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# How Principals Promote a Culturally Relevant Learning Environment to Improve Black Student Achievement in Urban Elementary Schools

Rachel Maria Lee

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HOW PRINCIPALS PROMOTE A CULTURALLY RELEVANT LEARNING  
ENVIRONMENT TO IMPROVE BLACK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN URBAN  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

by

RACHEL LEE

(Under the Direction of Walter Polka)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore the role of the principals in promoting a culturally relevant learning environment to help Black students in urban elementary schools to achieve academic success. The voice of the principals is absent in the literature. As a group, the academic achievement of students in suburban elementary schools surpasses the academic achievement of students in urban elementary schools based on assessments on the national and state levels. The majority of the Black students in elementary schools attend schools located in the urban areas that utilize the traditional teaching instruction, strategies, and methods to impart knowledge to their students. Based on the scores on the standardized assessments, many Black students are not demonstrating that they have mastered the required concepts for proficiency in the academic areas.

Many researchers confirm that the traditional schooling is failing to educate Black students. Teachers are not connecting the classroom learning with the daily experiences of the Black students. The consequence of the disconnection between academic knowledge and the daily experiences of Black students results in the disinterest in the educational process for many Black students.

Researchers support culturally relevant learning environments that are designed to strengthen the cohesiveness between the classroom knowledge and the experiences of Black students. Culturally relevant learning environments nurture the intellectual, social, and emotional aspects of the student. Black students are able to become active learners and take ownership of their learning as they utilize the classroom learning in their daily lives. A review of the research literature indicates that the traditional educational systems are providing an inadequate education for the Black students in urban elementary schools.

The data for the study was collected using qualitative methods. The researcher utilized three case studies to explore the role of the principals in promoting a culturally relevant learning environment to help Black students in urban elementary schools to achieve academic success. The study revealed that the principals promoted culturally relevant activities intermittently to help improve the academic achievement of the Black students in their schools.

**INDEX WORDS:** Black students, Urban elementary schools, Culturally relevant learning environment, Principal, Culturally responsive teaching

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ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Electronic Version Approved:  
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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this doctoral dissertation to my deceased mother, Mrs. Rosie Pearl Lee, who is the preeminent individual in my life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my family and friends for their support and encouragement. Your encouraging words were inspirational to me throughout this dissertation process. I thank each of you for being positive forces in my life.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### General Introduction

The public school systems have the responsibility of educating all the students in America. The disparities between the academic performances of the minority and majority students in American schools are major educational issues. Researchers state that the disparities exist because the socialization systems of the public schools are not structured to teach diverse student populations (Hale, 2001; Kuykendall, 1991; Murrell, 2002; Thompson, 2004; Watkins, 2001).

Anderson (1988) reports that Black people established schools before 1865. Also, Black people began to advocate for universal public education with the legal end of slavery in 1865 (Anderson, 1988). As of 1867, some Blacks began to receive free public education under the Reconstruction Act in the South (Altman, 1997; Joiner, Bonner, Shearouse, & Smith, 1979.) Free public schools were open to all children in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas in 1867 (Altman 1997). At the end of the Reconstruction era in 1877, funding for education was drastically reduced (Altman, 1997; Woodson, 1919). Subsequently, Black students were taught with out-of-date textbooks, damaged equipment, and crowded classrooms throughout the South (Altman, 1997). Yet, the quest for the educational opportunity acquired during the Reconstruction period remained a goal for the future generations of Blacks (Altman, 1997).

The Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), enabled the states to pass laws requiring racial segregation in public schools when the facilities

were deemed to be equal. However, in the court case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), the United States Supreme Court rejected the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision stating that segregated schools are “inherently unequal” and must be abolished. Yet, the Jim Crow laws prolonged segregation in the South (Morgan, 1995). The Jim Crow laws were racial restrictions imposed on Blacks in the South to keep them from exercising their rights as citizens such as voting, buying property, attending schools, and applying for jobs (Morgan, 1995). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was instrumental in repealing the Jim Crow laws (Morgan, 1995). In 1964, the Civil Rights Act made it unconstitutional for racial segregation in public venues (Cashin, 1985).

During 1964 in Richmond County, Georgia, the first three primary grades opened to all the students who lived in the zones of the schools (Cashin, 1985). A year later, all the students could attend schools in their residents’ zones (Cashin, 1985). However, the zone schools did not allow for integration between Black and White students. Due to social and economic constraints, Blacks were restricted to live in designated neighborhoods (Cashin, 1985). In 1972, the implementation of a court-ordered busing plan transported the Black students to predominately White schools (Cashin, 1985). After the implementation of the court-ordered busing plan, many private schools, known as “academies”, opened for the White students who did not want to participate in the busing plan to integrate the Richmond County public schools in 1972 (Cashin, 1985). Also, the *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974), decision ensured that the schools would not be desegregated across school districts. This decision enabled the minority students in urban districts to be legally segregated from the majority students in suburban districts.

Despite the efforts toward school integration, the curriculum reflects the majority culture in most public schools in America (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Murrell, 2002). Public school systems are structured to educate the majority students while mis-educating and under-educating minority students (Hale, 2001; Thompson, 2004; Woodson, 1933). The experiences of the majority students are immersed in the daily curriculum with a learning environment that reflects their culture (Gay, 2000; Kuykendall, 1991). Hilliard (2001) defines culture as a group's individual and collective ways of thinking, and believing which includes their experiences, skills, values, behaviors, forms of expression and social institutions. However, culture of the minority students is not part of the primary learning environment in most public schools in contemporary America (Gay, 2000; Kuykendall 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Murrell, 2002; Thompson, 2004). Since public schools are required to provide a quality education for all students, the learning environments should meet the needs of all the students in the classrooms (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Murrell, 2002).

In contemporary America, it is important to focus on the culture of the minority students because the minority population is increasing in the public schools (Ladson-Billings, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). According to the U.S Census Bureau (2004), the projected population of the United States in 2010 is 13.1% Black, 15.5% Hispanic, 79.3 White, 4.6 Asian, and 3.0% for American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islanders.

Researchers have documented that an achievement gap exists between minority students and majority students. The achievement gap has existed for over 40 years (Coleman et al., 1966; Duran, 1983; Ramist, Lewis, & McCamley, 1994). According to

the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2004), minority students continue to score lower than majority students on standardized tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2004) reports that the test scores of the Black and Hispanic students in the fourth grade were lower than the test scores of the White students in math and reading. The average scale score in math for the Black students in 2004 was 23 points below the test scores of the White students. The average scale score in math for the Hispanic students in 2004 was 18 points below the test scores of the White students. The average scales score for both Black and Hispanic students in reading in 2004 was 42 points below the test scores of the White students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2004). Researchers cite that minority students are one of the largest segments of the population in the public school systems, and that their talents cannot continue to be undervalued (DuBois, 1940; Nettles & Perna; 1997; Pine & Hillard, 1990). Minority students warrant a learning environment that meets their intellectual, emotional, and social needs (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally relevant environments are important to meet the needs of diverse student populations (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Murrell, 2002). Culturally responsive teachers provide culturally relevant learning activities to help all the students achieve academic success. However, the education system established through slavery, segregation, and White dominance is not sufficient to educate the current diverse student populations (Baptiste, Boyer, Herrera, & Murry, 1999).

#### Statement of the Problem

Recent efforts of the school reform have demanded schools to accept accountability roles in increasing student achievement. Low student achievement, as

measured by the results of scores on standardized tests, continues to be a major concern in the urban schools. As educational leaders, urban elementary principals play a pivotal role in promoting the educational standards in the academic environments of the schools. However, the urban elementary principal's voice is missing from the literature. Some urban elementary principals support the academic and personal growth of Black students by promoting culturally relevant learning environments. However, these urban elementary principals are the exception, not the norm. Black students rank at the bottom of the standardized test scores in disproportionate numbers. Urban elementary principals may help to change this trend by promoting culturally relevant learning environments for Black students.

Culturally relevant learning environments for Black students in urban elementary schools may promote a receptive and engaging environment that increases the academic performances of the students. However, little information is known about the principals' understanding of the importance of a culturally relevant environment as it relates to student achievement and their role in promoting a nurturing environment for Black students. The purpose of this study is to explore how principals promote culturally relevant learning environments in urban elementary schools to improve the academic achievement of the Black students.

### Research Questions

The primary research question of the study was: How do principals promote a culturally relevant environment to improve learning as it relates to student achievement for Black students in urban elementary schools? The study focused on the following specific secondary questions to collect additional information about the topic:

1. How do principals define a culturally relevant learning environment for Black students in urban elementary schools?
2. What is the role of the principal in promoting culturally-relevant training for teachers and staff who teach Black students in urban elementary schools?
3. What are the principals' perceptions of culturally responsive teachers for Black students in urban elementary schools?

### Theoretical Perspectives

Researchers cite that the intellectual, emotional, and social needs of the Black students are not being met in the traditional schools (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The traditional learning environments of the schools derive from the historically dominant cultural group in America. Therefore, these schools may not provide the learning environments in which the majority of the Black students can experience academic success (Baptiste, Boyer, Herrera, & Murry, 1999; Scheurich, 1998). In addition, Murrell (2002) asserts that when Black students' cultural needs are not met in the classroom, many Black students become disinterested in the education process.

More schools should establish culturally responsive learning environments with culturally responsive teachers to reduce the disengagement of Black students from the education process, (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Murrell, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant educational environment for Black students as one that encompasses the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of the students, while using cultural themes to impart knowledge and skills in the classrooms. The learning environment should be congruent with the cultural value systems of diverse student

populations (Gay, 2000). It is important to maintain the interest of Black students in learning environment by connecting the classroom knowledge to their culture (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Boykin (1983) identifies nine cultural themes that are integral components of the academic success of Black students in urban elementary schools. These cultural themes are spirituality, harmony, verve, movement, oral tradition, affect, expressive individualism, social time perspective, and communalism. These nine cultural themes are parallel to the themes of Kwanzaa, a contemporary Black cultural celebration in the United States (Karenga, 1998).

Studies conducted by Boykin and Bailey (2000) revealed that the academic performance of the Black students in the classroom improved with the implementation of the cultural themes. Black students' comprehension skills were higher when the teachers told the stories with high movement such as moving around and being expressive while telling the stories. Also, the highest academic performance of the Black students was with music playing in the background in the classrooms (Boykin & Bailey, 2000).

Carter (2001) cited that urban elementary schools with culturally relevant environments were a major factor in helping Black students score above average on standardized assessments. Teachers incorporated African history to teach reading comprehension and literacy. Also, students studied Swahili, English, and Spanish.

Howard (2001) conducted case studies that identified three educational themes utilized by the classroom teachers for academic success for Black students. The teachers used holistic instructional strategies emphasizing academic and moral competencies. The teachers utilized skill building strategies to help students acquire the knowledge for academic success. These teachers helped the students to use the new knowledge beyond

the classroom (Howard, 2001). Foster and Peele (1999) assert that the school principal is the major catalyst in promoting the training for the teachers to blend Black culture in the learning environment.

Foster and Peele (1999) conducted a study that revealed that teachers attended training for teaching diverse student populations when the principals expressed vocal support for the professional development program. Principals are the cultural and educational leaders of their schools (Carter, 2001; Hale, 2001). Gay (2000) states that the school leaders should appreciate the facts about the cultural values of the students to keep them engaged in the education process and to promote a culturally inclusive ambience.

As the instructional leaders, principals should promote a culturally relevant learning environment that is conducive to the needs of every student in urban elementary schools (Hale, 2001). Urban principals should respectfully understand the importance of selecting quality teachers for every student (Haberman, 1995). Also, they should select teachers who are committed to the emotional, intellectual, and social growth of every child (Education Trust, 1999; Haberman, 1995). These “star teachers” provide a nurturing environment for all students to succeed in the classroom (Haberman, 1995).

However, when principals and others possess insufficient knowledge of the Black students’ cultural values, they can form negative stereotypes about Black students (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001). These stereotypes often have a negative impact on the Black students and may cause them to struggle with their identities (Boykin, 1994; Murrell, 2002). According to Murrell (2002), the academic performance of the Black students is higher in schools when principals promote a culturally relevant learning environment.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

The study was designed to obtain the perceptions of the principals regarding the research questions about promoting a culturally relevant learning environment for Black students in urban elementary schools. The researcher used qualitative methods to obtain data for the research. The researcher developed an interview questionnaire to guide the semi-structured interviews of the principals for the study.

### *Population*

There are 35 elementary schools in the Richmond County School District located in Augusta, Georgia. The urban elementary schools in Richmond County do not meet the criteria of the “90/90/90 Schools” cited in the study conducted by Reeves (2000). The three criteria for the “90/90/90 Schools” are: (a) more than 90 percent of the students are ethnic minorities; (b) more than 90 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced meals; and (c) more than 90 percent of the students met or exceeded the academic standards. The closest concept of the “90/90/90 Schools” in Richmond County is the “70/70/70 Schools”. Therefore, the three urban elementary school principals were selected from Richmond County School District because their schools met these three criteria: (a) Black students comprise 70 percent or more of the student population, (b) 70 percent or more of the student population receive free or reduced meals, and (c) 70 percent or more of the students in the schools met or exceeded the academic performance indicator for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test (GCRCT) for the 2004-2005 school year. These criteria produced eight schools that have the demographics of a Black majority and socio-economically

disadvantage students, yet met or exceeded the Adequately Yearly Progress standards for the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test in the 2004-2005 school year. Three urban elementary schools were randomly selected from the eight schools to participate in the study.

#### *Data Collection*

The researcher communicated with the three selected urban elementary principals to determine if they were willing to participate in the study. After the principals agreed to participate in the study, the researcher mailed an informational letter and consent form to each principal. Next, the researcher scheduled the face-to-face interviews with each principal. The researcher scheduled additional visits to ask follow-up questions and to observe the learning environments of the three schools.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data was transcribed from the interviews and observations. The researcher coded, categorized, and analyzed the interview data to identify the common themes, patterns, and language.

#### Significance of the Study

As a counselor in an urban elementary school setting, I have observed negative tendencies among some Black students regarding the education process. After the second grade, many Black students do not demonstrate the enthusiasm and the enjoyment for learning as they did in their initial years of their formal education. When given the opportunity to correct assignments, many of the students think this is a punishment. These students do not view the second chance as a learning tool. Some students do not take ownership of their learning. Students tell me that they want to earn good grades. Yet,

they do not commit themselves to carry out the tasks to enable them to earn good grades. Many of the students are not an integral part of the learning process because many of them put forth little effort in the classroom. If the educational environment was nurturing and fulfilling to the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of the Black students, would more Black students be receptive to the knowledge and actively engaged in the learning process?

As a group, Black students in urban schools are consistently identified as performing below average on standardized achievement tests. I believe that Black students need principals and teachers who possess an understanding of the culture and traditions of the Black students to help them achieve academic success. I believe that Black students in every urban elementary school should receive a quality education. A quality education for Black students includes a nurturing environment where Black students are respected as individuals and their ancestors' contributions are acknowledged in the curriculum on a daily basis. Black students deserve to observe, read, and discuss the contributions of Black people more than in the month of February. Black students should be able to identify and relate to the content knowledge on some level in their daily lives. A culturally relevant learning environment may help Black students to connect the new knowledge to their daily lives.

Since little information exists about the understanding that principals have about the importance of a culturally relevant learning environment as it relates to student learning and their roles in promoting these environments, the study may help to expand the knowledge base of practicing and future leaders in providing a quality education for Black students. Interviewing principals to obtain their views about promoting culturally

relevant learning environments for Black students may provide strategies that will help other principals to establish culturally relevant learning environments to stimulate the academic performance of the Black students.

In many schools, Black students are not receiving a quality education. It is important for parents, policymakers, educators, and society to address the core issues related to the mediocrity of the academic performance of the Black students in America's schools. The vast numbers of Black students who underachieve in urban schools indicate a problem with the traditional schooling process. The results of the study may help parents, policymakers, educators, and society to understand the importance of providing culturally relevant learning environments for Black students in urban elementary schools.

The study will broaden the literature base regarding the importance of providing culturally relevant learning environments for Black students to help improve their academic achievement. Urban elementary schools provide the educational base for many Black students in the major cities in the United States. It is essential that the principals of the urban elementary schools provide learning environments for Black students that keep them engaged in the learning process.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

#### Introduction

This dissertation examines the impact of the role of the principals for promoting a culturally relevant learning environment to improve the academic achievement of Black students in urban elementary schools in Augusta, Georgia. The eight bodies of literature that are explored by the researcher include: (a) the education of the Blacks in the United States, (b) policy and educational reforms, (c) urban schools and community relations, (d) urban elementary schools, (e) student achievement, (f) culturally responsive teachers, (g) cultural themes of the Black students, and (h) the roles of the principals as they relate to the culture and the academic achievement of Black students. The major studies that are related to the research literature are displayed in Tables 1-4 on pages 144-148.

#### Education of Black People in the United States

The southern Whites opposed educating Blacks more than the northern Whites because the southern Whites perceived education as an empowerment for the Blacks to end slavery (Morgan, 1995). Beginning in the late 1600's to the 1700's, the religious groups provided education for many of the Blacks (Anderson, 1988; Morgan, 1995). The Quakers taught Blacks to read the Bible so Blacks could learn about Christianity (Morgan, 1995). In 1695, the Reverend Samuel Thomas taught Black adults and children to read in his parish in Goose Creek, South Carolina. Also, in 1735 the Quakers organized schools for Blacks in South Carolina (Morgan, 1995).

