

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: EXCELLENT TEACHING OF LITERACY IN AN  
URBAN SCHOOL: INCLUDING NEW LITERACIES  
AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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This is a single case study of an excellent teacher of literacy in an urban school. The study examines and exposes the practices and pedagogy this teacher possesses in order to assist students as they become literate thinkers and processors of information. I conducted this study using qualitative inquiry methods in an effort to explore the life experiences, instructional style, and content knowledge of my case study subject.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the pedagogy and processes an excellent teacher of literacy employed in order to design literacy instruction that increased student achievement in literacy. Through data collection, from daily literacy lessons, materials analyses, and formal and informal interviews, several themes emerged. These interrelated themes are (a) including new literacies, (b) inclusion of safe competition, and (c) youth development and empowerment. I developed three research questions to guide my study.

1. How do effective urban literacy instructors define good teaching?
  - a. What personal experiences have shaped those beliefs?

- b. Do they believe that their teaching methods are shaped by the particular context they teach in? If so, how?
- 2. What kinds of practices do effective urban literacy educators employ?
  - a. What professional development opportunities have influenced their instruction?
  - b. How does the school/community context (neighborhood, leadership, colleagues) shape their teaching?
- 3. How does this instruction impact learners? What do teachers believe has been the impact on the urban learners?
  - a. Do they believe that their practices have affected urban learners in particular ways?
  - b. How have they measured and defined their effectiveness with urban learners?

Data collected included interviews, fieldnotes, audio recordings, artifacts, and standardized assessment scores. Authentic data, such as discourse analysis and interviews, provided a detailed outline for student academic development and teacher choice. Results from data analysis revealed that students developed and advanced using this teacher's mixed methods approach to literacy teaching and learning. These findings suggest that components found within his literacy instruction provide students with opportunities to develop a range of skills needed to become more literate and expand their ways of thinking and knowing.

Based on my findings, requisite skills and instructional components emerged that are necessary in order to promote high-quality instruction in the area of literacy in urban

schools. Several implications can be drawn from this study. First, support was garnered from preceding studies that call for the revision of teacher preparation programs for pre-service and in-service teachers. Although this study highlights a teacher that obtained alternative certification, he developed awareness for the needs of urban learners while satisfying state licensure requirements. Second, this research supports the tenants of culturally relevant teaching. The case study subject had high expectations, exuded care for all the learners within the community, and built upon students' culture and needs to craft literacy instruction that was inclusive of there experiences and ways of knowing and thinking, all of which call for the inclusion of culturally relevant teaching within curricula in diverse learning spaces. Third, my case study subject seamlessly infused new literacies that spoke directly to his students' interests and likenesses. He was able to include multiple literacies that helped to promote the deconstruction of texts and dominant forms of teaching and learning. This approach to literacy instruction pushes educators and researchers to realize ways to consider both critical and sociocultural theories when designing instruction for students. Finally, the presence of youth development is nuanced throughout his work as an education professional. The body of research conducted to understand the needs of urban youth indicates that urban students require more than a "teacher"; their teachers must be community members, advocates, and systematic structure builders in order for the achievement gap to be championed.

EXCELLENT TEACHING OF LITERACY IN AN URBAN SCHOOL:  
INCLUDING NEW LITERACIES AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

by

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all of the excellent urban teachers that make strides toward championing the ails of urban education daily.

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As a parent and educator, I truly embody the African proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” This proverb can also be applied to many personal goals we set out to accomplish. Completing this process involved my entire family. I thank my husband Glen for granting me the space and assistance necessary to earn this degree. I also thank my daughter Delaney for sharing her mommy for four long years. Lastly, I thank my unborn child that waits patiently in my womb for mommy to finish this process. I would also like to acknowledge my parents John and Gail Oliver for their continuous and unwavering encouragement and resources that helped me to see the end. I thank my brother Quantay for listening to my complaining, my uncle Jeffrey and Aunt Lynn for their supportive and kind words, my in-laws Glen and Carol O’Gilvie for understanding and supporting my goal. I also thank my friends and cheerleading squad. Jevonna, I sincerely thank you for checking on me and my progress daily and for learning the process with me. Kelley, I thank you for wanting to understand my program and goals.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Education defines urban schools as schools located in the central city of a metropolitan area and/or serving children who are “socially and academically” at risk. Urban schools have for several years tried to close the achievement gap, recruit and retain highly-qualified teachers, improve academic achievement, decrease the drop-out rate, improve professional development, and improve parental involvement (Council of Great City Schools, 2006). Research conducted by the Council of Great City Schools indicates that improved reading programs were viewed as the most important means to address the issues that hinder progress in urban schools (Council of Great City Schools, 2006).

For decades, researchers have sought ways to efficiently and effectively teach young people how to read (Lipson & Wixson, 2003). Urban schools, in particular, face significant challenges in this area (National Research Council, 1998). Aside from minimal progress on standardized reading assessments, urban schools suffer from several issues that impact teaching and learning. Noguera (2003) argues that classroom experiences are largely shaped by the context in which they take place. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress from the Trial Urban Districts (TUDA) indicate that only two of the six urban cities participating witnessed gains in reading in fourth grade (NAEP, 2005). Included in the TUDA statistics are Austin, New York, Houston, San Diego, Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and the District of Columbia. The Table 1 displays reading scores from fourth grade students in these

urban cities. The table shows four categories of reading levels: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced.

Table 1

*Trial Urban District Reading Scores, Grade 4*

City	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Nation	38%	33%	23%	7%
Large Central City	51%	29%	15%	4%
Charlotte	35%	32%	24%	9%
Austin	39%	32%	22%	7%
New York	43%	35%	18%	5%
Houston	48%	31%	16%	5%
San Diego	49%	30%	17%	5%
Boston	49%	34%	14%	3%
Atlanta	59%	24%	13%	4%
Chicago	60%	27%	12%	2%
Cleveland	63%	28%	9%	1%
Los Angeles	63%	23%	11%	3%
District of Columbia	67%	22%	9%	2%

Source: NAEP, 2005 ([www.nces.ed.gov](http://www.nces.ed.gov))

The scores presented on this table indicate the dire need for reading improvement in urban schools. Also noteworthy is the diversity that exists among races and

achievement in grade four. White and Asian Pacific Islander students earned an average scale score of 229 (NAEP, 2005), while African Americans earned an average scale score of 200; Hispanics averaged a 203 scale score, and American Indian/Alaska Native, averaged a 204 scale score (NAEP, 2005). These disparities raise critical questions surrounding literacy instruction for students of color in urban schools.

While the work of researchers studying urban schools in recent years has depicted a sense of hopelessness and despair, researchers like Noguera (2003) and Irvine (1988) provide hope for both students and teachers in urban areas. Irvine (1988) suggests that success in urban schools is contingent upon several actors: (a) visionary leadership, (b) quality instruction, (c) loosely and tightly coupled system, and (d) partnerships with parents and communities. While these factors address successful urban schools in general, my interest is in literacy specifically within the context of urban schools. Excellent literacy instruction in urban schools has been the topic of many conversations. Researchers and several urban school districts have attempted to close literacy achievement gaps; however, high levels of academic difference continue to exist between urban learners and their counterparts receiving education outside of this context. Over the past two decades, there has been increased interest in examining processes to improve the academic performance of culturally and ethnically diverse learners in the area of literacy (Au, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tatum 2000a; Turner, 2005).

Wilkinson and Silliman (2000) developed three assumptions about literacy learning that might directly impact how we understand excellent literacy teaching in urban schools. First, learning is a social activity—interpersonal behaviors, both observed and enacted in the classroom, are the basis for new conceptual understandings in

cognition and communication. Second, learning is integrated—strong interrelationships exist between oral and written language learning. Finally, learning requires active student engagement in classrooms activities and interaction—engaged students are motivated for literacy learning and have the best chance of achieving full communicative competence across the broad spectrum of language and literacy skills.

Social activity, integrated learning, and active student engagement should be evident during literacy instruction in urban schools. Social activity calls for the inclusion of cooperative learning. This structure allows students to work in concert with other students and gives them an opportunity to receive feedback from their peers during literacy instruction. Further, it implies that students should engage in conversations about literacy and literacy activities. Integrated learning establishes the link between dimensions of reading and writing. Student engagement addresses student motivation and cultural factors that may impact literacy learning and instruction. Students may show increased motivation and engagement during instructional activities that are sensitive to their personal interests and draw from student experiences. These assumptions related to literacy and literacy learning offer guidance for the observation and analysis of literacy teaching in urban contexts. These three ideas help to build my construct of excellent teaching of literacy in urban schools.

#### Excellent Literacy Teachers and Teaching as Constructs

According to Taylor, Pressley, and Pearson (2002), effective elementary teachers of reading have been widely studied and have helped to define excellent teaching of reading. During the early 1970s, researchers argued that effective teachers “maintained an academic focus, kept more pupils on task, and provided direct instruction” (Brophy,

1973; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974). As the classroom began to evolve and include many diverse learners, researchers have been challenged to expand the characteristics of effective teaching. Now included in this definition is higher-level thinking, small group instruction, coaching, and new literacies (Asselin, 2004; Knapp, 1995; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). As the lives, experiences, and stories of our students in elementary classrooms expand to add more complexity, so too must our teaching practices. As noted by Asselin, our diverse society requires use to develop skill sets beyond basic reading and writing. Kist (2001) provides educators with a framework that outlines elements that help to support new literacy teaching and learning. Kist states that new literacy instruction embraces ongoing, continuous use of multiple forms of representation; explicit discussion of symbol usage, past and present; students in ongoing meta-dialogues in an atmosphere of cognitive pluralism; a balance of individual and collaborative activities; evidence of student engagement, a balance of choice and collaborative activities, and work centered around projects; and evidence of a breakdown of traditional teacher and student roles. These descriptions help to support the construct of excellent teaching of literacy that guided my research and data collection.

This dissertation is grounded in the assumptions of sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory states that particular ways of thinking, acting, and speaking occur as an individual participates with others in activities that constitute daily life within a cultured community (Vygotsky, 1978). Drawing on sociocultural theory and the construct of excellent teaching, I explored the teaching practice of an excellent teacher of literacy in an urban school. More specifically, I investigated how his personal beliefs, experiences, and the context in which he teaches shape the teaching and learning of

literacy. This study is also grounded in critical theory and culturally relevant pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lynn, 2006; McLaren, 1998; Turner, 2005). This unique combination of theories helped to investigate this teacher intimately.

### Research Questions

There is a need for more literacy research that strongly considers the factors that shape the experiences of students in urban schools. Uncovering the practices of excellent teachers of literacy provides much needed information that adds to the scholarship surrounding literacy instruction for urban learners and high-quality teaching. The following research questions helped to guide my study.

1. How do effective urban literacy instructors define good teaching?
  - a. What personal experiences have shaped those beliefs?
  - b. Do they believe that their teaching methods are shaped by the particular context they teach in? If so, how?
2. What kinds of practices do effective urban literacy educators employ?
  - a. What professional development opportunities have influenced their instruction?
  - b. How does the school/community context (neighborhood, leadership, colleagues) shape their teaching?
3. How does this instruction impact learners? What do teachers believe has been the impact on the urban learners?
  - a. Do they believe that their practices have affected urban learners in particular ways?

- b. How have they measured and defined their effectiveness with urban learners?

The focus of this dissertation is extremely personal. As a former urban elementary practitioner, I struggled with understanding how I could impact teaching and learning in these spaces. I have always been deeply interested in literacy and after much research and exposure to achievement disparities in this content area, my interest has deepened. The research questions that helped to guide this study were crafted after critical reflection on my practice as an elementary teacher. Further, as a teacher educator, I developed a sincere commitment to urban students and the educational and social opportunities afforded to them. I argue that this study stands to re-shape pre-service teacher preparation programs nationwide. What is revealed in the research findings exposes the need to re-craft and re-shape teaching and learning in grade schools and in higher education-teacher preparation programs.

Although reading instruction is pivotal within schools, little research has been published that addresses the added stress placed upon the teaching and learning of literacy in urban learning spaces. Although some research has been conducted on excellent literacy teaching in urban schools, few studies have investigated practices that extend beyond the traditional curriculum. Scholarly examinations of urban schooling and its impact on instructional practices offer various contributions. My research adds to the literature surrounding urban schools and the teaching of literacy. Findings expose talent among urban area practitioners and excellent teaching characteristics. Further, limited information exists that uncovers the personal experiences of urban area practitioners and epistemologies that help guide the instruction taking shape within their classrooms.

My research, guided by sociocultural theory and other frameworks mentioned previously, investigates the skill sets necessary to provide excellent instruction to urban students. More specifically, this study exposes the characteristics, how they are enlisted, and how they impact the teaching and learning of literacy in urban spaces. As evidenced in Table 1, urban students for many years have made very little progress in reading. It is important to realize factors that hinder their academic growth. Darling-Hammond (2004) has identified several factors that have contributed to the lack of academic achievement and progress among communities and school districts serving high percentages of students of color. She notes that these inequities will continue to stifle academic progress in these spaces if educational policies are not adjusted to address this issue. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005), students from diverse backgrounds attending urban schools make up close to 47% of the school age population nationwide. If academic progress in urban school districts continues to be slow to increase, the nation will witness severe outcomes that are sure to impact the lives of citizens across the country. Care and quality education for urban students must become a focal point for researchers, teacher educators, and teachers working in these spaces. Several sound research studies have been conducted that have outlined the need for urban school improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Oakes & Saunders, 2002; Semerdon, Crenon, Lanahan, Anderson, Iannotti, & Angeles, 2000). Lastly, the findings of this study help to shed light on how one excellent teacher enlisted strategies that promote academic and social growth to meet the needs of his students while promoting academic excellence.

The literature review in Chapter 2 provides readers with an overview of urban education and literacy instruction in urban schools. The primary focus of the review is to

provide readers with research detailing excellent practices of urban educators and teachers of literacy. My focus is broad, as I plan to highlight the connection between new literacies incorporation and the traditional reading curriculum. Moreover, the review of literature will detail the structures necessary in order to provide diverse learners with rich opportunities to develop academically and socially. Some research presented in this review identifies concepts based upon teaching for transformation and change. I use these features to analyze my case study subject. Following the review of literature, I describe the research methods I utilized. Chapter 4 provides an in-depth analysis of my findings and how they are connected to my construct of the excellent teaching of literacy. Chapter 5 highlights the study's conclusion and implications for continued research focusing on literacy instruction in urban schools.

#### Limitations

Much like studies of similar nature that preceded my work, I experienced and wrestled with numerous limiting factors. First, the study described one teacher that helped to facilitate effective literacy instruction to students attending an urban school. Tellis (1997) describes a common criticism associated with a single case study design as incapable of providing generalizable conclusions. Another potential disadvantage to this study is associated with the sheer nature of the state of the school district. The school district is in jeopardy of takeover. Many educators and school board officials oppose these efforts. School board officials are disseminating misinformation that questions the takeover efforts. As a result, many educators are fearful that new legislation will bring about more change resulting in reform efforts that do not promote student achievement.

## Definitions

The following definitions are significant to this study:

*Critical Pedagogy:* Primarily focused on seeking more equitable and liberating educational experiences (McLaren, 1998).

*Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:* An effective means of meeting the academic and social needs of culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000; Howard. 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997).

*Knowledgeable Other:* The teacher, or adult, who is responsive to the student's needs and is therefore able to assist the student with progressing academically (Vygotsky, 1978).

*Literacy:* The ability to think and reason like a literate person, within a particular society (Lipson & Wixson, 2003).

*Literacy:* More than reading, writing, speaking, and listening; literacy involves the practices in which these processes are embedded (Moje, 1996).

*Literacy Environments:* Schools and other linguistic communities that foster language and other communicative practices (Lipson & Wixson, 2003).

*New Literacies:* The unique ways of reading and writing with new technologies of information, communication, and multimedia (Asselin, 2004).

*Positive Youth Development:* Every young person has the potential for successful, healthy development, all youth have the capacity for positive development (Lerner, 2002).

*Sociocultural Theory:* Particular ways of thinking, acting, and speaking occur as an individual participates with others in activities that constitute daily life within a cultural community (Vygotsky, 1978).

*Youth Development Workers:* Adults or workers acting as supports for youth, families, and colleagues, and act as a resource to youth and the community in which they work (Bernard, 1991).

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review has been conducted to highlight the attributes that help to comprise efforts to create high-quality literacy instruction in urban schools as well as to capture the characteristics that help to shape excellent teachers or literacy in these spaces. The literature identifies a dire need to include a multilayered approach for providing urban students with quality instruction as well as excellent teachers. This review of literature is organized into six sections; each section will discuss a factor that contributes to the construction of excellent teaching and learning of literacy. It begins with an in-depth examination of excellent teachers and teaching in urban schools, which is followed by an exploration of urban schools and the profound effects inequity, discrimination, and power and privilege have had on the education of diverse urban learners. I will also discuss trends in urban education and public school reform. Then, an analysis of literacy instruction and literature will be exposed. Moreover, the literature will explore relevant studies that describe and define excellent teaching, followed by characteristics that constitute effective teachers of literacy. Finally, the literature review ends with an exploration of culturally relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy and positive youth development. The lessons yielded from literature and studies have been adapted and applied to strengthen the methodology of this study.

#### Characteristics of Excellent Teachers

Pedagogical problems in our cities are not chiefly matters of injustice, inequality, or segregation, but of insufficient information about teaching strategies. If we could simply learn “what works” in [the classroom of an exemplary teacher], we’d then be in a position to repeat this . . . in every other system. (Kozol, 1991, p. 128)

There are many attributes and qualities that contribute to the description of excellent teachers. In addition to this, excellent teachers possess a unique understanding of teaching and learning that allows them to methodologically create spaces that promote academic success. The combination of these characteristics that excellent practitioners use is endless. Perhaps most important to this combination are the knowledge and skills needed to understand when particular combinations are warranted in order to increase achievement. According to Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003), there are behaviors and techniques that constantly emerge in any examination of excellent teaching. Thernstrom and Thernstrom argue that there are 9 basic characteristics of excellent teaching: (a) good prior academic performance, (b) communication skills, (c) creativity, (d) professionalism, (e) pedagogical knowledge, (f) thorough and appropriate student evaluation assessment, (g) self-development or lifelong learning, (h) personality, talent, or content area knowledge and (i) the ability to model concepts in their content area. While the aforementioned list of excellent teacher qualities is comprehensive, these traits are not exhibited in a systematic order or in a particular combination.

#### Excellent Teaching Strategies in Use

Expectations and support for students of color is detrimental to their success as learners, thinkers, and productive members in our society. Excellent teachers that have been studied by researchers in the field have noted that these teachers require that students meet and unwavering standards that include submitting high-quality assignments, adherence to standards of behavior, and participation (Foster, 1991). Included in this paradigm is the consistent encouragement of self-regulated learning that

allows students to identify individual strengths and areas of need (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Noddings (1992) has conducted extensive research on care in learning environments. Excellent teachers of students of color demonstrate this by creating learning environments that are supportive and encouraging. Additionally, care is also exhibiting through selfless acts, compromise, and self-sacrifice from teachers. Including the stories of students and their cultures further supports this notion of care within learning communities largely comprised of students of color (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001). Establishing and maintaining connections with the local school communities and the communities in which young people live is also a critical component embedded with care for and about students in urban schools. Encouraging parental involvement and/or accounting for lack of parental involvement allows students to feel guidance and support from more knowledgeable others. Additionally, teachers are given authentic opportunities to implement structures that support overall growth and development (Lerner, 1994).

Professional development and growth of teachers in urban schools helps to ensure that these teachers have a deep understanding of content knowledge to ensure academic progression of students (Foster, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Excellent teachers often develop networks of excellent teachers so that they may share information and practices with one another (Brookhart & Rusnak, 1993). Their content knowledge and overall commitment to teaching is exuded throughout the professional decisions they make for instruction and professional growth.

## Excellent Teachers of Students of Color

Excellent teachers of African-American students are equipped with many of the previously mentioned characteristics in addition to knowledge and skills associated with pedagogy that uses students' cultures and backgrounds to devise instructions that increase academic achievement (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Researchers that have examined the practices of excellent teachers of African-American students noted several findings that draw on culturally relevant pedagogy (Foster, 1997; Lovelace, 1997; New, 1996; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Research has presented a consistent list of traits that help to support a construct of excellent teaching for students of color. It is safe to combine a cadre of characteristics that have been repeated across these studies of excellent teaching for this population of students. Howard (2004) identifies three qualities that African-American students described as excellent teacher characteristics. Howard argues that African-American urban students found that excellent teachers (a) establish family, community, and home-like characteristics, (b) establish culturally connected and caring relationships with students, and (c) use certain types of verbal communication and affirmation. In addition to these, the following notions have been repeated across studies on excellent teachers of students of color: (a) culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lynn 2006; Turner, 2005), (b) high expectations (Wilson & Corbett, 2001), (c) care (Howard, 2001), (d) language and culture (Hilliard, 2002), (e) classroom management and routines (Ladson-Billings, 1994), (f) school environment (Nieto, 2000), (g) local school control and involvement (Crawford & Aagard, 1991), (h) assisting with the positive development of youth (Lerner, 1994), and (i) professional career growth and development (Ayers & Shubert, 1994). Many

excellent teachers in urban communities create learning communities for students of color that have been noted to incorporate the preceding traits. Although his community members nominated Mr. Jones as an excellent teacher, I used these lists to further support his nomination.

Affording students opportunities to interact with one another, share developments, and stories about their personal experiences and families seems to promote social growth and a sense of family. Howard (2002) argues that the inclusion of “Morning Circle,” an activity that takes place in the classroom environment that enables students to share news with their peers and teachers, was noted to be some students’ favorite portion of the day. The community and home-like structure of this free-flowing talk helped students build community. Students within this study agreed that only effective practitioners utilized this classroom ritual (Howard, 2002).

Howard (2002) defines culturally connected caring as “a display of caring that occurs within a cultural context in which students are familiar” (p. 434). This forges a relationship between the students’ home cultures and that of the learning environment. Students are, therefore, not required to abandon or camouflage their culture when behavior is redirected, affection from teachers is garnered, or when nurturing is required (Howard, 2002).

### Common Characteristics of Urban Schools

Urban area schools have failed our nation’s children. Throughout their existence, student achievement has been questionable. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, schools have experienced desegregation and re-segregation. Historians argue that “white flight” (white middle class families fleeing urban school districts) has had, and

will continue to have, overwhelming impacts on school desegregation (Fossey, 2003). Racial stratification, poverty, low socioeconomic status, English language learners, cultural stratification, lack of teacher preparedness, and under-funded schools have been readily and repeatedly identified as causes for the failure or lack of progress amongst urban schools (Ogbu, 1994).

With racial and ethnic diversity increasing steadily, it is anticipated that urban area schools will continue to be faced with the challenge of educating the vast majority of minority learners. As indicated by the Census Bureau in 2000, it is expected that African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Pacific Islanders will make up an extensive share of the school-age population.

Poverty, a harsh reality often associated with urban schooling and living, must be examined when attempting to determine immediate and potential causes for lack of adequate or continued academic failure. Sturiale (1997) notes that urban area children are far more likely to be poor than suburban or rural children. Additionally, Predmore (2004) identified other problems that contribute to urban schooling woes, including “over-crowded classrooms, dilapidated facilities, lack of equipment, and teacher shortages.

Throughout the past decades, the term *urban* has come to mean densely populated, city, ghetto, largely black or minority, under-resourced, underserved, and inept (Haymes, 1995). Unfortunately, these adjectives used to describe most urban areas are often transferred to urban schools. In an effort to capture support of these and many similar assertions, a quote from a New York City area administrator states,

When I arrived as unit administrator and visited this school I could not see the children because it was so dark and gloomy. There were times when, if more than three electrical appliances were used, all the fuses blew. There is a very unusual architectural design on the first floor. There are three classrooms, and in order to get to the third one, you had to go through the first two. The building does not have a library; lunch facilities are dismal, and plumbing is inadequate. It is almost inconceivable that children attended this school. (McCoy, in Marcus & Viaro, 1971, p. 23)

Unfortunately, this administrator's depiction of the physical environment in one such urban area school captures the environmental despair and inadequacies in most of today's inner city schools. School buildings and other urban learning spaces offer shelter to students, practitioners, administrators, and other personnel. When conditions are less than desirable, the output is often the same. Ortiz (2004) argues, "When teachers work in well designed and highly functional school buildings, they are able to be more effective than when they must teach in inadequate facilities" (p. 46).

#### Trends in Urban Education and Educational Reform

Crafting and implementing educational services for urban learners remains a difficult fete. Researchers, administrators, policy makers, and practitioners have made several attempts to decrease educational disparities among urban learners. Quite often their efforts result in schooling trends for urban and diverse learners. Flaxman and Collins (1998) note three major trends within urban area education, including creating equal educational opportunities, altering all aspects of the schooling process, and systemic reform (Flaxman & Collins, 1998, Oakes, 2004.) Equal education opportunities often translate into standards and accountability. In response to the standards push, many national education associations developed national standards of learning to be adopted by school districts nationwide (Shepard, 2001).

## Reading Instruction and No Child Left Behind

Our 43<sup>rd</sup> president, George W. Bush, is credited with spearheading the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) mandate. The ratification of this law validated George W. Bush’s bipartisan educational reform model. The goal of this act is to improve academic achievement for all elementary through high school students. The improvement measures as stated would improve accountability, flexibility, and choice within all federal education programs (U.S. Department of Education). According to the executive summary, the NCLB contains a “framework on how to improve the performance of America's elementary and secondary schools while at the same time ensuring that no child is trapped in a failing school” (U.S. Department of Education). There are four major sub-areas within the NCLB law: (a) increased accountability, (b) more choices for parents and students, (c) greater flexibility for states and school districts, and (d) put reading first. In addition to these major components, the law also regulates class size, professional development, teacher quality, local school reform, and bilingual and immigrant instruction.

The NCLB’s Reading First Initiative promises to help ensure that all children will read by the end of grade three (U.S. Department of Education). Secondly, this initiative supports and encourages the use of scientifically based reading programs. This initiative states that all Title I schools must utilize a scientifically based reading program approved by the Reading First Initiative.

Title I, within the NCLB framework, means, “Support programs in schools and school districts to improve the learning of children from low-income families”

(<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/parents.html>). The U.S. Department of

Education allots Title I funds to states to support school districts based on the number of children from low-income families in each district (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb>). The mandate promises increased choice for parents and students attending low-performing schools. Minority students and students from low social economic class statuses most often populate these schools.

“School in need of improvement” is another phrase within the NCLB that has special meaning. A school in need of improvement refers to “schools receiving Title I funds that have not met state reading and math goals (Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP]) for at least two years.” If a student’s school is labeled a "school in need of improvement," it receives extra help to improve academic achievement among students. The inability to meet AYP also grants students the option to “transfer to another public school or a public charter school” (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb>). While this choice seems to offer options, this practice is truly divisive and disruptive for all parties involved.

While the articles within this law affect many students, poor and minority students are most often displaced and forced to readjust following the corrective measures stated in this law. Scripted or pre-packaged reading programs that exclude the voices and experiences of minorities and other members of the non-dominant class dictate the teaching and learning of reading.

#### No Child Left Behind and School Reform

AYP is loosely defined as a method of checks and balances that are crafted to ensure that all children will be proficient in both language arts and math by 2014. In order to effectively measure progress, gains or setbacks, states and school districts create benchmarks that help track growth, regression, or maintenance. AYP has five sub-

categories: (a) states determine what all students should know and be able to do; (b) states calculate the starting point for AYP; (c) states set specific targets to measure whether all groups of students are making Adequate Yearly Progress in language arts and math; (d) states measure the performance of students and schools; (e) steps are taken to help students in schools that do not meet AYP.

The No Child Left Behind federal law states that failure to meet AYP after five years will result in “dramatic changes to the way the school is run” ([www.ed.gov/nclb](http://www.ed.gov/nclb)).

These dramatic changes may include the following:

- Appointing an outside expert to advise the school;
- Instituting a new curriculum, including appropriate professional development;
- Extending the physical school day or year;
- Restructuring the school’s internal organization;
- Significantly “decreasing the management authority” at the school level; and
- Replacing the school staff “who are relevant to make the failure of AYP.”

([www.ed.gov/nclb](http://www.ed.gov/nclb))

Although the notion of school reform is fairly new, empirical studies confirm the many challenges associated with its use. Unfortunately, urban area schools will experience the painful wrath of bureaucratic reform if strategies are not developed to ensure that individual schools meet AYP.

Possible solutions for the academic problems related to low or slow achievement within schools most likely to be affected by mandates such as NCLB include the hiring of effective teachers (Stronge & Tucker, 2000). Stronge and Tucker assert that the single

most influential factor that impacts student achievement in schools is the teacher. In the subsequent paragraphs, principles for effective teaching will be explored.

### Excellent Teachers of Literacy

Elizabeth Moje (1996) defines literacy rather broadly. I use her definition as a construct for the teaching and learning of literacy.

Literacy as I define it, is more than reading, writing, speaking, and listening; literacy involves the practices in which these processes are embedded. Based on this sociocultural perspective, I defined reading and writing, speaking, and listening as tools for engaging in and making sense of social practices. (p. 175)

The literature on excellent teachers helps to identify what these teachers actually do, what their classrooms look like, what strategies they employ, and how their philosophy of education and teaching and learning impact their responsibilities as practitioners. Many researchers have identified characteristics that are indicative of excellent teachers of reading (Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2003; Needles & Gage, 2001; Pressley, 2000). In a chapter published in the *Handbook of Reading Research*, Hoffman (1991) found that effective or excellent teachers

Focused on academics, had high numbers of pupils on task, and provided direct instruction that included making learning goals clear, asking students questions as part of monitoring their understanding of what was being covered, and providing feedback to students about their academic progress.

In short, effective teachers provide opportunities for students to learn, have well organized learning environments, understand the content being taught, foster high levels of interaction between teachers and pupils, generate engaging activities, introduce tasks and subject matter enthusiastically, have high expectations, encourage student self-regulation, and have excellent classroom management (Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004; Poulson & Avramidis, 2003).

