Data Doesn’t Always Determine Success (Balancing Research and Reality):
An Autoethnographical Journey of a Marginalized, Academically Challenged, Black Girl from the South

A thesis presented
by
Kimberly Pearson Johnson

to
The School of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
May 2016
Abstract:

This autoethnographic project focuses on the author’s life growing up in a marginalized environment and the lived experiences that helped her direct a career path toward education. Through those experiences, she may further enhance her interactions as an out of school time (OST) program director working with marginalized middle school students. Grounded in self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation and autonomy, this research uses mini stories and poetry to help relay the author’s lived experiences. Through lived experiences, academic success may be impacted by elements other than data. With qualitative methods that include auto ethnography, artifacts, and head notes, the author turns inward to examine self in a manner that will denote that other elements should be considered when teaching children, particularly the black and brown children who are often deemed marginalized. When those experiences denote value, they produce a higher level of self-perception. When there is a lack of value, self-perception becomes negative. The author examines the levels of self-perception that she experienced.

Furthermore, it is the hope that educators will realize that they have the ability to take their own experiences and the lived experiences of the students that they serve and use those experiences to help plant seeds of determination and hope. In addition, when teachers and OST staff seek to operate in a culturally responsive manner, they begin to examine their own positionality in society as it may serve as a reflection of their cultural perspectives. It is the vision that this auto ethnographical approach will encourage educators to examine their youth beyond the data, charts and graphs that sometimes diminish the opportunities for success that youth often possess.
Acknowledgments

This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:13

This work is dedicated to my grandparents, Amos and Lucy Pearson. They always believed that I could rise above my circumstances and excel at anything I put my mind to. Above all, they encouraged me to keep reaching higher and keep my eye on the prize of what my future could bring me. I know for a fact that I would not be standing at this door of a doctoral degree had it not been for them and the other icons and legacies who have gone before and proven that hard work does pay off. It was through their determination and motivation that I am here. From generations of slavery to second class citizenry, they sacrificed so that I could be here…lest I forget….

As I set out to earn my doctorate, I had no idea that I would embark on as many facets of learning as I have encountered. I have perhaps felt every emotion that one can feel within the confines of 130 pages or so. Starting with a sense of hopefulness and then moving toward anger and settling in for a few minutes with fear and now back at the door of hopefulness. Perhaps the most important thing that I have learned is that I still have a lot of work to do and that being a scholar practitioner means more than just taking on an additional title. It means walking into an educational setting and looking for many opportunities to impact lives. I have to be optimistic in my approach, because it is through that optimism that I can see the hopefulness. Another thing that I have learned is that I cannot and will not lower my expectations for the children that I serve. It is through those higher expectations and standards that children can blossom and strive toward their own levels of greatness. My grandparents understood that lowering
their standards would only cause me to lower my own self-desire and expectations. I have come to realize that children want us to keep our levels high because it shows that we are the structural thinkers in their lives. Many of our black and brown children have enough deficit thinkers in their lives already. They need more optimism. I am a children’s author and I travel throughout the country teaching other people’s children, but what I have come to realize is that they are all OUR children. The kids in Dallas, New York, Philadelphia and Rock Hill, South Carolina, they all belong to me because I am an educator. This educational experience has shown me that when I took on the charge to be an educator, I took on all of the baggage that sometimes comes with the title. I must challenge myself to accept whatever the students bring to me – including family issues, cultural differences and socio-economic deficits. They all belong to the students and when they are with me, those challenges belong to me too. I think that sometimes as educators, we forget that simple fact…you cannot separate children from who they are. I do believe that we can add to their greatness by looking for more chances to encourage, empower and inspire them. At least that is what happened to me, in my life.

My biggest fear is that we will continue to be so absorbed by numbers and graphs and charts that we will miss the big picture of what it means to meet children where they are. I fear that we will determine the worth of a child based on their family’s bank account or education level. Most importantly, I fear that we will miss the ability to help our children find that door within their soul that will open up their minds and knowledge base to become the change agents that they can become. This dissertation may not change the world, it may not impact the number of people that I
hope to inspire and impact one day through my work as an author. Nevertheless, it has
given me the motivation to continue my work in education, to find other levels of
learning that may give children the desire to reach higher goals in their own
communities and family settings. Each day when I am with young people, I am
reminded that the world is still a wonderful place and that we can help fix a broken
system if we just stay focused on the desired outcomes. Perhaps I am idealistic in my
belief that we can create a system that will teach our children from the inside out and
foster, in each of them, their own sense of determination and autonomy. That is what
happened to me….a marginalized, academically challenged, black girl from the
South……

This is for all of the first generation college kids who ever doubted their
abilities to make it through the challenges they faced along the way. I dedicate this
work to all of the educators who have retired from the field but continue to get up every
day and impact education. These are the true soldiers of education and they inspire all
of us to work harder and believe in ourselves.

To Victoria Uricoechea – God had a plan for placing you in my life and I am
ever so grateful that He did. It was your inspiration and encouragement that re-ignited
my desire to pursue this higher level of education. Me das ánimo para crecer….y para
todo alcanzar!

To my amazing and supportive husband Jeff: You are the wind beneath my
wings and your love has continued to lift me. You never kept me from following my
dreams and you have ALWAYS supported my efforts. Without you, I would not be
able to do these amazing things in life. You gave me the time and space to create and
research and that was the biggest part of this journey. To Whitney, thank you for being an amazing niece. I have learned more from you than I thought was ever possible. You challenge me to reach higher and you challenge me to problem-solve beyond my wildest dreams. For that, I am grateful. To my dear friend, Deborah Larrabee – you encouraged me to think outside of the box and write from a place that would perhaps impact the world. I am glad that I listened to you.

To Dr. Kristal Moore Clemons, Dr. Lynda Beltz and Dr. William Quinn – without your knowledge and guidance I would not have found my voice through this amazing research methodology – autoethnography. Your intelligence and passion for the field of education is the example of how I want to impact the world. You made me dig deeper and you also made me look outside of the box – that is what true legacies do. Your work will forever impact the world. I can only hope to be the iconic educators that you are.

Most of all, I thank God for always knowing that I could do this – you created me and you knew that I would have this desire to go beyond my circumstances. I said many years ago, God use me and you have cleared my paths to wonderful opportunities and given me the desire to help in so many ways. Without you, I would not be who I am. You are the light of my life, the love in my heart and the depth of my soul….please continue to use me so that I may forever share the glory of who YOU are through my work!
Table of Contents

Executive Summary. ................................................................. 10

Chapter

1  INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 14
   My Story. ................................................................. 14
   The ABC’S of Kimberly Pearson Johnson. ......................... 16
   Connectivity ............................................................ 17
   Purpose of the Study ................................................. 20
   Problem of Practice ............................................... 23
   Significance of the Problem ....................................... 25
   Theoretical Framework ............................................. 27
   Systems Connector (Adult and Adolescent). .................... 29
   Autonomy Support. ................................................. 31
   Self-Determination and Intrinsic motivation support ..... 32

Chapter

2  LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................... 33
   Whose Child is This. ................................................... 34
   Adolescence as Newness. ........................................... 35
   Positive Youth Development ....................................... 36
   The Need for Out of School Time Programming ............. 38
   Together We Can ....................................................... 39
   Interrogating White Privilege ..................................... 43
   Defining Self-Determination, Autonomy and Intrinsic Motivation. 47
   Culturally Responsive Teaching .................................... 49
   Parental Support .......................................................... 52
Fundamentals of Youth Leadership ........................................... 54

Chapter

3 METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 56

Alignment ................................................................. 56
Challenges Associated with the View of Self ........................................... 57
Scholarly Debates of Autoethnography ........................................... 59
Collecting data, Collecting self ........................................... 62
The Process ................................................................. 65
Poetry as Analysis and Clarification ........................................... 66
Remembering when ......................................................... 68
Autoethnography as Program Builder ........................................... 69
Capacities for Change and limitations ........................................... 70

Chapter

4 THIS SHARED JOURNEY ................................................................. 73

Feeling Broken ................................................................. 73
Family as Connector ................................................................. 75
Privilege as Connector ................................................................. 77
Program as Connector ................................................................. 77
Negative Preconceptions ................................................................. 80
Know Thyself ................................................................. 82
An Imagination is Born ................................................................. 85
But For the Color of My Skin ................................................................. 90
Positive Reinforcement ................................................................. 92
Words of Wisdom and Life Lessons ................................................................. 93
Trouble Don’t Last Always ................................................................. 98
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>THE JOURNEY THROUGH THEMES</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This Journey</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational Reflections</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncovering Themes</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning How to Change things - the struggle to undo habits</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beyond The Books</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents of Adolescents Please Stand Up.</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implications for Further Research</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendix A: TLS Model</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendix B: 40 Developmental Assets</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many expectations have been placed on educational systems to intervene and help solve some of the problems facing youth in the 21st century. Afterschool programs are among those systems that serve as a resource for creating change in the lives of youth. In addition, educational leaders are being asked to further examine and understand the academic and social strengths of youth and also examine areas where they lack guidance and confidence. In doing so, educators must put on social lenses that determine how youth are impacted by their societal situations. When youth are seen through lens of deficit thinking, they are unable to build strengths and opportunities for greater performance. However, through structural lenses, educational and cultural visionaries, educators can begin to assist youth in building their own balances within the classroom and beyond (Cahnmann-Taylor, M. 2010). Learning has to be a compilation of many expectations and experiences. Learning must also start by finding ways to ignite success and not solely relying on data to determine classroom success or individual capabilities.

This doctoral thesis will guide afterschool staff and pre-service teachers on how to foster academic and social balances and family connectedness. In addition, through these experiences, this research will shed light on how educators can effectively work with youth from various backgrounds and incorporate more cultural understanding into the educational processes. Effective educators must begin utilizing collaboration opportunities and culturally responsive teaching methods in order to engage youth more (Gay, 2010).

To further explain, Nieto (2010) suggests that students who are privileged enough to have rich cultural experiences are better equipped for success because they already know the rules that are reportedly required for success. However, for those students who do not know the rules, they are immediately placed at a disadvantage and negative data further alienates them from the
opportunities to engage in autonomy and self-determination. Both Nieto and Gay (2010) suggest that when caring adults begin to meet the students where they are, they have a better chance at curtailing some of the negative trajectories that the lack of cultural power can bring. This essentially means adding some of the students own cultural experiences into the planning and programming. Furthermore, unless the adult is willing to get into the world of the student they are not able to effectively teach nor reach them. Moreover, those experiences and interactions can help culminate other facets of learning that impact success beyond the data.

Successful afterschool programs require more than just helping youth with homework assignments or reading books about diverse people. Support groups must also consist of culturally responsive teachers who can create community awareness and help youth prepare themselves for stronger futures. Such programs must also pay attention to the behavioral, cognitive and social aspects of the youth involved. The question becomes, “What more can educators do to help ensure future success for our youth?” By accepting challenges and changes presented by youth, professionals can begin to shape the ideas and enhance the experiences of, otherwise deemed, marginalized students. Staff must be trained in how to serve as valuable mentors and non-judgmental positive role models (Pinto, 2013). Professionals must meet youth where they are and refrain from treating them as problematic or treating them as broken toys. Yes it is true that the goal is to move students to areas of autonomy, but sometimes the youth are not ready to be moved and that is when teachers and programs have to be aligned with youth and their needs. It is this interaction and collaboration between family and school that can monitor the overall success of youth from the time they enter school until they graduate and even beyond, in some cases. Families can look at OST programs as tools that can help them learn how to assist their children in various areas (Lopez & Caspe, 2014).
Ladson-Billings (1994) reminds us that all aspects of a student’s culture and experiences must be incorporated into the learning process. When this happens, educators are embracing what it means to be culturally responsive. Often teachers do not understand a student’s culture or background. Therefore, it makes it difficult for the teacher to incorporate what they don’t know into the learning exchange. For this very reason it is imperative that teachers open their minds to the many elements of the culture that youth bring into the classroom. When teachers are curious about a student’s home life and traditional practices, it shows that the students are valuable to the teachers. Student-directed conversations can also serve as a great way to share information about one’s culture (Brisk & Harrington, 2000). This interest in their lives beyond the academic realm can encourage youth to take what they learn, from the teacher (i.e teacher experiences), into their home and community environment. This bi-directional learning process gives everyone the chance to exchange ideas and practices (Padron, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002).

When textbooks do not support the culturally diverse information, educators much become proactive in finding materials or striking up conversations that are supportive of one’s culture (Delpit, 2012). This may entail gathering magazines, newspaper articles or video clips that support culture and diversity. These efforts bring about cultural consciousness and show that teachers are eager to embrace and value the depth of what students bring into the setting. The implications from this autoethnography can further require educators to delve into their own ideas and biases that may prohibit youth from connecting with them within the setting.

As educators, we must learn to work more closely with parents or whoever serves as the support system for the youth. Parents or caretakers, for the most part, are the sources of guidance that many youth interact with daily. Parental involvement can come from grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles or anyone who has a definite stake in the success of the youth (Strom, 1985).
Therefore, we cannot separate the youth from their environments, nor the experiences that are connected with those environments. Research informs us that we spend so much time focusing on the academic elements of youth that we forget to ask youth what is important to them and their own visions of success. Adolescents should be included in our quest for academic and social balance (Strom & Bernard, 1982). The initial step in helping adolescents learn to gain their own levels of success is to encourage parents to take active roles in their child’s overall development. Both motivation and self-determination start at home. Autonomy support also starts at home but is continued into the classroom. Parents and educators can create a partnership that helps foster many areas of success.