Elias Neau opened a school for Black students in New York City in 1704 (Morgan, 1995). The Quakers formed the Manumission Society in 1785 to protect Blacks

from the slave bounty hunters (Morgan, 1995). The Manumission Society established the New York African Free School for Blacks in 1794 (Morgan, 1995). The earliest example of special classes for the gifted, called “merit” classes, was part of the instruction at the African Free School. Some abolitionists like, John Jay, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Benjamin Franklin believed that the Blacks should have equal access to education to expand their intellectual capacity (Morgan, 1995). However, Thomas Jefferson believed that the education of the Blacks should be limited to the areas of agriculture, construction, and skills related to the industrial pursuits (Morgan, 1995).

During the period from 1833 to 1865, a school for the Black students existed in Savannah, Georgia without the knowledge of the slave owner regime (Anderson, 1988). The Black *New Orleans Union* founded the Pioneer School of Freedom in 1864. Blacks were instrumental in establishing schools for themselves through their communal values by creating more than 22 schools in South Carolina in 1867 (Anderson, 1988). In 1863, Blacks established schools in New Orleans and other southern states before the Freedmen’s Bureau took control over the school system in 1865. However, in 1866, every school operated by the Freedmen’s Bureau closed because of financial problems (Altman, 1997; Anderson, 1988). Blacks viewed the universal education as a major part of their society because the Blacks believed that literacy and formal education were the pathways to liberation and freedom (Anderson, 1988).

After the Civil War and Reconstruction era, the establishment of schools for Blacks was more difficult in the South than the North (Anderson, 1988; Morgan, 1995). Morgan (1995) reports that the Whites in the South considered the Blacks as servants who did not require to be educated. In 1886, Lucy Laney opened the Haines Normal and

Industrial School of Augusta, Georgia for Blacks. The student population of the school was 900 with 22 Black teachers in 1915. The curriculum consisted of English, French, Latin, German, Greek, sociology, history, physiology, and chemistry (Morgan, 1995). Lucy Laney's rigorous curriculum was the impetus for Ware High School for Blacks that was located in Augusta, Georgia (Morgan, 1995).

In 1897, the White school board of Richmond County voted to close Ware High School because more elementary schools were needed (Morgan, 1995). Some of the Black parents of Richmond County petitioned the United States Supreme Court for a reversal in *Cumming v. School Board of Richmond County, Georgia*, 175 U.S. 528 (1899). The lawyers for the Black parents used *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) as the precedent case. Although two White high schools existed in the county, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the case presented for Ware High School did not prove that the Richmond County School Board's decision was primarily based on race (Morgan, 1995). Twenty years after Ware High School closed in 1897, the southern cities provided public high schools for over 75,000 White children and none for the Black students (Morgan, 1995).

The United States Supreme Court rejected *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) with the court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), which outlawed segregation in the public schools. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act that made it unconstitutional for racial segregation in public places in 1964. The Elementary and Secondary School Education Act of 1965 provided the funds for the school districts to promote integration in the public schools.

## Policy and Education Reform

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB, Public Law 107-110) has impacted public schools across the United States. The NCLB was created to revitalize public education and to improve student achievement throughout the United States. The NCLB helps states and communities to establish a framework for a comprehensive, standards-based education reform for all students. The law mandates that every public school teacher is highly qualified by the guidelines of NCLB. The standardized assessments are given to students to evaluate their proficiency in the specified content areas. If the students do not meet the standards, the law requires the states to take disciplinary actions against the school districts. Adam (2006) asserts that some states such as North Carolina, New Mexico, and Indiana inflated the number of minority students who graduated to prevent being penalized for low graduation rates among minority students.

The accountability component of the NCLB requires every state to design a standardized assessment that measures the students' academic performance on high-stakes tests. High-stakes tests are mandated standardized tests. The results of the high-stakes tests are used to make decisions about the academic knowledge of the students and the schools in which the students are educated (Smith & Fey, 2000). NCLB requires the states to establish a baseline level for student achievement. The students must demonstrate yearly academic improvement to reach the proficient level on the state's assessment (National Education Association, 2004). Each state, school district, and school must demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) with the results of the standardized assessments in reading and math in grades three through eight (National Education Association, 2004). If schools do not meet Adequate Yearly Progress, a series

of sanctions are outlined in the NCLB that may result in financial penalties, closure, or even takeover of the school by the state (National Education Association, 2004).

Some of the state officials believe that the NCLB guidelines require too much federal involvement with state and local school districts. Also, many state officials believe that the funds are insufficient to implement the different policies required by the NCLB (Bradley, 2006; Hoff, 2006). The taxpayers in Kit Carson School District in Colorado voted for a property-tax levy to replace the federal money provided by the NCLB instead of following the mandate of the NCLB.

The National Education Association and school districts in Michigan, Vermont, and Texas filed a lawsuit with the argument that the implementation of the law was more costly than the federal funding that the states were receiving (Lacy, 2005). The lawsuit was dismissed after the court ruled that Congress imposes mandates that are not funded, not the federal officials (Lacy, 2005). Congress has the right to expect state and local school districts to comply with federal guidelines including training teachers, and administering and improving assessment scores (Lacy, 2005).

### Communities and Urban Schools

Many urban schools are located in communities with high-poverty, unemployment, and lack of community resources (Kozol, 1991; Wang & Reynolds, 1995). For this study, urban schools are defined as schools located in cities with a student population of 70 percent or higher of Black students with the poverty level of 70 percent or higher (Education Trust, 2003). Urban schools receive little social capital, economic capital, and support in the urban communities (Kozol, 1991). Many of the social and

economic problems can be improved with sufficient funding to finance the urban development projects (Mickelson & Smith, 1995).

Mickelson and Smith (1995) declare that a form of a comprehensive urban development growth policy can reverse the decline of the businesses in the urban communities and improve the employment for the residents in the urban communities. Also, the new businesses will afford residents to earn more than the minimum wage so families can earn a wage above the poverty level (Mickelson & Smith, 1995). The revitalization of the urban communities may help to alleviate some of the negative social circumstances and educational conditions where many of the Black children live and attend schools (Kozol, 1991; Mickelson & Smith, 1995).

During the 2002-2003 school year, 2003 public schools existed in Georgia. Approximately 811 of the 2003 schools were located in urban areas (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2004). Urban elementary schools have a unique opportunity of educating the minority and low-socio-economical students. Across the ethnic and economic categories, the urban elementary schools must overcome the inequalities in educational, occupational, and social opportunity to improve the educational experiences and academic performance of the urban elementary students (Education Trust, 2003). Despite social and economic constraints, many urban elementary schools are focusing on the instructional behaviors and the academic culture to improve the academic performances of their students (Education Trust, 2003). Some urban elementary schools have a strong sense of community with common academic agendas within the schools (Carter, 2001; Murrell, 2002).

High academic goals with shared values, activities, traditions, and nurturing relationships of students and adults are components of the successful urban elementary schools (Carter, 2001; Charles Dana Center, 1999; Reeves, 2000). The Charles Dana Center (1999) conducted a study of nine high-performing and high-poverty urban elementary schools where students achieved academic success. The achievement of the urban students in mathematics and reading on the norm and criterion-referenced assessments surpassed the achievement of the students in some of the suburban schools. The researchers used quantitative and qualitative data to generate the case studies for the schools. The research data was obtained over a two-day period. The researchers observed that some of these schools are working to build a team among the teachers, staff, learning community, and parents who help students to continue to improve in all of the areas of the curriculum. Some of these schools are teaching their students to accept responsibility for their learning and academic success (Charles Dana Center, 1999).

Reeves (2000) conducted a case study of the “90/90/90 Schools”. The “90/90/90 Schools” characteristics are: (a) more than 90 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals, (b) more than 90 percent of the students are ethnic minorities, and (c) more than 90 percent of the students met or exceeded academic standards. The data was obtained from more than 130,000 students in 228 schools. The research included four years of the assessment data with the students in the elementary, middle, and high school settings. The schools’ location included urban, suburban, and rural schools. The data was acquired from site visits and analyses of the accountability data.

Reeves (2000) reported that five characteristics are common to all the “90/90/90 Schools”. The characteristics are: (a) a strong emphasis and focus on academic

achievement, (b) clear curricular choices, (c) frequent review of the student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement, (d) an emphasis on writing in all of the academic areas, and (e) external scoring of the student work. Reeves (2000) conveys that the most common characteristic of the “90/90/90 Schools” is the emphasis on writing. Writing requires the students to use their thought processing skills as they formulate their answers. Also, teachers can assess their student writing to discern if the student has vocabulary issues, reasoning errors, fails to follow directions, or a multitude of other causes that a right or wrong answer will not reveal (Reeves, 2000). All of the schools have standards. However, the difference between the “90/90/90 Schools” and the ineffective schools is the manner that the “90/90/90 Schools” implement, monitor, and assess their students’ academic progress to meet the standards (Reeves, 2000).

#### Student Achievement

Achievement gap is the term used by researchers to describe the disparity between poor minority students and middle-class non-minority students (Haycock, 1998; Reeves, 2000; Steele, 1999). Some researchers have conducted studies that concluded that the achievement gap exists because of the internal deficiencies of the minority groups. The Coleman Report (1966) contends that the achievement gap exists because the Black students have a decreased capacity or a deficit for learning so the achievement gap widens from the first to the twelfth grade. Jensen’s (1969) viewpoint, updated by Hernstein and Murray (1994), conveyed in the *Bell Curve* that there are inherited, genetic differences among the ethnic groups. Black students do not possess the mental ability because of genetics to achieve the same level of academic success as White students (Jensen, 1969).

However, some researchers confirm that the achievement gap between Black and White students exists due to numerous external factors. These factors include cultural attitudes and racism, inappropriate curricula, ineffective instruction, and disengaging classroom discourse (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Steele, 1999; Thompson, 2004). The ideologies of the studies conducted by Coleman (1966), Jensen (1969), and Hernstein and Murray (1994) are twentieth century literature that have perpetuated a fallacy regarding the intellectual superiority of one ethnic group above another ethnic group (Hilliard, 2001; Steele 1999). Steele and Aronson (1995) conclude that certain negative stereotypes exist in subtle and inadvertent forms that hamper the academic achievement of Black students. Some Black students experience a higher anxiety regarding failure because they do not want to confirm the negative stereotype by their poor performance on a given assessment (Steele, 1999).

An important part of the negative stereotype about Blacks relates to their intellectual ability (Steele, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele and Aronson (1995) conducted a study of Black and White students with similar ability levels at Stanford University to acquire evidence of stereotype threat. Students were required to take the Graduate Record Exam subject test in English literature. The test was designed to evoke frustration with both the Black and White students. The students were told that the test was a measure of their verbal ability. The Black students performed a full standard deviation lower than the White students.

Steele and Aronson (1995) concluded that since the ability level was the same, the Black students performed poorly because they were under the stereotype threat of the test being used as a diagnostic measure of their intellectual ability. The test was

administered to the students a second time as a laboratory task and not as a measurement of a level of their intellectual ability. The performance of the Black and White students on the test was equal. Steele and Aronson (1995) confirmed that the Black students were able to focus on the test as a task and not as a statement about their ethnicity and/or intellectual ability when the racial stereotype was removed. When stereotype threat exists, Black students began to mistrust their learning environment and their academic performance declines (Steele, 1999). The appropriate learning environments and positive teacher-student relationships are strategies that may help to prevent stereotype threats (Steele, 1999).

Although there has been evidence of academic achievement of the Black students in the urban schools, there is still an educational concern across the United States (Carter, 2001; Kober, 2001). The Council of Great City Schools is a coalition of about 65 of the nation's largest urban school systems. The Council of Great City Schools conducts studies on the conditions and trends of the urban schools (Council of Great City Schools, 2005). The Council of Great City Schools reports that in 2004, the student achievement in the nation's major urban public school systems is improving, not stagnant. The Council's fifth annual report on *Beating the Odds* conveys the academic performance on the states' assessment of students in grades four and eight in math and reading. The 2004 results of the math study show:

- 70.8 percent of the urban city schools improved in all grades tested—increased from 47 percent in 2001;
- 21.7 percent of the urban city schools improved in all grades tested, improved faster than their state—up from 4 percent in 2001;

- 95.4 percent of the urban city schools improved in at least half of the grades tested—increased from 92 percent in 2001;
- 68.3 percent of the urban city schools improved in at least half of the grades tested, improved faster than their states—increased from 47 percent in 2001;
- 57.5 percent of all of the grades tested reduced the achievement gaps between White and Black students—increased from 49 percent in 2001; and
- 54.7 percent of all of the grades tested reduced the achievement gaps between White and Hispanic students—the same as 2001.

The reading results in 2004 are:

- 41.5 percent of the urban city schools improved in all of the grades tested—increased from 35 percent in the 2001 analysis;
- 15.0 percent of the urban city schools improved in all of the grades tested improved faster than their states—increased from 6 percent in 2001;
- 89.2 percent of the urban city schools improved in at least half of the grades tested—up slightly from 80 percent in 2001;
- 56.7 percent of the urban city schools improved in at least half of the grades tested improved faster than their states—increased from 34 percent in 2001;
- 63.8 percent of all of the grades tested reduced the achievement gaps between White and Black students—the same as 2001; and

- 53.2 percent of all of the grades tested reduced the achievement gaps between White and Hispanic students—decreased from 68 percent in 2001.

The study shows that the achievement gap has decreased between the urban students and the non-urban students. Despite the improvement of the academic performance of the urban students on the math assessment, the academic performance of the urban students was still below the state and national averages (Council of the Great City Schools, 2005).

The achievement gap between the minority and majority groups is closing according to Georgia's test score data (Georgia Department of Education, 2005). Georgia's standard-based assessment called the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test is part of the federal mandate, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. In 2002, 64 percent of the Black fifth-graders passed the Georgia's math test, compared with 86 percent of the White students, a 22-percentage point achievement gap. In 2005, 80 percent of Black students passed the Georgia's math test, compared with 92 percent of the White students, a 12-percentage point achievement gap. In 2002, 71 percent of the Hispanic third-graders passed Georgia's reading test, compared with 90 percent of the White students, a 19-percentage point achievement gap. In 2005, 86 percent of the Hispanic students passed Georgia's reading test, compared with 96 percent of the White students, a 10-percentage point achievement gap (Georgia Department of Education, 2005).

The fourth-grade students in Georgia made positive gains on the Georgia's reading and math tests between 2002 and 2005. The reading proficiency of the fourth-grade students increased by eight percentage points. The mathematics proficiency of the

fourth-grade students increased by nine percentage points. The Black fourth-grade students decreased the achievement gap between the White fourth-grade students by six percentage points in both reading and math. The Hispanic fourth-grade students decreased the achievement gap between the White fourth-grade students by eight percentage points in both reading and math (Georgia Department of Education, 2005).

Although the achievement gap is closing between the minority and majority groups, the achievement gap still exists. The studies provide documentation of the fallacy that the minority students as a group do not possess the intellectual abilities that the majority group possesses (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Murrell, 2002). The test scores and grades are symptoms, not causes, of the achievement gap (Carter, 2001; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001). Black students are motivated to learn from instruction to which they can relate (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Thompson, 2004). Culturally responsive teaching may ignite the higher learning potentials and improve student achievement of ethnically diverse groups in the learning environments.

### Culturally Responsive Teaching

Traditional educational practices are not helping most students in urban schools reach their optimal level of academic success (Gay, 2000; Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Kunjufu, 1984; Mahiri, 1998; Murrell, 2002). The learning environment of the traditional schools tends to be conservative where the knowledge is transmitted passively from the teacher to the student (Freire, 1996; Mahiri, 1998; Murrell, 2002). The learning environment in the traditional schools emphasizes control, rigidity, and conformity (Freire, 1996). Researchers explain that culturally responsive teaching provides the urban students with learning environments that educate more students than

the traditional schools (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Freire, 1996; Mahiri, 1998; Murrell, 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (Gay, 2000). Students are validated when the teachers use the cultural knowledge and prior experiences of the students as tools to achieve mastery of the new knowledge and skills (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Black students need teachers who espouse knowledge of the achievement legacy of Black people so Black students know that high expectations and academic achievement are part of their educational legacy (Murrell, 2002).

Ladson-Billings (1995) clarifies that culturally responsive teaching is comprehensive because the teachers develop the intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning of the Black students by using their cultural experiences to impart the knowledge, attitude, and skills. Culturally responsive teachers educate the whole child (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000, Ladson-Billings, 1994). The education for Black students incorporates appropriate reference in the classroom discourse and the curriculum because the cultural identity and heritage of the Black students are important factors in their academic achievement (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Murrell, 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching is multidimensional because it involves curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, instructional strategies, performance assessments, and student-teacher relationships (Gay, 2000). A cultural concept can be taught by the teachers from various disciplines such as math, social studies, and language arts to help the students use new concepts in different applications (Gay, 2000).