Literacy practices in urban schools vary widely. Research conducted in these central city schools supports this assertion. Some urban school districts have opted to employ the direct instruction (DI) approach; some have chosen to purchase reading reform programs like *Success For All* (SFA); while others have decided to use trade books and leveled readers (Mac Iver & Kemper, 2002). Although most of the approaches mentioned have rendered similar results, in that students of color and urban learners are still well behind their white and suburban area counterparts, these strategies fail to address immediate concerns present in urban area reading classrooms. Like most supporters of critical literacy, Tatum (2000) calls for “curriculum that treats reality as something to be questioned and analyzed” with “opportunities for developing strategies and hope for overcoming barriers to economic success in the mainstream.”

Ruddell (2006) has designed instructional principles aimed at increasing awareness among practitioners, policy makers, and administrators. The principles have been crafted to direct attention toward our responsibility to create learning environments for linguistically and culturally diverse learners (Ruddell, 2006). Ruddell presents principles that support literacy instruction for diverse learners: (a) students do not come from inferior cultures, nor do they suffer from language deficits; instead, they may possess a culture, dialect, and language that vary from your own; (b) children’s acquisition of language and literacy abilities is meaning-based as well as developmental and is best facilitated by interactive meaning construction activities; (c) it is important to learn as much as possible about your students’ homes, communities, languages, and cultural backgrounds so that you can incorporate this knowledge into instructional content and interactions in the classroom; (d) it is important to create a context-rich,

interactive, supportive classroom environment for language exploration and use; (e) creating a low-anxiety, low-risk language learning setting (low affective filter) is also important; (f) you can help children develop social language skills that facilitate literacy interactions both in and out of school; (g) you must also help them develop academic and content-based literacy skills; (h) you need to provide instructional opportunities in language use that will encourage risk-taking and will develop the understanding that individuals learn from their mistakes as they acquire a new language; (i) you need to help children build positive self-concepts by providing frequent academic and social opportunities for interactive meaning-based language use; and (j) the same learning principles are at work in all children, e.g., children with all languages and from all cultures as active theory builders and hypothesis testers. They are motivated to make sense of their world. Their language acquisition is greatly enhanced through active participation in meaning construction with their peers, teachers, and other individuals in their school and community (Ruddell, 2006).

The principles described by Ruddell (2006) are important ideals that call for an appreciation of diversity among young people within literacy instruction. Ruddell's principles challenge all teachers to evolve into effective practitioners. Nuanced within each principle is an effective teacher characteristic. For example, principle 3 encourages practitioners to build rapport with their students. Howard (2002) calls this "establishing culturally connected and caring relationships with students." These eight principles abandon the notion of the deficit model (Ogbu, 1994/1995).

Existing literature surrounding effective literacy in urban schools is sparse. Although studies exist, very few studies focus on instructional strategies and best

practices in urban schools. The following section of this literature review will describe strategies that have been deemed appropriate for highly effective literacy instruction in the context of urban learning spaces. Although the literature available is limited, helpful methods can be extracted from similar works. In the literature on excellent teaching in urban schools, little information involves the teaching of literacy. Many studies focus on excellent instructional practices for African-American students in general or excellent instructional practices for students of diverse backgrounds. Very few studies focus solely on excellent literacy instruction in urban schools.

### Literacy in Urban Schools

Urban schools have witnessed several reform methods aimed at improving literacy instruction for all learners. Literacy teaching in urban schools has been under scrutiny for several decades. While there have been several attempts to quickly address shortcomings, these attempts have been less than successful. Despite some progress on large-scale longitudinal assessments, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), urban school districts, students of color and especially African-American students are out-performed in the areas of mathematics, science, and reading (Washington, 2001). This achievement gap has been placed at the forefront of educational research in the United States.

Teachers who lack adequate content and pedagogical knowledge often deliver literacy instruction in urban schools (Washington, 2001). Selecting appropriate reading curricula in urban schools is beneficial to the success of students attending these schools. Access to school and community resources is minimal when compared to suburban schools. Urban schools and communities also suffer from high mobility rates and

instability within school communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These matters have adverse effects on reading instruction and learning and place urban learners at a disadvantage.

Far too many students of color are not learning to be successful readers and writers. As noted by MacGillivray and Rueda (2004), children of color and English-language learners are grossly overrepresented within the groups of youth identified as unsuccessful literacy students. Literacy abilities are pivotal for the successful navigation of academics and life. Reading programs implemented throughout many urban school districts in the United States are largely comprised of literature that misrepresents or is absent of students and people of color and women. Many of the approaches to reading instruction are not inclusive of technology or culturally responsive literature (Ivers, 2002).

Since the early 1920s, reading instruction has witnessed much debate surrounding the most effective models of instruction for urban learners, that is to say the use of phonics or whole language and basal readers or trade books (Fitzgerald, 2000). Ironically, the debate has not included ideas that make the interests of students of color or issues of diversity central to these reforms. Reading instruction must speak to the racial, socioeconomic, and cultural and language differences among urban learners. Furthermore, most of the prepackaged curricula were created with middle-class, native English speakers in mind (Robinson, Mckenna & Wedman, 2004). Many of the students categorized as *other*, develop feelings of alienation, stemming from the absence of images of their own lives in the curriculum (Hefflin, 2002). A reading program inclusive of culturally relevant literacy instruction and critical literacy would reject the traditional

structural pattern of classroom interactions that often subjugate students of color within urban learning spaces. Given the nature of the current and historical meta-narrative surrounding urban cities and urban schooling, it is necessary for teacher learning and professional development to experience reform. The cultural mismatch plaguing the lives of most urban learners and students of color often hinders their academic progress. Ladson-Billings (1995), Irvine (2002), and Benson-Hale (1986, 2001) argue for curricula that complements the lives of students of color. Other researchers heavily grounded in literacy instruction welcome similar strategies that encourage curricular change. Although, the scholarly research on literacy instruction for students of color is comparable for teaching any learner, strategies and suggestions differ.

It is said that students in urban communities rarely have opportunities to venture outside of their living spaces (Maria, 1990). While it is never safe to assume the experiences of urban learners, experiences outside of the residential community often help students actively participate with text. Familiarity of text allows the reader to navigate and participate actively while reading. Maria (1990) calls for strategic background building for diverse and economically disadvantaged children. Further, Delpit (1990) in her paper, "A Socio-cultural View of Diversity and Instruction," presented at the Annual Conference of Reading Research, calls for the maintenance of "visions of success for the disadvantaged." Delpit states, "We have to help them get As, not just pass, because the disadvantaged often fall behind; they must catch up and then move ahead." Delpit reported,

Middle-class children are more likely to be taught strategies at home that will help them achieve success in school and are more likely to receive help at home if they have difficulty or fail to understand implicit instruction at school. Low-income

children need direct, explicit instruction. If they do not learn skills at school, the home will be less likely to supply or obtain remedial help for them. The disadvantaged must have better teaching and more of it.

As Delpit suggests, although high stakes test scores may support rigorous basic skill instruction, Garcia (1990) encourages the incorporation of higher-level thinking as well as basic skills and strategies. Garcia notes, “These skills should be taught in context with plenty of opportunity to apply them to high-quality reading materials and real life.” This idea calls for a balanced reading program. A balanced reading program in urban schools should include multicultural literature, culturally relevant instruction, and critical literacy, while simultaneously promoting teacher learning and family literacy.

These principles should guide the teaching and learning of literacy in all classrooms. While each principle outlines simplistic privileges that should be afforded to every school-age learner, political corruptness and other mismatches alter the rights as stated. For instance, many of literacy text sets being utilized are not sensitive to English-language learners, wherein some terms used are not easily translated into the students’ first language. Further, many reading programs are not inclusive of technology; this exclusion further exacerbates the digital divide that haunts many students of color. Lastly, not all school districts are equipped with human resources that allow struggling readers to receive literacy instruction from well-trained and/or highly qualified practitioners.

#### Four Essential Components of Urban Literacy Instruction

Considering the cultural lives and experiences of students of color when seeking to provide them with high quality instruction that speaks directly to their history involves the inclusion of relevant instructional practices. Since the middle 1970s, anthropologists

have explored ways to foster a harmonious fit between students' home cultures and school cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Realizing the many issues facing urban practitioners and students, students are charged with the task of being engaged learners, while practitioners must come equipped with a toolkit for creating learning spaces for their diverse learners. Students of color, engaging with public school curricula are not always given access to culturally rich literature. Perhaps inaccessibility and inequity are to be charged with causing the slow progress of students of color in the area of reading. Unfortunately, the history surrounding the birth of African American literature and storytelling has not been widely celebrated. While some literature exists that personifies people of color, urban students are not often privileged with literature that highlights and honors the lives of people of color. This type of subjugation prompted researchers to explore the history of literature written for or about African Americans.

### New Literacies

New literacies instruction is a broad domain that includes creating meaning within a community. Teachers opting to utilize this approach to instruction may consider the infusion of book club plus, critical literacy, and hip-hop integration. All of these ways of exploring texts allow participants to create meaning and contribute to the discourse analysis created within the topic of discussion. How do we best teach children to read and become literate members of our community? This question, while highly debatable, has been the center of much discussion within the field of education. Asselin (2004) argues that the answer may be embedded in new literacies. Asselin asserts that functioning in our current society requires more than basic reading and writing. We must now include unique ways of reading and writing with new technologies of information,

communication and multimedia. Gee (1996) states, “Reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural practices of which they are a part of.” Further, new literacies instruction pays special attention to the ways in which knowledge and meaning are situated within talking, writing, acting, and interacting with various genres of literature (Meyers, 1992). New literacies instruction allows educators to not only recognize the diversity within their classrooms, but the diversity of literacy practice (Kist, 2001). Leu, Castek, Coiro, Gort, Henry, and Lima (2005) have developed a construct for new literacies. These researchers argue that the construct includes three defining characteristics: (a) new literacies are central to full civic, economic, and personal participation in a globalized community and, as a result, are critical to educational research and the education of all of our students; (b) new literacies are deictic—they regularly change as their defining technologies change; and (c) new literacies are multifaceted—they benefit from analysis that brings multiple points of view to the discussion.

Urban teachers of literacy may find it difficult to incorporate new literacies instruction into their classrooms, as they are often challenged by the abundance of basic and below-basic readers. Many educators feel that new approaches to teaching and learning that challenge traditional forms are not suited for struggling readers. Rather, they have been designed for expert or advanced readers. However, the diversity that exists among students’ cultures welcomes this style of instruction. For example, many culturally diverse learners emulate adult practices that include reading and discussing texts in open forums. New literacies instruction includes a critique of texts that provides space for young students to share their opinions about topics under study. This allows

both teachers and students to expand the curriculum. Expansion of the curriculum and curricula practices gives way to many multicultural educational perspectives. Further, Kellner's (1998) new literacies strengthen teaching and learning through the incorporation of voices, viewpoints, and perspectives that are often excluded from traditional forms of teaching and learning. Finally, advocates for new literacies instruction in schools argue that these strategies promote both traditional pedagogic goals as well as contribute to the production of a more democratic group that appreciates and affirms differences between ethnic, racial, and cultural groups through the "transmission of knowledge, the cultivation of reading and writing skills, and the mastering of fields and disciplines" (Asselin, 2004; Begoray, 2002; Kellner, 1998). Much like the descriptions of excellent teachers and excellent teachers of students of color, questions emerge that call for the unique combination of practices that produce the greatest outcome. New literacies instruction requires practitioners to preserve the best from traditional education while connecting these with new literacies techniques.

### *Hip-Hip Infusion*

The inclusion of hip-hop within literacy lessons creates space for students to think and understand forms of literary expression that they most often enjoy. Using this method brings students lives outside of the classroom into the classroom through music (Quinn, 2005). Hip-hop researchers argue that hip-hop music is the representative voice of urban youth because the genre was created by and for urban youth (George, 1998; Morrell 2002; Rose 1994). Many hip-hop artists label themselves educators, as their personal missions often include raising the consciousness of their listeners, which are mostly urban young people (Morrell, 2002). Freire (1970) asserts that raising critical

consciousness in people who have been oppressed is the first step in helping them to obtain critical literacy. Hip-hop infusion in classrooms has evolved to include a systematic approach. For instance, Morrell created a hip-hop course, which included an in-depth exploration of poetry and the historical periods in which the poems were written. From here, Morrell transitioned into explaining the relationship between poetry and rap. His study denoted the transgression of student thinking. Students generated works that provided critical social commentary and encouraged action for social justice (Morrell, 2002). The inclusion of hip-hop and other new literacies can lead to the increase of literacy achievement and global understanding, as these lessons are situated in the experiences of students.

### *Critical Literacy*

Critical literacy is defined as a means for understanding one's own history and culture, to recognize connections between one's life and the social structure, to believe that change in one's life and the lives of others and society are possible as well as desirable, and to act on this new knowledge in order to foster equal and just participation in all decisions that affect and control our lives (Luke, 1995). This approach to literacy instruction provides students with a critical lens to examine literary text as it applies to their daily lives and the lives of their community members. As noted by McDaniel (2004), critical literacy transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one's world. As students begin to interpret written text that is generally inclusive of perfect endings, they may be prone to become removed from actual real-life happenings. A feasible solution

for this common occurrence could perhaps include encouraging readers to adopt a questioning stance.

Traditionally, curricula within the United States have promoted a specific set of values (McDaniel, 2004). These values have been synonymous with White values. Reading has been treated as an independent activity with an emphasis on learning to read, not reading to learn, and focusing on new critical text-based approaches to reading (McDaniel, 2004). As stated by many critical literacy theorists, this practice prompts students to search for the correct answers and interpretations of a text as defined by the teacher or curriculum guide, instilling in children a habit of privileging institutional beliefs and devaluing their own reactions and opinions (McDaniel, 2004). The challenge of promoting democratic or critical consciousness occurs as practitioners begin to couple correct usage, paragraph skills, and cause and effect skills with challenging readers to think about the relationship between language and power. As noted by Vasquez (2003), readers are encouraged to question the underlying ideologies of discourses and everyday life, asking questions such as, “Why are things the way they are?” and “Who benefits from the status quo?” Furthermore, when attempting to foster critical thinking skills within critical literacy, readers must be taught to uncover implicit messages in texts and to examine all aspects of discourse (Bean, 2003).

Critical literacy, “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (Vasquez, 2003, p. 20), is a crucial component of effective literacy instruction for all learners. Vasquez encourages the deconstruction and encoding of text while fostering reader engagement. Additionally, critical literacy begs the question, whose needs are

being served within the language of the text? Finally, it locates power and oppression within race, class, and gender. This approach to literacy instruction fosters critical consciousness and promotes personal and academic growth and development. Critical literacy can be traced back to the work of critical pedagogues. An examination of critical pedagogy further highlights the relationship between critical literacy and effective teaching for traditionally marginalized students.

### Youth Development

Teachers are no longer simply responsible for delivering instruction that supports the school curriculum (Davis, 1999). In order to meet the needs of students with whom they interact daily, they must provide more than academic instruction. The guidance and social instruction they should provide has been called youth development. Youth development has been defined as an approach to working with young people that defines goals based on capacities, strengths, and developmental needs of youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Pittman and Irby (1998) provided youth workers and educators with a conceptual definition, “Youth development is a process by which all young people seek ways to meet their basic physical and social needs and to build competencies (knowledge and skills) necessary to succeed in adolescence and adulthood” (p. 3). Teachers are expected to develop the “whole child.” This includes, listening to student concerns that transition outside of the classroom, identifying problems and concerns that exceed learning difficulties, offering guidance and advice on issues that are not always related to teaching and learning, and creating communities that foster partnerships with community members (Davis, 1999). These tasks further complicate the responsibilities many practitioners navigate daily. I argue that these tasks impact the teaching of literacy within

urban classrooms. Teachers who are able to make connections with students' lives both inside and outside of the classroom are equipped to impact students' lives and outcomes significantly (Lerner, 2007). Embedded in the notion of youth development or positive youth development is preventative instruction. Teachers and other adult youth workers are asked to encourage behaviors that prevent violence to self, others, and communities. The construct that supports youth development is operationalized through the five Cs—competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2004). Teachers and more knowledgeable others are charged with the task of helping to shape and impact the lives of young people through the incorporation of the five Cs.

In urban schools, students bring with them a unique set of experiences requiring teachers to exert and dispel attitudes and behaviors that are conducive to helping others outside of the classroom context (Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1999). Youth developers act as supports to students. They provide resources that compliment their personal lives. For example, youth development workers often provide students with access to opportunities that promote social growth. In addition, youth developers help to provide students and young people with safety and structure, belonging and membership, self-worth and the ability to contribute, self-awareness and the ability to reflect and assess, independence and control over one's life, closeness with at least one lasting relationship with an adult, and competence and mastery (Pittman & Irby, 1998). The needs of young people seamlessly spiral into the classroom context. Many excellent teachers have combined content knowledge and other instructional competencies with the components necessary to include youth development into classroom practices.

## Empowerment through Education

Empowerment, simply defined as giving power and control, has evolved to include many different and new concepts (Wade, 1995). Empowerment in education has roots as far back as John Dewey (1916, 1940). Today, researchers, including Michael Apple and Kristine Sleeter, have contributed to this scholarship. While the perspectives on empowerment have varying purposes, excellent teachers of students of color include empowerment strategies to reject the oppressive and unjust conditions in the world and focus on a vision of human possibility (Wade, 1995; Willis, 1988). Key themes evident within educational empowerment include dialogue, decision making, and supportive communities (Kreisberg, 1992). Further, Goodman (1992) noted that students should be given frequent choices within teacher-centered curriculum, and power-sharing is central to educational empowerment. Like the other components of new literacies, empowerment necessitates transgressing beyond the technical view of the curriculum (Wade, 1995). Moreover, Wade (1995) argues that education for empowerment takes place in classrooms where “students participate and make decisions that influence the content and form their educational activities, and curriculum must be viewed as a social process, created and experienced within multiple, interacting contexts” (p. 341). Empowerment in urban schools must include encouraging students to initiate their own learning.

## Critical Pedagogy

Reading instruction in diverse classrooms must be inclusive of diverse characters and speak directly to the lives and lived experiences of the audience. The absence of such literature confirms the hegemony that exists within American education. Power and

privilege prevent multicultural curricula from taking shape in today's classrooms. Like most social entities, schools re-edify social stereotypes and other various structures related to race, power, and ethnicity (McLaren, 1998). These ideas have been intently explored through critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy has been defined as "an entry point in the contradictory nature of schooling, a chance to force it toward creating conditions for a new public sphere" (Giroux, 1983, p. 116). It is overtly concerned with the issues of power in the teaching and learning context. Further, this school of thought questions, "How and in whose knowledge interests is produced and 'passed on' and views the ideal aims of education as emancipatory" (Shor, 1996). According to Sleeter and Bernal (2004), critical pedagogues have come to value youth culture, calling it a site of cultural production, social struggle, and social transformation.

Critical pedagogy is deeply rooted in critical theory. Both critical theory and critical pedagogy can be traced back to the work of Paulo Freire and the Frankfurt school of Germany (Demetrian, 2000). Since their inception (critical theory and critical pedagogy), theorists have developed ways of thinking that attempt to deconstruct hegemonic educational practices, while encouraging an explicit examination of oppressive power relations and inequalities existing in educational institutions. Although the two are seemingly intertwined, critical pedagogy is primarily focused on seeking more equitable and liberating educational experiences (McLaren, 1998). Critical pedagogy involves being "realistically involved in enlarging the *sites* within our institutions where genuine, noncoercive dialogue and reasonable opposition to oppressive bureaucratic controls can emerge" (Collins, 1998.)

First, we may explore the notion of being critical. Critical, as stated in Merriam Webster (2003), involves the act of examining or judging analytically without bias. Developing multicultural curricula incorporates the notion of being critical. Secondly, critical pedagogy calls for an understanding of curricula as a political text. Curricula are not neutral; they are ideals and issues of class, race, gender, and power deeply embedded (Belzer, 2004). Next, critical pedagogy pushes practitioners to create opportunities for learning that includes students' day-to-day experiences inside and outside of traditional learning spaces, thus building on their strengths rather than their perceived academic shortcomings.

### Culturally Relevant Teaching

Another initiative developed by theorists that supports non-traditional practices, but encourages a fusion between the student and the curriculum, has been described as culturally relevant pedagogy. Since the mid 1970s, anthropologists have explored ways to foster a harmonious fit between students' home cultures and school cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This examination of strategies has seemingly led the way to the inception of "culturally appropriate," "culturally congruent," "culturally responsive," "culturally compatible," "culturally sensitive," "culturally reflective," "culturally mediated," "culturally contextualized," and "culturally synchronized instruction" (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Although this practice has many different names, the ideas giving way to the impact this teaching style affords culturally diverse students remains consistent. According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy is a theoretical construct that rests on three propositions: (a) successful teaching focuses on students' academic achievement; (b) successful teaching supports students' cultural

competence; and (c) successful teaching promotes students' socio-political consciousness (p. 31).

As mentioned by educational researcher Hefflin (2002), the goal of culturally responsive instruction is to “heighten academic performance by providing materials that encourage students to use what they know to acquire new knowledge, skills, and dispositions.” In reflection, these approaches place great attention on students' personal cultural identities.

Utilizing culturally relevant literacy as a vehicle to teach reading to students of color is potentially one of the most effective ways to promote thoughtful, yet critical, thinkers and learners. This instructional approach involves the use of relevant literature and writing and discussions within the classroom context. Practitioners rely on texts that speak to the interest and daily lives of students. For instance, Ladson-Billings (1995) notes that during *Operation: Desert Storm*, one such culturally relevant practitioner elected to abandon the use of her reading text to use a novel that discussed war. While many practitioners would argue that this is simply “good teaching,” Ladson-Billings argues that this type of instruction may be just “good teaching,” but these strategies exceed good teaching and are not present in classrooms housing African-American students (1995). The work of Ladson-Billings, Irvine, Au, and many others has helped me to devise a conceptual framework that includes practices that complement the lives and meta-narrative surrounding instructional practices for urban students.

### Conceptual Framework

Critical reflection and lived experiences as a teacher and teacher supervisor have allowed me to craft a conceptual framework that promotes literacy teaching and learning

that is considerate to students of color. The research conducted by scholars in the field has helped me to craft a conceptual framework that is inclusive of several components that should be evident within an urban classroom. Excellent teachers of literacy practice within an environment that embraces diversified methods of instruction and create lessons that are interesting (Bohn et al., 2004).

This study of excellent literacy practices in urban learning spaces has led me to design a framework that rests upon culturally relevant pedagogy, critical theory, new literacies, and the urban literacy framework developed by Lynn, Turner, and Wiseman (in press). The research and findings of scholars interested in literacy, critical theory, and the overall academic progression of students of color inspire their knowledge strands. The conceptual framework designed for investigating excellent literacy practices in urban schools has allowed me to identify key strategies and witness the dynamic created and supported by both the teacher, Mr. Jones, and the students. I argue that the Mr. Jones' personal experiences and his multilayered role within the classroom and the larger context of society helped to shape his instruction. These personal experiences are supported by critical theory and culturally relevant pedagogy. While both critical theory and culturally relevant pedagogy impact literacy instruction in urban classrooms, the knowledge strands embedded within the conceptual framework helped shape literacy instruction in his classroom. His students were afforded opportunities to explore literacy learning in environments that drew from their personal experiences, home-cultures, individual interests and learning styles, interconnected disciplines, and multicultural literature, all while developing a critical lens through which they learned to “read the word in order to read the world” (Freire, 2000).

Figure 1 illustrates the interplaying of the framework and knowledge strands that were observed during instruction and in-school time.

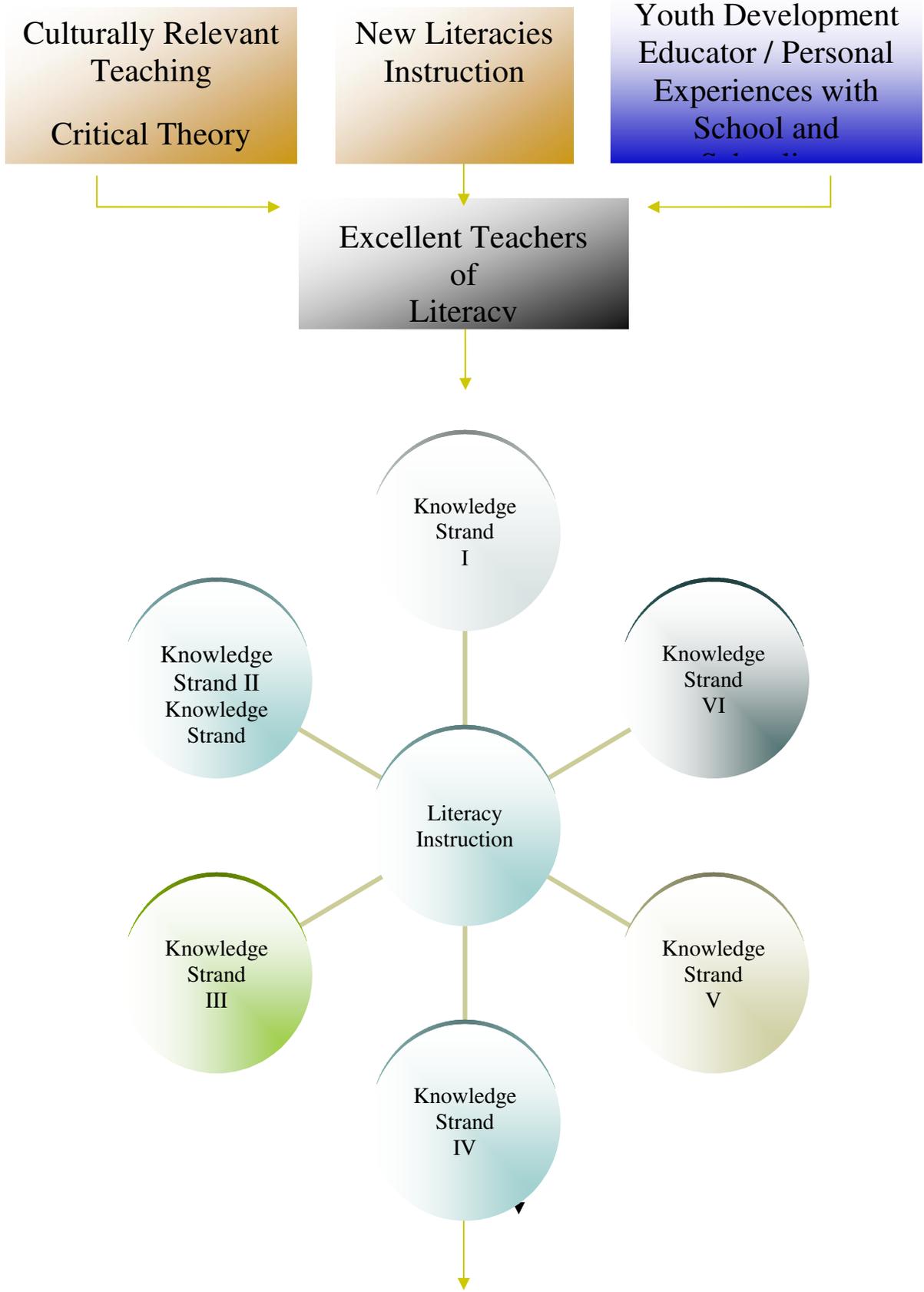


Figure 1. Urban learner.

### *Knowledge Strand I*

*Knowledge of sociolinguistics and how children's home languages connect to literacy teaching* (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Foster, 1989, 1999; Guitierrez & Baquendano-Lopez, 1997; Moll & Gonzalez (2004). Lynn et al. (in-press) argue that practitioners have mastery of Strand I when (a) they are able to integrate students' home language into reading lessons and (b) they draw from students' linguistic resources in order to construct reading lessons that help students build bridges from their home language to standard English.

### *Knowledge Strand II*

*Knowledge of cultural learning styles and how to employ a variety of literacy-based approaches in order to meet the needs of students with various learning styles* (Gay, 2000, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1992, Lee, 1992; Mason & Schumm, 2005).

Practitioners have gained an understanding of this strand when they (a) are able to demonstrate how to use cooperative learning, peer tutoring, think-pair-share, and other methods that are aligned with the learning styles of diverse learners in order to help them become literate; (b) use literacy-based and phonics-based approaches in the classroom as a way to help students learn to read; and (c) construct creative reading lessons that involve music, dance, and drama as a way to connect reading.

### *Knowledge Strand III*

*Knowledge of interdisciplinary/thematic approaches to teaching reading in urban contexts* (Ladson-Billings, 1994, Mason & Schumm, 2005). Mastery of Strand III occurs after practitioners can (a) demonstrate the integration of reading content with all other

content areas; (b) use inquiry-based, project-based, and problem-based approaches to construct literacy learning units that draw from students' interests and prior knowledge.

#### *Knowledge Strand IV*

*Knowledge of how to orchestrate literacy instruction around cultural and community resources as a means of motivating and engaging the urban reader* (Mason & Schumm, 2003; Tatum, 2003). According to Lynn et al. (in press), this strand is realized when teachers (a) can construct lessons that help students connect their personal lives to the lives of those they read about and (b) assist students with envisioning themselves as producers of culture by writing about their own lives and sharing this material with others.

#### *Knowledge Strand V*

*Knowledge of how to use reading as a method through which to teach children to engage in textual analysis, "read the world," and become socially conscious and politically active citizens* (Freire, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994; Rose, 1989).

Teachers have understood the underpinnings of this strand when they are able to (a) construct lessons that ask children to decipher the point of view and motives of the author, (b) use newspapers, magazines, videos, and other resources to construct reading lessons that address issues that are pertinent to children's lives, and (c) use the Internet and other resources to help students learn about and participate in the local, state, and federal government through reading and writing projects.

#### *Knowledge Strand VI*

*Knowledge of how to select high-quality multicultural literature and integrate it within traditional elementary reading curricula and instruction* (Akanbi, 2005; Sims-

Bishop, 1993, Turner, 2005). Teachers have realized Strand VI when they are able to (a) use literature that represents a variety of cultures as a way to capture the imaginations of diverse learners, (b) connect diverse literature with traditional literature as a way to illustrate various points of view on a particular topic or issue, and (c) integrate multicultural literature into a variety of reading instructional activities and strategies (e.g., guided reading lessons, reading workshops, independent reading).