Some youth, who come from marginalized families and environments, can benefit from programs that help them navigate through the many perils of curriculum and other facets of academic understanding. Another thought is that parents today need more support than ever because the dynamics of our world continues to change and challenge us all. Parents need someone to help them navigate through the rapid changes that are impacting youth in the 21st century. They can no longer use their experiences, or just what data determines, as barometers for understanding how youth think and operate (Apter, 2006). Educators can provide relationships that will help parents build the confidence they need in their own parenting skills (Strom, 1985).
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

My Story:

My story is based on an understanding of self that began in a poor and rural area of North Carolina. However, those experiences and understandings ultimately helped propel me into the genuine meaning of determination and value. It was also the many socio-economic and cultural challenges that I faced, as an African-American student growing up in a marginalized setting, which helped me understand that value was not solely attached to money or status. Instead, my value was a combination of strong family foundations, caring community members, and belief in self. The many seeds of self-determination and motivation in my life were planted by illiterate grandparents and role models who themselves understood that autonomy must be supported by caring individuals who have a deep sense of intrinsic motivation.

I must admit, my visions and understanding of self-determination began to shift when I entered middle school. This was the platform where I started to see the differences that culture and socio-economics could make in one’s life. As a middle school student, I witnessed other students who appeared to have more wealth and privilege than I had and it made me question myself and who I would become. It was my judgment of the wealthier students, “the others,” that perhaps created pockets of doubt in my self-determination and ability to excel. At times, it was the perceived lack of support from my teachers that further widened the gap between success and self-determination. It was the reflections that stated, “those students, the privileged, are smarter because they have better clothes or they are better than me because of where they live,” that jeopardized my self-belief.
As Duzak (2002) stated, one must focus on how to turn the perceived “other” into a “you.” It is also about creating a dialogue that will allow the others and you to create the “we-discourses.” Those dialogues must be developed by individuals who want to support the independence and autonomy of youth. If this premise, of self-reflection, were articulated in the homes of youth who are tormented by their views of self, or depicted in the classrooms where youth feel inadequate - perhaps it would change the trajectories of our current findings on youth motivation and autonomy. My grandparents gave me as much support as they could, but I also needed that same level of support throughout my middle school years to continue helping me foster my self-determination and own sense of autonomy.

My belief is that teachers and mentors need to look beyond class, race and gender, and discover the true identities of our youth and model the way as Vygotsky (1978) suggests. More importantly, they must serve as support systems for the overall development of all students. As Nieto (1999) clarifies, before one becomes a multicultural teacher, he must first become a multicultural person. In other words, how can a teacher teach youth whom they do not know? Moreover, how can they form partnerships between parents and community programs when they cannot fully relate or support autonomy? (Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez & Brown, 2004). Recent studies suggest that youth must be encouraged by a various group of stakeholders within the family circle and beyond (Scales & Leffert, 1999). It is these connections that can begin to lay the platform for youth to see themselves as worthy individuals who can make a difference in their lives. However, they must first understand how they see themselves.
The ABC’s of Kimberly Pearson Johnson

African-American

Black

Colored and

Determined  – Kimberly Pearson Johnson

Expecting to have

Freedom -

Growing up with grandparents who

Helped plant the seeds in my life

Intrigued by education

Just eager to learn how to

Keep my focus,

Lead by example and

Make a difference in the world!

Never thinking about giving up

Only focused on the prize

Persistent at all times

Quietly becoming God’s plan for good!

Raising the standard along the way

Self-determination in my heart

Telling me what to do each day

Using my motivation to get me out of bed
Veracity is what I know
Working to help others find their sense of motivation because I have an exceptional amount of love to share
Yearning to make a difference
Zealous Woman of God!!

Connectivity

Many researchers and community members agree that some youth of the 21st century are not fully prepared to transition into adulthood (Berlin, Furstenberg & Waters, 2010). In addition, communities are seeking programs that can help address the issues of education, leadership and social development in youth in a more holistic manner. There is a need for increased connectedness between communities, families and schools. This connectedness can help youth build trusting relationships that will foster further development, self-determination and autonomy (Barber, 2005). Barber contends that connectedness is also a feeling state. In other words, just saying that one is connected to another is not enough; the other must feel that connection. Given that, community-based programs are being requested to provide additional social building and autonomy support for youth. There is much research on the effectiveness of out of school time (OST) programs, or often called afterschool programs, as they pertain to academics and recreational interaction. However, there is little research on the social and leadership support of out of school time programs, particularly when it comes to the interaction of brown and black middle school students (Benson & Saito, 2000; Edelman, Gill, Comerford, Larson, & Hare, 2004).
Kenneth Rasmussen, the South Dakota State University Education Leadership Chairman, (2006), states that the future is in the hands of today’s youth. His perspective is that we cannot look toward a successful future until our youth learn how to become positive leaders. Therefore, educators, policy makers and funders suggest that OST programs with structured activities can give youth the foundation they need to continue building positive development (Kahne, Brown, Nagaoka, O’Brien, Quinn, & Thiede 2001). The Konopka Institute (2000) showed that there are practices of programs, such as in OST, which can help make them effective in creating a sense of belonging for youth. Those components consist of skills in decision-making, self-efficacy/self-esteem, peer interaction and creative activities.

An OST program is one that is defined as a safe and nurturing program that helps support the academic and social needs of youth. These elements can help lead to balance in social, community and school life (Halpern, 2002). In 1970, the feminist movement spawned women to return to the workforce. It was also during the 1970’s and 1980’s when there was additional concern about helping inner city youth build social skills and have a safe place to go after school. For many working parents, the OST programs provided a “service” for out of school youth so they would not engage in adverse behavior (Halpern 2002). Additionally, in 1984 a national conference held on Latchkey Children ignited the concern for out of school time to be viewed as an issue of further concern. As more youth were being left alone at home, it was necessary to consider options that would provide more structured and organized settings (Naughton, 2003). It was also noted that such programs could help provide additional support to fill in some of the gaps for marginalized students.

Currently, many schools and educational systems are trying to further understand the gaps in learning that are evident between children of color and those who face poverty (Pitre,
This issue of disparity is not a 21st-century problem; it has always been a part of our educational system. Educational psychologist Linda Rogers states throughout much of her work that research usually leaves out the information that can prove to be revealing to the challenges of human life. She further surmises that educators must reach beyond the data related numbers and theories and find the aspects that legitimize a setting. In other words, it is not just the data that can determine whether or not a student is prepared to be successful; other factors can help expand the preparedness of youth. Boylorn (2009) also uses her stories and experiences to encourage researchers to stretch beyond what they see in the field and discover the layers of self and try to understand what it is that can truly engage others in their facets of learning. This could include making strong strides in helping youth embrace their differences, while believing in self. Educators must reach beyond the test scores and try to create a balance that will allow youth to see that their cultural aspects matter and that their circumstances do not always have to define their abilities to be successful in the classroom or beyond. Moreover, youth need to understand the triggers in their lives that can help guide them toward areas of success and not solely focus on their deficits in other areas.

According to Halpern (2002), OST programs have the ability to not pathologize the children who are from marginalized backgrounds. Such programs even have the ability to fill in the gaps that low-income children face. There was a point when such OST programs were viewed as a place to play, to offer a sense of relief or escape for children burdened by their societal woes. However, as program opportunities progressed, the programs were viewed more as an opportunity for growth. Moreover, OST providers have suggested that the programs should be shaped by the interests and creativity of the participants, but also providers must be willing to
understand the needs of those participants and how they can help them flourish in the programs (Halpern, 2002).

**Purpose of the Study**

In order to effectively serve as a change agent for youth, I must understand who I am as an educational leader and children’s author. The main purpose of this dissertation is to look at the other factors, beyond data, that can help trigger a sense of autonomy and self-determination in marginalized black and brown youth in OST programs. This dissertation will be presented as an autoethnography. Though some social scientists denote that it is best for the researcher to separate self from their research subjects or activities, it is increasingly difficult to completely separate self from research material (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Autoethnographers understand their role as it pertains to gaining a deeper perspective of the work that they are performing in their chosen field. Moreover, autoethnographers understand that self-reflexive positionality can propel them to step back and examine the things that have transpired in their lives and use those experiences to impact the lives of others within various contexts (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). In addition, autoethnography must be a depiction of both story and theory coming together to create a culturally thick description (Denzin 1992).

In this dissertation, I hope to offer suggestions that may contribute to the work already being done in the out of school time arena. I will examine a program here in SC called Falcon TEAMS (pseudonym) and how such an educational setting can help foster continued cultural support and provide the needed tools to engage adolescents in their sense of self-determination and autonomy. During my years of middle school, there were times that I wished my teachers knew more about the culture of my ancestors and the traditions of African-Americans. I would often watch my teachers pay attention to my culture when it was mentioned during Black History
Month. They would spend each February talking about the African-American icons that I already knew about – such as, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, or Thurgood Marshall. Rarely did they mention or introduce me to the African-Americans who lived in my own community or who made a difference in my own neighborhoods. These local icons were just as important to my cultural foundation. I listened to my teachers talk about Slavery and Civil Rights as if those were the only major events of history that bore our images. They failed to share information about all of the doctors or lawyers or even teachers who impacted my traditions and life.

Today, many schools surmise that there is a lack of time and resources in the classroom setting to help develop youth in various areas or share this vital information about culture and local icons. Researchers believe that when youth engage in activities outside of the school hours, they increase their connectedness to school and community. This is the belief because such interactions can help youth build academics, good social networks and self-esteem (Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez & Brown, 2004). Theokas and Lerner (2006) indicate through their findings that if youth have positive experiences within one area of their life, they are likely to see those positive experiences in other areas of their life. Therefore, out of school time programs have the opportunity to teach, mentor and offer autonomous support to youth. These critical skills could lead to more autonomy, cultural understanding and stronger leadership abilities (Kozol, 2005). Given that, an assumption is that parents, teachers, mentors or community leaders can have a direct impact on helping youth meet the daily challenges they face because they are the closest to the youth (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). In turn, this connection can help build the areas of self-determination and independence (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

It is from my own experiences that I have come to realize that youth cannot love themselves to not define if they do not know themselves. It is from the experiences of learning
about people, who have impacted their culture or built opportunities for success from struggles, that youth are able to align themselves with positive role models who can impact their lives. The Falcon TEAM’S mission is to introduce students to culture on a continuous basis and not just relegate this information and discovery to one month of the year such as Black History Month. In addition, the goal is for the program not to define the success of our participants based only on grades or test scores. Culture and tradition are year-round processes and youth must be introduced to the people who live in their communities and can impact their self-determination. As the Falcon TEAMS program serves many youth who come from some of the same backgrounds and marginalized settings that I came from, the goal is to make sure that we share various cultural stories with the students. It is through those opportunities for cultural experiences that youth can open their minds and begin to build their own sense of value and appreciation of others and themselves.

According to Dewey, the matter of teaching must entail the child’s outside experiences (Dewey, 1929). I believe that some of us as educational leaders become so consumed with the routine and chaos of rubrics, data and theory that we forget to implement the experiences that are part of the youth’s everyday life (Dewey, 1929). Numbers, graphs and charts only give us a bird’s eye view of who the youth really are as learners and ultimately as adults. Had my success been solely focused on data and theory, I would not have been predicted to follow these tremendous paths that I have been blessed to follow today, as an African-American woman, educator and author. Part of this narrative is rooted in the lessons and journey of my grandparents, who taught me how to develop a path that would not define who I was but who I could become in my life. More importantly, my life lessons of growing up in a poor community taught me that self-determination could create success for my life.
Problem of Practice

This dissertation is a critical examination of one after school program director’s journey in the Falcon TEAMS program in rural South Carolina. This doctoral thesis will utilize my journey, to provide deeper insight on the challenges that students face due to economics or cultural differences and how they can learn to overcome such challenges if they are placed in environments with culturally responsive staff that support autonomy and are given opportunities to engage in conversations about self-determination and motivation. Much like the environment I experienced growing up, dialogue can help provide youth with increasing levels of self-determination through structural thinking and motivation. These relationships can provide skills that data does not necessarily measure. I do not believe that data is the end all to determining the levels of success that youth can gain in positive and accepting environments. I was exposed early on to many positive role models who helped me gain confidence in myself and begin to understand that my differences were an asset, in order for not a deficit.

Successful afterschool programs and culturally responsive educators require more than just helping youth with homework assignments or reading books about diverse people. Support groups must also create community awareness and help youth prepare themselves for stronger futures. The question becomes, “What more can professionals do to help ensure future success for our youth?” By accepting challenges and changes presented by youth, professionals can begin to help youth shape their futures through structural thinking. For that to happen, staff must be trained in how to serve as valuable mentors and non-judgmental positive role models. Professionals must meet youth where they are and refrain from treating them as problematic or treating them like broken toys.
Therefore, when I entered middle school and did not have as many positive influences in
the school setting as I had when I was in elementary and before – I was still able to utilize the
self-determination that had been planted by my grandparents through structural thinking.
However, I needed other people in my life to reinforce the autonomy I sought as a thriving
adolescent. Unfortunately, if youth are not exposed to the models who can provide what they
need in deficit areas then they will need to find such models elsewhere. Nieto (1999) states that
teachers and staff can start conversations with families and present genuine dialogue that will
help staff truly begin to understand and relate to both students and families. Those conversations
can begin to plant the seeds of self-determination and motivation in youth.