Harmon (2002) conducted a qualitative study with fourth and fifth grade gifted Black students in an urban elementary school. The students were asked to identify the behaviors of the effective and ineffective teachers. The fourth and fifth grade students' perceptions were that the effective teachers are respectful to all of the students and have high expectations for all of the students. The ineffective teachers were disrespectful, had low expectations, and demonstrated prejudice against the Black students. The effective teachers demonstrated an understanding of the Black culture by utilizing multicultural pedagogy, explaining the concepts in ways that the Black students could understand, discussing the life skills such as prejudice, racism, and achievement, and teaching the students in small learning groups. The ineffective teachers did not possess an understanding of the culture of the Black students (Harmon, 2002).

Students are empowered by culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Murrell, 2002). The students demonstrate empowerment with self-determination, academic competence, and initiative in the learning environment. Students should have the belief and the motivation that they can succeed in all of their learning tasks (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Greenwald, Hedges & Lane, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Culturally responsive teachers should demonstrate high expectations and create a culturally rich learning environment for the students to help them achieve their academic goals. Teachers can help students achieve their academic goals by modeling positive self-efficacy beliefs and celebrating the accomplishments of every student (Gay, 2000).

Ladson-Billings (1995) conducted case studies with five Black and three White teachers who were nominated by the parents, teachers and principals as being excellent teachers. The elementary school consisted of predominantly Black students in a high-

poverty school district in Northern California. The researcher conducted ethnographic interviews, observed the teachers in the classrooms, videotaped and audiotaped the teachers' classes, took field notes, and held two-three hour meetings for the teachers to analyze their teaching practices. The researcher observed one teacher using the lyrics of rap songs to teach the elements of poetry.

A student who experienced multiple suspensions was given the opportunity to use his leadership skills and was elected the president of his sixth-grade class. The teachers encouraged their students to assume the roles of academic leaders. Some students completed a class project about their community. The students discovered that they possessed the ability to improve and reclaim their community. The students in the eight observed classrooms met the academic standards on their standardized assessments in the classrooms. Each of the eight teachers believed that helping the Black students to develop academically is the primary goal of culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally responsive teaching is transformative (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive teachers incorporate the cultures and experiences of the various groups and use other cultures as resources to expand the students' learning experiences (Gay, 2000). Hale (2001) states that if education is to empower Black students, it should help them to develop the knowledge, values, and skills needed to become reflective about their learning and help them to implement the knowledge for positive personal, social and economic rewards.

Culturally responsive teaching is liberating (Hale, 2001; Murrell, 2002). When the discourse in the classroom is about authentic knowledge of a given topic, the students are

able to understand that the knowledge is something to be shared, revised, and renewed (Foster & Peele, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The goal of the discourse in the classroom is not to find a definitive answer but to discuss the various possibilities that exist about the topic.

Culturally responsive teachers are empathic, caring, use instructional materials that are ethnically and culturally diverse, and the discourse in the classroom is culturally relevant (Gay, 2000; Kaplan & Owings, 2001; McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Murrell, 2002). McAllister and Irvine (2002) conducted a study regarding the role of empathy when teaching culturally diverse students. The researchers concluded that empathic teachers are caring and supportive toward culturally diverse students. They demonstrate empathy through cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. The teachers facilitate supportive learning environments that enhance the personal and academic growth of Black students.

A culturally relevant learning environment allows Black students to utilize the new knowledge beyond the classroom (Howard, 2001). Researchers describe the school as a social environment that should emphasize learning in relation to the everyday lives of the students (Boykin, 1994; Dewey, 1956; Dubois, 1903). Also, it is important for students to have a personal interest and a connection in the educational experience. Researchers report that a culturally relevant learning environment may decrease the remedial practices such as summer school, extended day school, retention, and social promotions for Black students (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Murrell, 2002; Thompson, 2004).

## Cultural Themes of Black Students

Researchers state that the cultural themes of Black students are important factors in the academic achievement of Black students (Boykin, 1994; Boykin, 1983; Ellison & Boykin, Towns, & Stokes, 2000; Hillard, 2001; Kunjufu, 1984; Ogbu, 1985). Boykin (1994) states that the cultural themes are dimensions of the culture of Black people that encompass the essence of the experiences and interactions of Black students. Boykin (1983) cites nine cultural themes that Black students learn in their homes and communities.

The Black students in urban schools bring culturally informed knowledge, values, and skills to the classrooms. Black students use their cultural experiences as a reference for interpreting the new knowledge (Ellison & Boykin, Towns, & Stokes, 2000). These nine cultural themes have a positive effect on the learning environment for Black students in the classrooms (Boykin, 1983). These cultural themes are spirituality, harmony, verve, movement, oral tradition, affect, expressive individualism, social time perspective, and communalism.

- Spirituality is the beliefs of the individuals' inner strength and the spiritual forces that influence their lives. Individuals believe that there is a divine power that governs human behaviors.
- Harmony emphasizes that humans and nature are congruently interrelated. Humans are striving to achieve a balance among the various aspects of the universe.
- Verve is the preference for action, variety, and a high level of stimulation. Action refers to the loudness of the stimulation or the vigor or an individual's behavior.

Variety connotes the alternation among the activities or stimuli in an individual's environment.

- Movement is the preference for kinesthetic activities and experiential learning. Movement is described as a rhythmic orientation in one's speech patterns, dance, movement, and patterns of activities. Music and movements are viewed as important ways of engaging life and vital to the psychological health of an individual.
- Oral tradition emphasizes the oral modes of communication such as analogies, metaphors, and graphic forms of language. Individuals prefer that knowledge is transmitted and received through a spoken medium. Oral communication is interpreted as a mode of interacting and as a performance.
- Affect refers to a high regard for emotions with sensitivity to emotional cues and a tendency towards emotional response. Individuals integrate feelings with thoughts or actions because without an emotional connection, there is a lack of motivation.
- Expressive individualism refers to the need for developing a unique personality and an inherent inclination for spontaneous personal expression. Individuals are concerned with the style in which they complete a task. Individuals have a unique personality that is emphasized through their activities and behaviors.
- Social time perspective occurs when the event takes priority over time. The social interactions among individuals are more important than a designated timeframe. Social time perspective is a social construct that eliminates the inflexibility of time in the context of social events.

- Communalism is the desire to connect and work with others for the enrichment of the group. Cooperation among group members is the norm. The identity of the individual is bonded to the group membership rather than to the individual's status (Boykin, 1983).

The nine cultural themes that I referred to throughout this document are consistent with the nine cultural themes practiced as part of the Kwanzaa celebration. Kwanzaa is a Black American cultural celebration conceived by Dr. Maulana Ron Karenga in 1966. Kwanzaa is a seven-day celebration from December 26 through January 1 (Karenga, 1998). Many Black Americans identify with the African culture by practicing the seven principles of Kwanzaa (Karenga, 1998). The development of Kwanzaa allows Black Americans to further celebrate the meaning of “Christmas” or “Holiday” season by embracing themselves, their history, and their culture (Karenga, 1998). These seven principles and nine cultural themes that this research endorses are practices helpful to Black Americans to remain connected to their African roots (Karenga, 1998; Boykin, 1983).

Karenga (1998) cites that the seven principles of Kwanzaa are: Umoja (unity); Kujichagulia (self-determination); Ujamaa (cooperative economics); Nia (purpose); Kuumba (creativity); Imani (faith); and Ujima (collective work and responsibility). The nine cultural themes and Kwanzaa focus on the social and spiritual needs of Black people. These reinforcing themes and principals are designed to strengthen the collective self-concept of Black people, honor their past, evaluate their present, and commit themselves to a fulfilling and productive future (Boykin, 1983;

Karenga, 1998). Table 5 (see page 149) displays the commonalities between the Black cultural themes and the Kwanzaa principles.

According to Boykin (1994), the cultural themes of the Black students create educational challenges for some teachers in the classrooms. Some teachers are not able to achieve a balance between respecting the culture of the Black students while preparing the Black students to participate successfully in a formal school setting (Boykin, 1994; Murrell, 2002). This lack of balance often leads to academic dysfunction (Murrell, 2002).

Boykin and Bailey (2000) conducted a qualitative study with 128 students in the second grade using the African cultural theme of movement. The findings were that the comprehension skills of the Black students increased when stories involved high movement. However, the comprehension skills of the White students were higher when the stories were told in the absence of high movement. The comprehension performance of the Black students remained constant when music and movement were included in the break sessions.

A qualitative study was conducted by Boykin and Bailey (2000) with 72 Black students in the fifth grade using the African cultural theme of communalism. Creative problem solving activities were enhanced by communal learning activities. The Black students did not expect rewards but they were encouraged to do well for the good of the group. Boykin and Bailey (2000) concluded that the motivation for learning for the Black students was increased when the activities were completed in a group setting.

Boykin and Bailey (2000) conducted a qualitative study with 192 third and sixth grade students using the African cultural theme of verve. The highest problem solving performance of the Black students was with background music. The lowest problem

solving performance of the Black students was without background music. The highest problem solving performance of the White students was without background music. The lowest problem solving performance of the White students was with background music.

Mahiri (1998) reports that the classroom is a communal environment for Black students. Many Black students are raised in a cultural environment where the aspirations of the group supersede the aspirations of the individual (Gay, 2000). The success of the individual is measured by the success of the group. Murrell (2002) states that traditional schools reward individual accomplishments and encourage competition among students. These individualist norms conflict with the communal norms of the Black students (Boykin, 1994; Murrell, 2002; Gay, 2000).

Boykin (1994) reports that the cultural themes are present in the Black communities and in the family activities. Ellison, Boykin, Towns, and Stokes (2000) affirm that these cultural themes are a powerful influence in the lives of many of the Black students of low socioeconomic status who do not adhere to the mainstream's values and practices of society and the traditional schools. Black students are constantly trying to find equilibrium between the culture of the traditional schools and their culture (Hale, 2001; Mahiri, 1998). The role of the teacher is a crucial component with helping Black students to find a balance between the two cultures and to achieve academic success (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Mahiri, 1998).

Culturally responsive teachers for Black students recognize the cultural themes that the Black students bring to the classroom and make the instruction compatible with the cultural themes (Howard, 2001; Murrell, 2002). Howard (2001) cited in a case study that four urban teachers utilized culturally relevant teaching and learning environments to

help Black students to experience academic success. The teachers believed that education is a process to develop cognitive abilities, integrity, and life skills for the Black students. The teachers utilized holistic instructional strategies to teach the students the academic, moral, and social competencies.

Next, the teachers used culturally consistent communicative competencies to bridge the classroom discourse patterns, phrases, and vocabulary in modes consistent with the communication patterns of the students outside of the classroom. These teaching strategies enabled the students to connect their cultural knowledge with the content knowledge that was discussed in the classrooms. Finally, teachers employed skill-building strategies to promote academic success while providing the opportunities for students to acquire, transfer, and utilize the new knowledge. The teachers connected the cultural identities of the Black students to the learning process by using the cultural themes of the Black students (Boykin, 1983; Howard, 2001).

In the conventional classrooms, the behavioral expectations for Black students include passivity, quietness, conformity, and competition that may be inappropriate expectations for culturally diverse students (Boykin 1994; Ellison, Boykin, Towns, and Stokes, 2000). However, culturally responsive teachers for all of the students create a gentle and nurturing instructional classroom ambience (Gay, 2000, Haberman, 1995). Gentle instruction promotes respect for the cultural differences during the interactions of the students in the classrooms (Haberman, 1995).

Culturally responsive teachers provide a supporting environment for Black students by learning their culture and behaviors (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; McCollough, 2000). Black students who display enthusiastic, mobile, and assertive

behaviors in the classroom maybe perceived as disruptive students (Boykin, 1994). Culturally responsive teachers customize the learning experiences for students with instructional activities that promote the mobility, enthusiasm, and interest of the students (Murrell, 2002; Parsons, 2003). Gardner (2000) advocates that the teachers should focus on all of the intelligences of the students. Teachers should present and design their instructional activities in a variety of methods using group activities, role-playing, art activities, music, movement, and other forms of the multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2000).

McCullough (2000) confirms that culturally responsive teachers use a variety of teaching strategies and techniques to enhance the learning environments for Black students such as verbal responses, cultural terms, and life-experiences discourse (McCullough, 2000). Students' interest in education and their academic performances increase when their life experiences and contributions to the education process are valued (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mahiri, 1998; Murrell, 2002). Haberman (1995) asserts that the star teachers constantly utilize different teaching strategies and activities to create an interesting and engaging learning environment for every student.

Gay (2000) affirms that the teachers and Black students form positive relationships when the teachers understand the cultural background of the students. Culturally responsive teachers encourage dialogue with the students to discover their thought process and to help the students become independent thinkers (Gay, 2000). Positive relationships with teachers and culturally relevant activities are necessary for the majority of the Black students to maintain interest in the education process (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Culturally responsive teachers help Black students to connect the heritage and legacy of the Black Americans' achievements with the aspirations of the students (Boykin, 1994; Murrell, 2002). When the students are respected and treated as real partners in the learning environments, the students are able to develop an understanding of themselves and their positions in society (Dewey, 1956; Woodson, 1919). As collaborators with teachers, principals perform proactive roles in helping students achieve academic success (Obisesan & Cooper, 1999).

### Principals

The traditional role of a principal is as an individual who collaborates with others to accomplish the goals of the school (Obisesan & Cooper, 1999). As the leader, the principal is the change agent of the school (Olson, 1997). Researchers confirm that the effective characteristics of a principal as the leader are to possess a shared vision of teaching and provide a supportive learning environment for every student (Hale, 2001; Obisesan & Cooper, 1999; Renihan, 2000). A shared vision establishes the foundation of the entire school that promotes a collective effort to improve student learning (Goldman, 1998). Effective principals establish a learning environment of academic success for all of the students (Renihan, 2000). Principals help to create the learning environment that enhances the academic performance for all of the students (Day, 2000).

Urban elementary principals value the culture of the Black students (Carter, 2001; Foster & Peele, 1999). Carter (2001) identified two urban elementary principals who implemented an Afro-centric learning environment in their schools. In these schools, the academic performance of the students improved significantly in the content areas of math and science. In a qualitative study, Carter reported that the students at Marcus Garvey

Elementary scored in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading and in the 82<sup>nd</sup> percentile in math on an aptitude test. The students at Earhart Elementary School scored in the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading and in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile in math on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Principals should understand that when the culture of the Black students is part of the education process more Black students might achieve academic success (Carter, 2001; Mahiri, 1998).

Urban elementary principals are the key catalysts for creating learning environments in their schools that promote academic success for Black students (Carter, 2001; Hale, 2001). It is important for urban elementary principals to understand the cultural components that Black students bring to urban elementary schools. Mahiri (1998) conveys that the culturally relevant learning environment helps Black students to view their culture and themselves as important entities in the education process. Gay (2000) declares that it is essential for the Black American culture to be a part of the school's formal curriculum to help the Black students to connect the classroom knowledge to their daily lives.

However, most schools use the Black American culture in a symbolic curriculum (Gay, 2000). The symbolic curriculum includes bulletin boards, classroom walls, and decorations that exhibit Black Americans' achievements (Gay, 2000). Since it is often disregarded after Black History Month, the symbolic curriculum is not utilized for instructional purposes throughout the school year (Gay, 2000). The symbolic curriculum does not emphasize Black Americans' historic struggle for survival, liberation, and enhancement (Murrell, 2002). When the Black American culture is not part of the formal curricula, Black students view themselves as an inferior group. Black students become

disengaged from the education process (Gay, 2000). Disrespect for Black American culture and history may foster low expectations and negative educators' assessments of Black students and their educational aspirations (Mahiri, 1998).

Carter (2001) reports that some urban elementary principals possess factual knowledge about the culture of the Black students. As the leaders of urban elementary schools, principals lead by words and actions. Carter (2001) affirms that it is important for urban principals to use leadership, management, and delegation skills to promote culturally relevant learning environments. Some urban principals provide school-wide staff development programs for their faculty and staff to infuse the Black American culture in the curriculum (Foster & Peele, 1999).

Foster and Peele (1999) conducted a qualitative study of 32 teachers who attended training for adding Black American culture in the instructional activities in the learning environments in their schools. Foster and Peel (1999) reported that the principals who vocalize the importance of participating in professional development programs about the Black American culture had a higher rate of attendance by teachers. The proactive involvement of the principals stressed the importance of culturally relevant learning environments for all of the students (Foster & Peele, 1999). According to Murrell (2002), principals who promote culturally relevant learning environments are trying to engage Black students in the learning process and improve the students' academic performance. Carter (2001) confirms that some urban principals promoted culturally relevant learning environments that inspired Black students to use self-discipline to improve their individual performances and to take pride in their accomplishments.

Principals are the leaders who should possess the ability to elicit the best efforts from their faculty, staff, and students (Charles Dana Center, 1999; Day, 2000). As educational leaders, principals set goals of high expectations for all of the students, faculty, and staff (Charles Dana Center, 1999; Day, 2000). Principals possess the skills to nurture and to inspire others into sharing the leadership roles (Carter, 2001). The Charles Dana Center (1999) reports that the instructional leadership activities are priorities for principals in urban elementary schools.

As instructional leaders, principals spend a substantial amount of time in the classrooms (Carter, 2001; Charles Dana Center, 1999). Principals conduct observations of teachers in the classrooms to identify both the strengths and the areas that need to be improved. When principals observe weaknesses, they discuss the methods in which the teacher can improve the classroom environment with better management skills, different teaching strategies, and workshops for the teachers (Charles Dana Center, 1999).