The conceptual framework described within this literature review was developed to provide a framework for observing the instructional practices of excellent teachers of literacy in urban schools. It is meant to guide the data collection and analysis. Further, this framework helped to highlight the path that I used to navigate observations within literacy instruction in urban schools.

To summarize, I argue that using this conceptual framework enabled me to observe, retell, and analyze literacy instruction and other supports put in place in an effort to promote academic and social growth for students in urban classrooms. The findings presented in this study operationalize the framework and theories that were selected to support this study.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

This study describes the literacy instruction in an elementary classroom, in which the teacher was widely nominated as an excellent teacher of literacy. Specifically, the study focuses on literacy teaching and learning that occurred during February 2006 and June 2006. During this time, I documented the relationship between Mr. Jones' instructional style and the students' interaction, academic achievement and participation, and their response to the inclusion of new literacies. Additionally, it captured the pedagogical approach this practitioner chose to employ during literacy lessons. Next, this research examined how Mr. Mike Jones attempted to close the literacy gap that plagues our nation through the inclusion of culturally relevant teaching strategies and new literacies, which are unique ways of reading and writing with new technologies of information, communication, and multimedia (Asselin, 2004). To conclude, this study explored potential connections between culturally relevant pedagogy, sociocultural theory, and critical theory. I observed the methodologies this practitioner enlisted as he attempted to transform the mono-cultural public school curriculum into one that is inclusive of the voices and experiences of urban learners. My research, like the work of many others, has been framed to inform and improve practice, while offering a means for understanding the invaluable practice of an urban practitioner.

#### Qualitative Research—Studying an Excellent Urban Teacher: Methods and Design *Design*

The purpose of qualitative research is to deeply explore and describe phenomenon in an identified field (Merriam, 1988). Further, it allows researchers to bring forth a

critical understanding of the phenomenon under study rather than test a hypothesis (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This study employed qualitative research methods that included observation, interviews, nomination, collection of artifacts, and data analysis.

### *Case Study Methodology*

Attempting to recognize probable solutions for the crisis choking academic and systemic progress in MCPSD and exposing possible answers to my research questions prompted me to explore qualitative case study methodology. According to Merriam (1988), qualitative case study is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observations of educational phenomena. As stated by Yin (1984), case study often relies on some of the same techniques as historical research, but adds direct observation and systematic interviewing. Utilizing case study methods will allow me to toggle between that of history and authentic observation. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) present five characteristics of qualitative research:

- It considers natural settings as key sources of data because it is fundamentally concerned with context, and the researcher is the main research instrument.
- It is descriptive, with an emphasis on details rather than generalities.
- It is concerned with process rather than outcomes or products only.
- The data is analyzed inductively with the aim being to develop grounded theory.
- Rather than to prove or disprove hypotheses, the meanings that the research subjects attribute to the events and actions being studied are of central concern.

The characteristics presented by Bogdan and Biklen further influenced my decision to rely on this method of research. Case study methodology allowed me to document the strategies my practitioner utilized. Interactions among classroom community members and the context in which instruction took place impacted the learning process, all of which are key features of sociocultural theory.

Yin (1994) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). This design allowed me to realize how the phenomena and context are related. While some guides exist, the study was not theoretically determined; therefore, it did not set out to prove or disprove a current hypothesis. Rather, the theoretical frame helped to define the object of study (Yin, 1994).

### *Research Questions*

This study captured the practices one successful urban school fifth-grade teacher used during daily literacy instruction. When I first set out to conduct this study, my focus was narrow. After several days of observation, I realized that his practice overlapped literacy instruction and touched on many other content areas and non-academic dimensions. Although I felt my study was narrow, I decided not to re-craft my research questions, but instead document what I saw that contributed to my broad understanding of literacy. The questions that guided my study and data collection and analysis were:

1. How do effective urban literacy instructors define good teaching?
  - a. What personal experiences have shaped those beliefs?
  - b. Do they believe that their teaching methods are shaped by the particular context they teach in? If so, how?
2. What kinds of practices do effective urban literacy educators employ?
  - a. What professional development opportunities have influenced their instruction?

- b. How does the school / community context (neighborhood, leadership, colleagues) shape their teaching?
3. How does this instruction impact learners? What do teachers believe has been the impact on the urban learners?
  - a. Do they believe that their practices have affected urban learners in particular ways?
  - b. How have they measured and defined their effectiveness with urban learners?

With the first question, my hopes were to gain a clear understanding of how Mr. Jones described and defined good teaching. I wanted to expose his thoughts and beliefs about high-quality teaching in an effort to connect his definition to his actual practice. Further, I wanted to examine the relationship between his personal experience and the ways in which Mr. Jones shaped literacy instruction for his students. The aim of the second question was to assist me with documenting his practice. Specifically, I wanted to realize if the context in which he taught impacted literacy instruction. The sub-questions were created to identify how other components within the school system helped to shape literacy instruction and the choices he made as a professional. The final question was designed to help me, the researcher, understand how effective teachers of literacy impact the lives of urban young people.

After being immersed in this learning environment, I began to rethink my research questions. My research questions evolved to include the following.

1. How does an African-American male urban elementary school teacher teach literacy effectively?

2. To what extent is his practice culturally relevant?
3. What strategies and/or approaches does he use?
4. To what extent does he draw from his students' lives as he frames his pedagogy?
  - a. How does this influence his students?
  - b. How does he view his pedagogy?
5. What are the implications for teacher education?

### *Role of the Researcher*

My role as the researcher was pivotal to this study. As a researcher, I sought to study, understand, and describe literacy instruction in an urban classroom where the teacher was nominated by peers and deemed a successful teacher of literacy. More specifically, I wanted to explore the relationship between the teacher and students, the context in which learning took place, the practices and procedures utilized by this practitioner, and the connectedness between the theories that support this study and the emergent themes made evident.

The relationship of Mr. Jones (the case study subject) and me (the researcher) and the students brought about a unique set of conditions—first, my personal history as a former urban elementary school teacher; second, the topic under study; and lastly, the methodological choices I made during the study. My role was not to help Mr. Jones and his students create meaning but, rather, to capture the meaning that they as a community of learners created together. As a result, my role was to “Do No Harm” (Graue & Walsh, 1998). To that end, I found myself sitting, writing, and recording while sitting very stationary in the classroom. I followed students to special classes and attended field trips,

but I limited my interaction within the literacy block. On field trips, students often opted to sit next to me, but the conversations were always student-driven and generally about the exciting field experience forthcoming.

As my relationship with the students evolved, they became more comfortable with my presence and often opted to involve me in classroom discussions. I put forth every effort to remain silent and out of the classroom conversations. My relationship with Mr. Jones also evolved throughout the third and fourth quarters of the school term. He called me if his literacy block would be interrupted or if students would attend field trips that took them off campus. Although he shared these conflicts, he always welcomed me. We also talked regularly as I checked to ensure I actually saw what I saw and interpreted the data correctly.

The relationship between Mr. Jones and his students is also important to consider. While Mr. Jones was the authority and disciplinarian, his students were very comfortable with his role as such. Mr. Jones created a space that allowed students to interact with him and with each other. The relationships that students fostered amongst themselves included support, trustworthiness, and collaboration.

### *Context of the Study*

Noting the context of this study is a significant feature of this study. Context is an important contributing factor to the instructional style, content, and actions taken by members operating within it. As noted by Barton and Hamilton (1998), context influences components that determine the purposes and intentions for sociocultural research. The community in which the school is located contributed to the resources and partnerships made available at the local school level. More specifically, the council

member for the area in which the school is located established many beneficial relationships with business owners and other political figures in the city. As a result, his relationship with the principal and staff has afforded the school opportunities for increased funding and opportunities designed to promote academic achievement and overall success for young people.

The community in which the school is located is home to many longtime city residents over the age of 60 (City Website, 2007). To that end, the school welcomes nine *parent partners* that lend support to classroom teachers and administrative staff daily. The parent partners are community residents, many of who have retired from former full-time work outside of the school system. The parent partners do not usually assist with instruction; rather, they make photo copies, grade assignments, monitor lunch and recess, and assist the secretaries with the dissemination of correspondence to parents and teachers. Many parent partners note how much the school has changed and how the students have also changed due to “drugs, violence, and lack of parental involvement” (Fieldnotes, 5/1/06).

The resources located near the school include one library, three recreation centers, one police precinct, and several other community conveniences that cater to city life. Unfortunately, these conveniences include liquor stores and fast-food carryouts that promote unhealthy living. Although the school may receive additional funds, none of these funds have been allocated for facilities restoration and after-school programming. School Board officials are hard at work trying to negotiate building repair funds for all district schools. The “bricks and mortar” task force must approve funds and physical improvements (Fieldnotes, 6/18/06). The school building was constructed several

decades ago and is will not undergo renovations for some time. Floor and ceiling tiles are damaged; restroom facilities are inoperable; and many windows do not open. Furniture is old and broken; chalkboards are not functional; and the heating systems tend to offer heat intermittently. The school does not have a cooling system. In addition, many classrooms, including Mr. Jones', has poor lighting. Despite these challenges, Mr. Jones was able create a space that was inviting and welcoming to young people.

Roughly 300 students attend PS-5. Table 2 provides readers with a detailed description of the population.

Table 2

*PS-5 Demographics*

Black	Hispanic	% Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch	Number of Classroom Teachers	Number of Teachers with Standard Teaching Credentials
89%	10%	95%	24	15

Source: District Website, 2006.

My study involved two dimensions of context: (a) the context in which the school was located and (b) the context in which teaching and learning took place. Both the larger context of the school and the classroom context contributed to my understanding and documenting of practices employed by the classroom teacher and the responses shared by students during instruction and during other critical conversations that I witnessed.

*Site Selection and Entrée Access*

Selecting a site to conduct research proved to be extremely challenging. The site was selected through purposive sampling. The sites were information-rich and strategic (Creswell, 1994). As a result, I researched the academic progress and demographics of

five schools. I narrowed my selection of schools to three and began my quest with three schools. I began by contacting school administrators and was brushed off numerous times. As a result, I ventured to these schools to meet with the administrators in person. After two of the three schools agreed to participate in my study, I ended my search. Unfortunately, after completing the nomination process and one interview, my second case study participant fell seriously ill and was unable to continue. As a result, my study was redesigned to observe and document the practices of one teacher. I conducted my first observation with Mr. Jones on February 6, 2006. My last observation was conducted on June 14, 2006. I received permission from the local schools; however, gaining access through the school district was also difficult. After seven trips to the local school board, the assistant superintendent of research and academic improvement approved my study.

#### *Community Nomination Process*

My case study teacher was selected through a process adapted from Michele Foster. According to Foster (1991), community nomination involves engaging local community members in order to judge the excellence of people within their own settings. I enlisted the support of the principal, reading specialist and two parents to select my case study subject. Each person was interviewed separately and asked to share their thoughts and opinions about Mr. Jones's practice and commitment to teaching and learning. Specific questions about literacy teaching were also asked. I asked parents about newly acquired literacy behaviors their children have adopted. I also inquired about the kinds of conversations their children had that problematized all text sources.

The principal and reading specialist were especially impressed with Mr. Jones's ability to make measurable academic gains. They continually made mention of the

standardized test scores he garnered year after year. In addition, both parents talked about the time outside of school that Mr. Jones willingly spends with his students. One parent, quite familiar with Mr. Jones, having had the experience of working with him years ago, happily spoke of Mr. Jones' commitment to his students. She talked about Mr. Jones' willingness to attend her son's basketballs. Additionally, he helped this parent locate a "good" junior high school for her son. The other parent, just as satisfied with Mr. Jones' performance was elated about her daughters renewed interest in reading and music. She spoke at length about her daughter's concern with song lyrics and content. Mr. Jones was highly recommendation with outstanding remarks shared about his instruction and commitment to young people.

### *Participants*

The key participant in this study was Mr. Jones, a fifth grade elementary school teacher of literacy who was identified and nominated by administrators, the reading specialist, and parents as being exemplar and an excellent literacy instructor. For the purposes of this study, exemplary is defined as a classroom teacher that has garnered majority ratings of "Meets Expectations" on year-end district practitioner evaluation forms for three consecutive years, has taught for three years or more, and has demonstrated success through standardized assessments scores and increased academic achievement. Although I did not interview students, they were participants as well. Their standardized test scores, responses, and artifacts were examined. However, pseudonyms are used to protect their identities. Further, two parents, the school administrator, and the reading specialist are also named as participants.

## Data Sources

To address the set of research questions that guided this study, my case study subject was asked to complete a practitioner survey. The survey provided me with information regarding his education and training, years of teaching experiences, and efficacy beliefs as a teacher of literacy. I also conducted three interviews. The first interview took place immediately following the signing of consent forms. The second interview took place after the completion of 25 observations. The final interview was conducted following the last day of observation.

*Interviews.* In an effort to triangulate and further analyze data, I conducted three interviews with Mr. Jones. The initial interview focused on his personal experiences, professional career, and philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning. The second interview focused on the ways in which he allowed context to shape his practice. Also during the second interview, I asked questions that helped me to member check, as I needed to ensure that my interpretations were accurate. The final interview weaved together my understanding of his teaching practice and his views on his teaching and his students.

I also conducted separate interviews with two different parents. In these interviews, parents were given opportunities to support their decision for nominating Mr. Jones as an excellent teacher of literacy. These parents shared similar views. Parent A, a single mom of a female student in Mr. Jones' class, requested that her daughter be placed in Mr. Jones' classroom at the beginning of the school year because of her past interactions with him in his after-care coordinator capacity and the reputation he garnered among parents as being a "good teacher." She noted that before her daughter entered his

class, she did not enjoy reading; now she asks to buy books from the bookstore. The second parent, parent B, also a single parent, was very excited that her son was placed in Mr. Jones' class, as she had become very familiar with his practice during the 2002-2003 school year when her oldest son was placed in his class. She argued that he is the best teacher in the school and really cares about his students. I also conducted separate interviews with the principal and the reading specialist. Mr. Jones came highly recommended from both the principal and the reading specialist.

All of my interviews were nonscheduled, standardized interviews (Denzin, 1978). According to Denzin, the nonscheduled standardized interview is virtually an orally administered questionnaire. Further, Denzin notes that all respondents are asked the same questions, but the order in which they are posed may change according to how individuals respond. While Mr. Jones was asked questions that no other participants were asked, many questions emerged as a result of his responses. This also held true for the parents as well as the administrator and reading specialist. All of the participants elaborated extensively during interviews. They shared information and vivid descriptions that supported their reasons for nominating him as an effective teacher of literacy.

*Surveys.* Jaeger (1988) argues that the following must be present in order for good survey research to occur: (a) researchers must have a desire to learn specific information about a large group of objects, persons, or institutions; (b) the population or group of interest is well defined; (c) investigators are interested in the current conditions of a group, not what would transpire if a change were made; and finally (d) researchers realize that the best way to collect the desired information is to ask individual persons.

Mr. Jones was given a survey that was designed to expose intimate career details and his experience as an education professional.

*Observations.* Observations provided an opportunity for me to witness the interactions of the participants being studied. In all, I conducted 60 observations. Taking fieldnotes and often recording lessons and classroom conversations through the use of a digital recorder and an audio tape recorder documented each observation. The fieldnotes and data collected were analytical and descriptive—analytical meaning that the notes represented the comments documented by the observer’s jottings and mental notes (Agar, 1996). Glesne (1999) argues that fieldnotes are the primary recording tool of qualitative researchers. Observations took place during the teaching of literacy, during some off-campus fieldtrips, and during special events hosted by Mr. Jones or other faculty members. The observations provided me with detailed information about the strategies Mr. Jones provided authentic opportunities to witness first-hand his interaction with students, school curriculum, and the incorporation of new literacies and core youth development practices.

My role in the classroom as a researcher was limited. I did not participate in formal instructional lessons. Rather, my time was spent noting and recording the lessons and the many relationships I set out to understand. When students were given assignments that allowed Mr. Jones to circulate the room and begin to prepare for another lesson, I often talked with him about their assignments and the goal of the assignments. Many of these quick conversations were audio taped.

*Observation Protocols.* During classroom observations, I used an observation protocol. The coding legend was adapted from Taylor et al. (2002). The protocol was

equipped with a key and coding system for observing classroom instruction and interaction among teachers and students.

*Artifacts.* While observing Mr. Jones, I collected samples of student work, assessments, and assessment scores that were relevant to the study. Mr. Jones willingly admits that he rarely plans lessons on paper; rather, he writes his intentions on the backs of his reflection notes. He also notes that after he reads his reflections and conducts the lesson, he generally loses track of the paper. The collection of student artifacts and documents allowed me to address the research questions from a different perspective. These artifacts helped to triangulate my findings (Merriam, 1998). The artifacts collected also assisted with discovering instructional foci and student achievement. As noted by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), participant-generated documents help to provide the researcher with a lens through which the participant views the world.

*Fieldnotes, Analytic Memos, and Theoretical Memos.* During both observation and interviews, I recorded fieldnotes in a large three-subject spiral notebook. My fieldnotes captured data that included his daily schedule, student responses, and body language of students. On the first day of the study, I started by providing a thick description of the site (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) and a detailed description of literacy instruction. As the study progressed, I continued this process, but I paid special attention to events and practices that were inclusive of new literacies instruction. Primarily, my fieldnotes focused on the interaction between the teacher and the students and the assignments that impacted literacy and students' ways of thinking and knowing.

In addition to fieldnotes, I also wrote down my feelings and questions on which I needed clarification (Glesne, 1999). These analytic memos helped me to member check

and gain a better understanding of literacy instruction in Mr. Jones' classroom. My memos were powerful and helped to reframe my beliefs about teaching in urban spaces and restructuring literacy curricula in urban schools. Theoretical memos also played a significant role during this study. During observation and after daily observation, I reviewed fieldnotes and developed theoretical memos, which helped to shape my understanding of the teaching and learning process in Mr. Jones' classroom. Further, they helped to substantiate and support emergent themes that I grappled with throughout data collection.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis, as defined by Bogdan and Biklen (2003), refers to the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and other materials that are accumulated to enable you to produce findings. I collected data from several sources, including formal interviews, informal interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts. All observations and interviews were tape-recorded. Fieldnotes and observation protocols were written during observations. All interviews and recorded sessions were transcribed. Data was analyzed and coded by hand. Transcripts were coded through the use of many technologies that allowed me to toggle between mediums as I uncovered themes. The use of a variety of technologies allowed me to store my files and access them easily. As suggested by Graue and Walsh (1998), I was able to begin data analysis by asking questions of significance and by reading and rereading.

### *Member Checking*

Member checks (Merriam, 1998) with Mr. Jones occurred in a natural on-going manner. During both informal and formal interviews our sessions transgressed into focused conversations that always led to the generation of topics that we needed to think through. Our discussion occurred during scheduled interviews and during observation time. These conversations granted me opportunities to member check regularly as I attempted to understand subtle conflicts that I noted. For example while Mr. Jones often promoted collaboration and cooperative learning, he also stressed the importance of independence and self reliance. Students were encouraged to team, but they were also encouraged to think for themselves and solve problems independently.

In addition, I continually read and reread transcripts to make sense of what I saw, heard and recorded. As I cut and pasted electronic files into color-coded sections, I printed these files. These files were presented to Mr. Jones during formal interviews. The presentations of these transcripts allowed him to confirm my recordings and fieldnotes. After each member check session, Mr. Jones assured me that my notes were indeed accurate and reflective of him and his instructional methods.

### *Themes*

The emergent themes that I captured were the result of research questions and data collection and analysis. As I observed instruction and interviewed Mr. Jones, I listened for ideas and practices that helped to form emergent themes, as physical actions and lessons exposed and supported these themes. While I analyzed and coded my data, I tried to locate verbal expressions and other literary techniques that uncovered his philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning. The relationships, pedagogy, and

context all contributed to the exposure of inherent themes within this study. As I read and reread interviews and fieldnotes and listened to transcribed interviews and lessons, I began to create categories that triggered the construction of a conceptual scheme that suited the data (Basit, 2003). I developed six overarching categories that were color-coded: (a) literacy instruction, (b) modeling, (c) competition, (d) relationships and care, (e) culturally relevant teaching, and (f) expectations. These helped me to ask questions and make comparisons across data. I changed and dropped categories and constructed a hierarchical order of these categories (Basit, 2003). In addition to this, I tried to create distinct phases to data coding. Gough and Scott (2000) assert that construction of two phases is helpful to researchers. Phase one should be dedicated to focusing on meanings inside the research context, and phase two should address what may be meaningful to outside audiences. As I sifted through data, I utilized these phases to make sense of what I saw and gathered.

As data became more manageable and was placed in appropriate categories or sections, I realized that my themes were broad. According to Tesch (1990), this process is often referred to as data condensation. Data condensation is an eventual outcome of qualitative analysis, which implies that the body of data did not become manageable, but was the result of interpretation and organization (Tesch, 1990). Creating these categories required that I comb through data, helping to make descriptive reports and build theory. The decisions that were made during this process allowed me to organize the data in a useful manner. The category names that I developed came from professional readings that I discussed while completing course work (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As mentioned previously, I coded data manually. Bogdan and Bilken (1982) describe procedures for manual coding. I created note cards and electronic files that allowed me to cut and paste, color code, and create graphic organizers. As I began this process, I used a method of coding described by Miles and Huberman (1994). This method involved a provisional start list that came from my conceptual framework and research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using Patton's (1990) qualitative content analytic procedure allowed me to work in phases. As mentioned above, phase one included analysis. I then transitioned to developing categories to begin coding. The second phase included the formation of themes. The final phase allowed me to confirm the themes that were identified. Data were triangulated, which also allowed me to substantiate my findings.

Table 3 is an example of one category. The category houses quotes, behaviors, and fieldnotes that helped to confirm their placement within this category and the creation of the category altogether.

Table 3

*Example of Data Analysis Coding*

Category—Expectations				
“Finish it”	“I expect there to be no talking, get busy”	“I expect you to finish”	“You have to try”	Selects a student that doesn’t raise his hand.
“Put your pencil down son, I am speaking you should be paying attention”	“Fellows you have to learn how to ask yourself these questions while reading”	“I want you to take notes”	“That means take out your notebook and TAKE NOTES!”	“There is no failure in trying”
“I use strategies to teach” “I encourage and force my students to THINK”	“You must use Strategies”	Grading papers and comes across a test that renders a score of 10% and shares that this is an unacceptable score and the student must remain behind during recess or special classes.	Teacher— greets student outside of the door. MJ- “good morning class” “upon entering the class, take out your <i>Bud, Not Buddy</i> books and some paper for this morning’s assignments.” I expect you to follow procedures”	Teacher tells student that “she needs to step up her game”

*Trustworthiness*

Merriam (1998) notes, “All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (p. 198). While all research seeks to reach trustworthy results, different research methods achieve standards of trustworthiness in different ways. In qualitative work, however, the researcher is the primary instrument of

data collection (Merriam, 1998); therefore ongoing interventions must be built into the structure of the study to ensure rigorous results. As I conducted research during this study, I enlisted techniques to help ensure validity and trustworthiness.

Johnson (1997) outlined thirteen strategies that assist researchers with establishing and maintaining trustworthiness. In this study, I drew upon several of Johnson's recommended strategies for ensuring trustworthiness. First, I acted as a detective as I gathered information that helped to comprise my thick description of literacy teaching and learning. Also, I investigated his instructional decisions trying to fully understand his motives and goals, as I sought ways to understand the cause and effect of particular practices and behaviors displayed during observations. Second, I extended my fieldwork. While this decision was not planned, circumstances beyond my control allowed me to observe my case study teacher for an extended period of time. Consequently, these circumstances provided me with an opportunity to study his practice intimately throughout the course of the final two quarters of the academic year. Third, I utilized what Johnson describes as "low inference descriptors" (p. 3), which are direct quotes. I tried to capture and record Mr. Jones' exact words at all times. This allowed me to study his patterns and responses to specific classroom situations. Fourth, I triangulated data in an effort to fully understand the phenomenon under investigation. Lastly, the use of member checking strategies helped to make certain I interpreted the data correctly. These efforts used systematically created a valid and trustworthy study.

### Summary

This study examined the practice of one effective teacher of literacy in an urban school. The study detailed the context for which the study took place, the process for

identifying participants, and the participants that were involved. The research design helped me to answer the research questions and understand the relationship among the personal experiences of urban practitioners, critical theory, culturally relevant teaching, youth development perspectives, and urban learning spaces.

## CHAPTER 4

### A CLASSROOM TEACHER PROMOTING EXCELLENCE THROUGH LITERACY AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

#### Schooling and Being Schooled

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practice of an excellent teacher of literacy in an urban school. This study is supported by concepts of culturally relevant teaching, critical literacy, critical theory, sociocultural theory and strategies sensitive to urban learners. In this chapter, I will explore the instructional practice of an excellent teacher of literacy in an urban school. I assert that this excellent teacher is not only culturally sensitive in his approach to teaching and learning, but he also acts as an advocate in the lives of his students and the students attending his school. As I explore this teacher's pedagogy, it is impossible to describe effective teaching in urban schools without exploring the various unique strategies and techniques that he employs. In this dissertation, I try to expose the measures that this teacher, whom I call "Mr. Jones," takes to ensure that his students are not only successful in fifth-grade, but are beginning to take steps toward being prepared for life after grade school. I begin with a brief sketch of Mr. Jones. I capture his childhood, schooling, and early employment. Additionally, I provide an in-depth description of his literacy teaching practice. Embedded in this explanation is Mr. Jones' advocacy approach for preparing young people to become independent and critical thinkers.

#### Introducing Mr. Mike Jones

"I'm not here because of affirmative action, I'm here because I deserve to be here."

Throughout his grade school career, Mr. Mike Jones attended public schools in one of this nation's most affluent and highest performing school districts. This school district is located in the northeastern region of the United States, and notably has four out of its 25 high schools ranking in the top 100 highest performing high schools in the nation (*Newsweek*, 2005). As an African-American male, he was often the only person of color in most of his classes. Because his parents divorced prior to his start of elementary school, his mother, a top sales executive at a leading photo copying company, reared Mr. Jones. As a youngster, his mother decided not to move to the inner city in hopes of avoiding limited school choice and violent occurrences that often plague urban communities. Mr. Jones explained, "My mother busted her butt to avoid moving us to the surrounding inner cities. She knew that my dad was going to be absent, and she thought that I would fall victim to the streets" (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06). As a result, Mr. Jones and his mother lived in a quiet predominantly white affluent neighborhood, with a median income of \$80k. Like many other suburban children, Mr. Jones was involved in many extra curricular activities, including Boy Scouts of America, basketball, football, tennis, and golf. His summers were spent attending local camps and visiting his father and other relatives in Kansas. As a student, he excelled academically and received talented and gifted instruction. He recalls having a pretty average childhood.

When I was growing up, I never really thought of myself as overly different. My parents were divorced, but so were a lot of my friends' parents. I spent summers in camp and visiting my dad, just like some of my friends. I had babysitters when my mom worked late and many nights of fast food. Many of my friends walked home from school and let themselves in, so did I. The only major difference was skin color, and that really did not become an issue until middle school. (Interview 1, 2/04/06)

Although, he does not remember living with his dad as a youngster, he is not regretful. He has the highest regard for his mother and all of her efforts to rear a black young man alone. He speaks kindly about his father and shares that they have always had a good relationship. Mr. Jones confides that he does not think having his dad present or living within his local community would have changed much in his adolescent years.

During middle school, Mr. Jones continued to excel academically. He also began to realize racial differences amongst his peers. Girls were now becoming “black girls” or “white girls.” His male friends also began to take on this newly found persona. He began enjoying and listening to rap music. Mr. Jones stated that he noticed that many rappers used the word “nigga” regularly, and that was a term he did not use. He also began to notice and realize stereotypes about black people. Many of his peers expected him to excel in all sports; they didn’t expect him to enroll in talented and gifted courses. Lastly, they assumed that he knew all about drugs and drug dealing. Mr. Jones notes how this changed his outlook.

Often my white peers would ask me if anyone in my family has ever been shot. Or do I know how to roll a joint. Do I really prefer fried chicken over other foods? They were really silly about the kinds of questions they asked me. In honors classes, they would ask me what I was doing in there. I was even called the “N” bomb a few times. In retrospect, I know they only asked me those kinds of questions because I was for the most part pretty approachable and mild tempered. (Interview 1, 2/04/06)

Mr. Jones attended high school close to his home. During high school Mr. Jones was enrolled in several advanced placement courses. He argues that he never formed healthy relationships with his classmates, especially white students, as they thought that he was only in advanced courses because of affirmative action and district quotas. Mr. Jones argued,

I received so much flack for being enrolled in these classes. I was ostracized for being somewhat smart and black. The white students thought affirmative action got me there, and the black students just pretty much ignored me; they called me Uncle Tom, white boy, sell out. In class I participated and worked hard as I don't know what. White kids would gather together and cheat, passing cliff notes and cheat sheets. They never asked me if I wanted to cheat, even though I wouldn't have cheated. I was just never included in stuff in high school. They thought I wanted to be white, they would say, "Oh-oh he just wants to be like us." (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

Mr. Jones remembers only one other black student in his talented and gifted courses. Unlike Mr. Jones, she lived in an all-black neighborhood and was accepted by her black peers because of this. Mr. Jones recalls one black friend in high school, D'Angelo. D'Angelo did not mind hanging out with Mr. Jones. The two enjoyed attending games, and other gatherings together. Mr. Jones shared painful memories of being bullied consistently and threatened. He argues that most of all he resented being called white. Mr. Jones states,

I remember playing freshman football. I really liked to play. My team was ironically pretty diverse, but the blacks still didn't mess [associate] with me. I didn't mind though, I enjoyed being out there. We happened to be playing the school that most of the black students went to. A play ended, and I counted the number of players on the field and realized that there were 12. [I] realized that we were going to get a penalty unless somebody got off the field. So I ran off the field so that we wouldn't get a penalty. So a black kid says to me, Oh that was a smart white play. What does that mean? That's a smart white play, [be] cause I'm black, I can't count the number of players that are supposed to be on the field. So I didn't have a good rapport with any blacks at my school. (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

Incidentally, in her book *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity and Success at Capital High*, Fordham (1996) argues that black students resisted successful education achievement to avoid being called "white" or being referred to as "acting white." Mr. Jones wanted to earn excellent grades, but resented the thoughts his white and black peers shared about him. While working hard to complete high school in this very racialized

community, Mr. Jones struggled to keep lasting relationships with his peers both white and black. Many of the black students attended a high school that was nicknamed the “catch-all.” Mr. Jones said,

If you were black, Hispanic, or a struggling student you went to the other high school in my neighborhood. So since I still am and was over six feet tall, all of the black students, thought I went to my high school to play [basket] ball. The Hispanics were pretty much in their own worlds. So this experience made me want to get as far away from the thought of going to a white college as I could. (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

In the middle of Mr. Jones’ junior year of high school, he decided that he would only apply to historically black colleges and universities.

