English without consistently confronting them they speak Spanish. Due to this, Spanish speaking students may feel more welcomed at Sherwood because their cultural codes are seen to have higher value whereas African American students are constantly getting corrected by their teachers and not having their cultural codes legitimated in the school setting. This perception of Spanish being a more valuable language in comparison to “at-home language” is representative of larger societal standards that being bilingual is an asset in the business world where as “at-home language” is a hindrance to achieving occupational success. These different expectations may limit African American students’ opportunities to acquire a dominant form of cultural capital while enhancing Spanish Speaking students’ opportunities.

## Chapter Five

### **“Somebody Needs to Teach These Kids Some Manners” Teachers’ Perceptions of Students’ Home Environment**

Public policy, news media, and educational research often highlight the strong emphasis of standardized testing to which teachers have to adhere. The pressure on teachers to have their students perform at an academic level that will enable them to pass state and national tests is, at times, a looming and large obstacle to meet set standards. Though there is much emphasis on the numerical outcomes of the standardized testing, for teachers the educational context in which they have to accomplish such tasks is imperative to reaching set goals. Over the years, research has indicated that urban schools face particular challenges meeting set standards due to persisting social problems of poverty, unequal resources, and issues surrounding students’ home environment circumstances. It is within this type of educational context that I analyze the stories and experiences of teachers and administrators at Sherwood Elementary. I evaluate the stories and experiences teachers and administrators shared with me through conversation and interviews to answer one of my primary research questions: Do the perceptions teachers and administrators have of Title I students have an impact on teacher-student relationships? I examine the obstacles teachers face and the strategies they employ in building positive teacher-student relationships. I analyze the complexities of those obstacles and strategies through the lens of social capital.

Coleman (1987) describes social capital in the context of children and schools as “the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that

are of value for the child's growing up" (p. 35). Social capital is considered to be of significant importance to students' academic success in schools. According to Portes (1998) social capital exists within the structure of relationships and "to possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage" (p. 7). It is within social relationships that information, norms, and obligations are transmitted (Portes 1998; Goddard 2003; Dufur, Parcel, and McKune 2008). This is important to my study because by teachers building positive relationships with students, students can acquire the social capital they may or may not bring from home. It is within this framework that I examine below the obstacles teachers face and the strategies they employ to building positive teacher-student relationships.

### **Perceptions of Students' Home Environment**

Jennifer DiBara's (2007) research on the struggles of urban high school teachers, explores the tensions and negotiations teachers deal with when working with students with diverse needs. DiBara found that teachers felt forced to deal with the "very real needs students bring to the classroom" despite the fact that many teachers felt constrained by their position as a teacher and even lacked the competence to deal with certain issues. Likewise, teachers at Sherwood spoke of the difficult stories and experiences of their students:

You wouldn't believe some of the stuff [elementary] students come in and tell me but it's true. I had one student bring his whole suitcase to school and I was like OK man what are you doing with this? He said that he was leaving home and I asked why? He said, "If I don't leave home I'm gonna get killed." I have kids come tell me that they haven't eaten in two to three days and I'm like that's a hard thing to swallow.

Ms. Rodriguez shared a similar story:



We've had students who are a family of 9, both parents work and they have come down to one bedroom. They are still surviving, things have happened over the past, economic hardships or whatever, but we're still here struggling and trying to get ahead and that's what motivates us even more to help.

Ms. Rodriguez's comment on how the circumstances students at Sherwood face are seen by teachers as motivators to help their students was also echoed throughout DiBara's (2007) study. DiBara states that, for the most part, teachers felt that students' non-academic needs were also a teacher's responsibility (DiBara 2007). One teacher in DiBara's study commented that from her experience, students had trouble fully engaging in a lesson if there were outside distractions (DiBara 2007). These "outside distractions" were also of central concern to teachers at Sherwood. The majority of teachers and administrators felt that the home situations students came from had an impact on their classroom performance. Students coming from impoverished backgrounds, single-parent households, and parents' limited education who are not able to assist with homework, and parents who work two jobs and not at home after school were all "outside distractions" teachers spoke of. For example:

There are definitely distinctive stories that are very bad. Parents that aren't home or parents that don't want their children so they live with grandmas, grandpas, and aunts, uncles, neighbors, friends, foster care. Some are mentally abused, some physically; some aren't abused at all and come from a great home but their parents have than a high school education and are just trying to make ends meet.