Principals and staff use the professional learning communities to share new educational ideas and instructional strategies to improve the learning environment for the students and teachers (Carter, 2001; Charles Dana Center, 1999). Professional learning environments are effective when the principals share the leadership role by inviting the faculty and staff to share in the decision-making process in the schools. The collaboration between principals and teachers facilitates an environment of mutual respect as they establish a shared vision for the school (Carter, 2001; Louis & Kruse, 1995). The shared vision for the school is consistently articulated to help produce positive results in the learning environments to help improve the academic achievement of the students (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Urban elementary principals understand that the academic success of the Black students is contingent on knowledgeable and nurturing teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Haberman, 1995). The Charles Dana Center (1999) asserts that urban principals choose teachers who are committed and passionate about improving the academic achievement and the personal development of the Black students. Urban elementary principals believe that the teachers can be trained to teach in a culturally relevant learning environment (Carter, 2001). Urban principals have the leadership skills to inspire others to believe that culturally relevant learning environments will help more Black students in urban elementary schools to experience academic success throughout their formal educational years (Carter, 2001).

#### Summary

Many urban schools do not provide learning environments where the majority of the Black students achieve academic success. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* has established guidelines and funds to help public schools in every state to improve the academic achievement for all of the students. An achievement gap exists between the Black and White students. Researchers affirm that some of the factors for the achievement gap are cultural attitudes and racism, inappropriate curricula, and disengaging discourse. Culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant learning environments may help to narrow the achievement gap.

Culturally responsive teaching is an essential component of the academic achievement for all of the students. Culturally responsive teaching includes creating a caring learning environment, designing culturally relevant instructional activities, and orienting the classroom's learning environment to meet the needs of all of the students.

The literature indicates that the majority of the Black students in the urban elementary schools depend on their teachers for content knowledge. Culturally responsive teachers utilize the nine cultural themes of Black students when they design their instructional activities for their students.

Principals can be the catalyst for providing a learning environment that embraces the culture of Black students in urban elementary schools. They should understand the importance for Black students to view their culture and themselves as valuable entities in the education process. A culturally relevant learning environment for Black students emphasizes the achievements and the culture of Black individuals on a daily basis.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This chapter consists of a description of the research design, participants, data collection procedures, the instrument that was used to collect the data, and the methods that were used for the data analysis. The purpose of this study is to explore how principals promote culturally relevant learning environments in urban elementary schools to improve the academic achievement of Black students.

The researcher obtained the qualitative data by using case studies with semi-structured interviews. Three urban elementary schools were selected to collect the data for the study. The researcher coded, categorized, and analyzed the data obtained from the interviews and observations to identify the patterns and themes.

#### The School District

The selected district serves over 33,000 students in the Richmond County School District located in Augusta, Georgia. The school district is comprised of 10 secondary schools, 10 middle schools, and 35 elementary schools. Based on the Georgia Department of Education's website at [www.doe.k12.ga.us](http://www.doe.k12.ga.us), the selected school district serves a population of 72% Black, 22% White, 2% Hispanic, 2% multiracial, and .01% Asian, .086% Native American, and 70% economically disadvantaged students.

#### Research Questions

The primary research question of this study was: How do principals promote a culturally relevant learning environment to improve learning as it relates to student

achievement for Black students in urban elementary schools? The study focused on the following secondary research questions to collect additional information about the topic:

1. How do principals define a culturally relevant learning environment for Black students in urban elementary schools?
2. What is the role of the principal for promoting culturally-relevant training for teachers and staff who teach Black students in urban elementary schools?
3. What are the principals' perceptions of culturally responsive teachers for Black students in urban elementary schools?

### Research Design

The study was designed to obtain information from urban elementary principals about their roles in promoting a culturally relevant learning environment for Black students in urban elementary schools. The researcher obtained approval from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board to conduct the study (see Appendix A).

The researcher utilized the case study approach as the methodology. The case study research consisted of three-single case studies. Yin (2003) describes the case study as a method of categorizing social data without compromising the social object that is being studied. The research object in a case study is often a person, a group of people, a program, or an entity (Yin, 1994). Case study research enables the researcher to study the object in its natural environment (Stake, 1995). The type of case methodology is determined by the final research questions because the goal of the research will guide the methods of inquiry (Stake, 1995). Case study research is a method that explains an object. Although, there are difficulties with the task of generalizing from the one "case"

to the many “cases”, the instance and the class relationship are always important to the case study research (Aldeman, Jenkins, & Kemmis, 1980).

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the three urban elementary principals to collect the data for the study. Glesne (1999) cites interviews as a research technique to obtain in-depth information about a topic. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) define interviews as purposeful conversations that are directed by individuals to obtain information from other individuals.

According to Glesne (1999), the qualitative researcher begins with the generic categories and attempts to identify developing themes within the context of the study. Krathwohl (1998) cites that the qualitative method allows the answers to the research questions to emerge rather than limit the research questions to the prescribed categories. The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews to obtain the urban elementary school principals’ perceptions of their roles of promoting culturally relevant learning environments to improve the academic achievement of Black students. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher and the principals to discuss the responses to the open-ended questions in detail. The researcher asked the principals follow-up questions based on their oral response to the original questions.

#### Population

There are 35 public elementary schools in the Richmond County School District. The *No Child Left Behind Act* requires every state to administer a standards-based assessment for students who attend public schools. The Georgia’s standards-based assessment is called the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). The Richmond County School System met the criteria in 17 out of the

19 areas. However, the school system did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress for the 2004-2005 school year.

The elementary schools must meet certain guidelines to meet the goals of Adequate Yearly Progress for the 2004-2005 school year. On the elementary school level, 95 percent of the students must participate in the Criterion Referenced-Competency Test, and 66.7 percent of the students in grades 3-5 must meet the standards in reading with a score of 300 or above on the Criterion Referenced-Competency Test. In math, 58.3 percent of the students in grades 3-5 must meet the standards with a score of 300 or above. The researcher understands that a single assessment does not classify a school successful or unsuccessful for educating students. However, according to the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, the Criterion Referenced Competency Test is a major criterion for measuring the year-to-year academic achievement of the students (Georgia Department of Education, 2005).

Reeves (2000) conducted a case study of the “90/90/90 Schools”. The urban elementary schools in this study did not meet the “90/90/90 Schools” criteria. The “90/90/90 Schools” criteria are: (a) More than 90 percent of the students are ethnic minorities, (b) more than 90 percent of the students qualified free or reduced meals, and (c) more than 90 percent of the students met or exceeded the academic standards.

The urban elementary schools in this study are the “70/70/70 Schools”. The urban elementary schools met the following criteria: (a) 70 percent or higher of the population were comprised of Black students, (b) 70 percent or more of the student population received free or reduced meals, and (c) 70 percent of the students in the schools met or exceeded the academic performance indicator for Adequate Yearly Progress on the

Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test for the 2004-2005 school year. These three criteria identified eight urban elementary schools.

The researcher requested written permission from the superintendent of the Richmond County school district to conduct the study with the principals in the school system (see Appendix B). After receiving permission from the superintendent, three principals were chosen from the eight “70/70/70 Schools” by random selection (see Appendices C and D). Yin (1994) states that case studies do not need to have a specific number of cases. The researcher may work with the situation that presents itself in each case (Yin, 1994). Information about the study was shared with the principals. After the principals agreed to participate in the study, a cover letter was mailed to each principal (see Appendix E).

A week after the informational letter was mailed to the three principals, the researcher contacted the principals via the telephone to confirm their interest in participating in the study. During the telephone conversations, the researcher answered any additional questions the principals presented about the study. The principals wanted to know what their roles were in the study and details about the study. Also, the principals were curious about the reasons they were chosen to participate in the study. After the three principals agreed to participate in the study, the data was collected for the study.

### Data Collection

Before the data collection process began, a human subject form was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board-Human Subjects in Research at Georgia Southern University. During the initial site visit for each school, the researcher provided

an overview of the study and answered questions from the principals. The researcher conducted in-depth, face-to-face, and semi-structured interviews with each of the three principals to obtain information for the study. Stake (1995) confirms that the purpose of a qualitative interview is to give a description and explanation of an event. The researcher reviewed the purpose of the study with the principals and asked follow-up and probing questions about the open-ended items on the interview questionnaire during the initial 60-minute interview. Each principal signed a consent form (see Appendix F) to participate in the study before the interview process began. The interviews with the principals are explained in Chapter 4. The researcher informed the principals that the sources, reports, and data would remain anonymous.

During the second and third visitations of the three schools, the researcher conducted a 20-minute direct observation in the classrooms. The observations and the findings of the observations are discussed in Chapter 4. The researcher received approval from the principals to observe the classrooms before each visit to the schools. Twelve classrooms were observed for 20 minutes each for the study (see Appendix G). For the purpose of triangulation, the researcher used other sources of data such as participant observations, interviews, and written field notes to collect the data for the study. The researcher's field notes consisted of written description of observations, conversations, and experiences of the events and participants. The demographic data of the personnel was obtained from each of the school's archives (see Appendix H). After the completion of the data collection, the researcher met with the principals to clarify and edit their oral responses to the interview questions.

### Instrumentation

An adequate questionnaire instrument did not exist to obtain the information to conduct the study. The researcher designed the interview questionnaire for the study (see Appendix I). The research literature was the premise for the items on the interview questionnaire. The interview questionnaire was comprised of nine open-ended response items with planned and impromptu follow-up questions.

The open-ended questions were developed based on the review of the literature. The open-ended questions framed the interview questions for the questionnaire. The interview questions required the principals to give their perceptions about their roles of promoting culturally relevant learning environments to improve the academic achievement of Black students in their schools. Semi-structured interviews are useful when collecting attitudinal information (Patton, 2000). The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to ask probing questions to gain additional information on the topic. The researcher observed teachers and students in their classrooms using the observation protocol and the observation matrices (see Appendices J, K, L, and M). Stake (1995) affirms that the observation instruments allow the qualitative case researcher to report reliable descriptors of the physical situation.

### Data Analysis

The data was derived from the interviews, observations, and field notes. After the data was collected, the data was coded. Coding is the process of defining and sorting the interview notes, field notes, and observation notes that are relevant to the study (Glesne, 1999). The researcher transcribed the interview notes and checked them for accuracy, relationships, and meanings. The responses of the principals to the interview questions

were examined to identify themes regarding how they defined and promoted culturally relevant learning environments for Black students in their schools. The researcher wrote the similar responses from the principals on the index cards. The responses on the index cards were categorized by the themes that emerged from the reappearance of similar responses of the principals to the interview questions.

The researcher used the notes from the observational protocol to document the physical surroundings, conversations, and instructional activities of the classrooms and the schools. The observation instrument enabled the researcher to obtain balanced information about the similarities and differences of the teaching strategies, classroom settings, and schools (Stake, 1995). During the observations at the classrooms/schools, the researcher noted evidence of the Black cultural themes using the observation matrices. The evidence of the Black cultural themes was categorized according to the definition of each of the Black cultural theme. The presence of any of the nine Black cultural themes exhibited in the teaching strategies, student activities, classroom activities, and displays of student assignments in each school were documented using the observation matrices.

### Summary

Qualitative research methods were used to answer the research questions regarding the role of the principals in promoting culturally relevant learning environments to improve the learning environment as it relates to student achievement for Black students in urban elementary schools. The researcher used the case study research with semi-structured interviews and observations to obtain the data for the study. Also, a

human subject was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board-Human Subjects in Research at Georgia Southern University.

The participants were principals of three urban elementary schools in Richmond County located in Augusta, Georgia who met these three criteria: (a) The student population consisted of 70 percent or higher of Blacks, (b) 70 percent or more of the student population received free or reduced meals, and (c) 70 percent of the students in the schools met or exceeded the academic performance indicator for Adequate Yearly Progress on the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test for the 2004-2005 school year. The criteria produced eight urban elementary schools. The researcher used randomly selection to select three urban elementary principals to participate in the study.

The researcher communicated with the principals via the telephone to determine if they wanted to participate in the study. The principals were given an overview of the study. After the principals agreed to participate in the study, the researcher mailed an informational letter and a consent form to each participant.

An interview and observation instrument did not exist to collect the data for the study. The researcher designed the interview questionnaire for the study based on the research literature. The interview questionnaire was comprised of nine open-ended items. The researcher scheduled face-to-face interviews with each of the three principals and observed the learning environments of the schools. The researcher asked planned and impromptu follow-up questions during the interview with each principal. The researcher used the observation matrix to record evidence of the Black cultural themes in the learning environment of each school. The data was analyzed with qualitative methods. The researcher transcribed the data from the semi-structured interviews, observations,

and field notes. The researcher coded, categorized and analyzed the data to identify common themes and patterns.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The findings of how principals promoted a culturally relevant learning environment to improve Black student achievement in urban elementary schools are examined in this chapter. The experiences of the urban elementary principals are portrayed through data from the interviews. The names of the principals have been changed. Each case study is organized in this format: a profile of each school, the interview responses of each principal, a description of the four classroom observations of each school, a case-by-case review of the interview responses of the principals and the Black cultural themes observed in the classrooms and the schools.

#### Case Study #1

##### *The School*

The elementary school was located in a neighborhood with small homes. The school was renovated five years ago. The newly constructed school of red and black bricks with blue trimming had a majestic presence in the neighborhood. The school's staff included 66 employees and 512 students. As I entered the school, the high ceilings and the spacious foyer were breathtaking. I walked into the office and was greeted by the secretary with a warm greeting. I had made prior arrangements to tour the school. I was given a visitor pass and I began my tour of the school. In the lobby, a brag board displayed the students' accomplishments. Near the brag board, there was a table with math problems for each grade level to solve. Two students were walking toward me. I smiled and they smiled. Students' work aligned the white walls. "Cool Cat" coupons

were posted near most of the classroom doors. I saw students participating in physical education activities in the gym.

The sounds of learning emerged from the different classrooms with students working in small groups, teachers talking, and students singing songs. The pre-k students were singing a song about numbers. I wondered if the teachers used songs to teach the content to students in the fourth and fifth grades. I believe that learning should be fun throughout the elementary school years. As I encountered the students and teachers, they greeted me with a smile or a hello.

The school was bright and clean. You could feel the pride that the students and the staff felt about their school. I was smiling as I walked the corridors. I felt as though the school was a happy place to learn and to work.

*Elaine Wilson*

Elaine Wilson is a Black American female. She was raised in a rural county in Georgia. Elaine has over 30 years of experience in education. The student population of the school that she served as the principal was 512 with 96% Blacks, 4% Whites, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Multi-Racial.

*Interview with Elaine Wilson (November 14, 2006)*

Papers were arranged in different stacks on her desk. The bookcase held books as well as mementos. Family portraits were displayed on the top of one of the bookcases. Two framed pictures were on the white walls. Elaine appeared relaxed and comfortable with me throughout the interview. As she shared details of her early educational experiences, she smiled and sighed. Elaine appeared satisfied with all of her accomplishments.

Elaine's first classroom was the school's cafeteria. When the students entered the cafeteria for lunch, her classroom moved to the stage in the cafeteria. The size of her classes ranged from 30 to 35 students. After two years as an assistant principal at a high school, Elaine became the assistant principal and the principal of a middle school. She has served as principal at her current school for two years.

As Elaine explained what she enjoyed most about her position as the principal, she leaned forward and placed her hands on the table. "I enjoy seeing children learn. I enjoy observing the intellectual, social, and emotional development of the students. I enjoy observing teachers who are excited about teaching the children." She expressed that she enjoyed seeing the joy on the faces of the students as they performed in the classrooms, plays, and assembly programs. Elaine wanted the students to use the media center and maintain a love for books. She displayed books in the lobby and office area for the students to read. "I want my school to be a place where students enjoy learning and the staff enjoys their careers."

"The role of the principal is also a tough job. A lot of weight is placed on the principal." She expressed that every day is a fast day for an effective principal. The principal must adhere to a flexible daily schedule. "Everyday is different and challenging." Elaine paused, took a deep breath and smiled.

I have many duties/responsibilities such as communicator, public relations, counselor, and a friend. Parents talk more openly with me when I see them in the grocery store, in church, or in other places in the community. You must be loyal and diligent to your job. I enjoy success each day that I come to work and I don't have time to watch

the clock. I try to perform the duties of a principal so skillfully that everyone is left satisfied.”

A long period of silence lingered in the room before she began to describe the relationship between her school and the community. I interpreted her silence as a time for her to reflect on the positive aspects and the aspects that could be improved. “We need a higher percentage of parental involvement with the activities in our school. The majority of parents who participate in the school activities are parents of the younger students.” Elaine stated that she would continue to plan activities to increase parental involvement in the school. She expressed that they are planning a workshop for “Dads” to get them to volunteer in the school.

Elaine’s voice had a lighter tone as she talked about the businesses that supported her school. A business donated computers to the school. Another business gave the school discounts and financial support for school activities. Members of the school council donated items for the “Teacher of the Month” basket and other morale activities for the staff. Elaine was pleased with the mentoring program for the male students. However, she believed that the community should offer more programs for the students. “We need more community involvement to provide cultural, social, and other educational programs for our students and parents in our school. It would help our curriculum if drama, ballet, creative arts, and other activities were available for our students.”