Decades ago, preparing children for the future was regarded as the responsibility of the
families involved. However, recent studies suggest that the overall development of youth must
be supported by many entities since some children do not have access to solid family foundations
(Scales & Leffert, 1999). It has become even more evident that youth need culturally responsive
teachers and community advocates who will accept students and meet them where they are to
help them overcome some of the hurdles and roadblocks that many will encounter in life.
According to Deci and Ryan (2000), it is posited that environments and social settings that
promote and support autonomy can help foster structural thinking and motivation in individuals.
Research also states that parents who support autonomy can lend to the intrinsic motivation and
self-determination of students (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Developmental Theorist George
Mead surmises that people can figure out who they want to be based on the messages that they
receive from others. Given this, youth are looking for approval from adults and positive peers in
order to see the levels of success that they can reach (Feffer, 1990). Having these opportunities
will encourage youth to look for the possibilities of future success as adults.
Therefore, it is plausible that culturally responsive teaching is an approach that can further impact and create a strong foundation to support the importance found in including students' cultural references in their aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This includes both school systems and out of school time (OST) organizations which can prove to be impactful to the holistic growth and social development of learners. Gay (2000) posits that students who are viewed as advantaged in school settings are given positive feedback and encouragement, therefore, supporting autonomy. However, those who are disadvantaged or seen as marginalized are often viewed negatively. Furthermore, Thompson (2004) states that low expectations can create low self-esteem and lack of motivation in youth. It is even more important that OST staff members are focused on implementing positive feedback to all learners and giving them opportunities for autonomous interactions.

The concern is that when schools or OST organizations correlate motivation with external successes, this can create further feelings of inadequacies among various cultures or low-income students. There is a need for helping students gain their own sense of motivation and self-determination. This self-reflection can help them fill in the gaps if and when those feelings of inadequacy arise (Wlodkowski, & Ginsberg, 1995). Cultural responsive teachers and autonomy supportive staff and stakeholders can help support those needs by becoming more aware of the situations and circumstances that youth face.

**Significance of the Problem**

Middle school students often doubt their ability to perform well academically. This level of doubt can increase for marginalized students (Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003). Given that, perhaps it is initially important to start with a sense of control or external concept as opposed to approaching the view of motivation from an internal aspect for middle school
students. Simply stated, some educators fail to realize that they can motivate students by viewing motivation from a collective perspective and ask, *how can we help motivate our students?* This entails utilizing the community, school and family resources. It is true that external contingencies can ultimately be transformed into internal attributes. However, it must be noted that this transformation does not occur until the receiving individual integrates the action with their own true sense of self. In other words, until the youth use their sense of autonomy to accept the action as their own idea and belief, it will not be perceived as internal (Black, A. E., & Deci, E. L. 2000). This makes it even more critical for educators and OST staff to help students work through opportunities to seek autonomy. The research shows that when teachers and school leaders are more reflective about their practice they can relate to their students in a more impactful way. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that autonomy-supportive educators can help youth foster more intrinsic motivation. This leads to the broader idea that educational settings can help plant the seeds of self-determination by allowing students to maintain and reinforce their own levels of success.

Furthermore, by examining this process through an autoethnographic lens, this qualitative method will help combine information about self and the context of the setting to show any of the potential connections. This holistic approach to supporting all stakeholders further solidifies the importance of this approach because it allows the researcher to connect with self, others and the context. The findings of this study can contribute to the long-term success of OST programs by helping researchers gather more information on effective strategies to share with program planners. For practitioners, this work can provide information that helps them understand the attitudes and perceptions toward success, learning and after-school settings. In addition, the
significance of this autoethnography may help communities build stronger relationships between students, teachers and families.

As I continue to focus on various areas of development in my work as an OST educator and coordinator, I have come to realize that few programs have a fully developed aspect of self-determination and autonomy. Many of the programs, to include my current out of school time program, have been heavily concentrating on the academic aspect. However, we are beginning to realize, here in our third year of this middle school program, that the 21st-century schools and community programs need to strengthen the community by focusing on the overall development of youth and equipping them with the tools that will allow them to seek independence and self-determination. These efforts mean that there is value in having community entities involved in the afterschool efforts. For example, utilizing churches and volunteers can help reinforce the holistic approach to expanding interaction between community and schools. In addition, these supportive and caring adults can help youth believe in themselves and support their independence. The importance of helping youth create their own safe environments can allow them to understand the value in autonomy and motivation.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that is evident in this study is affiliated with autonomy and self-determination theory. This study posits that OST programs can provide youth with the supportive, culturally responsive adults and caring community connections that may help them gain more self-determination and independence. Putnam (2000) surmises that supportive autonomy is waning and, therefore, youth have less family and neighborhood interactions. Quinn (2004) states that self-value occurs through interactional experiences. While it is true that some
youth do not receive additional home support, these additional entities can further add to the support that some youth may receive from other caring community individuals.

Self-determination theory is the continued work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1985). They seek to understand to what degree an individual is motivated by his own self-determination and desire to succeed. They further believed that there are three psychological needs affiliated with self-determination. Those include competence, autonomy and psychological relatedness. Self-determination theory is centered on the idea that people have certain innate needs and that those needs can produce positive outcomes if they are fostered. If an individual observed an action and then imitated or duplicated that action, they would be rewarded. This sets into play the premise of motivation.

Vadeboncoeur (2006) supports this tenet by sharing that motivation and leadership skills are strong components that can help people focus on visions and build exemplary paths. The central tenets of self-determination define that engagement in community and learning social skills can contribute to the success of youth and the desire to excel. This framework also states that research has shown a huge connection between stakeholder support and the education of youth. Deci and Ryan (1985) state that self-determination starts as early as birth. It is believed that youth start learning about what drives and motivates them at very early ages. When they are given choices, they are given opportunities to think about what they want in or for their lives. Obtaining those results is a product of motivation. When youth feel that their ideas matter and that their voice is heard, they begin to build confidence. From this building, motivation and self-determination evolve.

This framework appears to be the best one for this kind of study because it helps one to see that the impact of self-determination and independence can help one gain the skills needed to
learn and problem solve. It is an opportunity to engage in an individuals’ interest and begin to accept and take on challenges that are faced. Deci and Ryan (1985) also note that there must be many opportunities to take on challenges in order to experience motivation and self-determination. Given that, it makes sense that teachers need to provide many chances for students to examine their own skills. Research supports the idea that self-determination is about youth leadership not solely the idea of being compliant. Youth experience success when they are challenged, accomplish a task and are given feedback. It is that immediate feedback that can encourage youth to try again or, at least, try to find another strategy to complete the task. It is the completion of the autonomy, relatedness and competence that can create a holistic approach to success in the educational setting.

The framework behind this study will also examine, through my lived experiences, what happens when students are in a more supportive environment that focuses on intrinsic motivation as opposed to the external factors: grades, prizes or money. The question becomes, will they continue to work harder to obtain and maintain that intrinsic motivation? Deci and Ryan (2000) have discovered in his work that because of the high stakes testing and need to meet levels of learning, many educators are foregoing the autonomy support and looking for opportunities to move youth toward the levels of success that are expected of them. This in turn diminishes the interests of youth and takes away their desire to learn for the mere sake of learning.

**Systems Connectors (Adult and Adolescence)**

As this study is focusing primarily on the framework of Deci and Ryan with self-determination/intrinsic motivation, the more I uncovered aspects of the work through autoethnography, the ecological system also emerged. Bronfenbrenner (1979) showed through his systems theory that the whole child can be assisted through the connection of smaller circles.
These circles consisting of microsystem (inner), mesosystem (settings), exosystem (institutions), macrosystem (culture) and chronosystem can impact the links between home, school and afterschool settings. I experienced these systems through my own growth and development. When afterschool programs are willing to integrate these various levels, support systems are developed and can create a comprehensive plan and begin laying the foundation for helping youth succeed into adulthood (Mertensmeyer, & Fine, 2000). With this idea in mind, it must also be noted that teachers and staff members can’t teach what they don’t know. This essentially means that educators and staff members must also look at their abilities to be culturally responsive. In order for an educator to impact the determination and drive of a youth, they must understand the cultural background of that youth and know what it takes to impact their thinking. Educators should depict cultural sensitivity for the group while raising their levels of expectations. This keeps educators from accepting the status quo based solely on what statistics say about the success of a population. In doing so, educators begin to understand the depth of each individual and works diligently to bring out the best in that particular student (Kleinfeld, 1974, 1975).

Montagu and Watson (1979) posit that communication makes a greater layer of community and that it brings people together. They also posit without this community connection it is difficult for students to know how to excel in areas of community and learning. When teachers can communicate and reinforce positive areas in youth, youth function better and find their voice in society. Moreover, Chirkov and Ryan (2001) state that youth are not likely to seek autonomy or self-determination if the adult in their life is controlling and demeaning. Therefore, as Barber (2005) stated, connectedness must entail the feeling that supports the idea
of mutual respect between the giver and the receiver. Once these types of relationships are fostered, trust begins to enable a foundation for more understanding and collaboration.

**Autonomy Support**

Research has shown that the older students get, the more they show a decline in motivation, particularly if they are not constantly motivated. This decline is quite prevalent from elementary to middle school levels (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). This change can be somewhat attributed to physiological changes and maturation. In addition, this change may also be associated with the learning environment that is presented in the middle school setting (Midgley, 1993). For example, if youth are in an environment where they are motivated and given many opportunities to experience success, they will continue to try to reach those levels of success. However, if they are placed in an environment that doesn’t support their current racial, gender or economic status, they will begin to see their deficits and tend to focus on those more, which could lead to feelings of failure. Educators have the ability to show students that their situations are modifiable. If educators do not do this and give the perception that a situation is not “correctable” the students may begin to harbor a sense of defeat and lose opportunities to experience success in the setting (Damon, 2004). This can be detrimental to middle school students who are already trying to deal with the pressures of adolescence and puberty.

Research suggests that students are not receiving as much autonomy support from teachers in middle school as they received in elementary settings. This also includes lack of opportunities for self-determination and skills development (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987). Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) state that support of student autonomy can be fostered when educators assist with developing student guidelines and allow many opportunities to make mistakes and reconstruct learning patterns. Sanders (2001) goes on to comment that communities
can be extremely valuable in the motivational and socialization aspects of youth, therefore enhancing their academic success. When afterschool programs provide youth opportunities to improve skills in the real world setting, they can gain leadership aspects, learn to further develop their identity among peers, gain independence and ultimately help improve the community.

**Self-determination and Intrinsic motivation support**

Wandersman (1981) posited that individuals can contribute in specific ways that will benefit communities. The belief in self and desire to create positive insight can help change the direction of the youth mindset. This is sometimes prevalent in a middle school setting. Given that, an assumption is that parents, teachers, mentors or community leaders can have a direct impact on the autonomy support of youth by helping them meet the daily challenges they face (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Perrucci & Wysong, (2008) also state that it is getting difficult to maintain family structures and settings. There are many things that are separating families to include divorce, death and parent imprisonment. That is why it is important that youth begin to build their own levels of autonomy which can lead to stronger self-determination and motivation. Moreover, educators can serve as additional support systems for youth by providing strong components that foster development. Ultimately, those components of development can help youth gain the confidence that they need to master the challenges of adulthood.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will help support the value of autoethnography and how the stories and lived experiences of educators can help shape the style and methods that are used to teach students. Kierkegaard (1938) states that in order to move forward with our lives and the work we do, we can only understand that process through what we examine from our past lives. It is through the way that we re-construct our lives that we are able to understand how to effectively teach our students. It is through what we gain and learn as youth that we are able to understand and pass along those experiences to the youth that we serve. By looking at and understanding what adolescence is comprised of, we can begin understanding some of the areas that need more focus in order to reinforce autonomy. By examining culturally responsive teaching and interrogating white privilege, we can have a better idea of how educators can review the aspects that affect self-determination and intrinsic motivation, particularly as it relates to our black and brown children. It is true that sometimes our environments can create barriers that contradict our methods of teaching. However, it is from those experiences, as well, that we learn to re-vamp our teaching processes and hopefully increase methods for success.

bell hooks (1994) states that educators, who want to change the way they teach and interact with students, need to come together and use their critical thinking skills to collaborate and create opportunities for success. It is through this identity construction that educators can support youth and give them the ability to find their voice and gain their own perspective of what success needs to look like for their lives (Burdell & Swadener, 1999). It is through the use of autoethnographical displays that educators can begin to examine the process of how to help youth construct their own identity through lived experiences. Furthermore, this study will
examine how the experiences of minority students are not always implemented into the teaching and learning process, therefore making it difficult for some students to connect with educators who do not fully understand their cultural underpinnings (Delpit, 1995).

This study will look at the accounts and experiences of myself as the researcher and researched. The lack of interconnectivity can make it difficult for some students to connect with educators. It also makes it difficult for educators to fully understand the cultural aspects of the youth that they serve (Delpit, 1995). Through this literature review, I will speak about how too many of our black and brown children are replacing their positive self-images with negative images of self (Pitre, Cook & McCree, 2009). Some of this may be in part due to the lack of opportunities to connect with adults who can help replenish the positive self-images. In addition, it may be the inability to create conversations that build self-determination and autonomy. It is difficult to fully determine if any of the characteristics of OST programs are sole causations of change or building self-determination in adolescents. A significant amount of the literature found on OST interaction suggests that such programs support and provide a bridge between home, school and community settings (Nicholson, Collins & Holmer, 2004).

Whose Child is this?

The key ideas, of this research, denote that adolescence is a period when youth are establishing a sense of personal identity. They are beginning to focus on goal setting and personal development themselves rather than being pushed or directed by their parents (Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). During young adolescence, family ties are growing weaker and peers are becoming more important which can be both positive and negative in regards to youth development. This sense of self-determination and autonomy can help youth begin to establish their own practices of interaction and problem-solving skills but at the same
time can lead them to poor judgement and choices (Shaffer, 2002). According to Park (2004), youth need to feel empowered and satisfied with life. When some of those goals are met, academic, social and leadership skills can encourage youth to take responsibility and learn to serve as role models for their younger counterparts. In addition, building social and life skills allow youth to understand and master situations that occur in their lives. It also promotes self-worth and ability.