Similarly Ms. Vane Stated:

A lot of parents are young. Because they are young a lot of them are separated so it's a lot of single parents and its not necessarily single mothers, I mean there are single fathers out there too raising children but, I found that it's rare to have a two parents home and most of the time it's a single mother. The dad has either left during pregnancy or when the child was an infant or they are locked away somewhere.

These illustrations are examples of how teachers in general perceived Sherwood students' home life. From interviews, casual conversations, and fieldnotes, the teachers at

Sherwood construct a clear picture of the “typical” home environment. These students come from broken homes, from uneducated parents, and live in dangerous conditions. Economic hardships are another characteristic that is associated with students’ home environments. The following data illustrates how these perceptions present obstacles to building teacher-student relationships and reveals the different strategies teachers employ to fulfill students perceived needs.

### **Obstacles and Strategies to Building Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

One obstacle teachers faced to building positive teacher-student relationships was administrative constraints placed on teachers to avoid getting too involved with their students. Teachers told me that the administration advised them against taking too great of an interest in their students because the area in which the school is located is a transient one. For example, Mr. Issac expressed his frustration with the fluctuating student population:

School starts in August but sometimes I have students just coming in December. I have kids that I put a lot of time and effort into and then they just disappear. I have no idea where they go, they just leave. The Administration tells us not to get too involved with our students, not to take too much interest because it takes its toll on you when that student leaves. I used to make an effort to go to students’ football games or events outside of school but I don’t do it as much anymore because it’s frustrating when they just leave. I used to go to meet parents and see them outside of school, make a positive connection but I don’t do it as much.

This type of frustration also appears in DiBara’s (2007) study in which teachers commented that they sometimes used their own money to provide students with learning materials and then were disappointed when that student left the school or lost the materials. It seems that Sherwood’s teachers want their students to see them as more than teachers, rather as people interested in them both in and outside of school. DiBara states that it is through personal relationships with students that teachers hope to have students

see them beyond an academic role and “gain students’ confidence and respect, and engage them in learning” (DiBara 2007: 17). From this perspective, teachers use their personal relationships with students as an instructional tool (DiBara 2007). Mr. Stone, a teacher’s assistant at Sherwood, expressed his struggle with taking an interest in students and doing what the school administration advised:

I coach football in the area because it is a way to interact with the kids and get them into something positive. It is also a way for me to interact with their parents on a positive level. We are advised against taking too much of an interest in students because they move so frequently to do jobs and money and what have you. It’s hard but it’s also hard not to take an interest.

Mr. Stone and Mr. Issac highlight just one of the complexities teachers at Sherwood face. Through interactions with students and parents, teachers hear and witness some of the struggles their students endure and as well as the teachers’ desire to engage with these students and their parents in order to build positive relationships. This view often conflicts with the administrations perspective, which projects that teachers who take a great deal of interest in their students will become “burned out.” As teachers and administrators described it, “it takes its toll.” The administrators want their teachers to avoid the disappointment and frustration that investing oneself can bring. It appears that the family disorganization these students come from combined with administrative mandates to “not to get too involved” lessens the chances for positive student-teacher relationships.

Whether a teacher has made a personal choice not to get too invested in a student or has taken the advice of the school administration, these constraints placed on teacher-student relationships can result in students not having the opportunity to acquire social capital. Dufur et al. (2008) state that the “information, obligation, and norms that are

transmitted through social ties [can become] resources that help children learn about and internalize appropriate behavior” (Dufur et al. 2008: 147). In addition, the stronger the students ties are to the school and teachers, the more commitment a student will have to normative behaviors and the greater likelihood of positive returns on the social capital acquired (Dufur et al. 2008).