Elaine believed that her school is a place where students are receiving a quality education from highly qualified teachers. She conveyed that the school improvement plan is a tool to help the school remain a productive learning environment for the students. She wanted to continue to improve their reading, language arts, and math scores on the

Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). “We are going to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), again, this year. We are a Reading First School. We use the reading program, Voyager, to improve our students’ reading skills.” Elaine articulated that increasing parental involvement is part of their school improvement plan. They have scheduled parental workshops throughout the school year to increase parental involvement.

“Discipline referrals have decreased.” Elaine explained that they were utilizing the Terry Alderman’s Discipline with Unity Behavioral Plan. Also, they gave “Cool Cat” awards weekly to students who demonstrate the appropriate behaviors. The pictures of the students are posted on the “Cool Cat” board. She stated that the students enjoyed seeing themselves and showing their pictures to their parents. As she continued to talk about the positive effects of the school discipline plan, a student knocked on her door. She excused herself and talked with the student for a few minutes.

Elaine returned to her office, sat down in her chair, and waited for me to continue with the next question. She explained that her staff received training via staff development/professional learning communities during the school year. The staff attended Reading First workshops on site. The workshops were organized on site by their literacy coach and the school district. Teachers attended district-wide workshops on the content areas and redeliver the information to the staff. Also, teachers engaged in grade-level meetings to share ideas and disseminate research-based information. “Professional learning is also mandatory for our faculty and staff to help them to teach the Georgia Professional Standards (GPS) lessons in all of the curriculum areas.” Elaine explained

that professional learning communities empower teachers. Also, the teachers should empower the students and help them succeed academically.

“We are responsible for the academic progress of our students. We have created a family atmosphere because it does take a village to raise a child.” She explained that the math problem of the week highlights the math skills of different students each week. Names of the students are drawn from the correct entries and the pictures of the students are taken and posted on the math board. Also, the students have an opportunity at the end of each semester to win money contained in piggy banks. The students and their parents are invited to an evening reading workshop. The students who have met or surpassed the reading goals receive certificates. Each teacher awards the student who has read the most books the classroom’s piggy bank. The school’s piggy bank is awarded to the student who has read the most books in the school.

Elaine stated that the students attend the remediation programs such as the After-School Academy, Scana Homework Center, and Saturday School Scholars. Also, individual teachers assisted students with their academics during their afternoon planning. The counselor talked with individual students about their grades. During her classroom guidance, the students participated in activities that bridged the academic skills with their future career goals. Students who achieve honor roll each six weeks are invited to ice cream parties. “We want to celebrate the success of our students as often as possible. We must educate the whole child to increase the opportunities for all the students to experience academic success.”

Elaine believed that the students bring to school a knowledge base of their homes and community. “A culturally relevant learning environment for Black students embraces

the attributes of the Black child's experiences and connects these experiences to the content that is taught in the classrooms." She smiled as she continued to talk. "I believe that the cultural activities that celebrate spirituality are important in our school and community. Our parents do not object to the spirituality theme in some of our programs." She felt that the Black History celebrations were important because it was important for their students to know their history. "I see students who were celebrating their birthdays wear money attached to their clothing. This is a tradition in some families in our community.

"When teachers understand the culture of the students and the community, the communications between the school and the home is more constructive and beneficial for the students and the parents." The telephone rang. Elaine was brief with the caller. She emphasized that many of her teachers have taught generations of students from the same family. She believed that many of the teachers understood the culture of the students and the community. "It is important to understand the terminology of the words or the phrasing of the words when communicating with some of their parents. The teachers communicate with the parents using the 'language' of the parents to build rapport."

Elaine paused. "We not only promote a culturally relevant learning environment to help improve the academic performance of our students. We want our students to be proud of who they are." She expressed that more cultural programs should be available to connect the experiences of the students with the classroom knowledge. Also, she expressed that it was essential to invite more resource people to share their cultural knowledge with her students. "Our students should read and study Black History,

participate, and observe cultural performances so they will know the broad spectrum of contributions that Blacks have made to the world.”

Elaine believed that the principal establishes the standards for the academic and social expectations of the school. She stressed that the principal should help teachers to respect the culture of the Black students by possessing cultural knowledge of Black students. Also, she added that the school’s professional library contained literature about educating the Black child. She expressed that the methods of educating teachers to teach Black students were achieved through informal discussions and faculty meetings. Elaine did not remember attending any specific workshops regarding the culture of Black students. She remembered that workshops have been offered regarding “at-risk” students. “I believe that the children are placed ‘at-risk’ because of the lower socioeconomic status not because of their ethnicity.” She articulated that all of the students should learn with the help of nurturing and caring teachers.

“Culturally responsive teachers for Black students in urban elementary schools are teachers who are caring and respectful of the experiences of the Black students.” Elaine described these teachers as being relaxed with the students and using a caring voice tone while moving among the students. She added that culturally responsive teachers say the students’ names as they talk with the students. “You can hear ‘learning’ noise in the classroom.” Elaine emphasized that these teachers use a variety of teaching strategies to delivery the content. “Culturally responsive teachers invite the students to share their experiences to help the students personalize the content.” I could hear the pride and the joy in her voice as she described the classrooms where students were enthusiastic about learning. Elaine expressed that students used different modalities to

complete their activities. She observed that the culturally responsive teachers disciplined the students in a positive, caring, fair and consistent manner. “Culturally responsive teachers demonstrate a high academic standards for all the students.”

As Elaine responded to the question about observing classrooms when the students were not engaged in the learning process, she looked down at her desk and began to speak at a slow rate. She slowly raised her head but continue to speak slowly. It appeared as though she was choosing her words very carefully. She explained that the teachers rarely say the names of the students as they talk with the students. Elaine felt as though these teachers treated the students like objects. She expressed that the teachers did not move among the students as they taught to check for understanding and to answer the questions of the students. The teachers did not invite students to actively participate in the learning process. “The teachers give the students too much ‘quiet seatwork’ to complete. Elaine felt that these teachers did not give students immediate feedback about their assignments.

Elaine continued to speak slowly. She expressed that these teachers did not plan effectively for the daily activities for the students. These teachers chose to write a large quantity of information on the board during instruction time instead of completing this task at an earlier time. After pausing for a moment, Elaine expressed that these teachers demonstrated prejudice toward some students because they are not consistent and fair with their discipline procedures. “Students know when they are not treated fairly. They shut down.” Elaine emphasized that these teachers experience more discipline problems in their classrooms because they have failed to establish a positive relationship with their students.

*Classroom Observations*

During my second visit to the school, I observed a fifth grade and a first grade class. I made prior arrangements with the principal to return to the school to observe two classes. I am greeted with a hello from the secretary. I informed her that I wanted to observe a fifth grade classroom. She gave me a visitor pass and directed me to the fifth grade classrooms. I knocked on the door of a fifth grade classroom during the social studies class period. The teacher greeted me. I informed her that I was given permission to observe her classroom. She pointed to some empty desks and I sat in one of the desks.

The students were sitting on the floor and in their desks. They were using scissors to cut and paste pictures and words from their newspapers. The teacher gave the students oral and visual examples of the different items that they were required to cut from the newspaper to complete the assignment. As the teacher walked among the students, individual students asked her questions. She repeated the questions so the entire class could hear the questions and the answers. When the teacher was not talking, I only heard low whispers from the students, and the sound of music in the background. The teacher was playing jazz music in her classroom.

The students appeared interested in their assignment. I did not observe one student who was not working to complete the assignment. The students glanced at me throughout the observation. One student asked me a question about the assignment. I helped her to discover the correct answer. I noticed the bright information on the walls. The information on the wall covered different content areas. The teacher's voice interrupted my thoughts. She asked a student if he needed left-handed scissors. He stated that he did. She proceeded to get him a pair of left-handed scissors. As I walked out of

the classroom, I realized that the teacher did not reprimand a student for being off task or talking loudly.

The teacher invited me into her first grade classroom. She was teaching the concept of money. The desks were arranged in clusters of three tables. The students answered the teacher's questions in unison. A teacher was sitting on the floor in the corner of the room teaching three students. Some students became restless and talkative. The teacher praised the students who were listening quietly. Most of the students who were talking became quiet. She continued talking with her students about money.

The teacher asked the students to look at their activity sheet while she demonstrated the answer to the math problem on the board. I noticed the "We Are Learning to Count" bulletin board. The board displayed different monetary denominations. Colorful poster and content information aligned the classroom walls. The teacher stopped her instruction again to remind some of the students to stop talking, sit still, and pay attention. The students became excited as the teacher distributed the money manipulatives to complete the money activity sheet. One student had a broad smile on her face as she raised both of her hands in the air continuously as she received her coins. The teacher gave each student a plastic bag with coins. I quietly exited the classroom.

This was my third visit to the school. I was in a fourth grade classroom. The arrangement of the desks implied that the students were completing a group assignment. The students were busily completing a written assignment. The white walls were covered with a word wall and other educational information. The teacher was talking with a student. The buzzing of a timer startled me. As the teacher walked to her desk to turn the

timer off, the students began to pass their homework to the students in the front of the class.

I observed a high level of movement among the students. However, the movement appeared to be purposeful and part of the morning routine. I looked at the posted schedule and it was the language arts period. After the students were settled, the teacher told the students it was time for them to review for the spelling test that would be given on the following day. The teacher set the timer for five minutes for the activity. Three students were asked to go to the board. The first student who wrote the spelling word correctly on the board received a point. After several rounds, the winner remained at the board and two new students were chosen. Most of the students eagerly raised their hands when it was time for new students to go to the board. As the students wrote the spelling words on the board, the teacher reminded them of the capitalization rules. As the timer indicated the end of the activity, some students sighed to demonstrate their disappointment.

The teacher proceeded to check the students' composition notebooks as she asked individual students to say the definition of the vocabulary words. The teacher repeated to the students that the vocabulary words and definitions should have been written in their composition notebooks. Some students were frantically searching for their assignment as the teacher checked the assignment of each student. The teacher gave an "I Can" coupon to each student who had completed the assignment. Each "I Can" coupon was placed in a container. A student explained to me that when students' names are selected from the container, they received prizes. The students who received the "I Can" coupons were asked to partner read while the remaining students were asked to complete the vocabulary

assignment. The students were completing the reading and vocabulary assignments as I left the classroom.

As I entered a science class, the fifth grade students were sitting in desks arranged in groups of threes and fours. Two students were sitting alone at two separate areas. The teacher asked individual students questions about erosion. If the students did not give detailed answers and the correct terminology, the teacher proceeded to ask another student to give additional information about the topic. As the students used the word such as “stuff”, the teacher reminded the students that “stuff” was not an appropriate word to use when giving a definition of a word. Some of the responses required the students to answer in unison.

A student walked into the room and sat next to one of the students who was sitting alone. As the teacher distributed the graded papers to the students, she told them why she deducted points from some of the assignments of the students. As part of the review, the students were engaged in answering questions individually and collectively. Instead of participating with the activity, a student was hitting his pencil on his desk. The teacher walked near the student and he stopped hitting the desk with his pencil. The teacher redirected the student with proximity instead of words.

The teacher assigned the students a written assignment. I did not hear any extraneous talking during the class discussion. However, after the teacher assigned the students a written assignment, a student began talking to his classmate. The teacher reminded the student this was an individual assignment. As I was leaving the classroom, a student raised his hand for permission to get a tissue.

## Case Study #2

### *The School*

Large trees surrounded the second elementary school that I visited. The orange and gold leaves adorned the trees and the ground. The school was nestled among the trees. The scenery was beautiful and calming. The school building was old but well maintained. The school had 56 staff members and 442 students. The entrance was quaint and colorful. Three women were in the office. I informed the woman at the counter the reason why I was at the school.

The artwork of the students aligned the walls near the office and throughout the building. The students were engaged in group activities, quiet seatwork, oral readings, and listening as I walked by the different classrooms. Students were laughing and enjoying their activities during physical education in the gym. Students were walking hastily to their destinations in the hallways. I received quick glances and smiles from the students. The staff members were friendly as I toured the building.

### *Angela Berry*

Angela is a Black American female. She has traveled extensively. Angela has over 25 years of experience in education. The student population of the school that she served as the principal was 442 with 85.4 % Blacks, 5.2% Hispanics, 4.5% Whites, 3.8% Multi-Racial, and 1.1% Asian/Pacific Islanders.

### *Interview with Angela Berry (October 18, 2006)*

Angela's office was decorated with professional and personal items. An elephant lamp was on her desk near a blue and white vase with flowers. A framed-print of a man

and a child and her educational degrees were on the white walls. The two bookcases, on the left and right of the desk, made the office very cozy.

The interview began with Angela describing her life and educational experiences. She cherished the experiences of her extensive travels. She has taught at different schools and at different grade levels. Angela has taught every grade level except the fourth grade. She was an assistant principal at several high schools and a middle school. Angela has been the principal at her present school for 10 years.

Angela clasped her hands on her desk and smiled as she began talking about her position as the principal. She expressed that she enjoyed the interactions with the students. "I enjoy watching the intellectual and social maturation of the students." She believed that it is important to assemble a staff that worked as a unit. She wanted to create a family atmosphere where the needs of all of the students were met. "I believe it is important to assemble a cohesive faculty and staff who work together to help our students receive a quality education."

Angela stressed that a positive relationship existed among the school, community, and businesses. She stated that the parents are visible in the school. She emphasized that parental involvement, parental attendance at PTA meetings, and other school activities were high. "I am pleased with the parental involvement at our school. We are blessed with parents who are very active in their children's education." Angela praised the businesses in the community. "The businesses provided support for the school activities throughout the school year. Some businesses provided coupons for students who achieved honor roll and perfect attendance every six weeks."

“We have many positive programs and activities at our school.” Angela paused and took a deep breath. “However, as part of our school improvement plan, we want to improve the integration of the arts in our school.” Her concern was that the students received exposure to the arts by traveling to different venues to watch plays. “I want our students to have more opportunities to experience a variety of the arts on site.”

Angela excused herself from the office for a minute. I detected frustration in her voice as she talked about the professional learning training/professional learning communities. She believed that the district-wide and site workshops for Voyager and other content areas were important. “I am concerned with the scheduling of the workshops during school hours because the teachers are not in the classroom teaching the students. These workshops decrease the amount of instructional time for the teachers. “Our students need their teachers to be in the classroom every day.”

Angela’s voice was filled with pride as she described the academic achievement of her students. “We have highly qualified teachers with positive attitudes about the students and their abilities to learn.” She believed that her teachers are caring with the students. “The teachers work as cohesive groups to help improve the academic achievement of our students.” Angela stated that they are a Voyager and Reading First School. Students in grades K-3 participate in the Voyager program to help them improve their reading skills.

Angela believed that it is important to understand the home and the community of the students in order to meet their educational needs. “A culturally relevant learning environment for Black students promotes high expectations for all of the students by understanding the students’ home and community environments and bridges the

academics to meet the educational needs of the students.” She believed that the teachers should engage in a daily dialogue with their students to discover the interests of their students. “When the teachers interact with their students as individuals, the teachers are able to find a variety of methods to help motivate the students to learn.” Angela stopped talking and looked away for a few seconds. Her words appeared very deliberate. “The goal of successful teaching is to teach the child. The academic performance of each child will improve when we meet the academic and emotional needs of the child.”

“There is no difference between teaching Blacks students and students of other ethnicities.” Angela believed that all of the children should be taught to deal with different people in different situations. “When we teach the whole child, the culture of the child is addressed in a meaningful capacity. We celebrate the different cultures of our students. We invite parents to come to the school to talk with the students about the cultures of the parents and the students.”

The interview is concluding. Angela checked the time before she gave her response to her perceptions of culturally responsive teachers for Blacks students. “Culturally responsive teachers increase the motivation of the students to learn which decreases the discipline problems in the classrooms.” She observed that in these classrooms, most of the students are happy and engaged in the learning process. Angela believed that caring and nurturing teachers use multiple teaching strategies when delivering a lesson.

Angela emphasized that the students are not engaged in the learning process when the teachers do not address the different learning styles of the students in the classrooms. “Teachers who are not caring and do not show concern about each child are a negative

presence in the classrooms.” Angela became pensive with a cheerless facial expression. “Students know when a teacher does not want to teach and the students will perceive that learning is not important.”

### *Classroom Observations*

During my second visit to the school, the principal informed her office staff that I was coming to observe two classes. The ladies in the office were friendly as they assisted me with the directions to a fifth grade classroom. Written assignments and artwork of the students aligned the white walls.

I knocked on the door and the teacher welcomed me into her classroom. I informed her that I was given permission by the principal to observe her classroom. She directed me to some empty desks in the back of the classroom. The red and blue brick wall in the front of the room and the red brick wall in the back of the room accentuated the two white walls. The desks were arranged in six rows with three desks in each row. One student was sitting in a desk that was separated from the other students. The class rules and expectations were posted on the wall. The topic of the language arts class was identifying the main ideas and details. The teacher led the classroom discussion with questions about the topic. The students responded to the questions in unison and individually. The majority of the students raised their hands to answer the questions posed by the teacher.

The interactions between the teacher and the students were continuous. After the teacher assigned the students an activity sheet to complete, she continued to give oral reminders to help the students complete the assignment. Two students were engaged in a brief conversation. The teacher walked among the students to answer questions and to

keep the students on task. I could hear the students laughing and playing. The students in the classroom did not appear to be distracted by the external noise. As I exited the classroom, I noticed that the classroom was located next to the gym.