When youth are not engaged in the school system or other community entities, OST programs tend to provide a positive approach that can encourage development to include academic and leadership components (Zeldin & Price, 1995). Youth need to be given psychological and social support (Shaffer, 2002). In addition, youth, of the 21st century, need supportive models to follow in order to obtain positive leadership and outcomes. A leader is defined as an individual who strives to influence a group and encourage them to reach for success. Leaders help others set goals and achieve them. Pallas (1993) tells us that changes in the implementation of social and leadership building may improve the effectiveness of the links between adolescence and adulthood.

**Adolescence as Newness**

In this stage of growth and development, youth may lack experience in dealing with their newfound independence. This period of discovery can prove to be a prime time for positive development organizations to begin reinforcing the behaviors and skills of its participants. OST programs often provide opportunities for youth to serve as volunteers, counselors, or tutors within the program, these opportunities can foster autonomy. Research supports the ideas that youth have important information to offer and that their views can create and generate many opportunities for overall success in their lives (Nieto, 1999). Having these varied experiences
further allows for youth to uncover and discover the definitions of leading and mentoring others. Furthermore, having these opportunities not only empower youth but give the younger participants someone to look up to who is close to their age and from their own neighborhood. Older youth feel a sense of pride knowing that they are viewed as valuable leaders for the program and that the younger participants see them as role models. These ideals can lay the groundwork for further leadership roles in youth and continued self-determination (Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004).

Vygotsky (1978) reminds us that the experiences that youth gain over a period of time can help shape who they become and their ways of thinking. Vygotsky’s theme of the more knowledgeable other (MKO) also proves to be connected with the development of teaching youth valuable skills that can enhance their social and leadership development. The MKO is any teacher, mentor or even peer who is involved with the youth and can offer a higher level of learning in completing a task or learning a new skill. Vygotsky viewed social interaction as a pivotal point in helping build strong cognition and leadership. In addition, Vygotsky saw community as instrumental in helping youth “make meaning”. Contrary to Jean Piaget’s theory that development preceded learning, Vygotsky saw learning as a predecessor to social development and beyond (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Positive Youth Development**

Some research denotes that leaders are made or molded and not necessarily born that way (Hollander & Torsney, 2000). Efforts are now being placed on programs to strengthen leadership skills in youth, as opposed to creating more program activities. Researchers believe that students are not exposed to enough programming to build autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Often, finding the adults who can display what quality leadership looks like is part of the challenge. Pittman
and Irby (1996) remind us, youth who are merely educated and problem-free are not necessarily prepared for their futures and they need more challenging opportunities to excel and rise above their adversities through personal successes and problem-solving opportunities. There is a significant need to build assets that will further contribute to the constructs of positive youth development (Park, 2004). Kouzes and Posner (2007) explain that *modeling* the way can help encourage others to follow. Parents, who are focused on raising well-rounded youth, aren’t just looking for OST programs to provide academic support or recreational engagement. They also want their children to experience good values and positive leadership development (Duffet & Johnson, 2004).

Quality OST programs integrate the youth development approach. This approach focuses on what youth need as they mature into responsible and caring adults. The National Collaboration for Youth describes the youth development approach as an engagement strategy which prepares children and youth to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood. This is accomplished through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences. The experiences help youth become socially, morally, emotionally, physically and cognitively competent, which can be translated as the development of leadership ([http://www.collab4youth.org/Policy/PublicPolicy.aspx?CategoryID=100](http://www.collab4youth.org/Policy/PublicPolicy.aspx?CategoryID=100)). Through such leadership skills, youth can begin to build their foundations of positive development and that development can lead to self-determination and motivation (Damon 2004). To reach higher levels of social and leadership success, today’s learning communities must build stronger bonds between schools and families.

The current literature supports the premise that positive youth development should be fostered in five particular areas. Those areas include thriving, connecting, working, learning and
leading (Ferber, Pittman, and Marshall 2002). Hamilton, Hamilton and Pittman (2004) further surmise that the guiding principles that help promote positive youth development within OST programs include universality. This premise entails a deeper understanding that all youth do not need the same things and that when youth develop they are actually going through a process. Through the five particular areas as mentioned above, youth can gain stronger levels of overall development (Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004). An important focus, according to researchers, is to build on the strengths of youth and understand that each youth is an individual with specific needs.

**The Need for Out of School Time Programming**

Research suggests that if youth are taught certain characteristics through community and afterschool programs, they may be able to use those values in helping to build both successful academic paths and adult lives (Nicholson, Collins & Holmer, 2004). The willingness to help students understand their abilities as a leader can perhaps help foster their desire to find jobs that correlate with their strengths. This is the belief because interaction can help youth build good social networks and self-esteem (Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez & Brown, 2004). OST programs are focused on helping bring about that well-roundedness.

The Falcon TEAMS, OST program primarily caters to marginalized students in middle school. The majority of the participants are Hispanic and African-American. According to data obtained by the Children’s Trust of South Carolina, since 2006 the number of African-American and Hispanic children living in areas of concentrated poverty in York County SC has more than doubled. It has risen from 12% to 24% for African-Americans and from 2% to 8% for Hispanic or Latinos. In addition, the National Kids Count data (2015) indicates that the number of children in families where the household head lacks a high school diploma by race and ethnicity in South
Carolina was last documented in 2013 at 41%. These numbers are daunting and suggest that this continued exposure to hardship can further delay the overall healthy development of youth.

Moreover, families of color are finding it more difficult to climb the ladder of success. As youth watch their families struggle, it creates more levels of self-doubt and lack of motivation (Kids Count data). When in actuality, this is the best time to encourage children to tap into levels of self-determination because doing so may set into motion their own desire to overcome some of the obstacles they see in their parent’s lives. However, parents struggle with providing this needed support for their children because they themselves are also being plagued by increased degrees of stress and self-esteem issues (Turner & Rawlings, 2005). Research tells us that when self-determination is triggered, youth can use those skills to help them transition into adulthood and obtain their levels of independence (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). This further solidifies the need for additional support for families in order to help them alleviate some of the stress factors associated with their child’s overall development.

**Together we can**

Many youth spend the majority of their waking hours in the care of someone else other than parents or guardians. This is in part due to the adult either working or not being available in the household (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Therefore, it is additionally important that youth have exposure to positive settings or support systems outside of the home setting. Youth who do not participate in out of school time programs or activities are more likely to encounter troublesome behavior. From truancy, to alcohol and drug abuse, to sexual activity, adolescents are at risk for illicit behavior when not actively engaged in positive settings (Scales & Leffert, 1999). The responsibility of helping youth find positive experiences and trusting supportive environments is shifting from just family entities. It is now becoming the responsibility of
families, communities and school settings to help navigate positive behavior in youth (Damon, 2004). Such interactions can help provide benefits of supportive staff in regards to positive youth development in out of school time settings.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) states: the future of our society is indicated by the implementation of character, competence, and the overall integrity depicted by our youth. The Bronfenbrenner concept shows that a single program or effort alone is not the only influence on the development or success of youth. Youth programs and organizations affect participants differently. Outcomes will never be uniform regardless of how structured programs and organizations appear. Such inescapable differences reinforce the importance of both variety and choice. One activity is not developmentally appropriate and enhancing for all. However, each adolescent needs to be able to have a definition of self and what is important to their individual success. (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004, p. 106).

Through partnerships such as the mentoring aspects and parent collaborations, research suggests that youth can move toward better grades, changed attitudes and more opportunities to participate in community events. According to Zaff and Michelsen (2002), such community interactions can also help youth build better work ethics when they enter adulthood. In addition, safe, productive community environments can benefit the traditional school setting. On the other hand, research also informs us that there are orientations associated with self-determination that can foster counter-productive results. Research denotes that self-determination theory occurs in various modes. Those modes are autonomous, controlled or impersonal. For example, the counteractive modules consist of the controlled and impersonal orientations.

These orientations can be led by adult individuals who can serve as models for youth. In
turn, these models can contribute to depictions that can distract from autonomy. The *controlled* tenant is led by models who seem to generate controlled inputs. The *impersonal* tenants are orientations that lead to unmotivated actions and also promote social anxiety along with the lack of self-esteem. Studies support the idea that autonomy support can help youth gain more autonomy, self-determination and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). This support can also increase positive student experiences and success (Ryan & Stiller, 1992).

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) explains through his ecological systems theory that everything outside of a child’s world can help determine how they grow and mentally develop. This statement helps guide my direction of research by supporting the premise that we all must work together to create a complete child. The ultimate goal of the Falcon TEAMS program is to pull all of the pertinent entities together, including, home, school and community. This process will allow us to surpass the vision of many OST programs and take it one step further by making this OST program one based on holistic development and leadership skills.

According to Durlak and Weissburg (2007), providing such effective training opportunities within an OST program may help youth acquire enhanced skills. Training activities such as problem-solving, role-playing and team building can help plant the seeds for motivation and build trust and self-determination (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Schools and community programs have a lot at stake and will ultimately lose out if they have no concrete actions toward establishing stronger collaborations (Organizational Research Services, 2004). Collaboration includes a vision for success, engaged parents or supportive adults who are interested in leading and helping youth excel, and importantly - partnerships between parents, community programs and the school systems to leverage resources (Cosden, Morrison, Guiterrez & Brown, 2004).
Sanders (2001) states that, with collaboration, there can also be improved attitudes. Sanders also comments that communities can be extremely valuable in encouraging youth to excel, therefore enhancing the success that programs strive to achieve. When OST programs provide youth opportunities to improve skills in the real world setting, they can learn to further develop their identity among peers and ultimately help improve the community. After school programs can help youth build their long-term success and achievement (Miller, 2003).

Theokas and Lerner (2006) reveal a dimension of ecological assets called “collective activity”. This type of collaboration between families and communities can promote civic interaction and social networking. The belief is that a good youth development framework occurs when resources are aligned with youth and community needs and that this type of alignment can lead to a decrease in negative behavior and may promote positive behaviors. Research is telling us that with the constant changes in society and family dynamics, communities are seeking more support and information in efforts to raise children who are equipped to deal with a variety of issues including peer pressure, bullying and gang interaction. The number of parents and youth, seeking opportunities to impact the social interactions of youth is growing (Greenberg & Kusche, 1997). This is in part due to the acknowledgement that positive leaders of the community can help impact the lives of youth by serving as examples and working closely with the school systems. Given that, families, community programs and schools can all contribute to such robust learning opportunities. When OST programs are willing to integrate these various levels, support systems are developed and can create a comprehensive plan and begin laying the foundation for helping youth succeed into adulthood (Mertensmeyer, & Fine, 2000).

Research supports the idea that when opportunities are provided that allow youth to reflect on their own leadership skills and abilities to evaluate their progress, they begin to
strengthen their overall development (Tiven, 2002). Social science researchers are finding that the time it takes to reach these stages of independence is increasing. With the increasing responsibilities required in adulthood, communities are seeking programs that can help address the issues of education, leadership and social development in youth. Adulthood is defined as the point when youth leave home, gain their own economic independence, and begin starting their own families (Berlin, Furstenberg & Waters, 2010). Accountability for actions and reduced crime rates involving youth is becoming even more imperative.

**Interrogating White Privilege**

Research tells us that minority youth are filling themselves with lots of negative images. Youth today are struggling with their identity (Pitre, Cook & McCree, 2009). From gang-bangers to criminals, these negative images tend to convince youth that they are who the images say they have to become. Woodson (1933) tells us in his work, *The Mis-education of the Negro* that schools often create a culture that is opposite of the life that some of our children have to live. These misunderstandings further increase when it involves youth who are deemed marginalized. Moreover, marginalized youth are provided with visions of success as presented by the people from the dominant groups, when in essence, those visions may not align with their cultural or social settings. This again solidifies that the dominant or privileged power is what drives many of the decisions and materials that are presented to youth within the school setting and beyond (Pitre, Cook, McCree, 2009).

This privileged power, often referred to as white privilege, is not new to the educational arena and has been seen throughout history. White privilege was identified prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as accepted acts of discrimination. It may be even better stated during that era as *privileges of whites* (Bennett, 2012). Such privileges included the right to sit and eat at lunch
counters, travel on public transportation and own property. Professor of Women’s Studies at Wellesley University, Peggy McIntosh, (1988) shared the contemporary definition of *White privilege* which states that whites enjoy certain privileges that they sometimes do not acknowledge that they possess. This definition, to a degree, freed some Whites from being affiliated with the ugliness of the term pre-Civil Rights era because they *did not know that they possessed the privilege*. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) speaks about the new racism that is often referred to as the *invisible oppression* that we sometimes don’t even recognize because it is so deeply embedded into our daily operation. In most cases, today’s privilege acts are not as blatant as they were in the pre-Civil Rights Act era. Nevertheless, white privilege still exists in our 21st century learning (Bennett, 2012). It is seen when whites choose to live in an area that alienates blacks or other people of color by creating social, economic or educational barriers. This depicts the face of the new racism.