These authors also examined the effects of family and school social capital has on social adjustment and found that social capital acquired through the family is a stronger predictor of school adjustment than social capital transmitted through school. However, for low-achieving students social capital acquired at school can have positive outcomes such as a lessened chance of delinquency and greater sense of school belonging (Dufur et al. 2008). Students who attend Sherwood may or may not have strong ties to their family due to single-parent households, economic struggles, foster care and other home environment circumstances, but they do have the potential to acquire social capital from their teachers. However, the degree to which they can build positive relationships with their teachers is limited by teachers’ perceptions of their students’ home environment and administrative constraints placed on teachers. If, like Dufur et al. (2008) suggest, acquiring social capital through school can reduce delinquency issues and increase a student’s sense of school belonging then the advice by the administration to not take too great of an interest in students might be contributing to existing behavioral problems Sherwood faces.

Though there appears to be a tension between teachers wanting to get involved with their students and administration’s advice not to, one of the strategies teachers employ to develop positive student-teacher and parent-teacher relationships is by making

“positive-phone calls” home. “Positive-phone calls home” means that teachers called students’ homes to tell their parents about their child’s good behavior. Teachers and administrators speculated that one of the main reasons Sherwood had trouble getting parents involved in school was because parents themselves had bad experiences in school when they were younger. Teachers and administrators at Sherwood thought that because of those bad experiences, teachers at Sherwood should employ certain strategies to gain a positive relationship with students’ parents. Ms. White, the assistant principal, stated, “We train our teachers to start off by saying something positive to the parents in a conference and then the parents will stay with you.” Teachers at Sherwood told me that they often would call students’ homes to tell parents how good their child was being. Teachers stated that if parents did not think that every phone call home was going to be negative one, then parents were more likely to interact with them. For example, Ms. Vane illustrates how she employs this strategy:

I make positive phone calls home. Instead of calling and saying, “Ok we need to fix this.” I call and say, “He has really been changing his behavior in a positive manner and I really like. I just wanted to let you know he is doing a great job!” In my experience positive phone calls home help and then parents do not come in stomping asking what he or she did.”

Likewise, Ms. Evan stated:

I make positive phone calls home because it gets the relationship on a positive level. One year I would text one of my student’s parents and give them regular updates. I have a pretty high rate of parents coming in and having conferences.

Here, Ms. Vane and Ms. Evan illustrate how using this strategy of making positive phone calls home helps them build positive relationships with their students’ parents. Both these teachers comment on how making positive phone calls has helped their students’ parents be more willing to become involved in school such as coming to parent-teacher

conferences. Not only does the administration at Sherwood instruct and encourage teachers to do this, teachers also saw positive returns from employing this strategy.

### **Character Building: Meeting Emotional and Behavioral Needs**

Another obstacle teachers faced was taking time away from teaching to work with students on “character building.” All the teachers in this study commented that the students’ home life had an effect on the classroom atmosphere and “character building” was an important facet of classroom instruction. Teachers and administrators referred to character building as teaching students proper manners and what behavior is appropriate in different situations. This was a task many teachers at Sherwood deemed as fundamental to their job as teaching math and science. For example Ms. Vane, a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher, expressed her thoughts on character building:

It’s definitely more character building in Title I because they push and shove because that is all they know. Instinctively, they feel the need to do that. One of the reasons I think Title I students are lower is because a lot of the instruction time is teaching character, manners, and behavior whereas if you had a class where the parents weren’t always off and away from the homes, they would learn that stuff at home. It literally takes time away from what we are originally here to do.

What Ms. Vane described here is that teaching students the dominant “codes” or attitudes and behaviors necessary to succeed. Many of the teachers at Sherwood experienced frustration by having to teach cultural codes, which they believed should be taught at home and students should come to school with. So, while teachers might be providing an avenue for students to acquire cultural capital by teaching them dominant codes and behaviors, this frustration may have been an impediment to strengthening social ties and the building of social capital because this seemed to take away from teachers’ instruction time, a concern expressed by Ms. Vane.