The black kids around me weren’t going to college. Maybe they’d go to the community college and work there butts off and then transfer to George Mason University. I didn’t want to go to community college or George Mason. No offense to people that go there but I wanted to go to a black college. I wanted to be around black people who were intelligent. Black people who didn’t see me as an uncle Tom, [be] cause I knew how to read, write and spell or to do things above average. (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

He had narrowed his list to Morehouse, Tuskegee, Hampton University, and Florida A&M. After extensive independent research, he made plans to attend Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. He shared the news with his uncle during his senior year and they visited Morehouse during fall break. Unfortunately, Mr. Jones’ mother did not approve of the distance Mr. Jones would have to travel in order to return home during holidays and breaks. Mr. Jones was devastated by this news. For weeks, he tried to convince his mother that he was destined to attend Morehouse. Mr. Jones’ mother would not change her mind. She wanted Mr. Jones to apply to and attend Harvard University. In an effort to make his own decisions, Mr. Jones explored other schools and tried to persuade his mother to allow him to make his own decision. He researched and applied to Hampton

University, Duke University, Harvard, North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

The spring semesters of Mr. Jones' senior year brought about much reward for all of the exceptional grades he had earned throughout high school. Mr. Jones had been accepted into all of his college selections. Each school offered him an academic scholarship of some sort. Following intense deliberations and discussions with his mother, Mr. Jones began to attend tours of these schools. His first tour landed him in Durham, North Carolina, at Duke University for black freshman weekend. Mr. Jones had a wonderful experience; and, without hesitation, he decided to attend Duke. He could not believe he would finally be able to socialize and study along side other black students that were of equal intelligence. The scholarship that Duke offered was partial, requiring Mr. Jones and his mother to collectively cover the outstanding balance. Mr. Jones decided to call the office of student scholarships and the office of student financial aid. A conversation with a scholarship counselor proved to be extremely beneficial, as the counselor was able to increase the amount of his academic scholarship. Mr. Jones shared this exciting news with his mother. The scholarship increase would only require Mr. Jones and his mother to cover a portion of the tuition for the year and subsequent years. Much to his disappointment, his mother did not share his sentiments. For weeks he tried to negotiate, but was unsuccessful. While sitting through a senior meeting in the gymnasium at high school, his counselor called the names of approximately 10 students and asked that they remain behind to talk privately. The counselor informed all 10 students that the top 50 high school seniors in the entire state of Virginia were eligible to receive a full academic scholarship to the University of Virginia (UVA). Mr. Jones tried

extremely hard to keep the news of this possible scholarship from his mother. His mother caught wind of the scholarship and encouraged him to apply. Three weeks later, he received confirmation that stated that he was indeed among the top 50 students in the state of Virginia. As a result, Mr. Jones received a full academic scholarship to attend the UVA. Mr. Jones shared the news of his scholarship with his mother. His mother was overjoyed. Mr. Jones was very unhappy and still wanted to attend Duke. Mr. Jones remembers pleading with his mother, “I’ll work hard. I’ll get job. I will take a loan out for \$10,000 and only have to come with \$8,000 more” (Interview 1, 2/4/06). Mr. Jones argues that his mother listened intently and then replied,

That’s fine; you can go to Duke. I will let you work and you will probably end up working at some restaurant waiting tables for some rich white kids who will make fun of you and tease you. You will come out of college \$40k in debt and have to work all your summers and part time jobs in the winter just to pay off your student loans. (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

Mr. Jones says, “She pulled that reverse race card on me. She knew how that was going to play into the situation and change my decision.” (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

In an effort to persuade Mr. Jones to attend UVA, his mother offered to purchase him a brand new car. Like many young people struggling to make college decisions, the brand new car helped him decide.

During the fall of 1993, Mr. Jones set out to study at UVA in Charlottesville. As a person of color attending a prestigious predominantly white institution, he felt that he had to surpass the many negative stereotypes about his race. As a result, he maintained a 3.0 grade point average and held a job driving the campus shuttle bus. Mr. Jones studied history and had plans on becoming an attorney. Mr. Jones recounts,

When I got to UVA, I fell in love with it. The reason I fell in love with it is because, when I got there, I did find a group of really smart black people and its like now I[m] finally hanging around really smart black people. And it's like now I'm hangin' around really smart black people and am finally accepted by my peers. I'm not being clowned anymore for living in a quote unquote rich area. I'm not being clowned anymore for being smart, these kids were as smart as me and sometimes even smarter. We could talk about Wu-Tang, (popular east coast rap group), Snoop Dogg (popular west coast rapper) and stuff that, well the commonalities that black people have especially with black boys in the same age group having some of the same experiences, we could also go into anthropology class or chemistry class and bust out A's and B's. So I loved UVA at first. But of course, according to the whites, we were all there because of affirmative action. I just wanted to be perceived as being intelligent. (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

Throughout his undergraduate career, many professors approached him and encouraged him to apply for admittance into the honors history program. He decided to apply and was accepted into the Undergraduate History Majors Honors program.

According to Mr. Jones, enrollment in these honors courses proved to be bad reminders of his high school days. His classmates were all white, and did not value his contributions to classroom discourse and discussions. After half a semester, Mr. Jones decided to withdraw from this program.

In lieu of simply studying, working, and participating in college life alone, Mr. Jones decided to get involved with a small group of black male mentors. Unlike Mr. Jones, the mentors were all education majors at UVA and worked closely with the surrounding elementary schools. Mr. Jones was paired with a first-grade student named Khalil. Mr. Jones says,

Khalil was off the hook. He was breaking laws at six years old. I really enjoyed working with that kid. I often wonder what happened to him. It's crazy the reason I stopped working with Khalil is because I was actually scared that I was going to get my butt kicked. Because, the crazy thing about UVA is, the black people that live in Charlottesville, they HATE, HATE the black students at UVA, [be] cause they think that we think that we're white. We go to UVA, we want to act white, we think we white. They hate us. I would come to the projects and

pick up Khalil in a brand new red car, with UVA tags, personalized license plates, and these dudes would look at me. Sometimes I'd go down there with my homeboys and that would make it even worse. Oh now its two of y'all [you all] now y'all [you all] really think you're hard now. At one point, I got threatened and had to stop picking Khalil up. (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

Mr. Jones earned a Bachelor's degree in History, with the intent on attending law school. Following graduation, he worked at a law firm for 2½ years and felt unfulfilled. Although he excelled, he said anyone could have filled his position at the firm. He spent much of his time photocopying documents, and proof reading reports. At the end of his first year, he earned a double raise, but still felt that he was somehow missing his calling. Mr. Jones remembers this life changing conversation.

When I was working at my law firm, this guy started working there- it was a white guy-and uh, through our conversations I found out he was a former school teacher, and he didn't like it. But he started telling me about it, and the more he told me about it, the more interested I became. And then at some point he told me that he thought I would make a great school teacher. And I told him I wanted to quit my job. So he gave me the name of a friend of his, and I started to interview. The rest is history. (Interview 1, 2/04/06)

### *Becoming a Teacher*

Mr. Jones is amongst the most sought-after teachers at P.S-5 Elementary. With seven years teaching experience and a reputation for being a disciplinarian many parents request that their children be placed in his classroom. While he did not earn a bachelors degree in education, he attended a local university that offered a one-year accelerated teacher certification program. As Mr. Jones explained, this program was designed to help teachers earn state licensure while completing critical content methodology courses:

Because, I didn't have much experience with working with kids, the principal that hired me first, told me about this accelerated certification program. I enrolled and liked it. The program offered all of the methods courses non-education majors needed, with assessment, and other theory mixed in. It required a good amount of work. I hung in there and finished it during my first year of teaching. I learned a

lot, but you know, nothing prepares you for your first year in an urban fourth-grade classroom. I probably really sucked that year. (Interview 1, 2/4/06)

Through the years, Mr. Jones has worked at two districts schools both providing education opportunities to diverse students living in urban spaces. These schools have afforded him opportunities to hone and perfect his instructional delivery and content knowledge, as well as realize the needs of his students and urban students alike.

Although he majored in history, he considers himself a strong teacher and an above-average literacy teacher.

I truly enjoy teaching literacy. I want my kids to be avid, informed readers and consumers. I, mean I've been able to significantly raise my children's reading test scores from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, as measured by their standardized tests. I know the strategies to use to teach them how to become more fluent readers. I'm able to understand their modalities, and the best ways they learn, which help my delivery of instruction. (Interview 1, 2/04/06)

As one of four male teachers at P.S-5 Elementary school, Mr. Jones felt compelled to provide his students with superior instruction and support throughout their elementary school careers:

My kids are very important to me. I don't want to hear that 10 years from now, that they're using drugs or struggling to survive. If I share real-world experiences with them, give them good solid instruction, and talk to them about all the reasons to do good in school, I think they just might get it. But that means, I have to be hard on them, I mean have unwavering high expectations, be honest so they know I can't depend on nobody but me to do this. Not enough black kids especially urban black kids get this sort of thing from teachers and other people that care about them. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

### *Professional Development*

The professional development opportunities offered at PS-5 during the 2005-2006 school year were, as Mr. Jones states, "not as good as some of the others in previous years" (Fieldnotes, 5/31/06). He recalls grading papers, completing progress reports and

thinking through lessons during these sessions. As noted by Mr. Jones, he argues that most of his professional development opportunities came by way of his first three years of teaching and through his accelerated certification program. He admittedly shares initial challenges that are now staples in his classroom. He also talks about colleagues that have much to learn about the possible positive attributes of professional development. For instance,

Professional developments like best practices. You know, like cooperative learning groups. Oh man, the first time I tried cooperative learning groups – I didn't want to try cooperative learning groups. I was scared to death. But when I got that professional development, and I was empowered with those strategies, and I had people who were willing to help me incorporate it into the classroom – then I finally tried it, and I saw how successful it could be, I fell in love with it. But the professional development, to me – teachers have to realize that teaching is an ever-evolving profession. And you cannot get mired in teaching one way, 'cause that way is not always going to work. These teachers come to professional developments, with the mindset that Oh man, I'm glad I'm out of the classroom. Is it time to go home yet? I'm going to sit around and act foolish for an hour. But if they really sit down and try to grasp the material, there is so much you can learn from professional development that you can utilize in the classroom, that's going to help you become a better practitioner, and help your students grow academically. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

As Mr. Jones speaks candidly about professional development, he also shares that the media and the greater society often shape his approach.

I know when that professional comes down from central administration, it is probably going to be content based. I also know that those clowns down there have not set foot in my classroom or any other classroom in the district to understand what we deal with every day. So I choose to take matters into my own hands. I give myself professional development. I listen to my kids. What are they talking about, what's hot, what's not? I also like many other adults, watch the news. How are we, they, us, being negatively impacted by the news today? And on weekends I go to the book store. Pick up the award winning books, pick up books with blacks, Hispanics, and woman on the cover. Read 'em and see if I think my kids will be interested. Of course I listen to music and watch videos so that I can talk to my kids about that stuff too. They know I love hip hop music. So they have come to expect that. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

As a self-proclaimed seasoned teacher, Mr. Jones feels as though his approach is the most effective approach for him and his students. He fully understands the importance of school wide professional development and supports it, but he resents being forced to sit through sessions that do not address issues in urban education.

Believe me, I know and understand how important good professional development is. However, you can't tell me that my colleague down the hall that just started teaching is now the phonics expert 'cause a few of her kids read something to the principal. Instead of wasting my time, give me some money and I will find my own professional development sessions at colleges and universities or through education consultants who are truly experts. I want to believe that professional development is shaped on viable and proven research that has been utilized in the setting in which you perform your operations in. For example, if you have this- for example, there's this new – I don't know how new it is – but there's this emphasis on brain-based learning. Where you're utilizing brain-based learning, and you've done a study of brain-based learning in an urban setting, and it's been proven it can work in one urban setting. Then I want to believe you will bring that professional development to my urban setting. I want to believe that it's based on practices that have been proven to be effective. But as you have already seen that is not always the case in the urban schools where I taught. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

Although urban schools and school systems often require a great deal of professional development opportunities for their staff, Mr. Jones' school had very few professional development workshops and sessions that were related to content area instruction. During the 2005-2006 school term, content-based professional development included; 120 minutes of technology integration, 60 minutes of Social Studies adoption series preparation, 60 minutes of math professional development conducted by the local school math lead, and 60 minutes of reading professional development conducted by the second grade grade-level chairperson (Local School, Professional Development Log, submitted to the office of Professional Development for Meadow Creek Public School System, June 2006),

Principals often impact the professional development process at their local schools. Many principals have different content area priorities that heavily influence their professional development selections for the year. Further, many principals elect to employ the “train the trainer” model in an effort to save resources at the local level.

### *Summary*

Considering the experiences and complex stories of case study participants is necessary for a comprehensive qualitative research study. Understanding and considering the implications and the impact Mr. Jones’ experiences with schooling have had on his career choices are pivotal to this study. Therefore, sharing details have helped to shape Mr. Jones, “the excellent teacher of literacy,” breathe life into this story. Like many students of color attending schools in predominantly white, affluent areas, Mr. Jones struggled to fit in. While obtaining excellent grades and developing as a thinker were not overly complex for Mr. Jones, he did struggle with being accepted as an intelligent black male student. Many of his talents were discredited because of his height and race. This truly made Mr. Jones feel inadequate and hurt, fueling his desire to socialize and learn alongside other intelligent black students. His racial attitude has been the driving force behind many of his professional and career decisions.

Mr. Jones’ insatiable yearning to attend a historically black college or university was quenched as Mr. Jones connected with other intelligent black students at a predominantly white institution, thus giving way for Mr. Jones to impact the lives of other young black students as evidenced through his brief mentoring relationship with Khalil. It becomes obvious that Mr. Jones is conscious of the importance of education and diversity as he begins to develop a commitment to African-American young people

while completing his undergraduate studies. Although Mr. Jones' route to teaching is somewhat side-tracked, it was easily redirected after a brief conversation. His commitment to African-American and urban students is supported as Mr. Jones opted to undertake a one hour commute each morning to provide educational opportunities to urban students. It is clear that Mr. Jones' experiences in school and his perceptions about race and attitudes have undeniably become the foundation for his literacy teaching. The theories that I draw from to support this study are deeply rooted in transformation education. Mr. Jones is ultimately working as an agent of change.

#### Literacy Instruction the Mike Jones Way

I can't expect my kids to like reading if I do what the system wants me to do only. I have to be creative and include what interests them most. I have to be creative. My lessons have to be motivating and engaging. That's why I teach literacy my way. (Fieldnotes, 4/26/06)

Literacy instruction, one of the most important content features in grade school, lends itself to several different approaches and instructional styles (Chall, 2000; Chall & Squire, 1991). Elementary teachers are often required by school districts to "stick to the script." Many school districts have very detailed and scripted literacy programs that neglect to include the experiences and likenesses of students and people of color (Au & Kawakami, 1994). Fortunately, some urban literacy teachers are risk takers. In the following section, I describe the literacy instruction of Mr. Mike Jones, a learning coach who elects to do things his way. I begin with a detailed description of the school and continue by highlighting a full literacy lesson. The literacy lesson that is captured takes place on my first day of observation in his classroom. This is followed by a

comprehensive description of the various strategies and methods he uses to engage his students and facilitate learning.

### Capturing the Essence of Literacy Instruction: A Day in Mike Jones'

#### Teaching Environment

As I approached the old schoolhouse positioned on top of a hill, I entered the teachers' parking lot in search of a parking space. As I located a vacant space, I pulled in and began to gather all of my belongings. Hundreds of school children ran and shouted just before the morning bell interrupted their free play. I entered the building and signed in as a visitor. The security officer directed me to Mr. Mike Jones' classroom. I walked along the dark corridor and noticed the bulletin boards affixed with student work and seasonal messages. The hallways were extremely wide with several classroom doors on either side. Teachers began filing out with clipboards and pens in hand. Conversation amongst teachers was light as they discussed the week ahead. They discussed homework sheets, the upcoming standardized test and the broken copy machine.

#### *Observing and Understanding the Urban Elementary School and Classroom*

As I entered Mr. Jones' classroom, I immediately noticed the drab and dreary environment. Floor tiles were missing; the green chalkboard appeared to be unusable; the radiators that offered heat whistled uncontrollably, and the furniture was old and mismatched. I did not see a teacher's desk or a table on which to rest my belongings. As I peered around the classroom, I noticed that there were bulletin boards for almost every subject. The classroom library was equipped with a variety of texts: a Phyllis Hunter classroom set, various chapter books, dictionaries, encyclopedias, thesauri, and extra

reading anthologies. The daily plan and a note written to the students from Mr. Jones were on the front green board.

Good morning fantastic fifth-graders. Today is Monday February 6, 2006. I expect nothing short of your best today. We will begin our day with our warm up as we wait for today's African American trivia question. We will then actively participate during our literacy block. Following our literacy block we will exercise with Mr. Brown during physical education class. After P.E., we will explore word problems in math. Please be reminded of my expectations, try your best and remember to think! (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

Beside the note was the daily schedule with the subject and times adjacent.

As I found a student desk in the corner of the room, Mr. Jones blew in and greeted me as he fumbled with his tie. He excused himself and exited the class only to return in less than two minutes with several young people in tow. As he re-approached the door, his students lined up behind him. The students stood quietly. He spoke to his students.

Mr. Jones      Good morning class  
Class            Good morning Mr. Jones  
Mr. Jones      We have a visitor in our class, she will be here in our class for a couple of weeks. I expect you to treat her like you treat every other adult in the building. Don't make me have to remind you of my expectations or of your duties as a member of our community. When you enter the classroom, empty your book bags, take out your supplies, and get busy on your warm-up.  
(Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

The students entered the classroom and stared at the foreign person in the rear taking notes. Some smiled, while others followed directions. As the students prepared for the day, they sharpened pencils, stacked books, and headed loose-leaf paper.

Ten minutes elapsed and many students read books silently, as they had already completed the daily warm-up. Mr. Jones encouraged students to complete the warm-up. His morning reminder was interrupted, by the blare of the principal's voice over the

public address system. Following the morning announcements, a sixth grade student introduced himself and read the African American trivia question.

I was born on August 25, 1927 in Silver, South Carolina. My family later moved to Harlem, New York where I was raised. I competed in golf, basketball, and paddle tennis. Buddy Walker, a noted musician, noticed me playing table tennis and introduced me to tennis courts in Harlem. I excelled quickly and won ten straight national championships hosted by the American Tennis Association. After overcoming racial discrimination and much adversity, I went on to win the Italian championship followed by four grand slam events capturing the French Open in singles and doubles. Finally, I became the first black person to win a Wimbledon Championship. Who am I? (Fieldnotes 2/ 6 /06)

After the trivia question was read Mr. Jones' students grabbed small slips of paper and jotted notes. They folded the small pieces of paper and placed them in a card box marked "Mr. Jones, Grade 5 Trivia Answers." A Latina student raised her hand to take the box down to the main office. All students with the correct responses were eligible to receive an undisclosed prize. The conclusion of the morning announcements brought about a sense of seriousness that over took the classroom. Mr. Jones stood in front of his students; their eyes were all focused on him, their mouths closed. He began again,

Good morning class. I would be crazy not to take this opportunity to talk to you all about this phenomenal athlete. Does anyone know her name? (15 second pause) Well her name is Althea Gibson. She was a dynamite competitor. She went to school, Florida A&M to be exact, on a full scholarship. [Do] You know what that means right? She studied hard, tried her best, applied herself, didn't make excuses, and relied on herself to get things done. So as you move throughout the day, think about Althea Gibson. Ok...

Let's go ahead and start our day. Take out your warm ups and prepare to share your answers. The warm up says: There were 2,175 students at last night's Wizard's game. If all 2,175 students ordered 2 hot dogs, 1 box of pop corn and a small soda. How many hot dogs were purchased for students? Ok, now stop for a second, what's the first thing you need to do in order to answer this question?

Student—You have to multiply.

Mr. Jones—Do you need to do anything before that?

Student—No

Student—Yeah, Mr. Jones, I know

Student—You need to take out any info you don't need. 'Cause the author may be trying to trick you or hold you up.

Mr. Jones—Great Answer. Alright so let's take this line by line. Which mathematical operation do we need to use in order to solve this problem?

Student—Multiplication

Student Interruption—Nont-ah [no wait] You need to use reading strategies. You need to be able to read the problem first, You gotta [got to] know what each word says, if you can't read the problem you can't do it. So first you read it, then you think, ok I better times this. Then you times 2,175 by two 'cause all the kids ordered two hot dogs, right Mr. Jones.

Mr. Jones—You're correct but you interrupted him, remember to be respectful and considerate. Son your response was also correct. She got you on a technicality. (Field notes 2/6/06)

Upon completion of the warm-up, Mr. Jones walked over to the board and placed a check mark next to; complete morning warm-up. The schedule now displayed; literacy block, PE, math, recess/lunch, science, social studies, and dismissal. After the check mark was placed on the board, students handed their warm-up papers to one student sitting within each cluster of four students. These designated students walked to the horseshoe table in the back of the room and placed them in a box marked, daily warm-ups. Students began taking out their reading supplies. On their desks, they placed a reading anthology, a notebook, a reading series workbook, their social studies text, and a novel. Mr. Jones started the lesson with a review of this week's pertinent vocabulary. He disseminated a teacher-made handout and a reproducible worksheet titled "Vocabulary Quilt." The handout used all of the story vocabulary in thoughtful sentences, which formed a meaningful paragraph. Vocabulary List: *Ablaze Charred Courageous Debris Ember Flammable Harness Singe Surround Suspect Temperature Timber.*

As he read the paragraph, he stopped at very intentional points to ask students what each word meant. When students shared their responses, he required that they highlight context clues that helped them determine the meaning of each word.

All of the vocabulary terms were written on the board, and students used the glossary in their reading anthologies to define each term. The vocabulary words and definitions were placed on the vocabulary quilt. While students completed this task, Mr. Jones constructed a large K-W-L chart. K-W-L charting, involves the notation of what students already know, want to learn, and what they have learned about a specific subject, this organizing system evolved as researchers and classroom teachers searched for ways to increase active reading of expository text (Ogle, 1989). As part of their instruction, students began to create K-W-L charts in their personal notebooks. As he started his lecture, students looked on intently. All students appeared to be very focused, as no one talked, squirmed, or looked unenthused. Students willingly and eagerly shared all they knew and wanted to know about wildfires. During the discussion, students were prompted to locate a map of the United States and find California. Mr. Jones discussed dry land and that heat often exacerbated wildfires.

Table 4

*Wildfires*

K	W	L
The fires start in the woods when no one is around or nothing	How wildfires start?	
It takes fire fighters a long time to put out the fire	What can stop wildfires from starting?	
People have to move cause [because] their houses might catch on fire.		

Source: Fieldnotes, 2/6/07.

When the K-W-L chart and vocabulary quilts were completed, students began to transition into the next portion of the literacy block. Mr. Jones refers to this time as “Literacy Centers.” Students are divided into four groups and rotate through the various centers completing literacy activities that have been created and assigned by Mr. Jones. A group of students wrote their names on the board next to the computer and began researching the topic on the Internet. Another group of students, affectionately called “Chick-Fil-A,” worked to complete pages in their workbooks, and other students moved to a table on the opposite side of the room under a sign that read “Writing Center.” Students in the writing center wrote summaries on the life of Frederick Douglass. Mr. Jones met with a small group of students. He and his students gathered at the horseshoe-shaped table and begin to discuss text-to-self connections. Students shared personal accounts that mirrored a story they read earlier during the preceding week. After 20 minutes, a kitchen timer sounded, students rotated to a new literacy center. The students that were seated at their desks journeyed to the writing center, the small group working with Mr. Jones took their seats; writing center students enjoyed time in the computer center, and the computer center students met in small group with Mr. Jones. At the conclusion of the first half of the literacy block, students were prompted to select a book from the library to read. As he notes later, this time was designated “Sustained Silent Reading” (SSR). SSR is an instructional strategy that involves everyone reading every day in the classroom (Gambrell, 1996). This strategy, which has been used effectively in schools over the past several decades, is appropriate for all grade levels (Gambrell, 1996). He circulated the room with a newspaper in his hand and peered over the shoulders of his students. After standing behind a male student, he says:

Why are you reading that? Look Class! Don't select a book if you only plan to read the first 10 pages. Part of becoming of good reader and really developing a love of reading is reading a book from start to finish and trying to understand it as you read. Don't read 10 pages of a book and move on to something else. Finish it. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

His mini-talk on finishing books and trying to become good readers evolved into an instructional conversation on the purpose of reading. Students engaged in a conversation on the purpose of reading. Many students shared their thoughts and opinions of the purpose of reading.

Student 1—You read to like, find out information.

Student 2—You read to learn things.

Student—You read to get directions, to read the times the bus is coming, to find out how to make stuff. Oh yeah, you can read the codes in the X-box book to win the game. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

Mr. Jones talked about the five components identified by the National Reading Panel (2002). He wrote phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and text comprehension on the board. His instructional conversation (Goldenberg, 1991) prompted students to outline the connection between each component. According to Goldenberg, instructional conversations are conversations that encourage expression of students' own ideas, builds upon information students provide and experiences they have had, and guides students to increasingly sophisticated levels of understanding (1991). To further explain the five components of reading, Mr. Jones said,

Ok y'all (you'll) I wrote down the five components of reading, we don't have phonics lessons in here like you have in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, but you do use phonics to decode or sound out words that you don't know. You have learned how to do that; that is called phonemic awareness; we all got that at this point. Knowing that vocabulary helps you understand and comprehend the book or the stuff that you are reading. Also guys, when you are a fluent reader, I mean not just word calling and reading all choppy, you are able to better understand what you are reading. That's where comprehension comes in at. As fifth-graders you all are pretty much using the last three things, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension so

we work from that point. Do you see what I'm saying? Ok, let's move on. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

Following the conversation, Mr. Jones shifted gears so that he could use the fifth-grade Social Studies text to teach the remaining portion of the literacy block. He instructed students to open to a particular page (p. 263). The chapter was titled "Differences Divide: Britain and its Colonies." After students arrived at that page, he prompted students to read the title silently and thumb through the section reading the sub-headings and look at the pictures. Mr. Jones continued,

Ok class, let's use one of our strategies before we start this chapter. Repeat after me "preview and predict", "preview and predict", "preview and predict." "preview and predict." I need you all to look at the first section of this chapter. Take your time. Look at the pictures, read the subtitles, look at the words in italics and bold. Take about three minutes to do this... (time elapses) All of you have just previewed the section and now I need you to predict what this section will be about. Now, when you share your predictions, you must use evidence from the section to support your prediction. Don't tell me that the section is going to be about people. Tell what kind of people, describe what the people are doing. You got it? (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

The use of repetition or call and response is a technique often employed by culturally relevant teachers in an effort to help African American students recall information that may assist them with figuring solutions to problems across content areas (Howard, 2003.) Mr. Jones relies on this strategy to help his students recall important steps when they try to solve problems and complete assignments independently. Mr. Jones claims,

When I have my students repeat after me, I find that they remember the steps better. It is much like rapping or singing. They remember the words to songs, so they can also remember the steps to solve problems or write down categories from the reading story map. During tests and quizzes, I usually see a few of them mumbling to themselves. I smile inside when I see this. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

As students offer their predictions, Mr. Jones raced to the board and writes “predictions” and places several of the student predictions on the board.

Student 1—They throwing boxes in the river

Student 2—They are really mad about something, that’s why they are throwing the boxes in the river.

Student 3—They are all gathered to talk about something. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

As the students offer all of their predictions, he stands in the rear of the classroom.

Again, he makes a valiant effort to highlight all vocabulary related to the section. The vocabulary terms included: Committee of Correspondence, Consequence Blockade Quarter, Continental Congress, Right, Minuteman, and Patriot. Only this time, he has students repeat vocabulary terms after him. Following the repetition of vocabulary, Mr. Jones goes on to provide students with definitions of each term from the student glossary. Mr. Jones began, “Ok, now let’s look at this” (Field notes 2/6/06).

Mr. Jones began to read the section orally, and then selects volunteers to read. As they read, Mr. Jones interjected and posed questions to ensure comprehension and understanding. Mr. Jones said,

Ok y’all [you all] tell me a little bit about the Committee of Correspondence? What was their role? Were they necessary? Before anyone responds, please think about your answer. Go back and scan the text. This is expository reading it’s not like fiction. You may have to read it a couple of times to remember and understand it. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

As students scan the text to provide their teacher and classmates with an answer, Mr. Jones looked at them and offered more strategies for locating and supplying the community with a correct response: “Ok, go back and locate the term Committee of Correspondence. Re-read that section. As you read, ask yourself, what is their role? Are they helpful, if so why, if not, why not? Got it?” (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06) Each interjection

affords students the opportunity to think and share their thoughts and interpretations of the selection thus far. As the discussion evolves, I noticed that he selected students that have not been so willing to participate in the class discussion. The questions he asked these students usually summarize the selection: “Help me recap what has happened so far in this section son, give us a good summary” (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06). As the student summarized the section, he scans the room. His presence and interaction with his students reduce outbursts, and unruly behaviors. As noted in his study on Black male teachers, Lynn (2006) highlights the learning environment in a male teacher’s classroom. He noted that his case study teacher has also established a rapport and classroom expectations that would allow him to simply wave his hand slightly and garner complete silence from his students (Lynn, 2006). Mr. Jones’ physical presence and interaction limited disruptive behavior patterns and allowed him to instruct with very little time spent on redirecting behaviors. Following the discussion on the Boston Tea Party, students are given construction paper to draw and describe in writing the events that have led up to the Boston Tea Party. Students were eager to draw and make these comic strips. Each drawing contained at least five pictures and five descriptions. When students completed their pieces, Mr. Jones instructed students to prepare for physical education class. Students are noticeably excited as they begin smiling, chattering, and pumping their closed fist in the air as they say “yes.”