To date, there have been many articles written about white privilege in a way to explain the *unconsciousness* of America to discriminate others who are deemed less fortunate. White privilege is defined by some as the perpetuation of social and economic choice (Bennett, 2012). The contemporary definition of white privilege is viewed as less harsh than the pre-Civil War definition of discrimination. McIntosh (1988) explained white privilege as a psychological barrier as opposed to something merely concrete or structural. Simply stated, it appears that the *privilege of whites* went from structural and concrete (pre- Civil Rights Act) to more *white privilege* which is psychological and social (post Civil Rights Act). White privilege is relegated to more of the subconscious system of thinking as opposed to the direct discriminatory system that entails action.
One such example of the subconscious depiction can perhaps be seen through the lived experiences of educator and author Julie Landsman. In her work, *A White Teacher Talks About Race*, Landsman (2001) shares what she learns as she observes students in her high school class while they prepare to seek jobs. She finds herself trying to prepare the students in a way that will allow them to perform well in job interviews. However, that preparation has her in a position of asking students to remove their true cultures and identities and place it on a shelf while slipping on whiteness….at least until their interview is over. In other words, Landsman tries to share with the students that their culture will provide a barrier for them seeking a position in the dominant world; therefore, she sets out to help them prepare to *fit in*. It is Landsman’s positionality as a middle to upper-class white woman that gives her the privilege to understand what the dominant culture expects from its employees. Landsman is delivering the roadmap to whiteness as opposed to delving into opportunities to *change* the way of thinking of those deemed the dominant group. Landsman’s work denotes that she is not blind to the racial inequalities that her students face. She appears to have come to accept them as reality, perhaps in her subconscious mind. This acceptance can in itself still add to the racial imbalances that many youth of color face. However, she felt that her small steps in preparing the students were a milestone in breaking down such barriers.

This preconceived notion that barriers are *going away* was no clearer than when 44th President Barack Obama took office in 2008, when polled by CNN – many white respondents felt that the election of a black president had put to rest the racial issues in America. However, the truth of the matter was that many of the white respondents still did not understand the overwhelming challenges that lie ahead for minorities in America. Research supports the idea that when you are part of a group that has been deemed dominant, one does not have to spend
much time worrying or trying to figure out how they can be accepted into the group, they are already there. As stated by anti-racist educator and author Tim Wise, race still matters in America. He posits that as much as we claim that we have moved past racism and racial dominance, we are still in the midst of environments that tout White privilege and sometimes support legacies of inequality (http://northeastern.kanopystreaming.com.ezproxy.neu.edu/node/93032). It must be clearly stated that Whiteness, as associated with privilege and dominance, goes beyond the physical components of skin color and features. White privilege is defined as the attitudes and perceptions of one toward the abilities and beliefs of one that is of another race (minority). To go even further, Wise states that it can be damaging for White people to remain blind to the racial inequalities and white privilege that exists.

This examination of white privilege is further explained in the work of Gay (2002) as she discusses pedagogical strategies that can help prepare educators to work effectively with youth of color. It is this misunderstanding of diversity that can keep good teachers from being great. Without the ability to understand the need to provide youth with many opportunities to feel confident and independent, autonomy and self-determination will be hard milestones to reach. It is the notion that one has about self that can help propel youth to higher levels of learning and progress. It is through the understanding of self-determination that educators can help youth change their self-image and shape ideologies of success. This will allow them to enter a classroom setting without being riddled by the assumptions of others. Jupp and Slattery (2010) remind us of the structural and deficit views of students that can prove to place a degree of misunderstanding on the lives and paths of youth and their families. Ultimately, in order to create a society that is indeed balanced and views everyone’s ability to experience humanness, we have
to create rich dialogue and talk about the possibilities for change within our educational and belief system.

Research by Anagnostopoulous (2003) states that teachers viewed the deficit thinking as one associated with the perceptions of the minority child’s home life. To further explain, if a child was living in a chaotic or perceived stressful environment, the expectation levels were lowered for that particular child. This was evident in Landsman’s (2001) comments about the student’s being able to ask their parents about how to survive in the dominant culture as she was sure that some of their parents had to do that as well in their professional careers. Again, this tends to support the belief that minority students are not capable of high expectations due to their environment or experiences. It is plausible that youth need to be in settings where they are provided with necessary autonomy support. This support will help them thrive according to their potential not necessarily according to their circumstance. Autonomy support is often fostered through the mentoring or experiences that youth are able to have in their lives (Damon, 2004).

**Defining Self-Determination, Autonomy and Intrinsic Motivation**

Self-determination theory researchers, Deci and Ryan posit that it is the interpersonal interactions that can help determine the degree of autonomy that one seeks (Black & Deci, 2000). The relationships that an individual encounters and the degree of autonomy support can have great impact on how one views self and therefore strives to gain the ability to do things on their own. In addition, the concepts of self-determination are often related to the environment in which the individual is exposed. Self-determination is the fulfillment of the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Poulsen, Roger, & Ziviani, 2006). Researchers say that, through the development of self-determination, adolescents are also developing the ability to see things from another’s point of view. Through this process youth are developing a commitment to their own
system of values and ability to do things well (Poulsen, Roger, & Ziviani, 2006). This sense of self-determination and autonomy can help youth begin to establish practices of interaction and problem-solving skills (Villarruel, et al., 2003). Moreover, self-determination theory can be influenced by the level of autonomy support that one receives.

The autonomy support occurs when a person who has a position to guide or direct an individual takes that position and helps the individual gain information and opportunities for growth and shaping perspectives. In addition, this support helps minimize the stress and pressures that the individual encounters, so they have more time to focus on their own levels of autonomy and self-determination (Black & Deci 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) also surmise that satisfying the needs that individuals have psychologically, such as fulfilling autonomy, can help prepare individuals for discovering their true interests and the values they develop. An autonomous act is one that is based on the true values of the individual. The researchers also denote that autonomy is important for individuals to begin planning their destiny and creating strategies that can help them improve their own lives.

Intrinsic motivation is a tenet of autonomy and can evolve as one begins to master a skill (Deci & Ryan, 1991). There is importance in helping youth find activities that appeal to them so they can begin to master those skills. This, in turn, will encourage them to want to perform those skills more often therefore feeding into the intrinsic motivation. Research has discovered that classrooms and educational settings that show overall autonomy support seem to foster youth who are intrinsically motivated to do well (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981). This includes continued assistance from adults within the community and the home setting. Research has shown that autonomy supportive parents or guardians can help encourage youth to complete homework and other school activities (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991).
This form of collective efficacy or social cohesion and steps toward self-determination can help groups create opportunities for performance. Based on ideas concerning collective efficacy, there are social underpinnings that suggest shared capacities of the group can create enhanced performance. It is the autonomous behaviors that affect the internal causality and are the results of personal interest to thrive (Deci & Ryan, 1991). These steps can lead to intrinsic operation which allows an individual to perform tasks for their own self-satisfaction. From those tasks youth can gain stronger relationships with others and further build their leadership abilities. This can ultimately lead to more well-roundedness within self and community.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Ladson-Billings (1995) suggest that educators should show support and belief in the success of minority students. This action can help foster the confidence that parents and students need to experience in order to build confidence in themselves. Moreover, teachers should be aware of the tone, body language and communication that they use with parents. This can either build up or deteriorate the relationships between the teachers and parents (Thompson, 2003). OST activities include after-school programs that foster mentoring sessions, cultural enrichment experiences and supportive teachers and tutors. It is proposed that such programs can help mitigate negative behaviors and develop stronger academic and leadership skills. Through Ladson-Billings (1994) experience of observing students in the classroom setting, she noted that students who felt as if their culture and experiences were welcomed as part of the whole group interaction, were more successful overall in the setting.

This holistic approach views the potential of addressing the whole youth as opposed to just particular areas of interest. In other words, keeping the youth out of trouble does not necessarily prepare them for autonomy. Research further explains that schools and community
programs face daunting challenges. These challenges include educating students who lack those critical skills that can be learned at home to help support autonomy and leadership skills (Weissberg & O’Brien 2003). The unfortunate thing is that some educators complete their studies and go on to take a few classes in diversity and feel that they are competent enough to engage youth in cultural awareness and diversity. This limited exposure merely acerbates the levels of racism that are discovered in educational settings because it is the preconceived notions about race that add to the belief systems already in place (Cross, 2003, 2004). Therefore, youth must be exposed to caring adults who are not afraid to engage in rich conversations and activities that can reinforce culture. Culturally responsive teachers and staff have the ability to connect with students in a way that tears down barriers and builds bridges to success.

It is the lived experiences of Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2000) that allow them to speak effectively on the power of filling classrooms with culturally responsive teachers. Gay (2000) surmises that educators must not be afraid to bring creative elements into the setting in order to arouse the creativity of students. Researcher Ladson-Billings (1994) talks about culturally responsive pedagogy and how it can help create leverage. She surmises that it will allow youth to leverage the power that structural thinking delivers. Through the cultural commitment of educators, students may be empowered to gain levels of knowledge, experiences and enhanced skills. Culturally responsive teachers understand that you cannot separate a youth’s home life from his culture. More importantly culturally responsive teachers can take the value that students bring to the classroom and utilize it to help reinforce their own style of teaching. Additionally, teachers can take the cultural experiences that youth bring from home and help other students build knowledge and skill sets from those experiences. This is fostered when
teachers approach this process with caring and interest about the student’s culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Ladson-Billings states from the Delpit & Dowdy work: *The Skin That We Speak*:

“Rather than experiencing the alienating effects of education where school-based learning detaches students from their home culture [culturally relevant pedagogy]...is a way for students to be bicultural and facile in the ability to move between school and home cultures...it is designed to help students ask larger socio-political questions about...ongoing inequity and social injustice.” (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p.111)

Landsman’s ethnographic technique of observation and role-playing with the high school students that she taught made an attempt to deal with the topic of race through her interpretive approach. Much of her affluent background prohibited her from fully empathizing with the struggles of her students. Nevertheless, it appears that Landsman views herself as one who was born into privilege and feels obligated to parlay some of her success onto those less fortunate. Despite her lack of cultural exposure, she tries to depict a strong multicultural level of comfort. To further prove her commitment, she freely interacts with the students and places herself in the middle of their lives. Landsman also shares her work as she was embedded in the discussion of race from a white teacher’s perspective. Her work is centered on allowing students to focus on who they are and how they can express themselves as opposed to jumping right in with the idea of, *oh let me fix this poor, marginalized student*. Landsman attempted to focus on building her students sense of self. Landsman stated, “I believe it is up to those of us in public education to be aware of this and to prepare these students, many of whom are not white, for a multitude of choices for their future” (p. 98).

Culturally responsive teachers and staff have the ability to help remove some of the deficit factors that keep youth from believing in their abilities to excel. Culturally responsive teachers and staff, much like my grandparents, can encourage youth to continue trying until they
gain some levels of success. The most important aspect of culturally responsive teaching is that educators understand that they can learn from the children as well. It is this open-mindedness that allows barriers to be broken down and autonomy begins to flourish. The confidence that culturally responsive teachers can impart on students allows them to examine their own values and systems. This encouragement must be done continuously in order to take root in the fibers of positive youth development. Moreover, students who walk into a setting and feel that their culture is included in the setting as opposed to being excluded can make substantial strides in their academic success. When students can walk into a setting and begin seeing themselves represented in the class, they start to gain more confidence in that setting. Sometimes students walk into a setting that tries to change them into something that they are not, this can prove to be counteractive in the achievement process (Delpit, 1995).

**Parental Support**

As was mentioned earlier, family ties are growing weaker and peers are becoming more important. Youth are beginning to focus on goal setting and personal development themselves rather than being pushed or directed by their parents. This type of bonding or attachment that is formed between youth and other caring adults, such as parents or guardians, helps youth create solid social interactions. These interactions can help plant the seeds for motivation and build trust and self-esteem (Cosden, et al. Summer 2004). In addition, safe, productive community environments can benefit the traditional school setting. Research also tells us that self-determination can be defined through the environments that youth are exposed to (Mithaug, Agran, Martin and Wehmeyer, 2003).

Quinn (2004) states that the family is an underutilized resource in human service delivery. But - by approaching our community with an attempt to integrate the families into
programs we can begin creating parental support systems to help eradicate some of the adverse behavior that is experienced in adolescence. The Falcon TEAMS program is focused on such character and leadership building approaches. Much of the literature suggests that an increase in problem solving skills, decision making, and conflict resolution can further enhance the overall development of youth and their families. Parental involvement can help improve the overall academic as well as social skills of youth (Quinn, 2004). However, research goes on to support the idea that parents are more comfortable helping their children when they gain guidance from teachers and supportive community members. Research also supports the premise that an eclectic blend of people coming together can help youth frame their processes on how to become better learners and leaders.

Research denotes that as youth get older, parents become less involved with the interactions over time. This is particularly apparent after elementary school. As parents try to respect the autonomy of their growing adolescents, they may often underestimate their knowledge or the value they can offer their youth in the way of leadership and direction (Sanders, 2001). Nieto (1999) suggests that the way youth view themselves and their cultural experiences and surroundings can have strong bearing on how they perform in society or even academically. Therefore, it is necessary for youth programs to obtain creative strategies to encourage youth and their support networks to get excited about the learning and leading process. Building a strong leadership component in afterschool programs also encourages youth to learn about and discuss important issues within their own communities. This essentially means that the adult must begin to understand that youth cannot be separated from their cultural environment. We must learn to value what their environment offers and learn to meet the participants where they are in regards to reaching success.
Research suggests that parents are usually involved with their youth based on the needs that they feel are prevalent to their youth’s success. Therefore, if parents feel that academics are the most important element of their child’s success that is what they focus on, if the area is athletics or another area that is where the focus lies (Miller, 2003). The unfortunate element is that as youth display success in school, parents often disengage in this area and are not as motivated about engaging in other related areas or activities. When students are struggling or facing difficulties in the school setting, parents usually show up and become involved (Damon, 2004). Parents want to give their children independence; at the same time, they want to be supportive and aware of their youth’s needs (Sanders, 2001).

**Fundamentals of Youth Leadership**

Many OST programs integrate a positive youth development approach into their programs. This is accomplished by incorporating program features that capitalize on the establishment of constructive and healthy development, which is the essence of positive youth development (Damon, 2004). Early implementation of leadership skills, within OST programs, can help set the foundation for building strong character enhancement and positive behavior in more youth. Responsibility, honesty, integrity and a caring disposition are a few of the future components of successful leaders (Brown, McComb, & Scott-Little, 2003). Implementing these components into program layout allows OST programs to spend time on various youth development skills, not just academics and recreational aspects.