In addition to teaching cultural codes, teachers at Sherwood also have to deal with the emotional needs students brought to the classroom. This presented another obstacle to building teacher-student relationships. Some teachers felt that the lack of attention students received at home made students crave attention at school. Teachers stated that they felt Title I students, especially boys, were more affectionate than usual. As one first grade teacher stated, “The boys are always coming up and asking for hugs. They need the assurance and attention that they are in a safe place.” On a similar note a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher’s assistant stated, “I don’t even know half the kids that come up and give me a hug but they know me. They come up and say, ‘I just wanted a hug.’ These kids just want to know someone cares.” I frequently witnessed teachers giving students hugs throughout the day. However, my observations do not allow me to assess whether students who received this type of emotional support displayed better behavior in the classroom. In any case, providing this type of emotional support appears to be another avenue for teachers to build a positive relationship with their students.

Some teachers attributed students’ bad behavior and trouble completing assignments to students demanding extra instruction time where they could work one-on-one with a teacher and, thus, have extra attention. When teachers felt that students were “acting out” in order to receive this attention, they often felt frustrated because it was a demand difficult to ignore. Often, teachers recognized behavioral patterns, specifically in situations where a few students acting out turned the whole classroom into an unmanageable disruption. In such cases, teachers felt that if they gave the initial students who were disrupting the class the attention they sought, it would prevent the situation from escalating into a class-wide event. This interaction was something teachers felt they

had to do and not something they wanted to do. It may be that this tension prevented teachers from building positive teacher-student relationships.

Like teachers at Sherwood, teachers in DiBara's study also felt that working with students of diverse needs made it "challenging to see where their responsibilities end" (DiBara 2007: 15). Similarly, Sherwood teachers stated that their responsibilities were broadened by having to deal with emotional and behavioral needs while also being expected to do their instructional job. It appeared that Sherwood teachers' first priority was to fulfill the students' emotional and behavioral needs, and deal with academic concerns second. Noddings (2005) refers to these types of emotional and behavioral issues as "over-whelming needs" (Noddings 2005: 151). She also states that, "[a]ll kinds of real, pressing needs overwhelm the academic ones we so easily infer for schoolchildren. Homelessness, poverty, toothaches, faulty vision, violence, fear of rebuke or mockery, sick or missing parents, and feelings of worthlessness all get in the way of the learning deemed important by school people" (Noddings 2005: 151). According to this author, it is unrealistic and "inappropriate" to address educational needs when basic biological and social needs have not been met (Noddings 2005:154). The complexities teachers faced in meeting students emotional and behavioral needs was very apparent in the classroom situations I witnessed. In the remainder of this section, I illustrate a few scenarios I observed at Sherwood that give a general overview to the complexities teachers face and the strategies teachers employ to build positive teacher-student relationships.

During my time at Sherwood I was witness to many behavioral and emotional issues teachers at Sherwood faced. I observed the complexity of dealing with students



with diverse needs while managing a classroom. These teachers also had to control their own emotions and frustrations when confronted with students' emotional or behavioral needs.

For example, Ms. Vane's taught a 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade combined class. Charles was in her class, a student who was supposed to be in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade but was held back. Charles presented many of the issues previously described. He would frequently walk into class 20 minutes late without a worry on his face. Charles did not seem like a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader but a 16-year old boy on the brink of manhood with sagging pants and his collar turned up. Charles did not get excited over writing on the white board or having stories read to him like his classmates. Rather, he spent most of his day with his head down at his table, causing trouble with the students seated around him or on most occasions saying "fuck" loudly when Ms. Vane was teaching. Charles was also very reluctant to complete assignments. However, Ms. Vane and I quickly realized that if you sat with Charles and worked with him, he was capable of doing the assignment. Ms. Vane often struggled with making decisions on how to handle Charles' behavior. It appeared that Ms. Vane showed compassion for Charles and saw him as a student who did not get the emotional support he needed at home but, could not let him continue to distract the class. One day Charles refused to walk in line with the rest of his classmates and after many warnings and a week of Charles resisting Ms. Vane's instructions, she sent him to the office to have his parents called and asked me to walk him there. Charles cried the whole way and begged to be brought back to class.