He continues by telling students to line up. The young people in his class clear their desk and place only their comic strips and math supplies on the desktops. As the students begin to form a line and exit the classroom, Mr. Jones called the names of four students and told them to meet him at the side table. Clearly disappointed as noted by

their frowns and slow-moving paces, four young men sit silently at the side table. As he escorted the rest of the class to PE, the young men that have been excluded from the line sat and waited in silence. Mr. Jones reentered the classroom and began,

Do you all know why you're missing PE?

Students—Silence

Well, I'll tell you, you all are not meeting my expectations in reading. Your scores on past tests and quizzes have been very low, and we are going to correct that starting now. So when everyone else lines up for special classes, I need you all to pack your reading things, and meet me at this table until further notice. Is that clear? (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

The students all shake their heads and stare at Mr. Jones. He looks at each of the students and continues,

Look man, I know you all really like going to PE, but you have to become better readers. You can't pass my class without improving your reading. Even bigger than my class, you can't succeed in life if you don't become better readers.

You're not the only ones missing out on something, I usually use this time to copy your homework and make sure that I have everything ready for the rest of the day at this time, now I have to find a way to do all of that stuff later. All I'm trying to say is that we all have to make sacrifices in order to be good at something, I want y'all [you all] to be better readers. Alright so let's get busy. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

Mr. Jones passed each student a graded reading assessment that they completed last Friday. The students all examined their scores and look embarrassed. Each student scored lower than 50%. He began by selecting a student to read the directions. As the student read the directions, the other students followed along silently. Mr. Jones said,

Mr. Jones—Ok, so what have we been asked to do?

Students—We have to read the story and then answer the questions.

Mr. Jones—Yeah you're right, but what do I want you to do first

Students- You want us to look at the pictures, subtitles, and read the questions first.

Mr. Jones—Excellent, that's exactly right. So let's take a look together. What's going on in the picture? What do you see?

Student—The elephant is juggling.

Mr. Jones—Ok, so do elephants really juggle?

Students—No

Mr. Jones—So right away what do we know about this story or what can we infer about the type of story we are about to read?

Students—It's make-believe.

Mr. Jones—Exactly, it's a fantasy. So we know that some of the information in the story is going to be far fetched or pretty unbelievable. Ok, so let's move, what's next?

Students—We need to read the questions first.

Mr. Jones—Ok, let's rock, read the first one. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

As the students read the questions orally, Mr. Jones stopped periodically, to rephrase questions to ensure that students understood the author's purpose.

Mr. Jones—Fellas, look we're dealing with something called author's purpose. Every author has a purpose for writing. Just like I or we have a purpose for being here. You all want to become better readers and I want to help you all improve your reading skills. Get it? Ok, so let's look at each question, what do you think he's trying to do here, don't answer that, but think about it as we go along. Start reading for me son. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

As each student reads orally, Mr. Jones reminded students of decoding strategies and coached them through the passage. Coaching, as explained by Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez (2003), includes the use of scaffolding and supportive actions by teachers to move an individual student or a group of students to the next level of independence. As the tutorial session progresses, the students engage in conversations about the passage and ask pertinent questions that led to a deeper understanding of the text. As Mr. Jones and the group of young men moved through the assessment, they answered the questions again and all earned passing grades. He then disseminated a different passage; this passage was titled "Planet Facts." As he handed each student a new assessment, he asked students to think about all of the strategies that they explored and encouraged them to use them as they work independently on this new assessment. Before he allowed students to begin, he warned,

Fellas, you're going to do this one on your own, I can't help you on the upcoming test, and the boy sitting next to you can't help you. So that means, you're gonna [going] need to help yourself. Remember, read the title, look at the pictures, read any and all subtitles, and read the questions before you read the passage. Think about the author's purpose for writing this. Use evidence from the story to support your answers, remember we just did this with the Boston Tea Party, I had you guys preview and predict, but you had to support your predictions with evidence, the same rules apply here. Go back into the story if you are not sure of an answer. Any questions? You may begin. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

The young men started scanning the assessments. Soon students are writing responses and underlining sentences in the passage. Ten minutes elapsed and the first student completed the new assessment. Mr. Jones noticed this and encouraged him to reread the story and check his work.

As the sound of multiple feet and excited voices neared the classroom door, Mr. Jones walked briskly to the door. He greeted his students and one-by-one allowed them to get a drink of water from the fountain. Students walked in the room after their short trip to the drinking fountain. Sweat glistened on many faces, and breathing was heavy and deep. Mr. Jones approached his tutorial group, collected their papers and instructed the small group to return to their seats. As all of the students settled into their seats, he loosened his tie and grabbed a new piece of chalk. He walked over to his daily schedule and checked off literacy block and PE. The next period was dedicated to math.

As I thought through Mr. Jones' literacy block, I realized that time spent on task with his students actively engaged in meaningful instruction, was significant. A key feature of effective teaching and learning includes time on task. The literacy block in Mr. Jones' classroom lasts 120 minutes. During this time, students are meaningfully engaged in literacy activities designed to support and enhance their literacy development as readers and thinkers. As noted by Brophy and Good (1986), features of classroom life

most consistently linked to student achievement are those that maximize student engagement in academic activities and minimum time spent unengaged. In an effort to minimize the time that students spend in transition or off tasks, Mr. Jones as implemented rules and expectations for self-regulated learning. Students must complete and submit literacy activities daily. As noted in the preceding section, Mr. Jones provides struggling students with extra time on task. This extra time on task affords students additional opportunities for their academic endeavors.

### *Summary*

Literacy instruction in many intermediate and upper elementary classrooms is often absent of high expectations, care, adequate time spent on task, and quality instruction (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000; Taylor et al., 2003; Waxman & Padron, 1995). As evidenced in Mr. Jones' day-to-day instructional routine, he has worked diligently to incorporate high expectations. His students are required to not only understand and apply content they are expected to demonstrate their competencies and mastery on various graded assignments and through teacher observations. His expectations are non-negotiable and consistent. While many students require additional intensive instructional time, Mr. Jones has created a space in his class to grant students this opportunity. His planning periods and personal lunch are altered daily in order to provide students with small group (private) instruction, this time was of course separate from the 120 minute literacy block. While teaching can be categorized as a caring profession, not all teachers truly care. Noddings (1992) argues that in order to aptly care for another, one must replace her own needs and desires with the needs and desires of another. Mr. Jones has unselfishly replaced his personal needs with the needs of all of his students.

Further, Mr. Jones is committed to showing his colleagues and administration that he is providing his students with a thorough and efficient education. Mr. Jones admits, “I am competitive by nature. Therefore, I want my students to have the highest test scores in the school. Besides, that is basically how they measure teacher effectiveness in this district” (Fieldnotes, 3/14/06). Literacy instruction, the Mr. Jones way, is inclusive of many self-imposed goals and objectives and strategies that have been compiled for his diverse community of learners. Mr. Jones argues,

I go through this every year. Taking time to learn my students so that I can see what I need to change, include and create so that all of my students are successful in here and for many years to come. Learning in my class is not just textbook; you know math, reading, social studies. I am trying to prepare them for that cold brutal world beyond school. Unfortunately, many of them are facing adversity right now as we speak. I try my damndest to get them ready. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

Mr. Jones’ daily literacy instruction mirrored that of the best practice and researched based requisites necessary to promote effective teaching and learning of literacy. His literacy block is high-energy, engaging, intentional, and needs based.

Although this snap-shot captured some of the strategies effective teachers employ during literacy lessons (Taylor et al., 2003), it does not fully expose his practice. I cataloged the first day of observation to illuminate the importance of multi-day consecutive observations. The first day of observation only revealed minute details about his practice. I felt that this depiction of the first day of instruction would add to the complexity found within this study. Realizing that curriculum in urban schools needs to include students and contextual factors, I wanted to expose how his practice evolved after he became comfortable with my presence as a researcher. You will note throughout Mr. Jones’ practice, standard best practices for reading instruction are still used, however he

includes new literacies that offer voice, empowerment, critical conscience thinking, academic and social development and diversity.

### Teaching Literacy and Preparing Students for Life Beyond Fifth Grade

In this section, I introduce and share literacy instruction observed throughout the course of the research study and the blending of core components with culture. As previously noted, the study took place in an urban school that provides educational opportunities to students of color. The goal of this section is to blend the themes captured with noted researched based practices that have been cited to support and encourage literacy learning and critical development of young people. To that end, I begin by laying out the emerging themes present in the instructional practice and personal life of Mr. Jones. I begin by sharing the strategies that Mr. Jones employed in an effort to promote the teaching and learning of literacy. Each practice is thoroughly described and supported by observational data and analysis. Further, I discuss the emergent themes present in this study. The chapter concludes with the in-depth analysis of the research questions guiding this study.

As a widely nominated excellent teacher of literacy, Mr. Jones employs a cadre of strategies to instruct and facilitate the teaching and learning of literacy. Many of these strategies have been widely cited by leading reading and literacy researchers and educational scholars. For example, I will make connections between Mr. Jones' practice and coaching described by Taylor et al., (2003), culturally relevant practices of Black male teachers, (Lynn, 2006), growth in reading and the influence of teacher practices (Taylor et al., 2003), culturally relevant pedagogy (Hefflin, 2002), expectations and culturally appropriate practices (Howard, 2003), quality instruction in urban schools

(Waxman & Padron, 1995), orchestration of success for African-American readers (Turner, 2005). And, finally, I will include many strategies that highly effective teachers of literacy rely upon as they facilitate high-quality instruction. While all of these strategies were present in the first snapshot, the forthcoming data supports all of the themes and techniques grounding this study.

Also included in the literature surrounding documented best practices and research-based methods is the notion of student choice and autonomy. Mr. Jones allowed students to feel autonomous during the literacy block. Students were given the opportunity to self-select literature, chose partners, and determine their own literacy reporting systems. Further, Mr. Jones preferred to use authentic assessments to track and notice student progress throughout the course of the year. Authentic assessment is the active role the teacher plays in classroom-based assessment of actual literacy experiences (Boyd-Batstone, 2000). In addition to this Baker, Dreher and Guthrie (2000) and Wigfield (1997) argue that such assessment may also be used to note objective and subjective information as well as affective information, like levels of engagement, curiosity and motivational factors. Mr. Jones shared why he relies on this method of assessment.

At Trinity the professors taught us to pretty much abandon the text books and use a thematic project-based approach for teaching. Many of our assignments dealt with creating thematic units of study. As a result, they really supported and encouraged authentic assessment 'cause [because] we didn't have a textbook to copy a test out of. We had to figure out ways to assess whether students were learning. Even though my principal likes us to use textbooks, I pretty much still use authentic assessments. And besides I spend a lot of time actually talking to my students and this really helps me assess their learning, interests and growth. (Interview 3, 6/18/06)

While the majority of Mr. Jones' lessons are evidently well structured and intentional, he often made adjustments mid-way to include the thoughts or comments of his students. He described this as capitalizing on teachable moments. Mr. Jones asserts,

If one of my students says something that I need to talk about with the whole group, I may switch an assignment. Making good use of teachable moments is what I like best about teaching. I can just bam shoot, and then they dive right in. For example, last year one of my students told me that he was sick of reading the stories in the reading text books, that they are always long, and boring. So, that day, I decided to allow my students to become authors for the next few days. Each person had to create a story, vocabulary words, and comprehension questions. I addressed his concern and still taught. My lesson just changed to include more of a writing focus for that week. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

This student's comments, over a year ago have had a lasting effect on Mr. Jones' teaching. He remembered that many students do not like the reading series. He argues that often "they can't relate to those stories" (Interview 2, 4/20/06). To account for this, he includes the novels written by and about people of color. For example, some books include *Bud, Not Buddy* and *The Watson's Go to Birmingham* by Christopher Paul Curtis, *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Munoz Ryan, *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake, and *A Girl Name Disaster* by Nancy Farmer. Further, his classroom library is stocked with a variety of books, magazines, and news papers that offer students choice. These include *Ebony Magazine*, *Essence Magazine*, *Jet Magazine*, *Word Up Magazine*, *Source Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, a host of cookbooks, and DIY publications.

*Literacy Instruction: Blending Core Composition with Culture Diversity and Sensitivity*

Mr. Jones' approach to preparing his students for literacy both in and beyond his classroom is multilayered and extremely purposeful. Researchers agree that strategic instruction provides students with resources to fully experience literacy and interact and

engage during literacy instruction more willingly (Pressley, Borkowski, Forrest-Pressley, Gaskins, & Wiley, 1990). During observation and interviews, I witnessed first-hand and documented Mr. Jones' thoughts on this position statement. Mr. Jones prefers to use strategies that promote independence. He enjoys hearing his students share their thoughts orally or in writing. As an upper elementary school practitioner, Mr. Jones' strategies almost deal solely with comprehension, vocabulary instruction, and fluency. In what follows, I will describe instruction during the literacy block in Mr. Jones' classroom. I will begin by discussing the strategies and methods that were used within literacy and literature-based instruction. Next, I will provide vivid examples of the inclusion of these strategies and methods and explain how they impacted literacy instruction.

### *Book Clubs*

Book Clubs, an approach to literacy development geared toward engaging students more fully in conversations about books (Tierney & Readence, 2005), was a tool incorporated by Mr. Jones. According to Tierney and Readence, book clubs have expanded and become a framework to guide teachers as researchers in developing reading and writing instructional activities to ensure that students can be as fully engaged as possible in literacy activities. Like many of the strategies and instructional approaches Mr. Jones utilized, book clubs have emerged from changing views of literacy teaching (Raphael, 2000). While the name "book club" has transitioned to *book club plus* because of the incorporation of key theoretical and pedagogical assumptions including sociocultural perspectives and reader response theory (Raphael, 2000), Mr. Jones' design lends itself to this more inclusive name. As noted by Raphael (2000), book club plus was crafted as an alternative to literature instruction based upon the question: What are the

implications of a sociocultural perspective for literature-based reading instruction?

McMahon and Raphael (1997) have identified four key principles: (a) language develops thinking and learners construct meanings—which are eventually internalized—in their interactions with others; (b) learning is best facilitated as more knowledgeable others guide the learning with appropriate tasks; (c) individuals construct a sense of self as they participate in social contexts, including their own and others’ roles in the group; and (d) individuals construct meanings for language within their own experiences and develop speech genres particular to given social contexts.

During my time in Mr. Jones’ classroom, he implemented the book club plus literacy program. Students in his class read and discussed *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis (1999). The book club lasted approximately three weeks and included a variety of activities. Most importantly, his book club instruction included what Raphael and Goatley (1996) describe as the four contexts for instruction and participation in language and literacy: (a) community share, (b) book club discussion groups, (c) reading, and (d) writing.

According to Raphael and Goatley (1996), community share time is a “complex and critical component providing a public and social forum within which students hear and use the language of literacy and literacy discussion” (p. 97). During this time, students are afforded the opportunity to gather and form a discourse community with shared knowledge. Community share in Mr. Jones’ classroom generally occurred during whole class instruction and activity time. Students read sections of the book orally, shared their personal thoughts and feelings, and made connections with characters in the text. Mr. Jones also used this time to raise issues that he wanted the students to consider.

Vocabulary instruction was also a critical element of community share. Students discussed and explored four vocabulary word lists for effective comprehension and understanding of *Bud, Not Buddy*. Students completed a variety of tasks and activities that provided them with meaningful and authentic ways to display their knowledge of word meanings.

Considering Mr. Jones' competitive nature and stance, community share time was also inclusive of debate. Students safely and effectively debated their thoughts, assumptions, and predictions. During these debates, Mr. Jones required students to support their argument with evidence from the story or text connections they have experienced. During this time, Mr. Jones played multiple roles. Mr. Jones willingly and effectively participated with students. For example, he read orally and offered many predictions.

Today we are going to begin reading a great book. The book is *Bud, Not Buddy*. Christopher Paul Curtis is the author and I think you all are going to love it. I started reading the book last night and I couldn't put it down. So let's look at the cover only and make some predictions about the text. What do you see and what do you think this book is going to be about. Look at the cover only, do not read the synopsis on the back.

Student—I think it is going to be about a boy named Bud that doesn't like being called Buddy.

Mr. Jones—Ok. Good.

Student—I think it is going to be about a boy taking a trip.

Student—I think it is going to be about a boy that likes music.

Student—I think it is going to be about a boy back in the old days.

Mr. Jones—Ok great, these are all very good predictions. Let's go over some vocabulary words that we will come across in the book and then we will begin reading to find out if your predictions were right. (Fieldnotes 3/15/06)

In addition to participating with students, Mr. Jones was also the instructional facilitator and coach. He strategically led students through the use of discussion and instructional coaching. More specifically, Mr. Jones created core sets of questions for each section

they read during book club. He coached students through the understanding of the text and the activities that he assigned. Additionally, he modeled reading and writing strategies that were indicative of excellent readers and writers. For example, as he read orally to students during book club, Mr. Jones would ask himself questions orally. Some of these questions included, “Hmm, do I understand why that family was pretending to be related to Bud?” What does that author mean by “kiss my wrist?” Why does Bud think that the librarian will be able to help him locate his family? Mr. Jones would go on to answer his own questions orally in an effort to provide students with examples of understanding and comprehension of reading. Also while reading, Mr. Jones would jot important events on the board in the front of the class. This strategy was used to highlight note-taking techniques for students.

Book club instruction, reading, included a cadre of opportunities. Students engaged in sustained silent reading, read orally in intimate groups and participated in whole class reading and discussion. Specific strategies were emphasized during this time. Mr. Jones encouraged students to read while completing story maps and other graphic organizers. For instance, during day two of *Bud, Not Buddy*, Mr. Jones began,

Let’s read orally the next chapter in the story. I will begin reading and I want you all to follow along. You can fill in your story maps as we go along. After I complete this chapter, I want you all to split into groups of two to four and partner read. For homework, you all will be required to read chapter 3. (Fieldnotes, 3/15/06)

Book club also included writing. Students were given time to reflect on occurrences in the book and provide written responses to various questions. Mr. Jones adapted a host of activities that were largely based on writing, recall, summarization, and making inferences, focusing questions, extending questions, clarifying questions, and

discussion. Many of these activities are found within the framework created by Ruddell (2006), titled *Seven Key Comprehension Skills* (p. 121). Mr. Jones charged students with the task of creating a “critical bag report.” This report was a refreshing take on the traditional book report format. After extensive examination of the directives associated with the critical bag report, I found that the critical bag report allowed students to recount the text features, explain text details, and examine the author’s purpose, while taking note of missing characters and messages nuanced throughout the literature. The directions were:

1. Summarize the entire text. Pay special attention to the most salient parts of each chapter.
2. Illustrate the cover of the paper bag with captions that highlight your summary. The front of the bag should also house the title of the text, author, and copyright date.
3. One section of the bag must contain information about the author. For example how many published works the author has produced, the author’s race, gender, and approximate age. Further, tell the author’s motive or purpose for writing this text.
4. One side of the bag should contain detailed character descriptions. Note the page numbers and chapters that contain these details. On the other side of the bag list omissions. Be sure to have students note what races, genders, classes are missing or are misrepresented.
5. Draft several paragraphs about their feelings as they relate to these omissions or inclusions. Encourage students to make connections between the author’s purpose and motive.
6. The back of the bag should contain sections that fully explain the a) setting, b) conflicts, c) resolutions and d) outcome.
7. Place 8 to 10 objects that are related to the text inside of each bag. Objects may be hand made, cut from magazines and periodicals, or authentic representations. A minimum of four items should capture their feelings about the story and the author’s overall reason for writing the story.
8. Develop a Likert scale so that students may rate their text and recommend it for others.

In addition to the critical bag report, Mr. Jones assigned another project titled “chapter by chapter diorama.” Students were responsible for illustrating each chapter in the novel.

Students worked in small groups to illustrate the main events in each chapter.

Specifically the directions were:

#### Chapter-By-Chapter Dioramas

1. This activity provides students with an opportunity to illustrate each chapter within a novel. Students teach reciprocally as they share their dioramas with their peers and others.
2. Keep and make note cards that summarize each chapter making a card pack for each chapter. Write predictions before moving on to the next chapter.
3. Following the completion of tasks 1 and 2, re-cap the chapter in a shoebox. The shoebox should illustrate the setting, characters, and major occurrences.
4. On one side of the shoebox, have students list difficult vocabulary terms.
5. On the other side of the shoebox, have students list the literary techniques used by the author to increase the descriptions and quality of writing. For instance students may locate similes and metaphors or foreshadowing and tell how they affect the text.
6. These shoeboxes should be created for every chapter. Be sure to change the grammar or literary focus as the chapters progress.

Further, Mr. Jones included comprehension questions, chapter quizzes, reader response questions, and unit tests. Notably, students enjoyed completing the chapter-by-chapter dioramas, as they willingly brought in magazines, miniature crafts, photos, and other items to place in the dioramas. Additionally, students were excited about the possibility of showcasing their completed dioramas for the benefit of others. Book club in Mr. Jones' classroom was dedicated to the exploration of culturally relevant text and space to share ideas, thoughts and feelings about texts. Students were actively engaged and completed all of the assigned tasks without complaint. Mr. Jones appreciated their enthusiasm and allowed students the opportunity to include their own creative twist. These projects were evaluated and graded within two board categories. Students were expected to present their dioramas and critical bag reports to the class and demonstrate clear understanding of the objectives of the assignments.

### *Comprehension Instruction*

During comprehension instruction, Mr. Jones relied heavily on coaching techniques. According to Taylor et al. (2003), coaching involves scaffolding and using supportive actions by teachers to move either an individual or a group of students to the next level of independence on completing a task, strategy, or activity. During literacy instruction that is based upon comprehension, Mr. Jones actively engages students in a cadre of activities. The strategies he uses to complete activities and accomplish goals are (a) allowing students to select texts based on their individual interest and likeness, (b) encouraging students to read more information and expository text, (c) incorporation of critical literacy, and (d) engagement in thoughtful discussion about text. Mr. Jones also used direct instruction, preview and predict strategies, and isolated test preparation. The purpose of direct instruction is designed to

Be governed by a consideration for instructional design that places a heavy emphasis on teacher-directed learning based on an analysis of complex tasks divided into their components skills, teaching these component skills, modeling to students how these components are combined, and scaffolding the learning of these skills with review to ensure that learning has occurred. (Tierney & Readence, 2005, p. 35)

Specifically, Mr. Jones facilitated instruction that involved him intimately. For example, the detailed description of his daily instruction found in the beginning of this chapter highlights his involvement and usage of direct instruction. He guided student instruction placing an emphasis on skills and *some* standards of learning from student textbooks and personal recollection. In particular, during a book club lesson, Mr. Jones walks students through the steps for creating a time line. He used a single student that volunteered to share the steps involved in preparing for school in the morning. While the student shared

the steps she takes to prepare for school, Mr. Jones recorded her method on the board. Following this, Mr. Jones instructed students to “think of the major events in the story, from that try to tell me how many days have passed so far.” During test preparation, Mr. Jones used the whole-class approach to prepare his students for the forthcoming standardized assessment. He shared the core objective and gave students time to think about the objective in relation to what they’ve learned thus far. Mr. Jones started, “Ok y’all, [you all] today we are going to continue to prepare for the up coming test. This morning’s focus is multiple meaning words. Does anyone know what a multiple meaning word is?”

Student—It’s a word with more than one meaning.

Mr. Jones—Excellent. A multiple meaning word is a word with more than one meaning. So as you can see on the board our objective is: Students will practice and review multiple meaning words in order to determine the correct definition. Let’s try a few together before we take our practice test. On the board are a couple of boxes with words inside. On the top row, you will find the word and below it are the meanings. The first row is row one, the second row is row two. I’m going to use the word in a sentence and I want you to tell me which definition fits the sentence. (Fieldnotes, 4/3/06)

Table 5

*Multiple Meaning Words Mini Lesson*

Model	Batter	Pitcher	Accent
-a replica of an object or person	- a person waiting to hit a ball during a game	- a container designed to store liquid	- a distinctive tone that changes the way words sound
-a person employed to pose	- a mixture of ingredients used for making food	- a person responsible for throwing a ball to a batter during a game	- a mark in writing used to stress syllables of spoken word

Source: Fieldnotes, 4/3/06.

Number 1. The foreign exchange student talks with an accent that makes it difficult for us to understand her. Which definition am I using?

Student—Row 1.

Mr. Jones—Good. Next one, Dequan built a model airplane after our trip to the airport. Which definition am I using?

Student—Row 1

Mr. Jones—Ok, last one and then you all will take the practice test. Mom left the pancake batter in the refrigerator. Alright, any takers?

Student—Row 2.

Mr. Jones—Super job. Now, turn your desks, put them in testing position, and wait to receive the practice test. Take your time, read, read, and re-read the sentences and definitions. When you are finished, go back and check your work. Take your time. Any questions? You may begin. (Field Notes 4/3/06)

Complementary to these strategies was a plethora of activities that further supported his instruction overall and individual teaching and learning. Mr. Jones often employed his favorite activities and semantic maps that were staples in the classroom, including various graphic organizers, story maps, venn diagrams, student created illustrations, journal writing, answering of higher-order thinking questions adopted from Bloom's Taxonomy, and applying text to real-life scenarios. Additionally, Mr. Jones used compare and contrast activities to denote literary and character differences, think-pair-share discussion, cooperative learning groups, vocabulary and language usage in text, explicit instruction surrounding grammar and literary devices such as similes, metaphors and idioms. Mr. Jones also uses summarization and paraphrasing, to help students fully understand text and elements present in the reading (Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, & Kurita, 1989).

As a graduate student studying at Trinity University, Mr. Jones asserted "the courses especially literacy work, always stressed Bloom's Taxonomy" (Interview 1, 2/4/06). Literacy instruction directly involving comprehension and story recall always includes some portion of Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom's Taxonomy, developed by Benjamin Bloom, created a systematic questioning hierarchy for categorizing levels of

abstraction of questions that commonly occur in educational settings (Bloom, 1984).

(See Attached [Bloom's Taxonomy Questions for *Bud, Not Buddy*].)

Ok guys, as the principal announced this morning we will not be using any L.O.T.S. All H.O.T.S. Fellas, what are H.O.T.S.?

Student Response—Higher order thinking skills

Yes, higher order thinking skills. So you know what you are expected to do. Use your brains, story maps, notes, anything. You can also think back to the discussions we had. You got me? I'm going to give you a hand out you may begin when you get it. Make sure to answer the questions in complete sentences. You're fifth graders, I shouldn't have to tell you that. (Fieldnotes, 3/20/06)

Another important element of literacy teaching and learning that contributes to the comprehension of text is “compare and contrast” assignments. Compare and contrast generally includes the comparison of differences or similarities, within a given text or topic under study (Gunning, 2005). Following the reading of an excerpt from *Bud, Not Buddy*, Mr. Jones charged his students with the task of comparing two characters from the story. Mr. Jones walks to the front of the class as says,

Ok, now let's compare Bud to Todd Amos. Think about what they have in common, how are these characters alike, how are the different. You have about five minutes to do this, so don't waste anytime talking to your little friends. Get busy, 'cause we are going to add on to this later on this week. Make a venn diagram if that is easier for you. (Fieldnotes, 3/17/06)

While students worked quietly to complete this assignment, Mr. Jones journeyed over to my area and said,

I like giving them this activity. It helps them think about the characters and get to know them. Getting to know characters also helps them with making inferences and predictions. You know what else? It really helps my struggling readers and writers. During discussion, they always raise their hands and contribute to the discussion, so this is one way I make sure that they are included. (Fieldnotes, 3/17/06)

This activity usually spiraled into a think-pair-share opportunity. Think-pair-share generally includes two or more students discussing their thoughts and overall

feelings about the topic of study. Here students were told to think-pair-share and write the options that faced Bud as he tried to solve his problem with the Amos's. Students gathered in groups of two and chattered softly. One pair of students, two boys, felt that Bud should have "knocked Todd upside the head with the dang on suit case." After several minutes, Mr. Jones allowed students to share what their partners thought were viable options for Bud. He allowed each group to share, but as indicated, the students that shared, had to share their partners thoughts. Mr. Jones emphasized the importance of text comprehension and made every effort to ensure that his students were given many different opportunities to build comprehension strategies. Overtime students were exposed to over 10 different activities that helped to increase text comprehension.

#### *Vocabulary Instruction*

According to the National Reading Panel (2000), there is a strong connection between vocabulary and reading comprehension. Anderson and Freedbody (1985) argue that "word knowledge is requisite for reading comprehension: people who do not know the meanings of words are most probably poor readers" (p. 367). Further, Brett, Rothlein, & Hurley (1996) claim that if students are introduced to relevant vocabulary as they encounter it in text, their ability to construct meaning from text will be enhanced.

Vocabulary instruction in Mr. Jones' classroom is made up of several different lesson formats all aimed at promoting students' vocabulary development. His first method includes extracting key vocabulary terms and introducing students to them both in content area context and in real world exhibits. For instance, Mr. Jones introduced students to vocabulary words for both reading and social studies instruction on day one of my observations. Students were given semantic maps called "vocabulary quilts" or

“word maps.” On these quilts and maps students wrote terms and definitions and other related words that helped them construct meaning. While engaging in *Book Club Plus*, Mr. Jones gave students six sets of vocabulary terms all related to the chapters under study. As these terms were read in context, Mr. Jones and the students often discussed their meaning. This pre-exposure to core vocabulary words allowed students to fully understand story content.