As a child, character enhancement was a common piece of my everyday living. Though my grandparents did not have the ability to reinforce the academics of my life, they certainly wanted to make sure that I built a strong value base that included caring, kindness and integrity. They knew that data would not always determine the success in my life. Moreover, they felt that
these components could help fill in some of the gaps in my academic and economic shortcomings. That is why for our 21st Century learning capacity, we must be able to prepare our youth beyond the books and give them an overall balance to learning. No matter what opportunities are presented, youth must serve as engaged participants in the event as opposed to just recipients (Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004).
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Alignment

This study will utilize autoethnography as the method. The goal is that information gathered, through my lived experiences, will help after school and community leaders obtain a better understanding of what youth can gain in a program and how they can learn to take on various responsibilities of adulthood through their own perceptions of motivation and autonomy. Since leadership abilities are important to overall success, information from this research may also direct educators on strategies about how to engage youth in leadership and self-determination opportunities (Mertensmeyer, & Fine, 2000). It is the hope that this chosen methodology will expand sociological understanding as it relates to adolescents and the quest by educators to support their needs.

The reason this method is best aligned with my work is because as an educator and author, it is my lived experiences and writings that have helped me make sense of the world and learn how to solve the problems that I faced as a marginalized adolescent. Boylorn (2008) explains that autoethnography is a way for the marginalized messages to be heard and to be given a voice. This voice does not necessarily represent the views of all marginalized people but it is through one’s experiences that a lens is provided in which to examine some of the parameters that are associated with such marginalization. Working with youth, I will now need to understand and try to make sense of their world experiences in order to serve them effectively. I know that all of my information will not apply to every student I serve, yet it will provide me with some frame of reference to help me build a better program that focuses on some of the needs of my OST participants. The hope is also that this research method will make a
contribution to the information that is already available about the attitudes and perceptions of self-determination, motivation and autonomy.

This study will center on the overarching question and the sub-questions:

1. How has my career been a reflection of the support that I received as a youth growing up in a marginalized household and community?

2. What experiences and areas of motivation led me to gain an interest in helping build stronger out of school time programs for marginalized youth?

3. What support systems or dialogue enabled me to pursue my own levels of self-determination and autonomy?

**Challenges associated with the view of self**

Autoethnography is sometimes questioned because of the concerns associated with ethics. Many social researchers contend that one cannot truly share the solid elements of data if one is so close to the message. However, it must also be noted that total objectivity is a near impossible task (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, H. 2010). It is this view of self that allows the researcher to further examine their personal interests and depict those interests in a way that others may understand. In this process, what some fail to understand is that revealing one’s self in this method of research places the researcher in a vulnerable state (Chang, 2008). Vickers (2002) reminds us that there is potential harm when researchers begin to talk about their experiences. From these experiences the research has the potential to open old wounds or reveal private information. Boylorn (2009) spoke of these same experiences and challenges in her work. She noted that there were times that she reflected back on family or conversations during her research and actually felt anger and resentment. I too reflected back over situations with my grandparents and felt a sense of anger. As a researcher in the middle of your own research, it is
difficult at times to keep the two elements separate, especially if you are rooted in the middle of the process.

Autoethnography takes some of the elements of autobiography and blends them with elements of ethnography. Together, an autoethnography allows the researcher to examine culture and how they are situated in those experiences (Ellis, & Bochner, 2000). In other words, it is a call to look at things from a socially conscious perspective and to look at things critically. In addition, there is the challenge of viewing self as the *subject* of the research and as the *object* of the research. The subject being the researcher and the object which shows the researcher as now in the role of the participant (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). It would seem difficult for one to play both roles in this research study, but it is the depth of the information that provides great strength to the social-cultural examination of the topic. This essentially can help create a window through which the researcher can understand the sensitive and inner issues happening around him (Ellis, & Bochner, 2000). To add to that, Mitra (2009) determines that the act of *doing* is indeed located within the realm of *being* and that the two elements are connected.

Autoethnography has been a part of research for over two decades and Reed-Danahay (1997) posits that personal narrative has seen a resurgence because of the need for individuals to tell their stories as a way to give voice to the various areas of education and its impact on daily lives. This approach in research can help one analyze what has happened in one’s own life and use that information to gain a greater and richer understanding of the cultural experiences that are encountered. This research goes on to state that educators teach students who are not enthralled by education or professional aura as much as they used to be impressed by these aspects. Therefore, for a teacher to be smart is not enough to engage the youth to always listen and learn. There needs to be other elements present to engage the interest of youth.
Scholarly Debates of Autoethnography

The scholarly debates of this approach seem to be wrapped in the way the information is gained for analysis. The flexibility and adaptability to research brings into question the rigor and validity of the method. It is believed that because the approach to gaining more recognition as a solid form of collecting research data, it may lead some to believe that there is not solid depth to this methodology (Smith, 1996). Yes it is true that the researcher has more access to the data by performing it as an autoethnography. However, the philosophical underpinnings of this method suggest that autoethnography focuses on intensive and detailed information that allows the researcher access to the inside world of the researched participant- self (Pavlenko, 2002, 2007). This in essence makes access to the information easier since the researcher can gather information based on their own experiences. The use of autoethnography gives one the ability to also use self-reflection and exploration as well as scientific inquiry (Ellis, 2008). This may require the researcher to provide more transparency in the approaches used in order to further solidify the use of this methodology (Chang 2008). Nevertheless, autoethnographers must remain diligent in presenting work that can be utilized by all and they must refuse to fall into the trap of turning these lived experiences into dry academic rhetoric.

However, with this access comes limitations as suggested by researchers who are not full proponents of this method of research. Denzin (2006) proposes that researchers such as Ellis, Bochner, Richardson and Holman Jones write and research more from their heart than from the political and scientific realm and he
feels that this jeopardizes the credibility of the research. He states that the pedagogical can enact a true way of seeing and being. As Sparkes (2000) has noted, the status of autoethnography - as appropriate research - still remains in question to many researchers. One of the prominent limitations is that this type of research can bring forth much contention for the researcher as some memories or detailed data can harbor emotions that the researcher is not able to explain or ready to confront. On the contrary, Richards (2008) suggests that these emotions can help exhibit truth and further understanding of the experiences that one has encountered. In addition, this method can allow others to open their eyes to situations that are similar to their own that they have never examined before.

Perhaps it is the release of the researcher-self that proves to be liberating for the reader as they may see themselves through the experiences of the researcher. It is also through the idiographic focus of such areas as “self” that make this method often debated by other researchers. Walford (2004) suggests that the idea of writing narrative can create a mode of fiction, per se, and not necessarily shine light on the total truth, since one is writing from their own recollections of truth. Perhaps this debate came about after the contention by Ellis and Bochner (2000) that autoethnography is a method that helps us see narration as a story talking about the past. Maybe it is the word story that throws caution that the information adds a question as to the validity.

As this is indeed a scholarly debate about the use of autoethnography as method, various research papers have effectively demonstrated that there is much doubt in placing the researcher at the center of their own research work. It is this
contrast between emotional and personal input and objectivity that creates the
debate as to whether this method is the most valid. Megford (2006) suggests that the
researcher implement an *ethic of accountability* in order to maintain a semblance of
objectivity. This would essentially allow the researcher to tell the total truth as they
have come to know it and with the understanding that everyone they are including
in that truth would be there to hear it. Conventional research methods can prove to be
limiting and narrow at times, but many researchers still believe that research has the opportunity
to be objective. However, with the desire to understand people who have varied backgrounds or
economic situations, researchers have come to realize that they must approach individuals from a
more personal perspective (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Smith (2004) argues that this
subjectivity can move research beyond the written text process to more of the
psychological and social meaning of data. Also, this subjectivity is another area that
makes it difficult for some researchers to look at this method as touting validity.

The specific aim of autoethnography is to get the researchers to open up and
think about their past and spark a degree of questions in the reader that will allow
them to begin to reflect on their own experiences (Ellis and Bochner (2000). More
importantly, this method is to allow everyone to walk away having learned
something. This method allows one to get as close to the ideas and perspectives of
the researcher and participant as possible and then try to understand why the
participants think and feel that way in that particular setting or situation based on
their experiences. Autoethnography views the difficulties associated with removing
self fully from every facet of thoughts or meanings associated with how things
really operate in the world. Moreover, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) surmise that there
is no way to capture true objectivity. What seems to be a clearer balance of autoethnography is suggested by Richardson (2000), he proposes to strike a balance by evaluating this method as both a science and an art. In doing so, the autoethnographer must view their work on the continuum as three areas: research and their process, culture and self. Researchers must then decide where on that continuum their research lies (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). However, Duncan (2004) warns that a fallacy of autoethnography is the inability to connect personal experiences that occur in one’s life with the theory that supports the method.

**Collecting data, Collecting self**

As autoethnography has no specific rules or approaches, it can be examined and implemented by using various types of genres. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) autoethnography also allows the researcher to collect information that examines the internal feelings and the emotions that are experienced, while at the same time looking at external as well as social conditions. Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that autoethnography is a constant discovery of inside and outside views. There is also the hope that autoethnography allows for the level of authenticity that gives lived experiences much validity. Ellis (1999) makes it clear that autoethnography allows one to come to a deeper understanding of their own ideas and views and in doing so can better understand those around themselves. I found this to be true with my own journey, I discovered ideas and patterns that I had not previously explored. Through those explorations, I found myself searching for better ways to serve the youth that I work with daily.
Sparkes (2000) challenges the question of validity by stating that if someone else (another researcher) gathered the same information from the researcher (autoethnographer) and analyzed or documented it, would it not be the same as the researcher (autoethnographer) gathering and documenting his own information and analyzing it? Lederman (1999) proposed that the headnotes (mental notes) may be far more legitimate than field notes. Anthropologist Margaret Mead also stated that it was her headnotes that provided much richer data to her work than merely the field notes that she gathered in order to do her research. I myself have dug into my headnotes for nearly five months, I have examined my old poetry notes, pictures and revisited my former home to reflect on my role as a marginalized youth growing up in a small town. More importantly, I have examined how those experiences have impacted me as an educator and author. This autoethnographic journey was organized thematically and I looked for and remembered emotional statements that served as platforms for my development and growth. Some of these statements came from my grandparents and their wonderful wisdom and some of them came from my own levels of expectations that I set in motion for myself. Ellis (1999) referred to this approach as emotional recall and through this, one is able to look deeply within to gather the nuggets of information that will serve as the foundation for one’s story to be told.

Data for autoethnography can be collected in many ways. From interviews to field notes, participant interviews or from artifacts, there are many ways to legitimize autoethnography. Muncey (2005) points out that items such as snapshots or artifacts can prove to be valuable if memory does not uphold the facets of
autoethnography. Duncan (2004) goes on to clarify that researchers need hard facts or information to support the soft ideas and impressions of autoethnography. For the research that I will conduct, I will depend on artifacts such as pictures or notes as well as poetry that I have written over the years recanting memories of my autonomy support and supportive community. I will also look deep into my own feelings and reactions as I revisit memories from my past. I will take notes of varied emotions that I feel when I read some of my older poetry. I will use that poetry to reflect on my experiences in both school and the community. The concern is that as I reflect on those experiences, it will be hard to examine this from a cultural experience outside of my own since I am the subject of the lived experiences.

The information from my notes, as related to my poetry and mini stories, was aligned with the qualitative process. Brady (2009) says that poetry is an open door that allows one to enter into their own meaning. The vision is to open that door for many with not only the poetry but also with the stories that I share. According to Banks-Wallace (2002), the foundation of qualitative research is based on stories. One process, interpretive constructionism, is in action throughout this autoethnography. As I am constantly making sense of the experiences around me and my own interpretation of what I encountered. I understand as Rubin and Rubin (2012) state that people will look at my experiences through their own and through different lenses, but it is my own interpretation that I will use throughout this process. Furthermore, I used mini stories that happened in my life to blend the self-reflexive information and the analytical information. In other words, I was able to
contextualize the information by examining the lived experiences that I had and then referencing them back to the research pieces that supported or aligned with those factors. This approach, in turn, is proposed to help educators live these experiences with me and further understand how to interact with youth from marginalized environments and different cultural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

As education has become such a vial of rigorous research and data that sometimes disconnects educators from the purpose of teaching, autoethnography is the refreshing element of research that challenges them to feel and experience what learning and student connection should look like for our classrooms and educational settings (DeVault, 1997). The hope is that this autoethnography will provide very clear-cut narratives that will engage the reader and also prove to be critically reflective (Spry, 2001). It is important for readers to understand where you are coming from so they, in turn, may question their own positionality in regards to their work. Readers should walk away from this information feeling as if they are going to examine their own beliefs and feelings as they pertain and are similar to the lived experiences of the researcher (Ferdinand, 2009).

The Process

First, I gathered as much of my poetry and poetic notes as I could that were written either when I was in middle school or during the time when I was writing my leadership materials for my professional career. After gathering the poems and notes, I began rereading them and looking for ideas that resonated from my childhood. I examined those ideas and found the links between those ideas. Through
tying my ideas from home to school to community, I was able to find the themes that tied those entities together. Those links came in the form of phrases that resonated throughout. Words such as *vision, belief and hard work* were woven throughout those life experiences. Cohen and Manion (2000) define triangulation as a way to map out or better explain information by examining it from various standpoints. For me, the process allowed the opportunity to examine how the family experiences, school experiences and community experiences all connected and if there was a fit between the information and the emergent themes throughout my experiences. By examining these three different entities, I was able to cross-check between the information and show connections. When the information connected or common themes or colloquialisms were detected, it provided stronger evidence that the information had validity and credibility as it supported the ideas and messages across the span of other research colleagues. Van Maanen (1983) urges the exploitation of opportunities to gather information across a span of people who serve as informants. In my case the informants were my grandparents, people within the community and teachers.