I entered a dark fifth grade classroom. I informed the teacher that I was given permission from the principal to observe her classroom. She smiled and asked me to sit at a table in the corner. Students were sitting in the chairs and on the tables viewing the different landmarks in New York City. The students were viewing art from space using the website called [www.google.earth.com](http://www.google.earth.com) in the science class. The teacher projected the website from the computer to a large screen. The students requested to view the Statue of Liberty. Students began to request to see their homes and other places in the different cities. The students were leading the instruction while the teacher was guiding them in the learning process. Some students were moving from one group to another group.

The students were learning in a structured and relaxed environment. The students were enthusiastic as they made their requests. It was difficult for the teacher to fulfill each student's request. The students were visibly upset when the activity ended. They sighed and asked the teacher if she would extend the activity. The teacher reminded the students that they needed to complete an opened-book quiz.

The teacher turned on the lights. A Christmas tree was erected on a table. The students returned to their seats. They sat in groups of four. I exited the classroom as the students began to open their science books.

This was my third visit to the school. As I entered the classroom, the kindergarten students were participating in Voyager, a reading program. The students were sitting at four different tables. I noticed a sign on each of the four tables designating each table as a

station. The students were happily engaged in their activities at each station. Two students were wearing headphones as they completed reading activities on the computer. The teacher was working with a group of students at a station. Two adults were assisting students with their activities at the other stations. One group of students was playing concentration. The students were matching words and pictures. Another group of students was playing a board game. The students were teaching and learning from each other. Also, they were socializing. Some of the conversation among the students was not related to the instructional activities. However, as the adults walked near the stations, the focus of the students returned to the instructional activities. A few students glanced at me as they were working at their stations. I assumed that the students were more interested in their learning activities than a visitor in the classroom.

The room was colorful and invigorating. Teddy bears were sitting on a bench and a green beanbag were the décor in the reading center. The white walls were covered with colorful and animated learning materials. As an observer in the classroom, I felt excited about being part of a vibrant learning environment. A student asked me if I was another student's mother. I smiled and said, "No, I am not his mother."

The ringing of the timer indicated it was time to move to the next activity. The teacher and most of the students walked to the carpet for story time. Three students and an adult remained at a station to practice the writing skills of the students. One of the adults left the classroom as the students walked to the carpet. After the students settled on the carpet, the teacher asked them to tell her the story as she turned the pages of the book. The teacher asked the students questions about the story. The leading questions required

the students to give the details of the story. A little girl was describing a character from the story as I walked out of the classroom.

The second grade students were sitting in their desks. The desks were aligned in four rows. The white walls were bare. It was odd that the walls were void of colorful instructional posters and charts. The students were completing a practice test for the Criterion Referenced Competency Test. The teacher reminded the students that it was time for the weekly spelling test. The voice of the teacher is calming and light. As I observed the students, they did not appear to be nervous about the spelling test. The students appeared to be excited about the spelling test. The students were smiling.

The students were attentive and quiet during the spelling test. After the spelling test was completed, the teacher collected the students' tests. The teacher graded the students' spelling tests. As the teacher graded the test of each student, she repeated the spelling words and the students orally spelled the words. Another adult came into the classroom and helped the teacher grade the spelling tests. Some students stood while they spelled the words. All of the students were participating in the activity. The students received immediate feedback because the teacher announced the scores of every student. The students clapped for one another as the teacher announced the scores of the students. All of the students passed the spelling test. I speculated that the students were motivated to study because their spelling grades are announced and they wanted to be a part of the success of the class. As the class prepared to depart to the media center, I exited the classroom.

## Case Study #3

*The School*

As I arrived at the third elementary school, the brown-bricked school appeared small in comparison to the vastness of the open space. The colorful red, white and blue playground equipment was located on the side of the school. Except for a building located to the right of the school, the area was void of trees, homes and buildings. The school's staff included 50 employees and 550 students. The entrance of the school was decorated with a large aquarium, plants, and a board that highlighted the students, parents, and the community. A curio filled with prizes was located near the board. Drug-free and positive posters aligned the white walls with the yellow stripes. I walked into the office and the secretary greeted me in a cordial manner. The office was painted with different colors. I smiled. I felt happy being in the space.

I was given permission to tour the school. I noticed that there were posters of positive messages and students' projects posted on the walls of each hallway. Also, the "Roadrunner" posters and the "Red Hot Rules" to live by were displayed on the walls. The aroma of the bread baking reminded me of my years as a student in my elementary school. A mural of *Gifted Hands* aligned one of the walls. Different careers were written on the hands.

The teachers were friendly as I toured the school. I smiled at the students and some of them waved at me. I heard laughter and the sounds of "fun" as I approached the gym. The students in the gym were playing with a lot of enthusiasm. As I left the vicinity of the gym, the school was quiet except for the voices from the teachers and the students as I walked by the classrooms. I observed the students listening to their teachers, working

in groups, and completing individual assignments in the various classrooms. The school was clean and well maintained. I felt rejuvenated as I walked out of the school.

*Joyce Allen*

Joyce is a Black female. Joyce has over 20 years of experience in education. The student population of the school that she served as the principal was 550 with 95.1 % Blacks, 2.5% Whites, 1.5% Multi-Racial, 0.4% Hispanics, 0.4% Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 0.1 American Indian.

*Interview with Joyce Allen (November 8, 2006)*

Joyce invited me into her office. She was friendly with an energetic personality. Two paintings hung on the white walls. Many books filled the two bookcases. The colorful furniture added warmth to the space. Although it was the end of the school day, Joyce was very energetic throughout the interview. During the interview, she revealed that she arrived at the school at 7:30 a.m. and departed at 6:30 p.m. daily. Joyce took a deep breath as she began to talk about her educational background and experiences.

Joyce began her educational career as a paraprofessional in a school system in Florida. She was a teacher at a middle School for 17 years. Joyce was the lead teacher/assistant principal for two years at the school before becoming the principal of her present school. "After I learned that our principal was retiring, I was wondering who would be our new principal. I did not expect to be the new principal." However, she appeared pleased with her leadership role and the academic programs at the school.

"I enjoy being part of the learning process and helping my students achieve academic and personal success. The students are 'My Queens and Kings'. I enjoy giving hugs and receiving hugs from my students."

Joyce described the relationship between her school and the community as “a family”. She expressed that the businesses in the area provided the school with different types of resources. I could hear the pride in her voice as she talked about the businesses in the community. “We have a dentist, a grocery store manager, an owner of a t-shirt company, and a church who donate resources to help us with our school activities throughout the school year.” She emphasized that the students received homework assistance at a community center four days a week.

Joyce hesitated before she responded to the next question. She repeated the question, “What are the focal points of our school improvement plan?” She was silent for a brief moment. “I want to improve parental involvement. I want to provide parental workshops to help parents become self-sufficient and help them grow personally and financially.” Joyce sat back in her chair. “I have a dream. I want to increase parental support so parents can help improve the academic performance and survival skills of their children. I want ‘My Queens and Kings’ to become lifelong learners and productive citizens.”

A tone of excitement filled Joyce’s voice as she described the staff development and professional learning communities for her staff. She believed that the staff has a strong sense of collegiality. “I want the staff to see themselves as leaders. The staff becomes leaders as part of their responsibilities as participants in our professional learning pods. The professional learning pods allow each staff member to contribute to the learning process in the school.” She explained that the staff was divided into study groups (pods). The pods consisted of staff from each grade level who met once a week. The pods organized workshops for the staff on various educational topics. She

emphasized that the pods discussed school improvement, student achievement, research-based teaching strategies, classroom management, and other educational-related topics. The custodians tutored the students with their academics. The cafeteria workers talked with the students about nutrition. Also, there is a mural on the cafeteria wall to remind students to eat nutritious foods. Joyce explained that sometimes she rearranged the daily schedule to allow the pods to meet.

Joyce was confident as she discussed the elements of the academic achievement of her students. She expressed that the school was a Reading First School and Voyager was the reading program that they used to improve the reading skills of her students. “We have highly qualified teachers, a high rate of parental involvement with student’s homework, and few discipline problems.” She expressed that they used the Terry Alderman Discipline Plan. Also, they highlighted student achievement with ice-cream socials, lunch with the principal, and “Roadrunner Bucks”. “Our students earned ‘Roadrunner Bucks’ for academics and appropriate behavior. The students used the ‘Roadrunner Bucks’ to buy items from the principal’s curio every six weeks.”

“A culturally relevant learning environment for Black students provides the knowledge in the classroom that they can use for the rest of their lives.” Joyce explained that one of the readings for the fifth grade students was *Gifted Hands* by Dr. Ben Carson. She emphasized that Dr. Carson did not allow his circumstances to affect his future in a negative manner. He became one of the accomplished surgeons in the world. She smiled. I wondered if she was thinking about her accomplishments. “I am reading a book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, by Ruby Payne. It is important for the principals and teachers to understand the social class of the students of poverty.” Joyce stressed that

the social class and the culture of her students are different from most of the teachers in the school. “It is important for Black students to be able to have a personal connection with the teachers and the learning process.”

Joyce explained that it was important for the principals to help the teachers to establish a classroom with excellent classroom management. She emphasized that the staff reminded the students daily to make the right choices and to follow the rules of their classrooms and the school. “The classroom environment is one of the most important components of the learning process for students. I give the teachers who need to improve their classroom management skills the opportunity to observe the teachers who have created an environment that fosters student learning.” Joyce believed that it was important for teachers to continue to earn advanced degrees because education is a life-long process.

A silence filled her office as she reflected on her response to the next question. Joyce stated that the district should provide the training for the teachers to help the teachers understand the culture of the students. She remembered attending workshops for ‘at-risk’ students. “I can not remember attending a district workshop with the focus on the culture of Black students.”

“I don’t see color. It is important to teach the whole child.” Joyce believed that it is important for culturally responsive teachers to establish positive relationships with Black students to keep them engaged and enthusiastic about the learning process in the classrooms. She stressed that the students were enthusiastic about the learning process when the culturally responsive teachers used a variety of teaching strategies such as graphic organizers, audio, technology, visual aids, and manipulatives to teach the

students. Also, she stated that the majority of the activities were student-centered. “I enjoy observing students working in groups. The students used their knowledge and social skills to complete the assigned task.”

Also, Joyce noticed that the majority of the students were listening and making eye contact with the culturally responsive teachers as they delivered the instructional information. She expressed that the culturally responsive teachers made it a priority to talk with the students and allow the students to talk about themselves and their home life. “Culturally responsive teachers utilize the peers of the students to teach the content as a review or remediation. The teacher utilized praise and positive words to redirect the students to the task.”

Joyce hesitated before describing the teachers’ classrooms when the students were not engaged in the learning process. She believed that these teachers were talking too much. The teachers did not invite the students to participate in the learning process. Joyce noticed that too many activities required the students to read and write the answers to the questions in a silent manner. “I do not hear ‘learning noise’ in the classroom.” She observed that many of the students were not making eye contact with the teachers. “I observed a lot of inattentiveness among the student such as looking around the classroom, scribbling on papers, playing with pencils, and engaging in other activities to entertain themselves.”

### *Classroom Observations*

This was my second visit to the school. The secretary escorted me to a fifth grade classroom. I received smiles from the teachers as we walked the corridors to the classroom. The teacher was cordial and invited me to sit in a chair at a table. She

continued teaching her science lesson about high (loud) and low sounds. As the teacher led the classroom discussion, she moved among her students. The voice of the teacher was loud and spirited. She was energetic and personable. She used her voice as an example of a loud sound.

As the students talked, their voice tones were not loud. The arrangement of the desks enabled the students to talk with a quiet voice. The desks were arranged with four rows of students in the middle and one row of students on each side. The room was large. The open partition indicated that the room could be used as two classrooms. The one blue wall and the three white walls were colorful decorated with instructional posters.

I observed the students being attentive as the teacher moved among the students as she led the classroom discussion. It appeared that the students admired and respected their teacher. When the teacher posed a question, the students eagerly raised their hands to answer the question. She asked the students to describe high and low sounds in their homes. The students shared their experiences about the topic. The students discussed themselves, their parents, and grandparents as they gave examples of the high and low sounds. The oral participation from the students led the classroom discussion. One student demonstrated a loud sound by making noise with his feet. I was wondering if the students were listening to their classmates as they talked. However, on cue, the students began to make a stepping noise with their feet. The teacher smiled. The students stopped making the stepping noise and the class discussion continued as I exited the classroom.

I entered the fifth grade social studies class. The teacher was amiable. She directed me to a chair in the back of the classroom. The white walls were decorated with content materials. The classroom environment appeared to be very structured. The

teacher's quiet voice was commanding. The teacher asked the students detailed questions about the Emancipation Proclamation. I noticed that some of the students were struggling to pronounce the words, Emancipation Proclamation. The teacher repeated the words each time a student struggled with the enunciation of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The teacher asked probing questions. The students were required to interpose their opinions with the facts as they responded to the questions. If the teacher was not pleased with the student's response, she would ask the student several follow-up questions. She gave the students an opportunity to use their cognitive and oral skills. Also, the teacher blended spelling and math in the social studies lesson. She asked the students to spell "Lincoln" as she wrote his name on the board. A student was asked to write the number, 2,000,000,000, on the board. He did not write it correctly the first time. He was required to use his mathematics skills to write it correctly. On his second attempt, he wrote the number correctly on the board. The teacher smiled many times and her voice remained calm during the class period. The students were attentive and respectful. As I left the classroom, I wondered if I struggled with the words, Emancipation Proclamation, when I was in the fifth grade.

A large decorative Christmas tree was added to the foyer during my third visit to the school. The secretary escorted me to a kindergarten classroom. The teacher welcomed me into the classroom. I sat at a table in the corner. Colorful and animated learning materials decorated the one blue wall and the three white walls. The students happily completed their activities.

The students were participating in their Voyager activities. Voyager is a Reading First Program in some of the elementary schools. The students were talking and various

activities were occurring at the different stations. A teacher and a student were completing a reading activity on a computer. At station #1, students were making compound words by playing concentration. They were using scissors to cut out the words. Although the students were sitting as a group, each student was required to complete the instructional activities individually. However, the students helped each other because of the proximity of the students at the station. Also, I believed that the social skills of sharing and taking turns are stressed at this grade level. The students at station #2 were making words by using wave boards and letter squares. The teacher was orally reading with the students at station #3. The students at station #4 were completing a spelling activity sheet. Some of the students were socializing and not completing their instructional activities. Another teacher was walking around the different stations to redirect the students to complete their instructional activities.

The teacher rang a bell. The students left their seats and stood in a line. I was impressed with the quiet manner in which they stood in a line. The students proceeded to their new stations as I exited the classroom.

I was sitting in a second grade classroom. Instructional posters and the classroom rules decorated the white brick walls. The students were sitting in groups as they completed their Voyager activities. The teacher was orally reading with a group of students. The students at the other stations were helping each other with the instructional activities. The teacher stopped her instruction several times to refocus the students at the other stations. Two students were completing a reading activity on the computer.

The teacher rang a bell. Two groups of students exchanged their seating arrangements. The other group of students remained at their tables. A student changed the

container with the Voyager supplies on each of the tables. This method reduced the transition period between the activities in this classroom compared with the other Voyager classes that I observed. Two students walked to the reading center. They began to read a story to each other.

The room became noisy. The noise was socializing noise; not learning noise. The teacher clapped her hands. The students clapped and raised their hands. The students became quiet. The teacher reviewed their conduct rules for Voyager. The teacher walked to each of the stations to check to see if the students were on task before she returned to the reading group. As I exited the classroom, I felt little eyes watching me.

#### Analysis of Findings

As the leader of the school, the principal is the catalyst for promoting a culturally relevant learning environment to improve the academic achievement of Black students (Hale, 2000). As the responses of the principals in this study unfold, several themes emerged that provided the connection that Hale described. In the study, the principals described a variety of methods they used to promote culturally relevant learning environments in their schools for the Black students. I identified promoting a culturally relevant learning environment for Black students as the major theme.

The principals believed that the teachers should be culturally responsive to the students to help them achieve academically. Also, the principals expressed that the principals and the teachers should have an understanding of the home/community of Black students to help improve their academic achievement. Boykin (1983) identified nine cultural themes that are important factors in the academic achievement of Black students. After observing the learning environment of the 12 classrooms in the three

urban elementary schools, I saw evidence of the presence of seven of the nine Black cultural themes. The actual evidence of the presence of the Black cultural themes observed in the classrooms emerged as another theme.

*Promoting a Culturally Relevant Learning Environment*

The data for the study confirmed the thought that the principals establish the culturally relevant learning environments of the schools (Carter, 2001; Hale, 2001). However, there was no evidence of school-wide learning environments in the three schools that celebrated the culture, legacy, and experiences of the Black students on a daily basis. The principals in the study espoused implementing isolated cultural activities to promote culturally relevant learning environments that were consistent with the trends in culturally relevant research (Charles Dana Center, 1999; Harmon, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The principals described the working relationships among the staff at their schools as a “family”. One of the goals of the principals was to assemble a caring and nurturing staff to meet the emotional, social, and academic needs of the students. The principals believed that their students would excel academically and emotionally with a caring and nurturing staff.