Mr. Jones also utilized a book titled *Vocabulary Cartoons: Elementary Edition* (1998). This book contains several terms that were taught in isolation. The book claimed it helped teach students new words easier and faster through the use of rhyming mnemonic devices and visual mnemonic devices. Mr. Jones disseminated a single unit every week and students were given a quiz after completion of the each unit. Although many students in his class were eager to read orally and contribute during conversation, Mr. Jones felt it necessary to stress vocabulary instruction. He asserted,

If you don't know the meaning of a word or two while you're reading, your comprehension and understanding of the text is severely compromised. I teach my kids to not only learn the meanings of words, but to use context clues as well. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

### *Fluency*

Oral reading in intermediate classrooms is often smooth and full of expression. Many students pride themselves with having developed a knack for reading flawlessly. This was the case in Mr. Jones' classroom. Many students volunteered to showcase their talents daily. In his classroom fluency was not only taught it was expected. Lipson and Lang (1991) define fluency as accurate, effortless, and rapid reading. Mr. Jones stressed

the importance of “reading what you see,” and reading with confidence in his class. He admits,

I’m not exactly sure how to teach fluency. So I just tell them to read what they see and read with confidence. Sometimes I give them text that I know they will not mess up on, other times I just tell them to get into the text and read with expression. (Fieldnotes, 5/3/06)

Although Mr. Jones did not feel very confident about assisting students with becoming fluent readers, he did create a game called the fluency game. This game involved the successful oral reading of a particular selection. During this game, students read a selection orally, as Mr. Jones not only timed, but miscued the selection. Students enjoyed the game and volunteered to be the next contestant. Although there is some opposition surrounding the relationship between fluency and overall reading ability, fluency is without a doubt important to consider and account for when assessing literacy levels.

#### *Engaging Students through the Use of Diverse Text*

Self-selection of text, involves students choosing from a variety of text sources, and reading during designated times or homework (Gunning, 2006). The classroom library located behind the horseshoe shaped table in Mr. Jones’ classroom, houses several types of reading materials. Mr. Jones purchases the locally published newspaper and places it in the library. In addition to this, there are magazines, comic books, cookbooks, textbooks, and student written-published stories, which are all essential for an attractive and accessible classroom library (Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993). During morning daily preparation, students may visit the classroom library to self-select text. There are a few guidelines that are in place to promote diversity of reading. Self-selection rules include (a) not selecting the same text twice without previous approval,

(b) selecting an information-based piece at least once weekly or twice monthly if reading a novel, and (c) keeping track of the texts read on a reading log provided by the teacher.

Encouraging students to read more information and expository text is often a great challenge for many teachers (Duke, 2000). Mr. Jones admits he struggled with this for many years as well.

It's hard to get kids to read stuff that isn't fictionalized. They often want to leave the harsh realities of their worlds. But, as a teacher trying to ensure that my kids are successful, I knew that I was going to have to get them to read that stuff. So I decided to ask them, individually, what they were interested in. I got so many answers, dogs, motorcycles, modeling, acting, sharks. I also got people, mainly sports figures and public icons. So I just went out and got the things they wanted to read. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

As mentioned previously, Mr. Jones often utilized the social studies text during his literacy block. During a lesson, "Differences Divide: Britain and its Colonies (Harcourt Brace, 2000), Mr. Jones strategically reviewed the Table 6 with his students.

Table 6

*Content Area Reading Lesson*

Focus	Main Idea	Vocabulary
Why might people today become unhappy with their government?	As you read, look for reasons the British colonists became unhappy with British rule.	Parliament Self-government Democracy Legislature Ally Tax Authority
How do individuals and groups today work to make changes in their government?	Read to learn how individuals and groups in the British colonies worked to make changes in their government.	Tariff            Repeal Loyalist        Massacre Representation Treason Public Opinion Petition Liberty Boycott Congress
What role did African Americans play during this time period?		
What brings people together in difficult times?	As you read, think about what brought the colonists together as they protested British rule.	Committee of Correspondence Consequence Blockade Quarter Continental Congress Right Minuteman Patriot

Mr. Jones challenged students to utilize strategies that often assist readers with understanding expository text. For example, Mr. Jones provided students with (a) a description of the selection, (b) an explanation of the time sequence, (c) information comparing and contrasting events, (d) an overview of the problem to be examined, and (e) the cause and effect of the event. This approach supports research conducted by

Meyer and Rice (1984) that lists the most important types of text structure within expository texts. Throughout the course of the lesson students searched the text to find answers to the focus questions. Mr. Jones posed the first focus question.

Mr. Jones—Why might the people today become unhappy with their government?

Student—Because they don't like George Bush.

Mr. Jones—Be more specific. What did or what does George Bush do to make people unhappy?

Student—He cheated and he won't stop the war.

Mr. Jones—Good, a lot of people feel like he cheated his way into office and even more people think that the war needs to be stopped. Excellent response. Ok, how do individuals and groups today work to make changes in their government?

Student—They vote for the people they really want. And, like when we had a big, big pot hole in our street my mother called the council men until they got somebody out there to fix it. All the neighbors were complaining and stuff, 'cause my next door neighbor's husband tire got flat 'cause he didn't see it.

Mr. Jones—Ok great, your mom helps the community. That's great. By calling the council members, her mom was able to make some changes through government. Now, let's think specifically about the chapter. What role did African Americans play during this fight? Think about it first, remember some of our morning trivia questions.

Student—We helped out a lot, Crispus Attucks was the first black man to die during the Boston Massacre. So I think that we fought too.

Mr. Jones—What do you mean you think we fought too?

Student—We haven't learned a whole rack [lot or bunch] about black people in social studies this year, only in morning trivia and when you tell us about it. There ain't [isn't] hardly even no black people in this book.

Mr. Jones—You're right. But I want you to know that African Americans were there. We contributed and lost lives as well. Later on we will do some research to find exactly what we did. As a matter of fact, I will get the smart board and we will do that tomorrow. Is that ok with everyone?

Class—Yes

Mr. Jones—Alright, let's look at the main ideas for the chapter. They started to get real unhappy, so as we read remember to think about why they started to get angry. Also, we need to think about how they worked as a group to make changes. Let's start reading together. I will begin and then I will take volunteers to help us finish. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/06)

Although many of Mr. Jones' students were often reluctant to read expository text, he found engaging and meaningful ways to peak their interest and keep them excited about the content within the expository text. As noted by Langer (1985), students of all

ages generally find reading expository text more difficult than reading narrative text. However, Mr. Jones uses this as a springboard to show students that they can understand and retell text (Moss, 2004). During content area reading in science, social studies and math, Mr. Jones requires his students to retell details and formulas to ensure that they fully understand the focus and the main idea. According to Moss (2004), retellings are oral or written post-reading recalls during which children relate what they remember from reading or listening to a particular text. As noted by Bromely (1998), retellings offer holistic representation of student understanding rather than the fragmented information provided by answering comprehension questions. Mr. Jones admits, “I like using other subject matter text during the literacy block. It keeps my kids guessing and on their toes” (Fieldnotes, 3/28/06). The incorporation of content area text and other expository readings afforded his students opportunities to read and acquire information that often exposed them to history and vital information. Additionally, they became familiar with common expository text structures, including descriptions, sequence, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem solving.

### *Critical Literacy Instruction*

Critical literacy includes the disrupting of dominant practices through resistant reading and writing of text (Rogers, 2002). During a read-aloud (Fieldnotes 2/15/06) Mr. Jones read from an issue of *Seventeen* magazine. The article talked about the high demands of modeling for both men and women. The read-aloud spiraled into 30 minutes of active listening and critical reading surrounding standards of beauty, education, eating disorders and the exclusion of certain races and ethnicities. Mr. Jones posed many questions and scenarios to his class. For instance,

I want you all to look at the pictures in this magazine, how do you think or better yet how does this magazine define beauty. Now let me be clear, we can't flip through the magazine and find a glossary like we have in our reading books, we have to use the pictures to help us with that. Do you all understand? (Fieldnotes 3/15/06)

Students offered several responses that illustrated a deep understanding of critical literacy. One student argued, "They think skinny girls in bikinis are pretty. They aren't the only pretty women in the world." A different male student asserts,

All the boys have their shirts off or are dressed in a tuxedo suit and are white. There are no black people in the whole magazine. Do they have a black version of Seventeen magazine? I don't read that dumb magazine anyway. (Fieldnotes, 3/15/06)

Mr. Jones used these responses to share information about critical literacy. He gave students a working definition of critical literacy that resonated with students, as they often used the questions Mr. Jones introduced to them as critical literacy questions when reading other text outside of this discussion. Mr. Jones said, "Critical literacy deals with asking yourself a set of questions. Why did the author write this, or why did the photographer take this picture? Who is included? Who is left out? Why are these people included or left out?" Following a brief overview and introduction to critical literacy, a female student raised her hand to share,

Mr. Jones, this morning on the bus, me and my mother saw a dove soap poster on the side of the bus stop plastic thing that had a picture of a women with freckles and underneath her picture, it said something like flawed or flawless. I remember you told us once that you had to make another test 'cause it had a flaw, so I said flawed must mean messed up. I think that woman with the freckles looked pretty, she looks just like Ms. Cobb that teaches here. (Fieldnotes 3/15/06)

Lalik and Oliver (2007), assert that images of the female body may be considered texts, as they are social artifacts that can be interpreted. Mr. Jones willingly admits that he is somewhat uncomfortable and apprehensive about discussing "girl issues" with his female

students. Mr. Jones complains, “Body image, health concerns, and hair scare me. I feel like I am going to say the wrong thing. I try to make all of my girls feel special and pretty, because I know that it is a big concern for them.” Because critical literacy was explored in Mr. Jones’ classroom, students felt comfortable questioning authors and creators of literature. They begin to have conversations that included the core set of critical literacy questions that Mr. Jones shared. Students often attempted to infuse these questions during general academic conversation.

### *Technology Integration*

Many urban schools nationwide lack resources to adequately infuse technology into daily instruction (Gorski & Clark, 2001). Although this was the case at PS-5, Mr. Jones sought was to counteract this shortcoming. Even though the school was technically, wired for internet accessibility, the computers in the classroom were outdated, and could not maintain a consistent internet connection. Software packages were incomplete and useless, as they did not compliment the newly implemented standards of learning. Students used the computers for word processing only. During literacy centers time, Mr. Jones allowed students (in pairs) to use his personal laptop to conduct research. Mr. Jones purchased and utilized a wireless network card to gain Internet access. During the 2005-2006 school year, the technology coordinator purchased three smart boards for the school building. A smart board is an interactive white board that connects to computers and becomes a digital projector that displays computer images (Smart-technologies, 2007). Mr. Jones utilized the smart board to display graphic organizers, time-lines, music lyrics and much more. He even conducted research with the entire class on various topics under study. Instruction that incorporated the use of the

white board was well received, as students were eager to write responses and display findings for all to see. Technology integration indeed extends beyond the use of computers, Mr. Jones used the television and books and text on tape in his classroom. His students never opted to listen to stories on tape but the option was available and used periodically during whole class instruction. The use of technology in Mr. Jones' classroom was engaging and empowering for students. Students' level of participation and willingness to participate during the use of the smart board and other technology-based resources was high. Learning to operate and utilize the smart board independently was empowering for students as they gained valuable computer and technology operating skills.

### *Differentiated Instruction*

Providing alternatives for struggling readers also proved to be extremely important to Mr. Jones. Each lesson contained some level of academic modification that allowed all students to participate actively. For instance, during journal writing on one particular day during the month of February, Mr. Jones instructed students to respond to a selection in their *Bud, Not Buddy* novels. Students were asked to write responses to offering Bud alternatives aside from walking across states to locate a librarian. Students with documented disabilities and other struggling readers and writers were paired with students that were able to complete the assignment with little or no assistance from the teacher. Each pair of students was assigned roles; either journalist or cartoonist. The journalists were responsible for facilitating the discussion and recording the agreed upon options for Bud. The cartoonists were charged with the task of illustrating the journal entry. These and similar efforts were put in place to ensure that all students were given

opportunities to participate in literacy instruction. This activity required students to work collectively, talk through options and think through possible solutions to a very real situation. These opportunities are pivotal to student growth and development.

### More Than a Literacy Teacher

In this section, I provide a summary of the new literacies methods that Mr. Jones included within literacy instruction. Included in his new literacies instruction are (a) hip-hop infusion, (b) cinema and popular culture, (c) critical literacy, and (d) youth development. Each section contains an explanation of the technique and description of integration of the new literacy in his classroom. Mr. Jones, truly an excellent teacher, not only taught from a ground five pillars of reading instruction approach (NRP, 2003), he also included a cadre of practices that engaged and students while promoting academic and holistic growth. The usefulness and outcomes help to necessitate this approach to literacy instruction.

#### *Theme One: Infusion of Popular Music into Literacy Instruction*

Many urban schools across the nation are inadequately prepared to provide high-quality instruction to its constituents. Most often these schools provide standard-one size fits all literacy instruction to our most diverse population of young people (Banks, 2006). As a result, the incidence of reading failure in urban schools is excessive. In this section, I will describe a literacy instruction method that was utilized by Mr. Jones. I call this method of literacy instruction “hip-hop infusion.” I begin by defining hip-hop and hip-hop infusion. Next, I describe literacy lessons that were infused with hip-hop. Then, I describe authentic assessments and assignments that were incorporated into daily lessons. Lastly, I capture students’ feelings and thoughts surrounding this method of instruction.

The infusion of hip-hop into literacy instruction in Mr. Jones' classroom called for a deep understanding of the hip-hop art form. Like many forms of art, there are several types of artist with varying motives and goals. In his literacy instruction, Mr. Jones opted to infuse music that was both popular, and music that had a positive message. As evidenced and expressed through the media and among hip-hop artist, there are three basic genres of rap (Quinn, 2005). These genres include, gansta rap, which represents what rappers see in their communities. Gangsta rap looks at and reflects and exacerbates worsening problems facing African American communities and young men in general (Quinn, 2005). Back Pack Rap, or Critically Conscience Rap, includes the infusion of a critical analysis of systems structure into their lyrics (Quinn, 2005). Popular Rap is described as a faddish style of music marketed as rap music; it sounds like and is often included in the rhythm and blues genre of music (Keys, 2004). Mr. Jones elected to allow his students to influence this portion of the literacy block. As a result, Mr. Jones often discussed songs and lyrics the students brought forth. In addition to this, he also led classroom conversation around Back Pack Rap or Critically Conscience Rap.

Table 7

*Rappers Categorized*

Gangsta Rapper	Back-Pack Rapper / Critically Conscience Rapper	Pop-Rapper
Three-6 Mafia	Kanye West	Jay-Z
Jeeze		Bow Wow
Yung Jock		Andre' 3000

Like many urban fifth-graders, the fifth graders in his class were lovers of rap, R & B, Soul, and Latin Soul music. Students sang and rapped lyrics from their favorite songs. Morning conversations among students discussed music videos on Black Entertainment Television's (BET) top ten count down list, or the "hot" new video premiers. Quite often, girls talked about Beyonce', Mary J. Blige, Cierra, and Bow Wow. Young men also talked about the popular rappers like Yung Jock, Jeeze, Jay-Z, Three-6 Mafia, Andre' 3000 and Kanye West. During morning preparation efforts or between seatwork assignments, Mr. Jones would overhear conversations about these singing and rap sensations and use these conversations to drive and design literacy instruction. Often, he used results from Grammy, Oscar, Billboard, and MTV awards shows to highlight controversial topics and incorporate critical literacy into literacy instruction. For instance, following the 2006 Oscar Award show, Mr. Jones engaged his students in a discussion about the award won by the Three-6 Mafia for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures, Original Song. The song was written for an extremely popular movie "Hustle and Flow" (Paramount Pictures, 2005) starring Terence Howard and Taraji Henson. Although the movie had some adult content and was rated "R", many of his students had viewed and enjoyed the movie. They were very excited to talk about news of the Three-6 Mafia winning the award. While many of the students didn't understand the controversy, they were introduced to the underpinnings by Mr. Jones, "Ok class, I know that you all have heard about the Three-6 Mafia winning an Oscar. So let's talk about that for a few minutes. Tell me what you know" (Fieldnotes, 3/6/06).

As students clamored and twisted in their seats eager to discuss something that they were all interested in, many hands shot up.

Student 1—I saw the movie this summer with my brother. It was real good.

Student 2—I got the CD, all the songs on the cd are good. But I like “It’s Hard out here for a Pimp” the best

Student 3—I know they won the award for that song, they was talking about that this morning on the radio. Russ Parr said that everybody was mad ‘cause they are a group of young black people rapping about things that are stupid.

Mr. Jones—Well do you all think that the song is about stupid things? (Fieldnotes 3/6/06)

The class had mixed feelings about his question. Some of the students felt that the song was less than productive, while others liked it.

Student 1—I just listen to music for the beat.

Student 2—Well I don’t like the song, because they are talking about pimps and stuff.

Student 3—I think we need to listen to the words slowly to see if he is saying something about making his life better. ‘Cause I think he is trying to get a job to pay his rent, but it is hard for him to find one. And it’s nothing wrong with that ‘cause my brother been trying to find a job for a minute [long while] and he can’t. His baby mother keep coming over yelling and screaming saying she needs child support money. So maybe he is really trying to do better like my brother.

Mr. Jones—You might be right. I don’t have the lyrics copied for you now and I don’t want to pull them up on the smart board because they use profanity. But what I’ll do is read the lyrics to you all. Listen to hear what they are saying, alright? (Fieldnotes, 3/6/06)

As Mr. Jones booted his laptop, he told students to prepare to take notes. Students opened their reading notebooks and waited. As they waited, many students engaged in conversations about rap music and rappers in general. When Mr. Jones located the lyrics, he stood with his laptop in hand. Students responded by ending conversations and facing their teacher. Mr. Jones began,

Ok, I’m going to read the lyrics to you, but I am going to skip all of the inappropriate words. Follow along and listen. Take notes so that you can develop your argument in support of them winning the award, or in support of them not

winning the award. We won't write about it, but you will need to speak clearly about your choice. Do you understand me?

Class—Yes, Mr. Jones.

Ok, here we go. (Fieldnotes 3/6/06)

As Mr. Jones read the lyrics some students jotted notes as others just listened. Following the reading of the lyrics Mr. Jones asked students to take a few moments to develop their argument. He reminded them to think about what the message of the song was. After approximately eight minutes, students begin to twist in their seats and look restless. Mr. Jones took that as an indicator and began again:

Guys, ok let's talk about this. What do you think? Do you think they deserved to win the award? Does the song have a somewhat positive message? When you share your feelings be clear about that.

Student 1—I don't think the song is positive at all. They are talking about pimps and can I say it Mr. Jones?

Mr. Jones—Sure

Student 1—Pimps and hoes, that's not positive and stuff like that for kids to be hearing.

Students 2—I think they should have got the award 'cause they worked hard. My mother said they just doing all that 'cause they black. If they were some white people yelling and screaming and banging their heads they wouldn't be doing all this.

Mr. Jones—Ok. I know how your mom feels, but how do you feel?

Student 2—I think my mom is right. She said people need to raise their own kids and stop letting music and movies do it. They are just making rap songs. I know I don't want people to call me no hoe, so I'm not going to be one, or act like one.

Mr. Jones—Ok, I think that was well said. Does anyone else have anything to add?

Student 3—I think they should have won the award too. They make some good songs.

Mr. Jones—But what about what they are saying?

Student 3—They are saying some stuff that I wouldn't say, but if I said that kind of stuff my mom would get [punish] me, so I know better.

Mr. Jones—Do you think everyone knows better?

Student 3—Well older kids should know better. They should know when people are lying about something in a song. Like my mother told me something about my favorite rapper, Lil Wayne. She said Lil Wayne goes to college. So Three-6Mafia is probably lying about that stuff too. They just made the song for the movie.

Mr. Jones—You bring up an excellent point. Many entertainers tell stories or lies. Their stories and tales are meant to make you laugh or entertain you. You must know that most rappers, singers, comedians, actors and just celebrities in general tell lies. That’s why it is important for us to know the difference. Very often people of color get a bad rap. Most of the stories we here on the radio and see on the news don’t really tell a positive story. They always have stories or breaking news about bad things like crimes. They rarely praise us for the good things that we do. (Fieldnotes, 3/6/06)

This discussion came to a close as students refrained from making further contributions to the discussion. Mr. Jones closed the discussion, by advising students to view songs, movies, TV, magazines, and newspapers as forms of entertainment. He also encouraged students to read these pieces of text carefully. As students looked on and listened attentively, he warned students to make good choices outside of the classroom. Mr. Jones said, “You must use common sense and judgment when making decisions” (Fieldnotes, 3/6/06). Students understand this recommendation and acknowledged him by saying, “Yes, Mr. Jones” (Fieldnotes, 3/6/06)

Hip-hop in Mr. Jones’ classroom was a welcomed genre of music and literacy often used to push students thinking. Many of the hip-hop lessons taught or explored in Mr. Jones’ class were impromptu. He allowed students to bring up matters that resonated with them. While apparently eavesdropping on students having a debate about the best rapper of all time, Mr. Jones invited students to write a position essay sharing their thoughts on the best rapper of all time. Mr. Jones wrote criteria on the board and allowed students that were not interested in writing about the best rapper of all time to write about the best singer of all time.

Instructions: Think about the best rapper or singer of all time. Brainstorm reasons why this person is the best of all time. Be sure to use supporting details, quotation marks to name songs, and complete thoughts to express yourself. There is no right or wrong answer. Try your best. (Fieldnotes, 5/4/06)

Students were given 20 minutes or so to complete this assignment. As students worked quietly, Mr. Jones circulated the room helping struggling students narrow down their personal opinions and formulate arguments that supported their selections. Chatter filled the classroom as students debated quietly. Following the completion of this assignment, students shared their papers with the entire class. After students shared their writing, they took questions from their peers. Mr. Jones required questions to follow a certain format:

Boys and girls, your questions must be clear, thoughtful, and organized to express a complete thought. Readers, if you don't know the answers to these questions, you must try to research them. You just might find out that this person really isn't your favorite after all. (Fieldnotes, 5/4/06)

Researchers argue that the use of hip hop in the classroom offers a cadre of education and enrichment opportunities (Rose, 1994). Further many assert, that this method gives voice and space for students that are often marginalized and powerless within their learning communities (Morrell, 2002). The use of hip hop or popular culture in a classroom setting is often extremely inviting to students that find it difficult to relate to traditional text in the classroom. Hip Hop is defined as, “a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experience of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community” (Rose, 1994, p. 21). Mr. Jones said hip-hop is a great mechanism for teaching in the classroom:

I like to use hip-hop and music that is relevant to my students 'cause it is engaging. They are really interested and everyone participates. You know I really think that they feel safe 'cause there is usually no right or wrong answer. So all of my kids participate. Actively. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

Although many of Mr. Jones' literacy lessons do not contain the explicit use of hip hop, when they do, students are extremely engaged. In a literacy lesson Mr. Jones says he borrowed from a colleague, students read and listened to "Hey Mama" by Kanye West. The lesson begins with Mr. Jones standing next to the smart board. As students file in from music, one of their special subject classes, they are eager to sit for the continuation of the literacy block. All of the students notice the smart board and are excited about using it. Mr. Jones walked over to the smart board to ensure that his lap top is connected. Students are all seated and waiting for further instructions. Mr. Jones began:

Alright folks, we are going to end today's lesson with a critical exploration of music and lyrics. How many of you like Kanye West? (all hands are raised) Ok then, we are going to not only listen to "Hey Mama" by Kanye West, we are going to read the lyrics and analyze them. By analyze I mean, we are going to try to figure out what Kanye is saying. Last time we did this, you all told me that rappers and singers have hidden messages and we discovered throughout this year that authors and many others do too. I am going to pull up the words to Kanye's song on the smart board so that we can all see them. I will also give you a copy. I used a marker to mark out curse words. So if you see a dark space, there was a word there, but I took it out. How many of you have heard this song before? (Almost all hands go up) Ok good, well we are going to start by listening to it first, then reading the lyrics. (Fieldnotes, 3/7/06)

As students listen to the song, many of them are moving to the beat subtly while others sit nearly motionless. At the songs end, Mr. Jones invites students to read the lyrics silently as he reads them orally. Students took notes and appeared to be deep in thought as some looked up at the ceiling and others closed their eyes. Mr. Jones continued, "Ok, think about what you heard. What is Kanye saying? Don't answer me now. Read it again, then I'd like you to pair up with a partner and discuss the words to the song" (Fieldnotes, 3/7/06). Students gathered in small groups and began discussing the song. Ten minutes later, Mr. Jones brought the students back for whole class instruction. He toggled screens

on the smart board and brought up a blank table. He encouraged students to journey to the smart board and write what they thought Kanye was talking about in his song. Table 8 captures the remarks shared by students.

Table 8

*Hey Mama Hip-Hop Lesson*

I think Kanye is trying to tell people that he is really proud of his mother.	Kanye is telling his fans that his mother really wanted him to finish school.	Kanye is saying that his mother always took care of him, like when she made him that homemade chickin soup, and put training wheels on his bike.	I think Kanye is thanking his mother, because he don't mention his father at all. So I think his mother did everything, just like my mother.	Kanye going to buy his mom a car for all that she has done for him.
He thinks his mom is an angel.	He says his mom is like poetry, and poems are beautiful and nice.	Kanye said it don't have to be no special time to thank his mother for being a good mother.	He said his mother worked late at night so she could keep the lights on in the house.	I think he think his mom is strong because he said words like unbreakable and thing that don't break are strong.
They used to live somewhere else, then they move to the Shy when he was 3.	He is telling his mother that he sorry for acting up and stuff.	He did the oposite of what his mother told him, but she still loved him anyway.	He really loved his mother.	He didn't like his father, because he only say thank you to his mother.

After the students finish writing their interpretations on the smart board, Mr. Jones read all of their responses orally. Each response elicited a deep conversation. Students are invited to agree or disagree. Many students mention having something in common with Kanye West. They talk about their mothers as single parents, working late at night to meet financial obligations, and treating them with unconditional love and care. Mr. Jones ran out of time and scrambled to conclude the lesson: “Ok guys, are rap songs

like poems? Why or why not? Are rap songs sending a message to listeners? We'll continue this later." The bell sounds (Fieldnotes, 3/7/06).

Including the experiences and interests of urban students into literacy instruction is perhaps the most powerful tool an educator can use. Morrell (2002) asserts that pedagogy of popular culture has to be a critical pedagogy where students and teachers learn from and with one another while engaging in authentic dialogue that is centered on the experiences of urban youth as participants in and creators of popular culture. As evidenced in many literacy lessons facilitated by Mr. Jones, he allowed students to become creators of knowledge while teaching and enlightening one another. While young people were often repeaters of information, i.e. (student 3 p. 45), they interpreted the information and began to consider the underpinnings of the argument. This practice affords space for critical literacy instruction and space to allow students to become producers of actions that encourage and support social justice.

#### *Theme Two: Including Cinema and Realistic Fiction*

As the school year neared the end, Mr. Jones and his colleagues planned a trip to Williamsburg, Virginia. This trip was designed to be interdisciplinary as it included, literacy, social studies and math. While Mr. Jones, a self-proclaimed history buff, willingly and strategically used the social studies text for its expository nature to enhance his literacy block, he also used realistic movies and historical fiction to engage students. A week prior to venturing to Williamsburg, Mr. Jones and his students watched several segments of the movie "The Patriot" starring Mel Gibson (Columbia Pictures, 2000). Due to the graphic nature of the film, Mr. Jones was granted permission from parents and the school administrator to view excerpts from the film.

Prior to watching the film, students recapped The Revolutionary War, which was discussed at length during the final quarters of the school year. Students completed extensive graphic organizers (K.W.L. Charts) to list all they knew and sought out to learn about the Revolutionary War. Each student's K.W.L. Chart was stored in her or his social studies folder or journal. As students watched sections of "The Patriot," Mr. Jones facilitated instruction through the posing and answering of questions pertaining to the Revolutionary War and periods thereafter. Students sat glued to their seats as Mr. Jones circulated the classroom with the remote control in his hand. Mr. Jones stopped after approximately 10 minutes and asked,

Mr. Jones—What do you notice about the setting of the movie?

Student—It doesn't look like today, it looks like the pictures in our social studies book.

Mr. Jones—What about how they are dressed? The things they are using to write with?

Student—They are dressed funny and they are writing with fancy pens and ink bottles.

Mr. Jones—Good, What does all of this tell you?

Student—That this happened a long long time ago, cause we don't dress like that or write with those kinds of pens and stuff.

Mr. Jones—Ok. So does the movie match what we have learned about this period of history?

Student—Yeah, because they didn't have the things that we have today, like computers, and jeans and tennis shoes.

Mr. Jones—Ok. Well let's watch a little more and then talk. (Fieldnotes, 6/2/06)

Mr. Jones and his students watched fragments of the movie for about an hour. After viewing excerpts from the movie, Mr. Jones discussed expectations and activities to be completed for their long trip to Williamsburg, Virginia.

As you all know next Friday we will be going to Williamsburg, Virginia. We will tour many sites and witness reenactments of parts of the war and life during that time period. We will have a discussion with students from The College of William and Mary about what we know and what we've learned. I want you to be

confident about your knowledge of this time period and I want you to be proud of yourself for having the courage to answer questions. We will behave like we always do, I expect your best all the way around. Are there any questions?  
(Fieldnotes 6/2/06)

Mr. Jones continued to prepare students as they reviewed and discussed the early United States. The students were very excited on many different fronts. Many of them would be venturing out of the metropolitan area for the first time, while others were excited about seeing a “real-life war re-enactment.”

On the day of the trip, students arrived at school at the required time, which was 5:30a.m. Mr. Jones arrived at approximately 5:45a.m. with two of his students jumping out of his back seat. When I asked him why he had two students with him, his reply was simply, “Their parents don’t have cars, I didn’t want them standing around waiting on the bus by themselves at 5:00 in the morning. I would never be able to forgive myself if something happen to them or if they missed this opportunity.” His response was no surprise, as I had come to know Mr. Jones as a selfless, dedicated, excellent practitioner.

### *Theme Three: Empowerment through Literacy*

Empowerment in upper elementary classrooms is central to the development of democratic schooling (Sleeter, 1991). This dissertation does not include empowerment as a core theme but as a necessary component within excellent literacy instruction for urban students. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) defined empowerment as “the opportunities a person has for autonomy, responsibility, choice, and authority” (p. 9). Although Mr. Jones was clearly the authority figure in his classroom, he gave students space to be empowered. For example, students were allowed choice in selecting text and determining topics of study. The young people in Mr. Jones’ class could elect to read and

respond to a variety of text. On several occasions he encouraged students to bring in text from home to share with others or to include in the classroom library. There was not an established criterion for the sharing of text. But Mr. Jones had an assumption regarding this.