**Poetry as analysis and clarification**

Eisner (1995), who is essentially a pathfinder in the area of arts and how it integrates with research, surmises that the creator of the artistic piece can use their creativity and talent to transform information in a way that can help us see it even clearer. Poetry is continuing to be viewed as a legitimate form of qualitative research because it gives the researcher the chance to share lived experiences. This is done in a way that is artful and at the same time creates a more stimulating and interesting application to the information presented. It can also be used to uncover more data and themes (Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2006). This fresh perspective of
presenting information can make it more engaging and interesting to the one who is learning about it.

Willis (2002) states that the goal of this artistic approach to research using poetry is to contextualize meaning and to expand the depth of the information that is presented. Reflecting upon the data along with the poetry provides additional verification of the impact of information, not only through the lenses of the research but also through the information of other researchers. Poetry is also noted as an important tool that can trigger certain psychosocial patterns that can impact the information and lend even richer insight (Gallardo, Furman & Kulkarni, 2009). This is important since research and data are influenced by socio-cultural background settings (Flick, 2002). Furthermore, the language in poetry can prove to be a bit easier to digest than the complicated language that science sometimes communicates (Oiler, 1983). Ultimately, the hope is that the poetry will prove to be a proponent that will move not only the researcher but the reader to action that can create stronger change agents in the educational realm (Cruikshank, 1987).

I began writing poetry in middle school; perhaps it was during that time that I found solace in putting what I thought in my head and in my heart onto paper. For me, this was a way to build my own levels of independence and a way to create a better way to reinforce the self-determination that my grandparents had planted in me. I pulled from those simple poems of motivation and growing up poor to help me share those lived experiences with others and help them further understand their own levels of motivation. In addition, research supports the premise that when others begin to read such poetry in research, they build levels of empathy and understanding with the researcher. This in turn helps the reader begin to find areas
of the poem that align with their own lives and experiences (Denzin, 1997). Lorde (1984) defines it as an opportunity to build a bridge between the personal aspects and the social aspects as well as create a platform that gives life to trying new ideas. She clearly states that poetry is a necessity in order to bring about change. Adolescents have the opportunity to further form their identity through the expression and participation found in creating poetry (Rudd, 2012).

**Remembering when.....**

I have many stories and poems that I have jotted down over the years to help me remember the great lessons and information that my grandparents shared with me during their lifetime. Also pictures and relatives remind me of the words of wisdom that my grandparents imparted in me. However, it was the sole memories that I gathered from my own mind that helped me construct this autoethnography. It is a lens that requires one to examine self in a way that may be uncomfortable at times but can deliver a deeper and wider understanding of the process that helps one arrive at their current position or state. This process also helps one gain a better idea of how to deal with some of the challenges that are faced in life. These challenges may include working with educators who do not have an understanding of various cultures and walk into classrooms with assumptions about the students they serve.

Experiences play a great part in helping depict the new voices of learners (Grant, 1999). These voices can be revealed through narratives and experiences. Given that, it is plausible that autoethnography would be an effective way to gain the depth and breathe of understanding needed in order to impact the needs of today's youth. In addition, autoethnography serves as a method that will allow researchers to demystify the process of understanding educational growth.
bell hooks (1994) goes even further to justify the need for these voices as depicted through narratives and autoethnography. She states that thinkers who intend on changing the educational realm must talk with each other and create paths that can cross boundaries and allow room for further development, conversations and community change.

**Autoethnography as program builder**

Autoethnography is focused on creating a connection between self, others and the context. This in turn can create a connection with the social issues that abound (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Wolcott, 2004). Kouzes and Posner (2007) posit that teachers and leaders can create other leaders by providing many opportunities to reach success. Furthermore, Kouzes and Posner (1995) suggest that some of the abilities necessary to build leadership skills include - challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way and encouraging the heart. This in essence is what this autoethnography intends to do by connecting the various facets together. Through these connections and understandings of self, OST programs can begin to build strong leadership components. Time spent in afterschool programs allow educators to have time, in a more relaxed environment to get to know students and also encourage them to learn about and discuss important issues. Leaders can also bring in some of their experiences and begin sharing visions with the participants. This rich dialogue can begin to open the door for further understanding of cultural nuances.

Furthermore, Banks (1991) states that education can empower youth who are deemed marginalized. However, in order for that to happen, it must be done in a way that will formulate the ideas of the individuals involved and help them develop self. With the idea of self, what autoethnography does not do is create a template for self. In other words, it does not define that self is, in essence, the right existence. The idea of self takes into account that one does not
operate in a silo but that the appreciation of the views, values, differences and experiences can create a multiplicity of others in order to better understand self (Chang, 2008).

**Capacities for change and limitations**

This dissertation is heavily influenced by researcher and scholar Robin Boylorn as she uses autoethnography to show how she came to understand feminism through the experiences she gained from her grandmother, mama and aunts. The way that Boylorn understood feminism is the way that I want to understand education and the impact it has on marginalized youth and learning. Boylorn talks about her experiences as both researcher and research subject. This helps her gain a deeper insight into feminism (Boylorn, 2013). In her work, Blackgirl Blogs (2013), Boylorn shares how she learned about woman-power and independence. These experiences further shaped her willingness to share her family experiences to help shape the feminism of women and young girls in the public setting. It was through her deep explanation that I also further understood the hidden strength that my grandmother possessed in our household. It also helped me realize that I could rely on these formulas for success and not have to be boxed into what other people detailed about my life as a black woman seeking success.

To go even further back into the origin of education, Dewey states, “Solution comes only by getting away from the meaning of terms that is already fixed upon and coming to see the conditions from another point of view, and hence in a fresh light.” (p. 127). Autoethnography can be seen as the “fresh light” that can help address many issues encountered by children during the learning and self-development process. What Dewey was essentially saying in his philosophy is that there are various components involved in understanding the learning process. I believe that sometimes as educational leaders, we get so wrapped up in the traditional definition of what is needed to learn, that we forget that learning is a broad approach and not the narrow process
that we often use to instruct youth. Therefore, autoethnography is the method that supports my vision of self-development. To expand that thought Chang (2008) states that this method is understood by both researchers and those who choose to read and understand this research. She also acknowledges that this method has the great ability to create inter-connectivity between the self and others to gain more understanding of socio-cultural issues.

It will also be through my own autoethnographical experiences that I will share with youth how to find that part of them that can conquer self-doubt. My goal is to help these youth, through a culturally responsive afterschool program, gain awareness that can perhaps supply them with the autonomy they need in order to thrive – no matter what their situation. There was a point in my life that I was ashamed of being poor, of being marginalized and perhaps even being black. However, it was through the stories and structural thinking that my grandparents and solid community provided to me, that encouraged me to take the risks of reaching outside of my comfort level and look for opportunities to defy the data. It is my hope that this autoethnographic journey will encourage youth and inspire educators.

There is limited information on what can constitute rigor and quality of research as it pertains to the autoethnographical quest. Spry (2001) denotes that autoethnography is designed to work directly in the field as opposed to being situation as information presented from behind a desk. Research also denotes that it is not plausible that every detail of information can be recalled by the human memory (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Therefore, I had conversations with older members of my family to include cousins and great aunts who confirmed that my memories were accurate. After the conversations were recalled, it was necessary to see the
information through more focused lens. In order to make that happen, first round coding was applied. Through the coding, themes were uncovered.

Some researchers state that another limitation is that one cannot remove self enough from the research process in order to make clear conclusions. However, Bochner and Ellis (1996) say that this full removal cannot fully happen in other facets of research either since there is no way to separate research subject completely from their socio-cultural self. Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) refer to this first round coding as placing the information into data “chunks.” This process of coding or examining these chunks allows the researcher to apply interpreted meaning to the information and thus begin to detect patterns. More importantly, it allows the researcher to reflect on the information that is recalled and create a deeper understanding so that research questions can be addressed. This first round was beneficial to me as a researcher because it allowed me to really digest the information and my poetry from my lived experiences as opposed to just “re-reading” it. This process can provide richer understanding and meaning to the gathered data.
Chapter 4

THIS SHARED JOURNEY

I have spent most of my educational career living in the world of data – not because that is necessarily where I chose to sit but because that is where I was TOLD to sit. As 21st century educators, we are being pushed into the arena that dictates the success of our youth through graphs, charts and numbers. Not by any means am I taking away from the strength and validity that data presents because those numbers do lend themselves to uncovering some of the academic concerns that could ultimately become barriers to success. However, I also know that data has its place and that every facet of learning or development is not intertwined in what numbers or charts or graphs depict. Sometimes, it is the soul triggers in a young person’s life that can make the difference between highs and lows, winning and losing and success and failure. I have come to realize that as educators, our job is to seek solutions that may in no way be attached to numbers or data – it may mean that we have to dig down deep and find out who that child is - culturally, socially and emotionally and from there begin to build (or in some cases – rebuild) the fibers of that child’s belief system. In doing so, we may be able to give them that “thing” that will inspire them to hurt but not hate to verbalize but not violate. We have the ability, as educators, to redefine what it is that we can do to show children what success looks like from the inside out as opposed to just viewing success from the outside - in! Let’s take this journey of discovery together and let’s help change the world!! This autoethnographic process will move me beyond telling my story and as Ellis and Bochner (2011) posit, traveling into a triad of self, culture and the process of understanding. I will take my story and analyze and interpret how my own experiences can perhaps somehow lay the foundation for the better understanding of marginalized middle schoolers. From there perhaps we can examine a way to offer stronger methods of self-determination and motivation. Through autonomy support, we may be able to ignite the internal desire to help youth overcome challenges and move toward their own understanding of self as “success”.

Feeling Broken

Setting out on this dissertation journey, I had no idea that I would come to the door of autoethnography as my method. In order to get to the self-determination, intrinsic motivation and autonomy that provided the framework of my study, I had to peel back the pain, hurt and disappointments that I had encountered along the way as a youth growing up in a poor environment. Nevertheless, I wanted to share with others the important triggers, through my own experiences, that set into motion my desire and drive to become successful. For me, success meant getting an education, a good job and giving back to the community in some capacity. I
was living proof that it takes more than just data to determine the worth and value of a person and their desire to gain such success. I also know that data doesn’t always reveal the outcomes associated with the anger and hurt that one feels when they realize that their life is not going in the direction they intended for it to go. However, in order to get to that information, they I had to plow through the areas of my life that were painful and sometimes ugly to think about.

Autoethnography requires that one examine their past as well as their present experiences. The challenge with this method is the understanding that there needs to be a separation between subjective and the objective data (Chang, 2008). My goal is to make sure that this research work does not become one of self-absorption. Instead, it is intended to be a process of self-analysis and reflection that can lend itself to further examination of how a collective strategy can impact the lives of youth in a positive way. I want to interrogate my own thoughts and emotions and get to the underpinnings of what creates the purpose and passion behind engaging youth in their sense of success and determination. The hope is that this work will create conversations through my own experiences and my original poetry. Poetry that has evolved from my psyche and perhaps served as its own therapy in helping me deal with the challenges that I once faced as an adolescent trying to successfully transition into adulthood.

I was a little girl who dreamt of growing up in a home with a mom and dad and lots of brothers and sisters whom I could fight with and love on and always laugh with. I needed the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, discipline and crafts projects that took both parents to complete. I wanted to go to football games to watch my brothers play and I wanted to stand dressed up in cool cheerleading outfits and pretty bows and yell to the top of my lungs. That was the life that I had dreamt of….Instead of that, I wore thrift store clothes, carried hand me down book bags and stood in line with my grandmother to collect government cheese. I had no siblings
that wanted to call me their own and had a mother who abandoned me at two weeks old. My dad, lived long distance and I rarely saw him or had the chance to get to know him. My grandparents couldn’t help me with projects because they didn’t know how to do them and they asked me to read the letters that were sent home from the PTA and teachers. They didn’t ask me to read the notes and letters because they were too tired, or too busy to read them, but merely because they couldn’t read or quite understand them. I was their connection to school and teachers; they were my connection to community and hard work.

It is true that my grandparents did the best that they could in life and I loved them for trying. They understood that hard work couldn’t replace academics but they knew that academics was not the only way to gain what you needed in life. They taught me to respect my teachers and listen when grown folks spoke. They taught me the value of saying “yes ma’am and no sir” and how showing respect could change the way people looked at you. They made me use my own sense of creativity to build pathways to success. All of these things would teach me that perhaps yes, I had come from a broken social world, according to society’s standards, but I would not be defeated. I would learn to become the best adult I could be, because I was equipped from the inside out. My grandparents needed me and I needed them. Deci and Ryan (1985) posit that when individuals engage in activities that are personally rewarding and that are valuable to them and others, they increase their sense of autonomy. Moreover, this autonomy is supported by adults or individuals who see the value in the other person and want to help them continue that sense of self.

**Family as Connector**

As an elementary aged girl growing up in this marginalized setting, I also received much of my direction and training from other family members, my community and school system. It
was this shared connection that provided me with the tools to be better equipped for adulthood. Today’s literature on youth development further suggests that the overall development of youth must be supported by a various group of stakeholders within the family circle and beyond (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Various studies have also attempted to show the benefits of collaboration between community, family and school. In order for youth to want to succeed, they must be mentally stretched and made to feel important enough to succeed. This can be accomplished by providing positive feedback and positive reinforcement through group work and experiential learning opportunities. This creates a sense of happiness about the past and the future (Seligman, 2002).