Elaine stressed that the Black History programs are important because the programs are celebrations of the achievements of Blacks. Each of the principals stated that it is important to connect the classroom knowledge with the daily experiences of their students by establishing a positive relationship with the students and the parents. The principals believed that it is important for the teachers to communicate with the parents on a continuous basis.

Joyce sponsored a book club for her fifth graders with books that emphasized the triumphs of Black individuals. Angela celebrated the different cultures of her diverse student population by inviting the parents to come to the school to talk with the students about the cultures of the parents. It is the belief of the principals that when the whole child is taught in the classroom, the culture of the child is covered in a meaningful capacity. If the instructional activities were meaningful to the students, the principals believed that the students would excel academically.

### *Culturally Responsive Teachers*

Gay (2000) stated that the culturally responsive teachers delivered the instructional activities that reflect the culture of the students. The principals did not communicate that the daily instruction of the teachers were designed to be culturally relevant for the Black students. Joyce stressed that culturally responsive teachers listen to the students and allow the Black students to personalize the content. Joyce felt that culturally responsive teachers for Black students are caring and respectful of the experiences of Black students. Angela believed that culturally responsive teachers increased the motivation of the Black students to learn and decrease the discipline problems in the classrooms. Elaine encouraged the teachers to read the professional literature in the school's media center about culturally responsive teaching. Since they did not provide any formal training for their teachers to be culturally responsive teachers, the principals promoted strategies for positive teacher-student relationships to improve the learning environment for their students.

### *School and Community*

The principals believed that the schools' relationship with the community, the school improvement plan, the professional learning days, and the academic programs were integral components of the academic achievement of their students. Joyce summarized the relationship between her school and the community as "a family". Angela and Elaine were pleased with their schools' relationships with the community. Elaine and Joyce implemented activities in their schools to increase parental involvement. Angela was satisfied with the parental and community involvement with her school. Elaine and Angela felt that the community should provide more cultural and educational programs for their students and their parents.

### *Student Achievement*

One of the goals for each of the principals was they wanted the academic achievement of their students to continue to improve. Joyce believed that a high rate of parental involvement with their children's homework was a major component of the academic success of the students in her school. Angela was passionate about her students making Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) each year. Each of the principals are leaders of Reading First Schools that used the reading program, Voyager, to improve the reading skills of their students. One principal, Elaine, explained the importance of the Saturday Scholars and the After School Academy programs as educational tools to help improve the academic skills of her students.

### *Professional Learning Training*

Each of the principals stated that culturally responsive teaching was not part of the professional learning training for their teachers. All of the principals stated that the

administrators in the school district did not provide the training for teachers to become culturally responsive teachers who teach Black students. The principals stressed that the focus of the majority of the professional learning days was for the reading program, Voyager. The principals appreciated the value of the professional learning days. Angela and Joyce believed that it was important for teachers to be professional “learners”. The principals required their teachers to meet weekly as part of the professional learning training. Teachers of grades, kindergarten through third, were required to meet weekly with the literacy coach to discuss the different aspects of Voyager, the schools’ reading program. However, Angela was frustrated with the scheduling of the professional learning days during the school hours because the teachers were not in the classrooms teaching the students. Joyce emphasized that the professional learning pods in her school had a positive effect on the learning environment and the morale of her staff.

#### *Cultural Themes of Black Students*

During the visitations and the classroom observations at the three elementary schools, I observed some of the nine cultural themes cited in the research literature (Boykin, 1994; Boykin, 1983; Ellison & Boykin, Towns, & Stokes, 2000; Hilliard, 2001; Kunjufu, 1984). The researchers cited that the nine cultural themes are the essence of the experiences and interactions of Black students. These nine cultural themes: spirituality, harmony, verve, movement, oral tradition, affect, expressive individualism, social time perspective, and communalism have a positive effect in the learning environments for Black students (Boykin, 1983; Ellison, Boykin, Towns, & Stokes, 2000). The observation matrices are a summary of the ideal evidence and the actual evidence of the nine cultural themes that I observed during the three visitations to each of the elementary schools.

I observed seven of the cultural themes of the Black students in the three schools and the twelve classrooms. The smiling faces of the students and the staff members in the schools illustrated harmony. The Voyager's activities had facets of verve, movement, and oral tradition. Affect was evident in the positive relationships between the students and the teachers. Expressive individualism was observed when the students made stepping noise with their feet to demonstrate a loud sound. Communalism was evident when the students worked in the groups to complete their learning activities.

The Black cultural themes, spirituality and social time, were not evident in the schools and the classrooms. I did not observe any religious symbols displayed in the school or the classrooms. Also, I did not hear any conversations with a spiritual or religious theme. The teachers did adhere to the timeframe for the learning activities for the students. In some cases, students were visibly disappointed when a learning activity ended because it was time to begin a new learning activity.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

I will review the evolution of my study. I planned to conduct a qualitative research study to explore the relevance of a culturally relevant learning environment in three urban elementary schools using three case studies. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of the principals in promoting culturally relevant learning environments in urban elementary schools to improve the academic achievement of Black students. The case study method allowed me to include the background conditions to explain the phenomena that were being observed (Yin, 2003). With multiple case studies, I documented the actual behavioral events for the study by conducting face-to-face interviews with three urban elementary principals and direct observations in 12 classrooms.

#### Summary

In my effort to understand how principals promote a culturally relevant learning environment to improve learning as it relates to the student achievement of Black students in urban elementary schools, I used these research questions to collect additional information about the topic:

1. How do principals define a culturally relevant learning environment for Blacks students in urban elementary schools?
2. What is the role of the principal for promoting culturally relevant training for teachers and staff who teach Black students in urban elementary schools?

3. What are the principals' perceptions of culturally responsive teachers for Black students in urban elementary schools?

I investigated the research questions through a semi-structured and face-to-face interview with each of the three principals. I also investigated the research questions through the collection of data received from observations of teachers and students, non-verbal cues, and recorded field notes. I collected, organized, and coded the data into categories.

I investigated the literature pertinent to the study of culturally relevant learning environments for Black students in urban elementary schools. I examined how the principals established and promoted a culturally relevant learning environment in urban elementary schools (Hale, 2001; Harmon, 2002). Foster and Peele (1999) confirmed that the role of the principals was significant in promoting the culturally relevant training for the teachers who teach Black students. Culturally responsive teachers are necessary to keep more Black students engaged in the education process (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings 1995). Culturally responsive teachers delivered instructional activities that reflect the culture of Black students in a nurturing and caring manner (Gay, 2000).

I examined the academic achievement of the Black students in the urban elementary schools. Some researchers concluded that the achievement gap existed because of internal deficiencies of the Black students (Hernstein & Murray 1994; Jensen, 1969; Coleman Report, 1966). A different viewpoint was presented by researchers who confirmed that the achievement gap between the Black and White students existed due to external factors such as inappropriate curricula, ineffective instruction, racism, stereotype threat, and disengaging classroom discourse (Hale, 2001; Steele, 1999; Thompson, 2004).

I analyzed the nine cultural themes of the Black students. Seven of the nine Black cultural themes were observed in the classrooms of the three urban elementary schools. Boykin (1983) cited that the nine cultural themes are the manner that the Black students perceived the world. Also, the presence of the Black cultural themes in the classrooms effected the learning environment in a positive manner.

### Discussion of Research Questions

#### *Culturally Relevant Learning Environment for Black Students*

Carter (2001) cited that the principals are the catalyst for creating culturally relevant learning environments for Black students. After analyzing the data from the interviews with the principals, I documented isolated cultural activities that the principals used to promote a culturally relevant learning environment for Black students in their schools. However, the culturally relevant learning activities were not promoted throughout the school. The definitions of the culturally relevant learning environment for Black students that emerged from the principals included meeting the emotional, social, and academic needs of the students; creating a caring and nurturing environment; and connecting the classroom knowledge with the daily experiences of the students.

“A culturally relevant learning environment for Black students provides knowledge in the classroom that they can use for the remainder of their lives,” stated Joyce. The fifth graders at her school read the book, *Gifted Hands*, by Dr. Ben Carson. Joyce explained that Dr. Carson did not allow his circumstances to have a negative impact on his life. She added, “It is important for Black students to be able to have a personal connection with the teachers and the learning process.” Angela and Elaine

thought it was important to understand the home and the community of the students to personalize the content to meet their educational needs of the students.

The principals believed that a “family” concept existed at their schools. The “family” environment enabled the teachers to establish positive relationships with the students and the parents. Angela felt that the cohesiveness of her staff was an influential factor in improving the academic achievement of her students. Elaine believed that it takes a village to raise a child because every adult in her school are responsible for the academic progress of her students.

#### *Role of the Principal for Promoting Culturally Relevant Training for Staff*

The principals agreed that the district did not offer culturally relevant training for teachers and staff who teach Black students. Elaine held conferences with individual teachers and staff to help them improve their effectiveness in the classrooms. Also, she discussed teacher-student relationships in faculty meetings to help her staff maintain positive relationships with the students and the parents. Elaine encouraged the staff to read the professional literature about culturally responsive teachers from the literature in the media center of the school. I saw three magazines with articles pertaining to culturally responsive teaching in the professional literature section in the media center of the school.

Joyce and Angela believed that when you teach the whole child, the culture of the child is addressed. Joyce and Angela said, “I don’t see color.” They believed that the ethnicity of their students does not determine the learning environment of the school. However, I believe that when you teach the whole child that the ethnicity of the child is not a neutral characteristic of teaching the whole child. The researchers confirmed that

the learning environment for Black students should respect the students, their culture, and their life experiences (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Murrell, 2002). Also, the ethnicity and culture of the child bring different life experiences to the discourse in the classrooms (Gay, 2000). The response of Joyce and Angela might indicate that a multicultural learning environment for their students is part of the learning environments of their schools. Angela's school is comprised of a diverse population and she invited the parents to come to the school to talk about their culture. Gay (2000) confirmed that it is important for students to learn about the different cultures of students to help the students to expand their learning experiences.

#### *Culturally Responsive Teachers*

Ladson-Billings (2001) affirmed that the Black students are validated when the teachers use the cultural knowledge and life experiences of the Black students as instructional strategies to help them acquire the new knowledge and skills. Angela observed teachers who engaged in a daily dialogue with their students to discover the interests of the students and the different methods to use to help motivate the students to learn. Each of the principals stated that culturally responsive teachers utilized different teaching strategies to impart the classroom knowledge to improve the academic success for all of the students.

Culturally responsive teachers are empathic, nurturing, knowledgeable about the culture of the students, and supportive with their students (Kaplan & Owings, 2001; McAllister & Irvine, 2002). The principals believed that culturally responsive teachers are knowledgeable about the culture of the Black students. They used the knowledge of the culture of the Black students to personalize the content and make the content relevant

to the lives of their students. Elaine described culturally responsive teachers for Black students as respectful and caring in their interactions with the students.

Culturally responsive teachers used a caring voice tone with the students. They walked among the students to check to see if the students understand the content as they complete their assignments. Joyce expressed that the students are constantly making eye contact and listening to the culturally responsive teachers during instruction. Angela expressed that the students were enthusiastic about the learning process with culturally responsive teachers. Also, the culturally responsive teachers utilized praise and positive words to keep the students focused on the instructional activities. Angela and Elaine stated that the discipline problems were not a major issue in the classrooms of culturally responsive teachers because the students focused on the instructional activities.

#### Conclusions

The principals advocated that their teachers should relate the home life of the students to the classroom discourse, demonstrate knowledge of the culture of the students, and be respectful and nurturing with the students to promote a culturally relevant learning environment for Black students. However, the principals did not implement any school-wide programs that promoted a culturally relevant learning environment for the Black students. The principals stressed positive relationships between the teachers and the students. The principals believed that their teachers and their staff met the emotional, social, and intellectual needs of their students with the “family concept”.

As the educational leaders of their schools, the principals were committed to improving the academic achievement of their students. The principals stated that the

district administrators did not provide the culturally relevant training for the principals, faculty, and staff who teach the Black students. The support of the school district administrators is required to help the principals to promote a culturally relevant learning environment to improve the academic achievement of the Black students. Each of the principals of the three schools used the traditional schooling approach to educate their students. The absence of a school-wide culturally relevant learning environment for Black students may prevent these three “70/70/70 Schools” from becoming the “90/90/90 Schools”.

The principals shared their knowledge about the culture of the Black students with their teachers during formal and informal discussions. The principals observed that the students in the classrooms of culturally responsive teachers were engaged and enthusiastic about the instructional activities. Also, the principals wanted the teachers to establish and maintain positive relationships with the students.

As an observer in the schools and the classrooms, I saw some actual evidence for seven of the nine cultural themes of Black students. I did not see any evidence of spirituality and social time. The classes could have been interchangeable at the three schools. The students were focused and enthusiastic about the learning process. The teacher-student relationships were positive at each school. When the students were not on task, the teachers redirected the students in a positive manner. As I exited each school, I felt hopeful, but still concerned about the academic future of the Black students in the urban elementary schools.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study:

1. The school district should provide district training for administrators, faculty, and staff to help them implement instructional activities that encompass the nine cultural themes of Black students. Boykin (1983) affirmed that the nine cultural themes have a positive impact on the learning environment for Black students.
2. Compare and contrast the academic achievement of Black students who are educated in the urban elementary schools with culturally relevant learning environments to the academic achievement of the students in the urban elementary schools who are educated with the traditional schooling approach. Researchers confirmed that the academic achievement of Black students improve when the students can relate to the content in the classrooms on a daily basis (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Thompson, 2004).

### Implications for Future Research

The following suggestions for further research are made based on the findings of this study:

1. The study was conducted with three urban elementary schools in one school district. It would be beneficial to replicate the study by increasing the number of principals.
2. Choose the principals with purposeful selection. Select the principals who promote a culturally relevant learning environment to improve the academic achievement of the Black students.

3. The voice of the principals is missing from the literature regarding the principals' understanding of the importance of promoting a culturally relevant learning environment to improve the academic achievement of Black students. Additional studies can add valuable information to the literature.
4. The study examined the presence of the cultural themes of the Black students in the classrooms. However, additional studies should explore the impact of the cultural themes of the Black students on the learning environment.

As a group, Black students in urban elementary schools need the support of the policy makers, their communities, district administrators, principals, faculty, staff, and parents to provide a learning environment to help them achieve academic success. The policy makers should examine the external factors that contribute to the achievement gap between the Black urban students and all other groups of students. These external factors include racism, inappropriate curricula, and the mandate of the high-stakes tests.

I believe that each of the urban principals in my study will continue to promote isolated cultural relevant activities in the learning environments of their schools to improve the academic achievement of Black students. However, I agree with the literature that the student achievement would improve if the isolated cultural relevant activities were expanded to learning environments that are immersed with culturally relevant activities throughout the school district for Black students. The literature confirms that the traditional schooling approach is failing to educate a plethora of Black students in urban elementary schools. The principals may help the Black students in the urban elementary schools achieve academic success by promoting culturally relevant learning environments in their schools.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

Georgia Southern University  
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Phone: 912-681-5465

Administrative Annex

P.O. Box 8005

Fax: 912-681-0719

Ovrsight@GeorgiaSouthern.edu

Statesboro, GA 30460

**To:** Rachel M. Lee  
4102 Social Circle  
Augusta, GA 30909

**cc:** Dr. Walter Polka, Faculty Advisor  
P. O. Box 8131

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Annex P.O. Box 8005  
Statesboro, GA 30460  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Date:** July 27, 2006

**Subject:** Receipt of Application for Approval to utilize Human Subjects in Research

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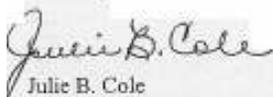
Your Institutional Review Board Application titled "**How Principals Promote a Culturally Relevant Learning Environment to Improve Black Student Achievement in Urban Elementary Schools**" was received by our office on "**July 27, 2006**". Your protocol number is "**H07012**". Please refer to this number when contacting the office. Your application has been sent to an IRB sub-committee reviewer. This review will determine the type of review to be performed (Exempt, Expedited, or Full-Board).

If your protocol is deemed to fall into the exempt or expedited category, the reviewer will either approve, or make recommendations for revisions. Recommendations for revisions will be sent to you as soon as they are received. You may revise your protocol in keeping with the recommended changes and resubmit to the IRB upon completion of those revisions necessary for approval.

If it is determined that your protocol must be reviewed by the full Board, you will be notified the time and the date of the Board meeting. You have the option of attending the meeting to present your protocol in person and answer Board questions. Decisions of the Board will be communicated following the meeting. You may check on the status of your IRB application at <http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/research/IRB.htm>

For additional information regarding the different types of review, please visit our website at: <http://academics.georgissouthern.edu/research/IRB.htm>

Sincerely



Julie B. Cole

Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX B

PERMISSION AND APPROVAL LETTER TO CONDUCT STUDY



Dr. Charles Larke, Superintendent  
Richmond County Board of Education  
864 Broad St.  
Augusta, GA 30901

Dear Dr. Larke

My name is Rachel Lee. I am pursuing my doctoral degree in Educational Administration from Georgia Southern University. My dissertation's title is "How Principals Promote a Culturally Relevant Learning Environment to Improve Black Student Achievement in Urban Elementary Schools". The voices of the principals are not evident in the research literature. Since the principals are the leaders of the schools, it is important for the principals to establish the atmosphere of the learning environments. Many researchers confirm that the traditional schooling is failing to educate the majority of Black students. Many teachers are not connecting the classroom learning with the daily experiences of Black students. The consequence of the disconnection between academic knowledge and daily experiences of Black students results in the disinterest in the educational process for many Black students.