I trust my students. I know that they will bring in appropriate books, magazines and other things to read. No one has every brought in anything that I had to send back home. Allowing them to create and expand our classroom library gives them a sense of empowerment. They feel like they too count in the class.  
(Interview 3, 6/18/06)

Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Turner (1997) assert that students should be considered resources when building a curriculum. To this end, Mr. Jones' students were allotted space to influence educational activities as they went about the literacy block. They were given opportunities to create news to respond to text or select an artist to be studied. Mr. Jones also had a set of assumptions that allowed him to make this a staple in his classroom.

When they [students] bring up topics or rappers that I don't feel comfortable discussing, I try to persuade them to select another topic. You know they have their favorite subjects and rappers that I discuss over and over again. When that happens, I simply remind them of the discussion and offer them time to pick something else. When they pick a gangsta rapper that uses too much profanity or other offense subject matter, I try to help them understand that I just can't deal with that right now.

Mr. Jones' role as a youth developer also embraced the notion of empowerment. While empowerment is a broad term inclusive of many ideas, it includes the ability to act effectively in the world, both alone and with others (Kreisberg, 1992). He made admirable efforts to equip students with necessary tools to become productive and active members of the larger community.

*Theme Four: Developing a Sense of Safe Competition through Instruction*

Many culturally relevant researchers agree that cooperative learning is often an effective means to facilitate learning in elementary schools. Small groups, partnerships, and collaborative projects are frequently included in culturally relevant or culturally responsive classrooms (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings 1998; Turner, 2005).

Competition is rarely used to promote teaching and learning. Yet Mr. Jones has figured a way to incorporate this highly controversial mechanism into literacy instruction and other content areas as well. In the classroom, he includes chess, Mr. Jones' Trivia Challenge, Fluency Game, Vocabulary Duels, Subject Matter Baseball, and It's Academic. Not only does Mr. Jones include competitive games, he also uses very competitive language when speaking to and encouraging his students. For instance, Mr. Jones says,

Folks, today we are going to start preparing for "It's Academic". Everyone knows what to expect right? Well for those of you that don't I will give the abbreviated version of what happens. As we prepare for "It's Academic" everyone will try out. The top three students will advance and represent our class in the school wide competition. Study tips. Study everything you've learned all year. Take out all of your vocabulary quilts, social studies notes, science notes, and math notes. I will try to give you a study guide, but now you see the strongest and most prepared students will survive. This is a three person show that will be made up of three individual people. Try your best. (Fieldnotes, 5/24/06)

After one full week of preparation, students launch into an aggressive academic competition against one another. Mr. Jones disseminates tongue depressors that students lift when they want to offer a response to a question asked by their teacher. In an effort to mirror the intermediate level school competition, Mr. Jones created questions that were similar in style and format to those that would be asked during the competition. For example, "What states make up the sunshine belt" derives from the geography category. He went on to ask additional questions: "How many teeth are found in a human mouth?"

“Where is your shin bone located?” “What is the formula for finding the area of a rectangle?” Which form is correct: “The students are going to recess after lunch” or “The students is going to recess after lunch?” After several rounds of questions, three students clearly out-scored their classmates. Mr. Jones declared these students the class representatives.

The students and their classmates prepare for the competition for two weeks. During the preparations, Mr. Jones is extremely demanding and unwavering. For instance, Mr. Jones asserts,

Take this serious guys; we all have our reputations at stake here. We worked hard, studied hard, and now it’s time to shine. We cannot come in second place. You all know what I say about second place, second place is the first loser. You will do well. We as a class will support each other and try our best to beat our opponents. (Fieldnotes, 5/24/06)

On the day of the school-wide competition, students filed into the auditorium. Competitors took the stage and spectators were seated in the audience. Questions were presented in seven categories. The categories were (a) United States Geography, (b) Grammar, (c) Human Body, (d) Problem Solving, (e) African-American History, (f) Current Events, and (g) Popular Culture. After pummeling through several rounds of rigorous questions from all content areas, the competitors from Mr. Jones’ class were tied for first place. The final question was: “What former NBA star has had his own line of sneakers with Nike over the last twenty years?” All of the groups responded with “Michael Jordan,” with the exception of Mr. Jones’ class. His class simply wrote “M.J.” During the final analysis, Mr. Jones, also posing as a judge along with the other upper elementary teachers, announced the winners. He prefaced his announcement with the following:

Good morning staff, parents, and students. It gives me great pleasure to announce the winner of this competition. Although the judges table shows that my class is tied for first, I can not allow them to compete for the tie breaker. You see, my students only wrote "M.J." M.J. could stand for anything or anyone, Magic Johnson, Michael Jackson, or even Marcus Jones. When you are competing you must be clear. In the next few days you all will compete on a very important test all by yourselves. You must be clear. Remember no short cuts. So having said that, the winners are Mr. Washington's class. Please give them a huge round of applause. (Fieldnotes, 6/1/06)

After returning to their classroom, Mr. Jones explains his decision to his kids. He reminds them of the importance of honesty and integrity. He also stresses the importance of not taking any short cuts. Following this conversation, Mr. Jones and his students agree to be clear and to continue to be fair competitors.

*Theme Five: Empowerment through Youth Development*

Youth development or youth advocacy is often defined as both a process and a philosophy (Pittman & Irby, 1998). They state, "Youth development is a process by which all young people seek ways to meet their basic physical and social needs and to build competencies (knowledge and skills) necessary to succeed in adolescence and adulthood" (p. 3). This definition gives way to Mr. Jones' multidimensional role in his current capacity as a youth worker and educator. Urban students are faced with much adversity daily. This adversity often compromises their lives. Fortunately, there are teachers and other advocates willing to assist school age youngsters with the navigation of urban life for youth. According to Bernard (1991), youth advocates and developers must act as supports for youth, families, and colleagues, act as a resource to youth, and the community in which they work. Further, Bernard argues that youth advocates and development workers must demonstrate awareness of self as an advocate; this includes their personal vision of youth work, self-evaluation, and quest for feedback. As I

observed and interviewed Mr. Jones, it became strikingly evident that his skill set included a personal vision that included a mission that many other teachers strive to develop. He kept reflective notes on pieces of paper that he read at the end of the day. Additionally, he conferred with colleagues following lessons in the classroom.

Another attribute that colored Mr. Jones' instructional persona was his overall commitment to the well being of all of his students. This is described as caring for youth and families (Bernard, 1991). Many of Mr. Jones' selfless acts are acts of kindness. During a literacy lesson, Mr. Jones' class was interrupted by one of his student's late arrival. Mr. Jones directed students to continue without him so that he would be free to have a brief conversation with his tardy student. Mr. Jones followed the student into the coat closet.

Mr. Jones—Why are you late son?

Student—I missed my bus.

Mr. Jones—How did you miss your bus?

Student—I over slept.

Mr. Jones—Doesn't your sister wake you up every morning?

Student—She is supposed to, but she doesn't always come home at night.

Mr. Jones—Ok. (pulling out his cell phone) Give me your number. I am going to wake you up every morning so that you are not late. Do you have tokens?

Students—I have one for tomorrow.

Mr. Jones— (handing over \$5) Take this to the main office and buy another pack. Make sure that you are on time from now on.

Student—Yes, I will. Thank you Mr. J. (Fieldnotes, 3/ 2/06)

Urban schools are home to the most diverse population of learners (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Acquiring and demonstrating respect for diversity and differences among students, families, and the communities in which they live is often an extremely challenging fete for education professionals practicing in urban schools. Many practitioners do not have the wherewithal to effectively accomplish this task. Like many

classrooms in PS-5 Elementary, Mr. Jones' classroom was "home" to not only African American students, but Latino students as well. Additionally, one of his students resided in a homeless shelter; two were being raised by grandparents over age 60; one student was being reared by a step-parent, as her biological mother was deceased and the biological father lives in Jamaica; 11 students were being reared in single-parent homes; and four students were of working class stature. Together, these students created a colorful mural of experiences, likeness, and cultural differences. Mr. Jones worked hard to come to know and appreciate all of his students. He had a three-ring binder with a section dedicated to each of his students. In each section was a questionnaire completed collectively by a parent or guardian and the student. He also had a contact log and anecdotal notes for everyone. The questionnaire was a set of pertinent questions that helped Mr. Jones realize who his students truly were. According to Bell (1996), appreciating and accepting diversity is critical to the development of the young people we seek to engage. Mr. Jones made fearless strides to pair commonalities and differences while embracing diversity. Mr. Jones allowed his Spanish-speaking students opportunities to converse with one another in their native language. Secondly, many of Mr. Jones' students were equipped with talents beyond academic expertise. He made space to allow students to foster their individual talents and interests. For instance, Mr. Jones allowed two of his students to practice playing their instruments during recess, or choice time. Additionally, he encouraged students interested in poetry to create pieces to be shared with classmates or displayed in the room. These actions contributed to the overall classroom community and the ways in which students developed an appreciation for diversity that will surely help guide decisions later in life. Students learned to

encourage classmates as they practiced and took steps toward improving their talents. Mr. Jones asserts, “I want them to appreciate and accept each other. They need to know and understand that we all contribute to society. Just because we look different, eat different foods, like different things doesn’t make us aliens” (Interview 2, 4/20/06). Mr. Jones’ overall goal for diversity and the appreciation of difference was to allow students to build on diversity within the classroom and use it as a means to strengthen the learning community.

As an educator of young people, Mr. Jones saw himself as a resource to his colleagues, students, and many students outside of his classroom. He often engaged in conversations about education theory and research about teaching and learning and youth development. According to Fleming and Johnson (1996), demonstrating an understanding of youth development and sharing this information with others in the same or similar capacities is key to changing the face of education and youth work. In addition, Mr. Jones had a knack for observing and talking with his students to assess individual needs and fears. This too is a key competence for education professionals and youth workers (Fleming & Johnson, 1996.)

Fleming and Johnson (1996) argue that successful youth workers and educators have the ability to demonstrate the capacity to sustain relations that facilitate youth empowerment. This is often evidenced through the practitioner’s ability to challenge values and attitudes of young people in a supportive manner, affirm and validate their feelings and ideas, and nurture and confirm learning (Fleming & Johnson, 1996). This competence was evident throughout Mr. Jones’ instruction and interaction with his students. For instance, Mr. Jones was able to safely push his students thinking without

devaluing their thoughts. This was evidenced in several examples within this chapter. More specifically, during the class discussion about the Three-6 Mafia, Mr. Jones allowed his students to voice their opinions and simultaneously challenge their values about the highly controversial lyrics. During a similar discussion, Mr. Jones allowed his students to debunk the definition of beauty thus valuing and supporting their ideas and assertions. The affirmation of their personal assumptions surrounding the magazines definition of beauty was both empowering and validating for students. This validation and acceptance helped to create a learning environment that was both comfortable and inviting for all students. As a result, students became healthy risk-takers and contributors to the learning environment. Along with the ability to empower and affirm students' development, educators and youth advocates must have the ability to articulate and maintain appropriate boundaries such as roles, responsibilities, relationships, and confidentiality with students and young people (Bernard, 1991). This was also displayed in many ways. Mr. Jones' students spoke to him in confidence about pressing home situations that they wanted help with. Mr. Jones never shared many details about these private conversations. He did however say "some of their home issues break my heart, these kids are soldiers." (Fieldnotes, 5/25/06) Mr. Jones' role as teacher was truly unique. He often allowed his students to set up gaming devices to be played during inclement weather. Additionally, he often allowed students to see who "he" really was. He shared personal stories about his daughter and his mother, students enjoyed being apart of his personal life. He was truly a human being in their eyes. His students respected his role and looked forward to his guidance.

*Evaluating Student Achievement: Mr. Jones' Indicators of Academic and Social Growth*

In recent years, there has been great emphasis on tracking and comparing academic progress nationwide school district by school district and within school districts (Goddard, Tschannan-Moran, & Hoy, 2003). There are several variables that negatively affect student achievement including, inadequate teachers and schools (Waxman & Padron, 1995). Waxman (1992) describes variables that adversely affect student achievement as environments that (a) alienate students and teachers, (b) provide low standards and low quality of education, (c) have differential expectations for students, (d) have high non-competitive rates for students, (e) are unresponsive to students, (f) have high truancy and disciplinary problems, or (g) do not adequately prepare students for the future. Many of these variables have been noted and documented for decades (Waxman, 1992). According to Mr. Jones, he accounts for many of these hindrances by implementing a system of independence, care, high expectations, preparedness beyond fifth-grade and cultural sensitivity: "I want to educate my students so that they become healthy, and develop a positive sense of self. I want them to develop abilities and motivation to succeed in school and participate fully in family and community life" (Interview 2, 4/20/06).

Achievement in the Meadow Creek School District has been minimal. Very few schools have witnessed steady gains in the content areas of math and reading (District Website, 2006). This harsh reality is not true for students at P.S.-5. Mr. Jones has taught at P.S.-5 for over five years. Each year his students have made significant measurable gains in tested content areas (reading and math), (Standardized Achievement Test, Fall

2002, Spring 2003, Fall 2003, Spring 2004, Spring 2005). Mr. Jones argues, “Oh, city wide, I believe that my children from top to bottom would be able to compete and out perform any children in the city and surrounding counties for that matter” (Interview 2 4/20/06). In direct support of Mr. Jones’ student’s progress, the principal argues,

I can almost bet, that Mr. Jones’ students will out perform the rest of their peers in the same grade in all subjects. For that matter, I call my girlfriends that are principals at other schools and brag about him and the scores that he earns. (Interview 2, 3/16/06)

The principal’s excitement regarding student progress on standardized tests scores is definitely warranted. As mentioned by Mr. Jones, “I usually get all of the students that have behavioral issues. It doesn’t bother me [be] cause I still make drastic improvements” (Interview 3, 6/18/06). Mr. Jones’ students came to him in the beginning of the school in need of rigorous instruction in all content areas. Although Mr. Jones made great progress, he argues that he would not have been able to witness such results had he followed the curriculum and neglected to include his methodology.

Mr. Jones does not feel that increased academic achievement is the sheer most important measurable outcome his students can accomplish; rather he believes that a balance must be achieved that helps to ensure that students develop socially and holistically. Mr. Jones argues that strategies and systems must be in place in order to satisfy both dimensions.

A few years ago I read an article about the fate of youth in urban cities. That article changed my life and my approach to teaching youth forever. The article said that young people need ways to meet their basic physical and social needs to build knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in adolescence and adulthood. So basically I think my job as a classroom teacher has just evolved to include this new holistic approach. (Interview, 2, 4/20/06)

While engaging in general talks with his students during non-instructional time, Mr. Jones often looks to observe what he calls “Mr. Jones’ indicators.” Mr. Jones’ indicators are signs that help him realize whether or not academic and his personally imposed goals and objectives are being met. During one such conversation Mr. Jones noticed that his students were eager to prepare for a fast approaching vocabulary duel against another fifth-grade class in the school. Moreover, students were willing to forgo their recess to prepare for the vocabulary competition. Mr. Jones was elated but not surprised by their dedication and commitment to the community. He asserted,

Children are willing to compete in what they know they’re good in. I try to urge them to prepare for competition so that they always have their best foot forward. I also try to explain to them that life is competitive. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

Howard (2003) reminds us that adequate preparation greatly alters our academic performance. We help to expose learners and competitors to this way of thinking through our awareness of the effects of lack of preparedness. As teachers, learning coaches, and facilitators, we ascribe to this method as it is critical to our survival and success as members of society. Conversations that Mr. Jones had with students about preparedness and preparation were embedded in discussions about being successful and winning.

While academic preparation was so deeply ingrained in Mr. Jones’ daily routine, he did not speak at length about reasons he encouraged his students to study or prepare. Rather, he talked about consequences of not preparing for academic, physical, or personal assessments. He spoke about preparedness metaphorically through competition. Mr.

Jones argued,

All children want to achieve. They want to be successful. You ask a group of students “What do you want to be when they grow up?” The answers you will get are football players, basketball players, doctors, lawyers, actors, actresses. What

[do] they all have in common, they're all successful. You don't hear someone say I want to grow up to be a crack-head, criminal. Because all children want to be successful, the teacher has to find the way to make all children successful. It could be small successes, but you have all the kids feeling good about themselves. Because when kids feel good about themselves, they become more accountable for their actions in the classroom, they become proud of themselves, and it makes them want to try harder. So it is up to all individual teachers to reach every kid and make them successful-even through small successes. And then from there just build upon success gradually. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

Mr. Jones' students challenged the fifth-grade class across the hall from them. A third-year male teacher taught this fifth-grade class. The teachers collectively selected several terms from their reading, social studies, and math textbooks. Additionally, students were given terms from a vocabulary book titled *Vocabulary Cartoons*. As mentioned previously, these terms from this book were equipped with illustrations that helped students make sense of the definition. On the day of the competition, students spent the morning preparing and studying the words that they were given. Students gathered in small groups quizzing one another. At 9:30a.m., the teacher from across hall asked Mr. Jones if he were ready to start. Following their brief conversation, students were instructed to clear their desks, line up, and "put their thinking caps on."

The competition was set up into three rounds. Each student was given the opportunity to respond once within each round. Students were seated in chairs along either side of the classroom. They sat in alphabetical order and waited their turn to showcase their knowledge of the core set of vocabulary terms they reviewed. Round one challenged students to recall the vocabulary terms after listening to the definition, which was read by the competition host, who acted as the daily intermediate level school paraprofessional. Round two called students to recite the definition of the term issued by the competition host. Round three required students to use the term in a complete

sentence that contained context clues that helped others decipher the meaning of the term. After three rounds of battle and serious competition, the students' participation in the vocabulary duel against their fellow fifth-grade schoolmates rendered them champions. When Mr. Jones' students returned to their classroom, they were very excited as they gave each other "hi-fives" and hugs. They noisily took their seats and waited for instructions from Mr. Jones.

Boys and girls I just want to congratulate you on a job well done. You all prepared well, studied hard, and most of all came together as a team. I want you to remember how it feels to be champions and remember how much work it takes to be victorious. Now when we see our opponents, we need to tell them good game, 'cause that's what good people with good sportsmanship do. Now I want us to carry out this preparation in everything we do, better yet, you all need to prepare like this for everything in life. Alright, let's get ready to go to lunch. (Fieldnotes, 4/7/06)

Mr. Jones uses competitions, observations, student assignments and conversations to determine whether or not his students are progressing academically and socially. He affords students several opportunities to display their newly acquired or newly polished skills in myriad of ways. He reveals to me that he felt pressure from his administration and the school district but was confident that his strategies, techniques and skills allow him and his students to prevail.

Although No Child Left Behind also places added pressure on teachers and students, Mr. Jones does not allow this pressure to compromise his pedagogy. He very willingly goes above and beyond his contractual duties to ensure that his students achieve greatness and acquire the skill set necessary to begin preparing for life beyond his class.

## Research Questions Examined

This study began as an exploration of an excellent teacher of literacy in an urban school. I sought to understand how effective teachers of literacy in urban schools define good teaching, the kinds of practices effective urban teachers employ, how this type of instruction impacts learners, and how they measured and defined their effectiveness with urban learners. As I analyzed my data, I found that my case study teacher's commitment to teaching and learning and urban students is deeply rooted in his personal experiences as a grade school student, college student, recent college graduate, and an adult. During the analysis, I found clear connections between the teacher's interest and experiences and the students' interests and experiences. Although the case study teacher, Mr. Jones' role as a classroom teacher was multilayered and multifaceted, his approach was useful to understanding the ways in which excellent teachers provide rich literacy instruction to diverse learners.

In taking steps toward fully understanding the answers to the questions supporting this study, I explored how the answers to my research questions were actually personified in the classroom. In short, the first question that I sought to answer was: *How does Mr. Mike Jones an excellent urban literacy instructor define good teaching? What personal experiences have shaped his beliefs? Do you believe that your teaching methods are shaped by the particular context you teach in? If so, how?*

As I conducted observations and interviews and collected work samples, I came to understand, Mr. Jones' stance on my first research question. Mr. Jones feels that there are many attributes that help to define good teaching of literacy in urban schools. In his words Mr. Jones asserts,

Teachers have to start to expect more out of their children than asking them these simple questions that required a yes or no answer—What day of the week was he in the store? It was Tuesday. Teachers need to start using Bloom’s taxonomy. They need to start using higher-order thinking skills. They need to start using authentic assessments. These types of strategies develop critical thinking skills. We gotta [have to] get out of the box. We gotta [have to] move past bubbling in the answer: choose A, B, C or D. We gotta [have to] have our kids demonstrate that they can, you know, delve deeper into the text. We gotta [have to] teach them how to do that. We gotta [have to] teach them using real-life examples. Real-world problems. We gotta [have to] use cooperative learning groups. Kids learn from kids. You have to train them. You can’t just say: Go in cooperative learning groups. You have to train them how to function in cooperative learning groups. But kids enjoy learning from kids. Um, you have to teach different teaching, I mean learning modalities. Auditory, visual, kinesthetic. You gotta [have to] infuse arts into the curriculum. I mean, look – do you know – you’re telling me that you understand this text. But I want to give you eight different ways for you to show it to me. I’m not going to tell you, you know, write an essay. Now you can write a poem. Create a dance. But do something to show me that you have grasped this text, outside of just I’m going to give you a test. Just bubble in the correct answer. (Interview 3, 6/18/06)

As evidenced in the previous response, Mr. Jones feels that effective teachers employ many different strategies and encourage learning through a multitude of ways. He feels that it is important to move beyond surface level instruction that doesn’t embrace high expectations, care and cultural relevance.

Mr. Jones felt that many of his personal experiences have impacted his teaching style. Further, he argues that all teachers are influenced by their personal experiences.

For Mr. Jones, he shared:

Well . . . I know growing up, I didn’t have a lot of exposure to African American authors. Especially since we’re teaching at a predominantly African American school. I try to bring in authors who represent, who are underrepresented generally. Women authors. African American and Hispanic authors. Just try to make the reading relevant to their lives. I mean, the way I got into reading as a young kid was just to read stuff that I was interested in. So I just bring that into the classroom. I mean, I try to – you know, you can force feed someone text, and you can turn them off to reading. You can make them read stuff that they absolutely can’t stand, and as a result they don’t want to read anymore. So I just

find stuff – I try to find stuff that kids are interested in reading. (Interview 2, 3/20/06)

Another sub-question within my initial research question deals with context. Researchers argue that context greatly influences teaching practices. Mr. Jones wholeheartedly agrees.

Teachers need to know that many of our children have limited exposure to the real world. There are cultural barriers. I had a kid once who couldn't understand the concept of a see-saw. He didn't understand that the bigger person was at the bottom of the see-saw, 'cause [because] he swore he had never been on a see-saw before. I mean, you know- you're writing about Maggie about a beach collecting seashells and starfish, and if you have a kid who's never been to the beach, that kid has no idea what Maggie's doing in the story. So you gotta understand that our kids have limited exposure. So that's – to me, teaching literary texts is about making the texts relevant to their lives, somehow. And if the kids don't have that exposure, they have no relevance. So that's why you gotta know this. You can't assume stuff. You can't assume that somebody's been to the beach, been to the farm. You can't even assume somebody's been on the subway before. So don't make assumptions about what you expect the children to know. What the children know is what they know. What you need to do is find out what they know, and build off of that. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

This sub-question sparked an intense conversation between Mr. Jones and me. He went on to note,

Kids in urban cities see and face obstacles on a daily basis that kids in suburban middle class neighborhoods have no idea. And these obstacles are obstacles to student achievement. These obstacles cause students – they hinder student achievement. I mean, the problems are obvious. Parents who do not participate in their children's lives, but abuse drugs, and, alcohol and engage in violent behavior. I'm doing it for the kids. We have to prepare our urban children to compete. Because the fact is they're already going to have a hard enough time. The opportunities in the middle class neighborhoods are vast – they have a lot of opportunities. Urban cities – few and far between. So we have to equip our children, not only with the knowledge, but embed a sense of competition and passion in them, and go get 'em spirit, so they can go out there and compete with their peers. They don't feel inadequate. I teach in the atmosphere – the atmosphere set at my school is an atmosphere of high expectations. And I teach to that. I hold high expectations in my classroom. And, so – do all the teachers at my school. Oh no. Some of it's – it's a belief – the point is my belief is that black boys, especially black boys – black children in general, but especially black

boys – are going to have a hard enough time just trying to get a job in America. And without an education, you know, they're just going to be another lost generation. It's a social issue. I try to embed success in my kids socially so they can compete.

Like many teachers, teaching and learning in urban spaces requires a dual focus. They must strike a balance between content area instruction and preparation for life outside of the confines of their classrooms. For many urban area teachers, accomplishing this often self-imposed goal is a major challenge that requires quick thinking and commitment beyond the daily tour of duty. For Mr. Jones, this came somewhat naturally.

Relationships were established in most cases prior to his students' entry into his fifth-grade class, but only as late as their official enrollment. This helped to guide his practice. Secondly, his expectations and care for each student individually regardless of race or class played a significant role. Also, wanting his students to achieve optimal success both socially and academically prompted the inclusion of many non-traditional practices that proved to be beneficial which leads me to my next research question.

The second question I set out to answer was: *What kinds of practices did Mr. Jones an excellent urban literacy educator employ? What professional development experiences have helped to influence Mr. Jones' instruction? How did the school / community context (neighborhood, leadership, colleagues) shape his teaching?*

The first portion of this question is extremely broad and does not fit neatly into a teacher recipe. I noticed that ultimately, my case study teacher exuded a high level of expectations, care and commitment to teaching and learning. While he held his students to a high degree of expectations, he was talented enough to realize that he must also perform in a manner that helped to ensure that all of his students met his expectations.

As mentioned previously, this meant forgoing planning periods and lunch, and personal breaks to assist students through extra tutorial services, phone calls to both students and their care providers or guardians, and conducting difficult conversations that were not generally conducted by other teachers. Because he cared deeply for his students and was overly dedicated and committed to his profession, he worked hard to incorporate best practice measures while researching and adjusting new and previously utilized procedures.

As mentioned previously, Mr. Jones' work and responsibilities extended far beyond his contractual agreement with the school district. He scheduled hair appointments for students, acted as personal alarm clocks, chauffeurs, music and literary critics, and managed to facilitate teaching and learning in a well-structured culturally sensitive environment. While teaching literacy, Mr. Jones included practices that included all learners, struggling readers as well as advanced and averaged readers were given opportunities to improve literacy skills. He creatively infused critical literacy that encouraged the deconstruction of stereotypes and exclusions of people of color. He recalled his alienation in elementary school and reacted accordingly, providing students with opportunities to read widely. Additionally, he helped to embrace funds of knowledge by including hip-hop, something that was well studied and embraced by all students. As a result of this infusionist approach, Mr. Jones' students developed holistically and globally, realizing that they as students of color were contributing to their learning.

Mr. Jones' practices that helped to facilitate instruction that was both needs based and meaningful included a wide array of instructional tactics all of which place the

culture of his students and the context in which learning is taking place at the forefront of his quest. Further, his practices afforded students access to higher-order thinking activities that supported reading comprehension, mastery learning, and critical thinking. Turner (2005) argues, “Without these key components students have fewer opportunities to acquire the ways of reading, using, thinking about, and talking about texts that are valued in school” (p. 3).

Additionally, during the preparation for the “It’s Academic” competition, Mr. Jones worked hard to convince his colleagues to include a sub-section titled “popular culture.” This sub-section considered the funds of knowledge students were most comfortable with. Funds of knowledge refer to the knowledge base that underlies the product exchange activities of groups (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). Further, the inclusion of hip-hop, media, and culturally sensitive texts also allowed students to become contributors and producers of knowledge within the learning community.

Mr. Jones asserts that the leadership and overall community within and around the school shape teaching and learning. Mr. Jones said,

As far as the community. . . Seeing the community overall, and seeing some of the lack of – some of the lack of opportunities my kids do have. And just—some people seem to be unmotivated. When you have community members who do not take interest in the child’s education, as far as my motivation is concerned, that motivates me *more*. Again, it goes back to my problem students. Now these students can possibly be a product of their environment, of what they’re seeing at home—they’re unmotivated. I try to call the mom, the mom’s not there, I don’t meet her at all. So I’m motivated to teach that student. With my colleagues, I mean, we share best practices. I go into—I frequently go in my colleague’s classrooms. I just sit there at the door and watch ‘em. I try to pick up little things. The leadership. Always telling our kids they’re proficient and advanced, and setting the tone of high expectations. I mean, that motivates *me*. It motivates me to know that my principal believes that these children can learn and that the teachers can teach. And when somebody believes in you and gives you- and

empowers you, you take ownership in the organization. And you want to work harder. You want to go the extra mile. (Interview 3, 6/18/06)

Mr. Jones' knowledge of urban students and their needs allowed him to become what Murrell (2001) describes as a community teacher. Mr. Jones considered the contextual factors that impacted teaching and learning and began to provide instruction that was "wrap-around". He seamlessly bridged the gap between the home and school allowing students to be successful in many endeavors through his literacy instruction.

Finally, my third question was: *How Mr. Jones' instruction impact learners? What did Mr. Jones believe has been the impact on urban learners? Do you believe that your practices have affected urban learners in particular ways? How has Mr. Jones measured and defined their effectiveness with urban learners?* As I witnessed first-hand Mr. Jones' answer to this question, I experienced a re-emerging commitment to urban education. I again came to realize that good is not good enough as it relates to urban education. As evidenced in his pedagogy, practice, fieldnotes, interviews and conversations, Mr. Jones is absolutely sure that his instruction impacts learners in countless ways. Mr. Jones argued that his style encourages independent thought, critical thinking, and strategic problem solving. Specifically, Mr. Jones asserts,

From the time my students enter my class until they leave me in June, they are developing and growing as thinkers and learners. When they come to me, I can almost bet that their previous teachers did not teach like me. I think my style is unique, it's not extraordinary or anything like that, but it does require a lot of self-sacrifice and commitment. Many teachers in schools like this are burn-out and not able to perform like me cause [because] they are stuck trying to use methods that they learned in college. Those methods don't always work for students in PS.-5. (Interview 2, 4/20/06)

Measuring and realizing immediate and residual effects of high-quality literacy instruction is often challenging to capture. However, through the use of observation,

anecdotal notes, conversations and assessments, Mr. Jones was able to notice significant changes in students' literate behaviors and an increase in assessment scores. After implementing the *Book Club Plus* program, students were excited about reading another novel as a community. They expressed their pleasure with completing an entire book and were eagerly awaiting the start of a new text. Further, students also attempted to coerce Mr. Jones to infuse hip-hop by asking questions about rap artist and sharing the views and opinions about lyrics and music videos, in hopes that Mr. Jones would hear these conversations and include them in the daily lessons. Witnessing student attempts to shape literature practices within a learning community speaks volumes. Many students especially struggling readers and disengaged readers extend every effort to avoid literacy instruction. While Mr. Jones labeled five of 18 of his students struggling readers, these students were also very involved during the literacy block and benefited greatly from his diverse methods. Mr. Jones' indicators of success included him wanting his students to develop a healthy sense of self. Providing students with safe space to deconstruct text, explore their social worlds and bring the cultures to school with them allowed them the opportunity to do just that. Further, Mr. Jones implementation of structures outside of his tour of duty description also helped to ensure that students were successful and felt cared for.