This situation highlights the complexities teachers at Sherwood face between feeling empathy towards their students and dealing with discipline problems while

managing a classroom. It appeared that teachers struggled to address behavior issues, especially among students whose personal story they knew. Another example of this type of situation occurred between Mr. Kast and Keith, a kindergarten student. Keith would not follow directions during a P.E. session so Mr. Kast instructed him to sit in the corner. When Keith did not follow this direction, Mr. Kast told him he was going to tell his mother about the situation at the end of the day. Keith responded, “I don’t have a mother”; Mr. Kast replied, “Well then I am going to tell your father.” Keith responded by saying he did not have a dad nor a grandma or grandpa and when Mr. Kast finally asked “Well then who do you live with?” Keith responded by saying, “My foster mom.” This conversation played out in front of the entire room consisting of two teachers and a classroom of 4<sup>th</sup> graders. Mr. Kast decided to let Keith play the game with the other students and to not take the punishment further.

Teachers’ perceptions of students’ home life and of the students themselves as emotionally deprived individuals, impacts how they deal with classroom issues. Early in my research at Sherwood, Ms. Bates, a retired teacher who was helping out for the summer session, pulled me aside and instructed me to look around the room. She then proceeded, “Every child in this room is a survivor. They are survivors of their environment. Every child has a story. They need safety and predictability, two things they don’t get at home.” Though most teachers would agree with Ms. Bates’ statement, the way she structured her classroom was very different from all the other classrooms I observed. I spent three days observing Ms. Bates’ classroom and assisting her with reading activities. Unlike the other classrooms I observed, Ms. Bates’ students were not

allowed to talk unless spoken to and were called by numbers instead of their names.

Teachers did not allow boys and girls sit next to each other or play together at recess.

One afternoon I was helping students play animal vowel bingo and I asked them to make the sounds of the animals that I called. I called “lion” and the students roared and laughed as they made their hands into lion paws and pretended to claw. Ms. Bates did not like this at all and stood up from her desk and told me very loudly and sternly that the students under no circumstances were allowed to talk, laugh, or anything else. They were to do their vowels and if I could not keep them quiet while they did it, I could leave. Embarrassed and a little confused I hushed the children and continued with the lesson. Ms. Bates explained to me that she ran her classroom based on what she thought her students needed: discipline and predictability. Ms. Bates acknowledged that her students come from tough home environments and she felt her classroom environment would best suit their needs. Providing a classroom environment of discipline and order was a strategy Ms. Bates employed. Though Ms. Bates’ strategy was different than Ms. Vane’s, who took more time to sit one-on-one with students and fostered a classroom environment where students could talk quietly and move around the room freely to choose books when assignments were completed, it was what Ms. Bates felt was needed to fulfill her students’ needs. Ms. Bates, Ms. Vane, and Mr. Kast are all examples of how teachers develop strategies to work with the obstacles they face. Though all three of these teachers had similar perceptions of their students’ needs, the way they sought to fulfill those needs were different. It appeared that the environment Ms. Bates created in her classroom did not foster an atmosphere for building positive teacher-student relationships as did Ms.

Vane and Mr. Kast who gave their students a certain amount of autonomy in the classroom and more one-on-one attention.

### **Conclusion**

It seems that the perceptions teachers had of students: as emotionally needy individuals, from unstructured home environments, and economically deprived, had a direct effect on the way they deal with classroom issues and broadens their responsibilities as teachers. These perceptions influence the types of student-teacher relationships at Sherwood and in turn influenced students' opportunity to build social capital at school. If students do not build the social ties at home needed to adjust to school and internalize proper behavior, then the need for them to acquire this type of capital at school becomes even more imperative.