Researchers support culturally relevant learning environments that are designed to strengthen the cohesiveness between the classroom knowledge and the experiences of Black students. Culturally relevant learning environments nurture the social and emotional aspects of the student. Black students are able to become active learners and take ownership of their learning as they utilize the classroom learning in their daily lives.

I am requesting to conduct my research study in three Richmond County Schools. I am using these three criteria to select the population for the study: (1) Black students will comprise of 70% or higher of the student population; (2) 70% or more of the student population will receive free or reduced meals; and (3) 70% of the student in the schools met or exceed the academic performance indicator for adequate yearly progress on the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test for the 2004-2005 school year.

I plan to conduct case studies with three of these urban elementary schools. I will visit each school three times. My first visit to each school will consist of an in-depth, face-to-face interview with the principals. I will observe two classrooms for a 20-minute observation during my second and third visits to each school. Participants will sign consent forms. Participation in the study is voluntary. There is no monetary compensation for participation in the study. The participants will remain anonymous.

Upon your approval, I plan to begin the research study process in late August (2006). If you have additional questions regarding the research study, please contact me.

Thank you

APPENDIX C  
STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

## Student Demographics

	Total Student Population (PK-5)	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian	Multi-racial	Economically Disadvantaged (Eligible Free or Reduced Lunch)
School #1	421	94%	4%	1%	0	1%	94%
School #2	392	81%	9%	4%	2%	4%	87%
School #3	514	93%	4%	1%	1%	1%	94%

CRITERION-REFERENCED COMPETENCY TEST RESULTS:  
STUDENTS IN GRADES 3-5 FOR 2004-2005

Criterion-Referenced Competency Test Results:  
Students in Grades 3-5 for  
2004-2005

Target Goal: Reading—66.7% Math—58.3%	School #1 % of Students Met or Exceeded Standards in Reading and Math 300 or Above	School #2 % of Students Met or Exceeded Standards in Reading and Math 300 or Above	School #3 % of Students Met or Exceeded Standards in Reading and Math 300 or Above
Reading	74.5%	82.4%	74.1%
English/Language Arts	69.8%	82.7%	74.1%
Mathematics	69.0%	75.4%	66.8%
Science	67.1%	79.9%	66.9%
Social Studies	72.3%	85.3%	75.4%

APPENDIX E

COVER LETTER TO THE PRINCIPALS

Dear Principal

My name is Rachel Lee. I am pursuing my doctoral degree from Georgia Southern University. The title of my dissertation is “How Principals Promote a Culturally Relevant Learning Environment to Improve Black Student Achievement in Urban Elementary Schools”. The purpose of this study is to explore the role of the principals in promoting a culturally relevant environment to help Black students in urban elementary schools to achieve academic success.

Dr. Larke has given me permission to collect the data for my dissertation. I have enclosed an approval letter from Dr. Larke. I need your assistance in the collection of the data for the study. The data collection process includes a face-to-face interview with you and two additional visits to your school to conduct two classroom observations during each of the visits. I will call you next week to see if you want to participate in the study. Also, I will give you detailed information about the study.

Thank you

APPENDIX F  
CASE STUDY CONSENT FORM

## Case Study Consent Form

Investigator: Rachel Lee Dr. Walter Polka, Advisor

The purpose of this study is to examine how elementary principals promote a culturally relevant learning environment to help improve Black student achievement in urban elementary schools. The study is conducted in Augusta, Georgia. The length of the interview with each of the participants will be approximately one hour.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand that:

- (1) The written information obtain during this study will be used to write a case study which will be read by the participants and the dissertation committee. The case study will not be disseminated to others without the written permission of the participants involved in this study.
- (2) All participants' names will remain confidential and no risks, benefits or compensation will be involved.
- (3) I am entitled to review the case study before the final draft is written and negotiate changes with the investigator.
- (4) I may withdraw (with no penalty) from this study at any time by speaking to the investigator and all of the data collected from me will be returned immediately.
- (5) Written information will be retained indefinitely by the investigator and will be stored in a secured file cabinet.

“I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board-Human Subjects in Research, Georgia Southern University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, I can contact the Institutional Review Board via Ms. Julie B. Cole, Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs, at 912.681.5465.”

I have read and understand the explanations provided to me. All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX G

GRADE LEVELS OF CLASSROOMS OBSERVED

## Grade Levels of Classrooms Observed

	School Visitation 2	School Visitation 3
School #1	Fifth grade class First grade class	Fourth grade class Fifth grade class
School # 2	Fifth grade class Fifth grade class	Kindergarten class Second grade class
School #3	Fifth grade class Fifth grade class	Kindergarten class Second grade class

APPENDIX H

SCHOOL PERSONNEL DEMOGRAPHICS 2004-2005

School Personnel Demographics  
2004-2005

	School #1	School #2	School #3
Personnel (PK-5)	39	32	39
Gender			
Female	35	30	34
Male	4	2	5
Certificate Level			
4 Yr Bachelor's	16	16	13
5 Yr Master's	17	11	24
6 Yr Specialist's	4	4	2
7 Yr Doctoral	2	1	0
Ethnicity			
Black	22	18	23
White	16	14	16
Hispanic	1	0	0
Years of Teaching Experience			
<1	0	0	0
1-10	12	10	14
11-20	13	9	14
21-30	9	7	8
>30	5	6	3
Student Enrollment/All Teachers Ratio	13:1	13:1	15:1

APPENDIX I  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

### Interview Questionnaire

1. Tell me about your educational background and experiences.
2. What do you enjoy most about your position as the principal?
3. Describe the relationship between your school and the community.
4. What are the focal points of your school improvement plan?
5. Describe the staff development/ professional learning communities that your faculty/staff participates throughout the school year.
6. Describe the specific elements of your school's learning environment that are factors in the academic achievement of your students.
7. How do principals define a culturally relevant learning environment for Black students in urban elementary schools?
  - a. What strategies do you utilize to create a culturally relevant learning environment on a daily basis?
  - b. Are there advantages for promoting a culturally relevant learning environment to help improve the academic performance of Black students in urban elementary schools? Explain your answer.
8. What is the role of the principal for promoting the training for teachers and staff who teach Black students in urban elementary schools?
  - a. Describe the types of training and workshops that your teachers/staff attend regarding Black students' culture and their learning environment.

9. What are the principals' perceptions of culturally responsive teachers for Black students in urban elementary schools?
  - a. Describe the types of teaching strategies/instruction that you have observed when Black students were engaged and enthusiastic about the learning process in the classrooms.
  - b. Describe the types of teaching strategies/instruction that you have observed when Black students were not engaged in the learning process. What are some of the strategies that the teacher could utilize to help the students relate to the content?

APPENDIX J  
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

## Observation Protocol

Date \_\_\_\_\_

School's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Time \_\_\_\_\_

Descriptors: School, Classroom Activities, etc.Comments

APPENDIX K

SCHOOL #1—OBSERVATION MATRIX

## School #1—Observation Matrix

Boykin's Nine Black Cultural Themes	Ideal Evidence of Black Cultural Themes	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 1	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 2	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 3
Spirituality	divine inspiration			
Harmony	positive interactions	quiet hallways smiling faces friendly greetings	quiet voice tones/ smiling faces/ happy students/ praising students	quiet voice tones/ smiling faces
Verve	variety of action with high level of stimulation	students' participation in physical education/ students' singing	jazz music playing in the classroom	students' participation in spelling activity at the board
Movement	rhythmic in speech pattern/ activities	students' participation in physical education	students moving from their desks to sit on the floor	students completing morning routine
Oral Tradition	students using a high level of oral communications			students required to give detailed answers to questions
Affect	sensitive to emotional cues		redirected students in a positive manner/ interactions between teachers and students	distribution of "I Can" coupons/ redirected student with proximity/ interactions between teachers and students
Expressive Individualism	students express themselves in unique manner: verbal/behaviors		student waved hands in the air continuously with excitement	Students' sighed with disappointment when activity ended
Social Time	activity takes priority over the timeframe for the activity			
Communalism	group work/group activities	students working in groups		students working in groups

APPENDIX L

SCHOOL #2—OBSERVATION MATRIX

## School #2—Observation Matrix

Boykin's Nine Black Cultural Themes	Ideal Evidence of Black Cultural Themes	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 1	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 2	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 3
Spirituality	divine inspiration			
Harmony	positive interactions	quiet hallways smiling faces friendly greetings	quiet voice tones	smiling faces/ happy students/ students clapped for each other
Verve	variety of action with high level of stimulation	students' participation in physical education activities	students' sitting on desks/tables variety of teaching strategies	students participating in Voyager
Movement	rhythmic in speech pattern/ activities	students' participation in physical education activities	students' moving from one group to another	students participating in Voyager/ Students standing next to their desk as they spelled the words
Oral Tradition	students using a high level of oral communications		activity focus on the students' oral responses	students participating in Voyager
Affect	sensitive to emotional cues		interactions between teachers and students	students clapped for each other/ interactions between teachers and students
Expressive Individualism	students express themselves in unique manner: verbal/behaviors		students' sighed with disappointment when activity ended	
Social Time	activity takes priority over the timeframe for the activity			
Communalism	group work/group activities			students participating in Voyager

APPENDIX M

SCHOOL #3—OBSERVATION MATRIX

## School #3—Observation Matrix

Boykin's Nine Black Cultural Themes	Ideal Evidence of Black Cultural Themes	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 1	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 2	Actual Evidence of Black Cultural Themes School Visitation 3
Spirituality	divine inspiration			
Harmony	positive interactions	friendly greetings/ smiling faces	happy students/ smiling faces	friendly greetings/ happy students/ smiling faces
Verve	variety of action with high level of stimulation			students participating in Voyager
Movement	rhythmic in speech pattern/ activities	students participating in physical education activities	teacher's teaching style and students' responses	students participating in Voyager
Oral Tradition	students using a high level of oral communications		students' oral responses were the focus of the activity	students participating in Voyager/ students' oral participation was the focus of the activity
Affect	sensitive to emotional cues		interactions between teachers and students	interactions between teachers and students/ redirected students using a hand clapping signal
Expressive Individualism	students express themselves in unique manner: verbal/behaviors		stepping noise with feet in unison	
Social Time	activity takes priority over the timeframe for the activity			
Communalism	group work/group activities	students participating in group activities		students participating in Voyager

Table 1

## Studies Related to High-Achieving Urban Elementary Schools

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design/Analysis	Outcomes
Charles Dana Center, 1999	Identify urban schools with above average student achievement	Nine urban elementary schools located in MA, TX, GA, IL, MI, WI, and MD	Visit each site for two days; Reviewed school documents and achievement data  Qualitative Interviews Observations	Standardized Assessment: Student achievement in mathematics and reading was higher than the average of all schools in the state
Reeves, 2000	Identify urban schools with above average student achievement	228 schools; 130,000+ urban, suburban and rural students across America's schools	Site visits; four years of assessment data  Observations Interviews Analyses of accountability data	“90/90/90 Schools” 90 percent of the students are: ethnic minorities, eligible for free/reduced meals, and met or exceeded academic standards

Table 2

## Studies Related to Stereotype Threat

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design/Analysis	Outcomes
Steele, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995	Provide evidence of stereotype threat when verbal ability is measured in a test situation	Black and White students at Stanford University	A 30-minute verbal test made from the advanced Graduate Record Examination was given to one student at a time.  Results of the test	Black students scored a full standard deviation lower than White students with similar ability level.  Black students performed poorly because they were under the stereotype threat of the test being a diagnostic measure of their intellectual ability.
Steele, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995	Retested the same students with the removal of the stereotype threat  Students were told that the verbal test did not measure their intellectual ability.	Black and White students at Stanford University	A 30-minute verbal test made from the advanced Graduate Record Examination was given to one student at a time.  Results of the test	Black students and White students earned similar scores on the verbal test.

Table 3

## Studies Related to Culturally Responsive Teaching

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design/Analysis	Outcomes
Harmon, 2002	Identify the behaviors of effective and ineffective teachers	6 gifted Black fourth and fifth grade students	Qualitative, Fieldwork, Observations, Interviews	Effective teachers are: (a) respectful and have high expectations for all students; (b) understand Black culture and relate classroom learning so the students can understand the new concepts; and (c) provide a discipline classroom and are caring and considerate with all students. Ineffective teachers are: (a) disrespectful and have low expectations of Black students; (b) do not possess an understanding of Black students' culture; and (c) demonstrate preferential treatment toward White students and unequal treatment of Black students.
Ladson-Billings, 1995	Identify the practices of culturally responsive teachers	8 Teachers in a high-poverty school district in Northern California	Case studies Interviews Field notes Videotape Audiotape Two-three hour meetings for teachers to analyze their teaching practices	The cultural values of the students are appreciated in the classrooms. Helping all students to develop academically is the primary goal of culturally responsive teaching.
McAllister & Irvine (2002)	Explore the role of empathy in teaching culturally diverse students through a CULTRES (Center for Urban Learning Teaching and Urban Research in Education and Schools) seminar	34 Teachers	Quantitative Applications  Qualitative: Final projects, Exit interviews, QSR NUDIST, Journalized methodological decisions and processes	The 34 teachers believed empathy was an important factor in teaching culturally diverse students. -Cognitive -Affective Three Valuable Activities: -Bafa Bafa-cross cultural simulation -Community Immersion-teachers visited four different cultural communities (African American, Mexican American, White Appalachian, and Asian American) and talked with parents, students, and community leaders -Self-Reflection on cultural experiences

Table 3 continued

Howard (2001)	Identify effective pedagogical practices for African American students	4 Urban Teachers	Qualitative: Case studies, In-depth & structured interviews, Classroom observations, A grounded theory approach	Three Pedagogical Themes for Academic Success -Holistic instructional strategies emphasize academic, moral, and social competencies -Culturally consistent communicative competencies scaffold the classroom structured discourse patterns, phrases, person-to-person interactions, and vocabulary with communication skills used at home -Skill building strategies to promote academic success create opportunities necessary for students to acquire the knowledge vital for school success remind students that all students are smart with different skill levels concentrate on improving students' skill levels to promote intellectual growth
Boykin & Bailey (2000)	Investigate the validity that implementing the Afro-cultural theme, movement, enhances the cognitive performance of African American children from low-income background	128 second graders; African Americans & European Americans; Baltimore, MD	Quantitative: Child Activity Questionnaire, Teacher Ratings on Classroom Achievement, Teacher Ratings on Classroom Motivation, Two Movement Encoding Questionnaires, Two Movement Inference Questionnaires	-Comprehension for African American children was higher when stories were told with high movement  -European American children's comprehension was higher when stories were presented in the absence of movement
Boykin & Bailey (2000)	Investigate the validity that implementing the Afro-cultural theme, communalism, enhances the cognitive performance of African American children from low-income background	72 fifth graders, African Americans Chicago, IL	Quantitative: Personal Beliefs and Behaviors Measure, Activity Preference Measure, Evaluative Questionnaire	-Communalism facilitates creative thinking among students -Students work together for the good of the group; not for rewards
Boykin & Bailey (2000)	Investigate the validity that implementing the Afro-cultural theme, verve, enhances the cognitive performance of African American children from low-income background	192 low-income third and sixth graders, African Americans, European Americans	Quantitative: Home Stimulation Perception Questionnaire, Pathway Preference Measure, Task Motivation Questionnaire	-African American students' highest problem-solving performance was with background music -African American students' lowest task performance was without background music -European American students' highest performance was without background music -European American students' lowest task performance was with background music

Table 4

## Studies Related to Principals Promoting the Culture of Black Students in the Daily Curriculum

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design/Analysis	Outcomes
Carter (2001)	Identify high performing urban elementary schools	2 Schools Marcus Garvey, Los Angeles, CA; 285 students Earhart, Chicago, IL; 265 students	Quantitative: survey  Qualitative: Interviews observations	<u>Marcus Garvey</u> -Afro-centric curriculum -Teachers trained six months to learn school's Afro-centric identity -Students study English, Spanish, & Swahili -Preschoolers add & subtract two-digit numbers -4 year olds know their multiplication tables -4 <sup>th</sup> graders study elementary algebra  <u>Earhart</u> -Afro-centric curriculum Focus on reading comprehension and literacy
Foster & Peele (1999)	Provide training for teachers to blend African American culture in the curriculum	55 Teachers	Quantitative: Survey  Qualitative: Classroom observations, interviews	32 teachers provided self-reported data that indicate high attendance for teachers in three groups: -Principals who expressed vocal support for the professional development program -women teachers -teachers of color

Table 5

## Similarities Between Black Students' Cultural Themes and the Kwanzaa Principles

Nine Cultural Themes	Seven Kwanzaa Principals	Explanation
Spirituality	Imani	A belief in a divine power
Harmony	Umoja; Kujichagulia	Emphasizes balance between humans and nature
Verve	Kuumba	Preference for variety, action
Movement	Kuumba	Kinesthetic activities
Oral Tradition	Kuumba	Analogies, metaphors, graphics form of language
Affect	Nia	Emotional connection
Expressive Individualism	Kuumba	Spontaneous personal expression
Social Time	Umoja	Event is more important than the timeframe
Communalism	Ujima; Ujamaa	Group's success supercedes individual's success