Not only were Mr. Jones' beliefs about his students' abilities to grow and prosper as students and young adults positive, his efficacy beliefs were also strong. Mr. Jones made every effort to be a better teacher and advocate for his students. While he believed he was "the best teacher at PS.-5" (Interview 3, 6/18/06), he knew that there was more to learn about educating and supporting young people. As a result, he read scholarly articles

and frequently engaged in conversations surrounding teaching and learning in elementary schools. Through his attempt to self-develop, Mr. Jones noticed something. He argued,

You know something, I read articles because I'm trying to finish up my Master's degree and I just basically want to be a better a teacher. But the stuff I read about strategies and techniques to include in your day-to-day teaching, all talk about kids somewhere far off in a suburban place, where resources are over-flowing, crime rates are low, and outside factors that hinder learning are almost non-existent. I am starting to really believe that I need to write about what I do, cause [because] what I do is for urban kids, right here in the hood. (Fieldnotes 5/10/06)

Clearly, urban schools struggle to offset inequities that exist in many different facets.

First, teachers actually working in these spaces generally lack standard credentials and are not prepared to adequately teach in these schools (Banks, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Gay, 2000). Secondly, contextual differences impact learning and school community expectations. Third, teacher preparation programs are not preparing pre-service teachers to teach and effect change in these locales (Murrell, 2001; Zeichner, 2003). Lastly, urban schools often witness many structural constraints due to bureaucratic decisions (Waxman & Pardon, 1995). Although these issues are daunting and often difficult to manage, Mr. Jones refuses to take a position close to home. He is committed to teaching and impacting the lives of urban young people. Mr. Jones claimed,

Sure I can teach in the county. For that matter, I can save on time, gas and stress. I can teach at the school right across the street from my house, walk to work and be the teacher next door. But I know that my students need me, especially my black boys. They are getting lost. It is up to me and the other men out there to make a major difference. (Interview 3, 6/18/06)

### Summary

Overall, it is apparent that this teacher was widely nominated and highly successful with his students. It is his deep commitment to teaching and learning and his

vast toolkit that allows him to achieve such greatness in the classroom. Experience, education, diversity among students, and student interest help him create powerful literacy lessons that force students to engage with tasks and become healthy risk takers. Data from the interviews, fieldnotes, and observations support findings from the qualitative analysis that state that this education professional has solved the puzzle for engaging urban elementary students in effective literacy lessons that have garnered increased levels of academic success. My case study teacher, an extremely confident and knowledgeable educator, feels certain that he can continue to impact lives through his unique approach to literacy instruction. The final chapter will discuss the results of this study and implications for instructional practice and future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLICATIONS

#### Summary

After five months of observation of Mr. Jones' literacy program and documenting the practices and pedagogy supporting teaching and learning in his classroom, I closed a major chapter in my life and anxiously began a new one. My new chapter began with a renewed sense of purpose and a great sense of personal responsibility to share what I have gleaned from this experience as a researcher. I learned an enormous amount about urban schooling and the factors that support quality instruction and the implementation of new literacies in urban environments. While much has been written about the challenges urban schools face, there are still few studies that capture the essence of excellent literacy instruction in urban schools. Mr. Jones' commitment to his students and the overall contribution he made to the PS-5 community is what I consider priceless. The administration as well as teaching staff respected and valued his contribution as an educator and silent mentor to staff members. As a former practitioner having also taught in an urban public school for several years, I argue that Mr. Jones' practices are relatively rare. The themes that were evident throughout my observation are not only worthy of mention and consideration, but need to be emphasized and implemented in urban classrooms nationwide.

As I took steps toward crafting this study, I tried to carefully consider my role as a researcher, teacher educator, and elementary practitioner. I approached this study from a bit of an "insider's" perspective. Although, I knew nothing about Mr. Jones' students and the PS-5 learning community, I knew a great deal about urban learners and their

historical academic achievement, social needs, and assumptions about how to “fix” urban education. Nothing could have prepared me for what I observed and documented throughout my work on this dissertation. Daily, I wrestled with a couple of questions that helped to focus my observations. These questions were: Can what he is doing in his classroom at this point help to close the achievement gap between cultural groups in the content area of reading and literacy? Can I teach pre-service as well as in-service teachers to do what he is doing? Are his students truly benefiting from these practices, if so how? Are students actively engaged, what is prompting their engagement? Is he including and modeling sound strategies for reading and literacy development? Are students eager to continue to develop as literate persons? These questions are at the heart of my research and are embedded in my implications. I also spent time critically examining, his tone, speech, expectations, content knowledge, and overall breadth of knowledge surrounding teaching and learning in urban schools. The relationships between my personal questions are the types of questions we as researchers need to consider as we research, share strategies, skills, and best practices in literacy instruction for urban learners with others.

### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the pedagogy and processes an excellent teacher of literacy employed in order to design literacy instruction that increased student achievement in literacy. Through data collection from daily literacy lessons, materials analyses, and formal and informal interviews, several themes emerged. Using a qualitative case study design approach allowed me to explore several facets of excellent teaching and learning of literacy in fifth-grade urban elementary

classroom. Utilizing observations, interviews, artifacts, and fieldnotes, I was able to develop an in-depth case study that provided insight into one excellent teacher of literacy practice. In conclusion, the findings uncovered the combination of sociocultural theory, culturally relevant theory, new literacies, and youth development frameworks enlisted by Mr. Jones in order to conduct excellent teaching practices.

I began by exploring and connecting his personal experiences to that of his students and his very intricate teaching strategies. I then discussed the impact his personal experiences and commitment had on the teaching and learning of literacy in his fifth-grade classroom. Finally, I threaded Mr. Jones' pedagogy and systematic approach to teaching and learning to prepare this story of excellent teaching. Weaved throughout this dissertation are questions about excellent teaching and examples that illustrate practices that engage the often hardest to teach learners.

#### Research Questions:

1. How do effective urban literacy instructors define good teaching?
  - a. What personal experiences have shaped those beliefs?
  - b. Do they believe that their teaching methods are shaped by the particular context they teach in? If so, how?
2. What kinds of practices do effective urban literacy educators employ?
  - a. What professional development experiences have helped to influence their instruction?
  - b. How does the school / community context (neighborhood, leadership, colleagues) shape their teaching?

3. How does this instruction impact learners? What do teachers believe has been the impact on the urban learners?
  - a. Do they believe that their practices have affected urban learners in particular ways?
  - b. How have they measured and defined their effectiveness with urban learners?

The research questions that helped to shape this study focused on the strategies employed, the demographics of the school and environment and the Mr. Jones' personal reflection and thoughts on effective teaching and learning of literacy. Embedded in the displays written about throughout this study are the dimensions and layers that attribute to excellent teaching and learning in urban schools.

This dissertation was designed to highlight the importance of blending various theoretical perspectives for understanding the invaluable impact excellent teachers in urban schools have on the lives of young people which they serve. The theories that support this study-- sociocultural theory, critical theory and culturally relevant pedagogy - offer useful lenses for realizing the numerous effects excellent teachers of literacy have on urban education. Sociocultural theory allows researchers to understand the impact of this teacher's prior experiences, expectations, concepts, values and practices emphasized to garner intentional outcomes from elementary students (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1970). Mr. Jones' performance and strategy in the classroom is a reflection of his prior experience, expectations and values. Specifically, Mr. Jones made courageous efforts to include new literacy practices in his day-to-day instruction. He introduced students to news ways of viewing and deconstructing text and multimedia. He allowed his students

to create personal space within the learning. As a student in grade school and in college, Mr. Jones faced challenges trying to acquire space and become part of the learning communities.

As he mentioned in his personal story, Mr. Jones did not develop healthy relationships with his fellow school mates in elementary, middle and high schools. As a result, Mr. Jones fostered and promoted collaboration, cooperative learning and teaming in his learning community. Students are expected to collectively solve problems and support one another. Conversely, Mr. Jones also promoted a sense of independence and personal competitiveness. This too is a result of his relationships or lack there of relationships among his grade school peers. Often, Mr. Jones competed against his self as his thoughts and perspectives of various subject matter and even recreation were not considered or valued. It is these experiences that push Mr. Jones to encourage his students to be the absolute best at all times. In addition to this, Mr. Jones stated that black students, especially black boys are in dire need of positive male role modeling and mentorship. His brief mentor/mentee relationship with Khalil in undergraduate school and his youth developer approach to his work as an educator and youth advocate exemplifies his desire to provide young boys with relationships that have been intentionally created to encourage positive and healthy social growth.

While sociocultural theory helped ground the understanding of Mr. Jones' personal experiences, critical theory provided a lens through which I looked to understand his vision of teaching and learning in urban schools. According to Gay (2004), the goals of critical theory are to “expose contradictions in culture, explain how conventional curriculum and instruction perpetuate the socioeconomic exploitation and

subjugation present in society, and to create more egalitarianism in schools and societies” (p. 31). This goal allows the more knowledgeable other to problematize common experiences and learn from each other. Mr. Jones’ role in the class as the instructional leader allowed him to assist students as they made connections between their positionality as presented in the traditional curriculum and their position according to their teacher. As noted in chapter four of this dissertation, Mr. Jones’ student argued that there social studies text lacked pictures of and content pertaining African Americans. Mr. Jones’ response was to allow students to challenge the text by researching history to locate contradictions. His solution offered a realistic alternate while simultaneously encouraging self regulated learning and a sense of historical existence and importance.

Culturally relevant pedagogy, as described by Howard, (2001) and Ladson-Billings (1994), is an effective means of meeting the social and academic needs of culturally diverse learners. Culturally relevant pedagogy was a theoretical frame that was consistently employed throughout Mr. Jones’ teaching and interactions with young people. As Mr. Jones worked hard to provide his students with quality instruction and social development, he considered their likenesses, culture and cultural experiences and areas of personal need. Particularly, Mr. Jones frequently reviewed and updated his student data sheets and anecdotal records, in an effort to include students’ interest and funds of knowledge into literacy lessons. He infused hip-hop by conducting examinations of lyrics and questioning societal reactions to popular hip-hop artists. Also included was the use of novels that portrayed African Americans and other minorities as main characters, giving students’ opportunities to see themselves in the text. More importantly, as a youth developer, Mr. Jones made every effort to support his students

holistically. He scheduled and negotiated hair appointments, provided students with “wake-up calls”, supplied car-fare, provided students with transportation when he felt it necessary and motivated and encouraged students to think and apply skills that they have acquired both in school and outside of school. As noted by Gay (2000), culturally relevant pedagogy, uses “cultural knowledge, prior experiences and frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective for students.” Although many of the examples supplied above are not traditionally academically based, students are placed in positions to learn important life lessons that contribute to their overall wellness development and care for other community members.

Although the aforementioned theories helped me to make sense of Mr. Jones’ teaching, they were not enough. Absent were the descriptions of an important dimension I termed youth development work and youth advocacy. I drew upon literature described in writings for and about young people nationwide, mainly young people in urban communities. Studies conducted in the toughest, most violent, and drug infested communities revealed a stark need to provide young people with access to teachers, mentors, and programming that was designed to prevent the downward spiral of young generations (Bernard, 1991). Further, it was derived from the realization that schools alone could not provide young people namely young people in urban communities with the necessary skills to become self-sustainable and transition them to successful adulthood living (Walker, 2002). Despite the official intended purpose of this study, I would be remised if I neglected to include this very important theme present in this study. The relationships, care, communicative style, and quest to be an agent of change for

students Mr. Jones exercised in learning within his community captured the essence of youth advocacy and youth development work. As a researcher who intimately studied Mr. Jones' practice, I argue that excellent teaching of literacy in urban schools is inclusive of the notion and epistemologies associated with youth advocacy and youth development work.

The theories that provided the lens through which I looked and the theory that newly emerged addressed a major shortcoming within educational programs for adolescent students. Moje (2002) argues that students are dismissed and overlooked as educational programs are created and that many of the learning experiences are disconnected from their lives. Mr. Jones' teaching approach provides teachers and educators with a way to place adolescent voices and likenesses at the center of instruction. As Mr. Jones positioned himself in multiple roles, he allowed students to see him as a caring person that encouraged students to achieve academically while taking strides toward preparing for the future.

#### Outcome Measures for Teacher Effectiveness

*Students' academic growth.* It is extremely likely that the students' reading levels increased substantially. According to Mr. Jones' anecdotal notes, assessments, and observations, his students made drastic improvements in literacy. Unfortunately, the district was piloting a new standardized assessment, as scores earned could not be compared to scores earned in previous years. Noteworthy was Mr. Jones' performance school wide. Mr. Jones and his students as a unit outperformed the other fifth grade classes at PS-5.

Pivotal to this section highlighting academic growth and expansion is the student's exposure to critical literacy. While it can be challenging to assess student's understand of critical literacy, Mr. Jones argued that critical literacy interested his students the most. Unpacking text, song lyrics and decoding photographs allowed students to evolve and develop as thinkers and decision makers. As this classroom and instructional facilitation of Mr. Jones will not always comfort students, they were well equipped to leave his classroom with a wealth of knowledge that is sure to impact their lives for years to come.

*Students Social Development.* Mr. Jones' commitment to adolescent students was demonstrated in all aspects of his work; not just educating young people, but to ensure that they are equipped for success beyond the classroom. As noted by Catapano (2006), advocacy strategies "help recognize the problem, view the issue through multiple lenses, and then problem solving through brainstorming and reflection and apply to classroom situations to develop alternative strategies to support children and families in urban settings" (p. 17). Clearly, Mr. Jones' relationship with his students and families within the learning community allowed him to execute advocacy strategies. Mr. Jones cares about hand his students and is extremely compassionate to those in need. For instance, in the case of a female student who lost her biological mother and has never meet her biological father, but resides with her step father, Mr. Jones organizes bi-weekly hair appointments for this students. He argued, "I noticed that when my students look un-kept, they are less-likely to behave and participate in class. She's a wonderful little girl who has experienced a lot, so I try to make sure that she keeps her hair neat" (Fieldnotes, 2/15/06). Mr. Jones' experiences as an adolescent youth may be partially to blame for his

sense of justice. Learning in spaces that were never welcoming to him helped Mr. Jones develop a sense of justice for marginalized young people. Promoting success and the will and determination to try, helps students to develop and think. All of these assist students with not only growing academically, but also socially.

### Implications for Urban In-Service Literacy Teachers: Practices and Professional Development

The continued support and education for educators and administrators is largely based on professional development. Many school districts nationwide require teachers to continue their education and advance their knowledge of content area and pedagogical practices through professional development courses or graduate level courses offered through institutes, colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Traditionally, professional development has been inclusive of an overview of best practices or content area instruction (Zeichner, 2003). In order to meet the needs of diverse students and students attending schools in urban areas, professional development must include intensive multicultural education, namely multicultural literacy instruction. Gay (2000) discusses at length the success of her program titled, *Multicultural Literacy Program*. According to Gay, the program included multiethnic literature, whole language approaches, and a sociocultural sensitive learning environment. Like Mr. Jones' literacy instruction, her program resonates with students' creative ways of thinking and illuminates common human connections among ethnic people (Gay, 2000).

Many urban teachers find themselves spending their days struggling to make sense of their class size, teach the prescribed curriculum, and maintain order; therefore very little time is left to the development of critical collegueships and personal reflection

(Cuban, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lord, 1993). The inclusion of such measures may create much needed space for in-service practitioners and administrators to re-examine and re-evaluate their current practices and the resources available to students and teachers charged with the task of engaging and facilitating instruction for students in urban schools. According to Valli (1997) reflection encompasses the looking back on “assumptions and beliefs to be sure that they are grounded in logic, evidence, or both and it looks forward to the implications or consequences of a particular course of action” (p. 68). As a result, reflection allows teachers to make pedagogical decisions that were clearly thought out and grounded in context. Further, critical collegiality grants teachers space to collaborate and share practices that have garnered students’ growth. For instance, conversing with a colleague about infusing hip-hop into literacy lessons encourages urban schoolteachers to consider and include the voices and perspectives of those that teach intentionally and unintentionally. Meaning, many hip-hop artists consider themselves teachers (Quinn, 2005). As students discuss the work of hip-hop artists with more knowledgeable others they are given opportunities to extract meaning from text. Critical collegiality that is centered around the sharing of practices and ideas that engage students and promote academic and social growth have the potential to change professional development for all (Lord, 1993).

Although researchers have conducted extensive studies to design the most effective professional development programs for reading instruction in general, few if any have been designed to address urban learners. As noted by Joyce and Showers, (2002) and Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampton (1998), high-quality professional development positively influences student achievement, especially in

literacy. L'Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) present the top ten strategies for creating high-quality professional development in reading. They argue that reading professional development should (a) build a community of learners that are sustained over time; (b) operate from a data driven perspective; (c) focus on evidenced based practices; (d) focus on reading as a meaning-making process used for pleasure, for gathering/learning information and for performing a task; (e) include facilitator-led or teacher-led discussions; (f) make connections to text, professional practice, personal experiences, and other professional development related experiences; (g) employ a gradual release of responsibility framework; (h) acknowledge the complexity of teaching in today's classroom; (i) address logistical issues associated with teaching, and (j) model important teacher dispositions.

The ideas presented above allow education leaders to frame professional development programs that are designed to help teachers develop skill sets that include content knowledge as well as open dispositions to urban learners. The 10 strategies necessary for devising high-quality professional development include many factors evident in new literacies, as it rejects some forms of traditional professional development. For instance, strategy number five affords critical collegueship groups time to share their practices with colleagues school wide as well as district wide. Strategy number nine encourages educators to consider the context in which they teach. Many practices are not feasible due to many contextual realities that may hinder full implementation of models under consideration.

L'Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) present a refreshing scope for professional development that provides educators with a framework to consider. Outdated models of

professional development often rely heavily on structures that include sessions conducted by outside consultants that “spray” teachers with information and “pray” that they will leave the session enlightened and prepared to implement the strategies discussed (Stone, 2004). Professional development is undoubtedly one way to improve student achievement in literacy. However, the kind of professional development afforded to teachers in urban spaces must consider both strategies like those presented by L’Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) and strategies made evident in this dissertation. The evaluation of current professional development efforts in urban schools requires leaders to envision meaning full change and transformation aimed at educational improvements (Fullan, 2001). The work of L’Allier and Elish-Piper offer a refreshing framework for the evaluation and design of professional development in urban schools.

The arguments presented here support the need for the evaluation and re-crafting of current professional development programs designed for improving literacy in urban schools. A broader scope and sequence that includes new literacies should be a part of this very important aspect of teaching and learning countrywide. In addition to this, training teachers to develop skills sets as youth development workers with dispositions that foster both academic and social growth for students is essential. Providing teachers with the training and support needed to become practitioners that are willing to transition toward a movement that helps them to embody “Mr. Jones’ Way” is central to professional development for literacy instruction in urban schools. The knowledge, skills and dispositions that Mr. Jones has will allow teachers to transition into excellent instructors of literacy in urban schools.

First, clear content knowledge allows Mr. Jones to draw a balance between teaching core skills that enable learners to actually read and respond to text and incorporating new literacies that permit learners to build upon their interests, funds of knowledge, and experiences as members of our society. Breadth of content knowledge varies widely as many educators have been trained to instruct literacy and reading in primary grades, where the focus is on phonics, decoding, blending, and actually providing students with the skills that allow them to understand how print works and the many roles it plays in people's lives (Purcell-Gates, 1997). In intermediate grades, the focus begins to shift, as teachers are taught to build upon the core skills introduced in primary grades and continue to help students become better more fluent readers while they comprehend text (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; Pressley, 1998). Secondly, providing practitioners with opportunities to develop the skills and strategies needed to provide students with sound instruction is vital to the success of the overall literacy program in elementary schools (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998). Lastly, Afflerbach (2000) argues, "As our understanding of curriculum, instruction, and learning evolve, so too should our research foci" (p. 174). This argument supports the need to adjust current professional development structures in urban schools for literacy instruction so that they are now inclusive of recent trends and new literacies.

The infusion of core elements of Mr. Jones' practice as an excellent teacher of literacy in an urban school can occur in a plethora of ways. The key themes presented in this dissertation have been weaved together to uncover a dynamic program for urban learners. The first key theme, is perhaps the most important theme discussed in this study, it is Mr. Jones' deep-rooted commitment to his students' academic achievement

and social development. This theme, multilayered and extremely complex, lends itself to the critical need for colleges and universities to attract, retain, and prepare only highly committed practitioners with open dispositions to our field. As noted by Banks (2006), Au and Raphael (2000), and Murrell (1996), research on pre-service teachers has exposed their attitudes about students and perceptions of self. Using such studies in an effort to identify potential assets to the education arena may save resources and most importantly lives.

As evidenced in the findings of this dissertation, access to highly effective teachers of literacy in urban schools brings forth access to our literacy-based society for children living and learning in urban spaces (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Commonly, students of color have in urban schools often had limited access to effective teachers in general, and effective teachers of literacy, and therefore have less than desirable and meaningful experiences with instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This calls for the immediate inclusion of courses designed to expose and the attitudes and racial perceptions of teachers of color. This inclusion places the needs of urban schools at the forefront of education reform throughout the country.

Creating literacy spaces and environments that welcome, empower, and speak to the needs and desires of diverse learners, is perhaps the key to successful literacy facilitation in urban schools. Utilizing literature and other texts that allow students to make connections to their lives and their experiences outside of school bridges gaps between curricula that doesn't speak to the needs and experiences of non-mainstream students (Delpit, 1998). As my research suggests, this teacher considered the academic needs, interests, cultural identities of students, and challenges present in the larger society

while creating opportunities to explore and learn. Mr. Jones' role as a youth development worker allowed him to continually include and consider students. Many young people in urban spaces do not have the opportunities and experiences that help them to grow mentally and socially. For urban students, these opportunities rarely come from parents. As a result, teachers, youth program workers, and other adults working with adolescent youth are charged with helping to develop young people. During literacy discussions, Mr. Jones helped students to (a) develop skills to discuss conflicting values, (b) experience active participation in class, (c) develop important relationships with him and with their fellow classmates and, most importantly, to (d) strive to be successful all while realizing that success if possible. Affirming and supporting their talents opened possibilities for them to be creative and imaginative thinkers (Delpit, 1988). As a result, texts were used in ways that responded to his student's academic, social, and cultural needs. In order to prevent further exacerbation of the achievement gap that exists between students of color and students of European descent, we must make central the inclusion of the strategies and practices highlighted in this dissertation.

#### Implications for Pre-Service Teachers

Teacher preparation programs in the United States, largely based on curriculum and instruction, have been designed to provide pre-service instructors with the content knowledge and best practice methods suited for students of European descent (Grant, Elsbree & Fondrie, 2004). While the landscape of public education in grades K-12 is becoming more diverse, the pre-service education programs have been relatively slow to respond to the nation's diversity (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

In his book, *The Community Teacher: A New Framework for Effective Urban Teaching*, Peter Murrell (2001) discusses the need to improve the quality of teacher education programs in the United States. His stance was supported by reports issued by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, (NCTAF) in 1996. Murrell argued:

The NCTAF issued a report concluding that the teaching profession had been degraded over the years by uneven teacher education, hit-or-miss induction of new teachers, and outdated systems of evaluating, rewarding, and developing teaching practice. To address this, Congress passed the Higher Education Act of 1998. Title II of the legislation calls for reforms in the training of teachers and teaching quality. (17)

Research and researchers have indicated that despite this renewed commitment to improve teacher education programs and teacher quality especially in urban spaces, teacher preparation programs have not shown any greater capacity to prepare teachers for successful work in diverse urban schools (Melnick & Zeichner, 1997; Murrell, 2001; NCTAF, 1996). To that end, pre-service teachers will need to seek and enter programs that are inclusive of a series of multicultural education, diversity courses and practicum experiences in diverse settings. Course work and multicultural and urban field placements must be incorporated throughout content area methods courses and basic requisite courses. Fragmentation of single multicultural education and diversity courses will not suffice. Pre-Service teachers enrolled in undergraduate education programs or accelerated certification programs must be exposed to the incorporation of cultural pluralism in all aspects of the educational process (Gay, 1995). This assertion presented by Gay, requires that these pre-service educators have a deep understanding of their personal knowledge and beliefs as well as cultural knowledge and values for the learning

process. According to Murrell (2001), the many challenges facing urban schools and teachers working in or seeking work in these spaces deals largely with their ability to effect change in the broader social, political, and historical context in which unequal schooling is constructed, rather than simply working effectively with students of color.

In order to begin to take strides toward addressing the needs of urban literacy learners, I argue for the incorporation of a unique program that allows in-service and pre-service teachers to research the needs of urban students and communities based on context, familial structure, cultural needs, and personal needs. Supporting practitioners in these aspects helps to ensure that students will receive services that “wrap-around” and extend beyond the mandated curriculum. Teacher talk and thoughts that include such statements as “I’ve put in my time here” and “they don’t want to learn,” needs to be refocused and channeled toward continually making change and impacting lives for the benefit of all. Mr. Jones, a practitioner that uses youth development techniques, has mastered this approach to teaching and learning. These teachers now equipped with the skill sets and desire to encourage students’ life long success is embedded throughout the notion of youth development work.

#### Implications for No Child Left Behind

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a federal reform enacted to promote accountability within public education, was designed to embrace school choice and eliminate the achievement gap (Fussarelli, 2007). This education reform model forced school districts to illustrate the relationship between federal dollars they receive and academic outcomes. Further, the legislation requires standardized testing in grades 3-8 in math and reading. Schools must achieve adequate yearly progress in its entirety and

among each subgroup in order to maintain funding. Schools that do not achieve adequate yearly progress jeopardize their funding and local school control. In addition, students attending failing schools are given the option to withdraw from the respective failing school and enroll in other successful schools in their local districts. Unfortunately, this forces schools to compete for both students and funding by illustrating academic gains sanctioned by NCLB. Because of this, urban schools providing educational opportunities to students of color will continue to witness progress in students' testing performance that renders unsatisfactory student achievement. Aside from this, persistently failing schools are required to offer supplemental tutorial services or make funds available for parents seeking to find external academic provisions.

The lofty goals of NCLB are specifically to leave no child behind and minimize the achievement gap; however, testing measures and funding linked to NCLB will narrow curricula. As a result, students that are in need of rigorous comprehensive instruction will receive instruction that follows a skill and drill roadmap (Haney, 2000). According to Hunter and Bartee (2003), NCLB will perpetuate inequalities by sanctioning or withholding funding from schools that serve low-performing and low-income students of color. Although NCLB suggests that schools disaggregate performance data and use information gleaned to drive instructional foci, NCLB does not make room for or encourage an instructional approach that is sensitive to urban learners. Findings from this study suggest that testing in urban schools is far too narrow. Policy makers, stakeholders and education practitioners must begin to take steps toward including assessments that have been designed with the likenesses of urban learners in mind. Data from these assessments can be used in the same manner as traditional standardized assessments.

## Areas for Continued Research

Realizing that the road ahead of educators and researchers worldwide continues to evolve and lengthen, we are presented with a daunting yet accomplishable challenge. This challenge includes, but is not limited to, the effective facilitation of literacy instruction for students in urban schools. Because urban education has been plagued with many systemic and racialized issues, extensive research to explore methods to recruit new teachers from education programs that emphasize multicultural education or urban studies must be conducted. Results from this research will lead to the placement of better-prepared practitioners in schools throughout the country. Placing teachers that have been adequately prepared to serve in these spaces will affect numerous outcomes, both quantitative and qualitative. This research will also confirm the need to change the ways in which pre-service teachers acquire knowledge (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Irvine 2003). As this research is conducted, researchers must keep in mind the goals at hand. Questions that are structured around reducing the achievement gap, ways to provide equitable high-quality instruction for urban students, and increasing literacy rates among urban learners need to be addressed.

Secondly, literacy teacher education researchers must consider ways to improve, expand, and strengthen teacher preparation programs (Turner, 2005). These programs cannot simply offer a single multicultural or diversity course and assume that practitioners are sufficiently prepared to serve our students with the greatest need. Questions that could perhaps guide this type of research must be centered upon “clarifying their own ethnic and cultural identities” and ways to best “develop a more positive attitude toward other racial, and ethnic cultural groups” (Banks, 2006, p. 218).

Lastly, researchers and educators must collectively devise strategies to retain teachers that have been deemed effective in urban schools. The retention of these educators saves a tremendous amount of resources (Ingersoll, 2001) and helps those engaged in the fight champion our crisis. Research in this area will impact the school's overall effectiveness (Bridge, Cunningham, & Forsbach, 1978), student development and achievement, and the morale of those teachers that remain in the profession eager to continue their very important work (MacDonald, 1999). A single question that may help to substantiate this research is: What do effective teachers in urban schools need in order to remain in these spaces and consistently perform at high levels?

As a new researcher, I remain deeply concerned about the crisis facing urban learners. Questions regarding this very intimate topic often shape my thoughts, as I still wonder if Mr. Jones' approach can be "packaged" and "delivered" to existing teacher education programs. I also wonder if his practice can be widely shared with others embarking on a similar path. I am eager to continue this research and share my findings with both per-service and in-service teachers in an effort to impact their practices while eventually shaping the lives of students worldwide. Creating a research program within an urban school district in partnership with a college or university serving this urban school district's teachers is my newly discovered dream. Realizing the long-term effects of action research in urban schools can have substantial measurable outcomes for all parties involved. Teaching practitioners to reflect upon and understand the dynamics that shape their practices and the principles that allow them to be excellent teachers is greatly needed.

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