The home environment students come from, their need for emotional support, and the need for character-building are all obstacles teachers at Sherwood are faced with. The strategies they employ to fulfill the students needs are based on the perceptions teachers have of students' home environment. As illustrated earlier, many teachers felt conflicted between getting to know their students in and outside of school and using their role as a teacher as an instructional tool and listening to administrative warnings about becoming "burned-out." Making positive phone calls home, giving hugs and emotional support, teaching students cultural codes, and working one-on-one with students are all strategies teachers at Sherwood used to deal with these obstacles. The strategies not only seemed to help teachers deal with the obstacles they faced but were also ways teachers work around administrative constraints and build positive relationships with their students that in return provided avenues for students to acquire social capital.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

The data presented in this study highlight obstacles and strategies encountered at Sherwood Elementary to students' acquisition of cultural and social capital. Through participant observations and in-depth interviews, this study sought to answer several questions: Do the resources available to students aide the acquisition of cultural capital? What expectations do teachers have for students' language usage and do these expectations impact acquisition of cultural capital? How do teachers talk about and perceive Title I students? Does this image affect a students' ability to build positive teacher relationships? Does this perception have an impact on students' opportunities to build social capital at school? I examined these questions through the lens of social and cultural capital.

Chapter three highlighted the lack of resources Sherwood had in regards to learning materials such as pencils, books and technological resources such as computers. A lack of these material resources seemed to impede students' ability to acquire cultural capital. Teachers responded to the lack of material resources by using their personal funds to purchase pencils, books, and other materials needed to run a classroom on a day-to-day basis. This is one example where teachers at Sherwood took it upon themselves to improve the educational context within which they work. Teachers at Sherwood recognized the importance of learning materials beyond textbooks, such as chapter books and short stories, for students' academic achievement. To help students acquire this type

of knowledge, teachers allowed students to checkout books to take home with them. This is one avenue for students' acquisition of cultural capital at school. Lareau and Weininger (2003) state that learning environments with valued educational resources provide students with access to obtain cultural capital. Therefore, teachers were not only improving the educational context they are working within, they are also providing their students ways to acquire dominant cultural codes that are necessary for success in the educational system. Though the school lacked some learning materials, Sherwood's administration did make a conscious effort to expose students to cultural experiences they did not get at home or in the community.

As Ms. Jones, the assistant principal, stated, "Schools in higher socioeconomic districts have daily exposure to cultural experiences that our students do not." During my observation time at Sherwood, I witnessed two programs that were brought into the school for this purpose, a healthy eating program, and the Westbridge Middle School Band. The goal of the health-eating program was to educate students on how to make healthier food choices and to expose them to healthy snacks they may never have tried before. The Westbridge Middle School Band played a concert at Sherwood to introduce students to an extracurricular activity that they could participate in upon entering middle school. Both of the programs exposed students to a form of cultural capital. The healthy eating program provided an avenue for students to be exposed to middle-class nutritional habits and norms, whereas the band introduced students to an activity that may allow them to acquire a skill with others may view as positive and beneficial. In addition, some studies state that minorities and low-income students have a harder time passing standardized tests because they do not have the cultural experiences needed to fully

understand the questions (Oakes 1985; Meier and Wood 2004; Kozol 2005). Perhaps, Sherwood's strategy of exposing students to dominant cultural experiences will have a positive impact on their ability to relate to the information they are taught in school for standardized tests. Though I cannot say if Sherwood was successful in teaching students how to activate the cultural capital to which they were exposed, it is important to highlight the acknowledgement and effort Sherwood's administration put into exposing students to dominant cultural experiences.

School resources were not the only avenues for students to acquire cultural capital at Sherwood. In Chapter four, I discussed teachers' expectations for language usage and how those expectations differed among groups of students, but also impacted students' acquisition of cultural capital. This study found that many African American students know how to speak Standard English, but it appeared that they did not know why it was important to activate this form of capital to their social benefit. Secondly, it seemed that teachers held Spanish-speaking students to a different set of expectations. Teachers allowed Spanish-speaking students to speak Spanish in class and, at times, teachers incorporated Spanish into the lesson. In contrast, African American students were constantly corrected when they did not speak Standard English by their white teachers whereas their African American teachers did not feel acquiring Standard English was as important and did not correct students.

Due to the difference in expectations, it was not surprising that African American students developed the ability to code switch. It appeared that African American students did not know why or when use their acquisition of Standard English as a form of cultural capital, but rather used it only when prompted to by their white teachers. Literature on

cultural capital states that acquisition of dominant language codes is important for students' success. Minority students who speak Standard English are more likely to be viewed as a "smart" and "good" student (Carter 2004). Teachers' perceptions and expectations of students influence a students' academic achievement (Finely 1984; Oakes 1985; Stein 2001). Therefore, if Title I students are able to acquire Standard English and the knowledge of how to use it to their benefit, teachers may be more likely to have higher expectations for them and may be more likely to engage in a positive teacher-student relationship. This may affect their ability to acquire social capital, as I discussed in chapter five.

In chapter five, I explored the perceptions and attitudes teachers have towards Title I students and how those influence students' ability to build positive teacher-student relationships. Analyses of my interviews and observational data revealed an image of what it meant to be a Title I student to teachers and administrators. It seemed that teachers' perceptions of students as emotionally deprived children who live in dangerous conditions and whose families face economic struggles did not always hinder a students' ability to build positive teacher-student relationships and acquire social capital. Though some studies have found that the label of Title I has negative consequences (Stein 2001; Meier and Wood 2004), this study found that teachers employed various strategies to fulfill students' perceived needs that helped teachers and students build positive relationships. These strategies included giving hugs to students, spending one-on-one time with students, making positive phone calls home, and taking an interest in students' activities outside of the school.



However, teachers did face obstacles to building relationships with their students. Administrators at Sherwood advised teachers against taking too great of an interest in students because students frequently moved. Administrators did not want teachers to get “burnt out” or discouraged after they put effort and time into a student and then that student moved away. It seemed that teachers’ perceptions of students stemmed from experiences teachers and administrators had encountered with students’ families. Whereas some studies state that the lack of parental involvement in school by working-class families may negatively influence students in the classroom (Lareau 1989; Lee and Bowen 2006), this study found that the teachers who knew about students’ home circumstances made a conscious effort to try to fulfill students’ emotional and behavioral needs.

One example includes teachers attempting to work with students’ behavioral issues instead of automatically sending them to the office or calling their parents. As illustrated in chapter three in the situations with Charles and Keith, their teachers felt bad for them because they believed that these students did not get the emotional attention they needed at home which caused them to “act out” in school. This study is not suggesting that the label Title I placed on students is positive or helps students’ achieve academic success. However, the findings in this study suggest that the knowledge of students’ home circumstances does not always hinder students’ ability to acquire social capital at school, but at times may help to build positive teacher-student relationships, as teachers try to fulfill students’ perceived needs.

This study contributes to literature on social and cultural capital in school especially among young children ages 6-11 years old. By analyzing how social and

cultural capital are mediated through a Title I program, this study was able to highlight the ways in which low-income minority students are able to acquire social and cultural capital through the educational system. Further research is needed to explore how the amount of time teachers spend dealing with emotional and behavioral issues take away from teaching academic lessons and how this impacts Title I students' academic achievement. If teachers have to spend a significant portion of their day giving one-on-one attention to their students in order to prevent bigger classroom disruptions, how does this impediment to academic lessons impact students' abilities to acquire the necessary information to succeed on standardized tests? Also, does the exposure to cultural resources impact students' ability to perform better on standardized tests because they are better equipped to relate to the information presented on tests? It may be that Title I students who are exposed to dominant-culture experiences may perform better on standardized tests because they are more familiar with the dominant knowledge and codes that standardized tests are based upon. Furthermore, what types of strategies can schools employ to take some of the emotional responsibilities off of teachers so that they can focus on academic concerns? One possible method for helping to relieve teachers of this responsibility may be to increase the number of school counselors and teachers' assistants. In addition, it seems that it is important to study if and how Title I students' learn to activate the social and cultural capital they acquire at school to their social benefit. For Title I students, it is in learning when and why to activate the social and cultural capital acquired that will provide them the social benefit they need to expand their networks and open opportunities for academic and career success.

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