My grandparents were strong advocates of connecting me to the community and giving me the opportunities to get involved with helping others. They never let me sit back and just watch others who needed help. If a neighbor was walking up the street carrying bags of groceries, Mama Lucy made me go help them. I always held doors open for people and always spoke to others. It is posited that public engagement is a key component to increasing dialogue and interaction among youth and adults. It certainly is going to take the various systems all working together to keep turning the wheels of education, which can generate stronger leadership skills in youth (Hargreaves, 2009). Given this overall information found in the literature, we can extrapolate from these findings that a balance in both school and home setting can help create a balance in the community setting. In other words, when there is synergy in multiple settings overall developmental needs are believed to be met. That is why it is important to create an environment that provides and promotes positive assets. In addition to such collaboration, there is a significant need to build assets that will further contribute to the constructs of youth development (Park, 2004).
Privilege as connector

Growing up in the Deep South, it is true that I often heard my grandparents correct me if they felt I was getting too comfortable in speaking to the white people we encountered. I sometimes got away with saying “Yes” to older black people in the community but my “Yes’s” had to always be layered with “ma’am or sir” when I spoke to white people. My grandmother used to tell me that I needed to “listen and learn” from these smart people. She, by no means, felt that we were inadequate but she understood that in order for me to get further ahead in life, particularly during a time that had just come out of segregation, I had to understand the hierarchical levels of power and privilege that our community had created.

My grandmother learned how to use her wisdom to navigate through the oppressive elements of growing up in the segregated South now she sought to teach her grandchildren how to do the same in the new integrated South. Banks-Wallace (2002) states that knowledge is the idea of having information that one can use but having wisdom is the ability to apply what you know in such a way that you can achieve the desired outcomes. Mama Lucy was a mountain of knowledge and she had learned how to use her experiences to gain the outcomes that she wanted. She wanted her grandchildren to live a life that was not riddled by oppression and anger and in order to make that happen, she had to prepare me (as she thought) to survive in this perceived white world. Lisa Delpit (1995) stated that parents who are not affiliated with the culture that is perceived as powerful often try to encourage their children to gain the patterns of this perceived powerful group.

Program as Connectors

When afterschool programs (OST) provide youth such opportunities to improve skills in the real world setting, to include character reinforcement, they can begin to build the
determination of youth to excel. This, in turn, helps youth learn to further develop their identity among peers and ultimately help improve the community (Damon, 2004). Ultimately, after school programs can potentially help youth build their own long-term goals. According to the research article by Mavis Sanders (2001), *The Role of “Community” in Comprehensive School, Family, and Community Partnership Programs*, communities can be extremely valuable in the socialization of youth, therefore, enhancing academic success. Through partnerships such as mentoring, homework clubs and tutoring sessions, research suggests that students can move toward improved outcomes (i.e. better grades, changed attitudes toward learning).

The reason Sander’s work is relevant to my research is that it suggests strategies that help incorporate a blend of activities into the community. This blend can create partnerships and build motivation. My grandparents instilled the idea of helping others and working together in many facets of my life. There were times that we went to my church and helped pack groceries and blankets for the homeless families. It was so hard for me to understand this because I felt that we were only a few blankets away from homelessness ourselves, yet they found the desire to help others. Moreover, they instilled in me the need to do the same. This perhaps began the intrinsic motivation portion of my life and connections to programs within my community. Even to this day, I find the energy and desire to help in the community because I feel that there is always something that we can do to help someone else. There is no tangible reward given in return for these efforts. This reminds me that intrinsic motivation was very much a part of my upbringing. This is what sets into mental motion the idea that we are conducting an act because it feels good and that it’s the right thing to do. Extrinsic on the other hand is usually attached to completing a task for a tangible reward (Griggs, 2010).

The rewards that we received for our efforts were attached to verbal praise and “thank-
yous”. Research reminds us that even praise must be dispensed in a way so as to not make it a contingency of success. Praise should create the confidence to continue striving for excellence (Breckler, Olson and Wiggins, 2006). Motivation is a valuable tool, as educators, we must be careful not to create an overjustification effect. Overjustification occurs when one places more value on extrinsic motivation than just the sheer delight that comes from intrinsically completing a task (Griggs, 2010). As a literacy advocate and afterschool programmer, I draw from the lessons my grandparents taught. Their lessons further encouraged me to incorporate these community assistance facets into my current programming.

There are desires to build intrinsic motivation that we can tap into that will engage today’s learners. Assisting senior citizens, expanding community visions and increasing organizational techniques can also enable connections and encourage youth to learn about the power of doing good things just for the sake of doing them. Sander’s in-depth research helps clarify some of the obstacles that prevent partnership development. Lack of time or poor communication skills can keep partnerships from forming, therefore, reducing opportunities to build autonomy or intrinsic motivation. There are significant correlations discussed in Sanders work that suggests when community members are encouraged to support partnerships, fewer obstacles occur. By allowing youth to participate in the development process, their input becomes a valuable resource to the academic and leadership process (Damon 2004). When youth feel that their voice counts, they become excited about being a part of something outside of themselves. Intervention strategies can prepare youth to continue to thrive and provide them with a purpose and positive attitude, ultimately promoting success. Some youth need a teacher to motivate or inspire them to accept their challenges (Ericksen, 1978). To expand this environment of inspiration, the community impact portion can provide perspectives of various opportunities to
learn and gain knowledge, which would include out of school time.

**Negative Preconceptions**

When I was in elementary school, I always wanted to be a Girl Scout but because of our limited transportation, I was unable to join the Girl Scouts. What I found the most engaging about the organization is that they were doing a lot of the activities that I was already doing in the community (helping the homeless, reading to the elderly, trash pick-ups, etc.). The ability to see what the Girl Scouts did reinforced the autonomy I had already gained from my efforts in my own community. However, I wanted to engage in these types of activities with peers, not just the adults in my community. I do know that the desire to continue helping, even into my adult life, began with the models that I examined in my early years. Community organizations, church and minority business impacts were very much a part of my foundational success in partnering with others and seeing success through the eyes of people who looked like me.

Damon (2004) supports this desire to engage in activities with peers. He states that research recognizes that the intellectual realm must be fostered by everyone who is of significance in the child’s life. Damon further recognized that the community plays a key role in helping to support positive youth development. It is through this continued support that children can gain the ability to reinforce skills that will allow them to contribute in positive ways through intrinsic efforts and not solely extrinsic efforts. The research does show that a compilation of various components such as peer mentoring, academic assistance and self-efficacy can lead to more well-balanced and focused youth who can begin to understand themselves and learn to collaborate and connect more (Brown, McComb, & Scott-Little, 2003).

According to Good & Brophy (1997), educators sometimes form preconceptions about children, particularly those living in poverty. The educators then begin lowering their
expectations for those children. It is these deficit views about intellect, economics and cultural background that can contribute to institutionalized oppression and prohibit some youth from excelling in other areas of learning and leadership (Dworin & Boomer, 2008). Also, such thoughts prohibit marginalized students from being given positions of leadership or power (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Perhaps this resistance to relinquishing power comes from the perpetual stereotypes that are formed against children of color. Delpit (1995) states that we often hear about the people of color who are involved with misconduct, but we do not hear about the large number of those who are not involved with such delinquent behavior.

Delpit (1995) further states that students must be told about the reality that exists when it comes to dominant power and class. It is through that knowledge that they can gain confidence and encouragement to understand the value that they can offer. My grandparents helped me focus on my values. They believed that being poor was the motivation needed to work even harder. They refused to let poverty be the excuse for not excelling in all areas of my life. They often said, “it’s not where you are now – it’s where you can go!!” Their visions of success became the self-determination that rooted itself in my mode of thinking and their method of leadership meant that they would set the example for me. They proved that when you work hard, gain a vision and build confidence; you can rise above many levels of adversity.

I did see value blossom in my life through the images that my grandparents planted in my mind. They were not images of delinquent children of color, but pictures and stories of little brown and black girls, like me, who did great things in their lives. I learned to do things that kids like me didn’t often partake in. For example, I always ran for school student body offices but I was never able to gain access to those areas of student decision making. Nevertheless, it did not keep me from trying. I honestly do not believe it was for my lack of commitment or enthusiasm,
but my lack of connections or abilities to collaborate with the more affluent people or businesses in the community that kept me from gaining access.

My grandparents delivered many traditional aspects of development that would prove to be important guidance for my future life decisions. In her work, *Character Strengths and Positive Youth Development*, Park (2004) states that character and leadership development is a type of moral education that can build on traditional behaviors such as respect, caring and responsibility. I encountered these character development traits each time I interacted with my grandparents, with an adult in my community or at school. Mama Lucy always told me that when you go out in public, *you gots to know how to act*. She essentially meant, like Park, that positive development was intertwined with the character that one would depict. That character entailed manners, respect for self and respect for others.

**Know thyself**

Our family’s belief system determined that we would not be defined by our lack of wealth, or by my grandparent’s lack of education. Moreover, we tried hard to not let the views of others define or dictate who we would become. Though we had very little financially, my grandparents never let our circumstances become our emotional crutch. I was expected to be as smart if not smarter than the other students in my class. They did not lower their levels of expectation based on our circumstances. On the contrary, it was their own self-determination that continually propelled them into dismantling the social injustices that they encountered before and during the Civil Rights Movement. From Jim Crow segregated South to blatant discrimination and hate, they learned to rise above the social barometer that told them that they were to be defined solely by the color of their skin. These were the lessons that their parents taught them about “self-discovery and pride” that encouraged them to not be defined by what others said
about them. So for me, it is this strong desire to help others create their own sense of autonomy that motivates me to work so hard in the education field. I know that if our families and youth become intrinsically motivated to succeed, they can dismantle some of the prejudices that are imposed on them based on race or economic status. In the process, they will better understand who they are and begin to determine their own values and standards (Chang, 2008). I always tell my students, “you can’t love yourselves if you don’t know yourselves!”

No matter how much we try to understand who we are and our values, I believe that there are still negative changes in the views of self-determination and autonomy. This may be in part due to the idea that what we are surrounded with can create much of an impact on who we become. For many of our black and brown children, the years of slavery and Civil Rights made us realize that we did not want to be socialized into second class citizenship, so we protested and demonstrated against it. When we were told that we could not own our own businesses, homes or cars, we fought even harder to gain them. However, today, we are more apt to believe the messages of culture. We have been taught not to let race, religion or gender define who we are, yet we often allow our negative internal beliefs to dictate our worth and success (Jones, 2000). For this reason alone, we are losing the desire to know ourselves and understand that we have the ability to propel ourselves beyond adversity. That is why it is extremely imperative to have culturally responsive teachers and strong out of school (OST) programming in place to curtail these negative views that youth foster and develop.

We must begin to acknowledge that oppressive attitudes can become the breeding ground for oppressive surroundings. This revelation was solidified upon my discovery of Weick (1995) and the description of sensemaking. Weicke talks about how we can make sense of the world by further understanding how we fit into the equation and help in the creation of that understanding.
To make it plain, we take our own cultural, personal and social experiences and use them to gain deeper understanding about how to use those experiences to navigate future actions. For me, the sense-making lay in my ability to create poetry that inspired others to do their best and to reach for success – this set into motion my own levels of motivation. For me, sense-making occurred when I could complete a task on my own without having my grandmother explain every facet of the task over and over – that was my autonomy. Finally, my sense-making occurred when I was able to believe enough in myself to rise above my circumstances and strive toward a better life for the next generation of my family – that was my self-determination. Sense-making is always taking place and we are always interpreting, observing and experiencing things that can be used to help us alter our actions and ideas. For some, it may be done in a positive way for others in a negative sense. One particular poem I wrote called *Build Your Mind* was birthed from the words of wisdom that my grandparents planted in my life about being determined to use your mind as the tool that could help build success and make sense of my own intellect.

*If you build your mind one day at a time and let your thoughts just flow*
*There’s never a doubt or question at all as to whether ideas can grow*

*You have to believe that your mind is the best and that dreams can really come true*
*But most of all believe in yourself and there is nothing that you can’t do*

*So, stop thinking can’t and start thinking can by building a positive mind*
*Reach for success in all that you do and leave negative thoughts behind*

*Kimberly Johnson (1997)*

*But most of all believe in yourself and there is nothing that you can’t do!! That line was*
probably the most prevalent statement while growing up. I heard this from my grandparents, from my pastor, from the older ladies in my neighborhood. I heard it so much that I actually began to believe it!! As educators, we must meet the students where they are academically and socially and help them reach those plateaus of understanding that they too may do anything that they choose to do in life. We need to recognize that students and families come to us from different levels of inheritance and culture. Moreover, we cannot just assume that parents will provide the structure and strength that students need in order to survive some of the social challenges that they are faced with each day. Therefore, it is part of our duty to encourage them in various ways. Whether through constant reinforcement, words of encouragement, or a simple smile, we can help youth continue – or in some cases begin - to believe in their abilities. Research says that self-determination is rooted in competence, connection and autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2000). When youth feel competent enough to build their own levels of intellect, they begin connecting with those who have like minds and they ultimately will seek further autonomy. It was through mental and intrinsic motivation that I sought answers outside of my immediate circle. It was the autonomy support of my grandparents and community elders that helped me realize that I had the potential within myself to reach for higher levels of success.

An Imagination is born

“When I was down beside the sea
A wooden spade they gave to me
   To dig the sandy shores
My holes were empty like a cup
   In every hole the sea came up
’Til it could come no more!!!”

(Stevenson, Robert Louis, 1913)

These words also resonated throughout my childhood as I often listened to my
grandmother recite them at my request. I imagined what it was like to actually sit on the sandy shores that were painted in my mind each time I heard the poem. “Say it again, mama!!” I coaxed her over and over. Each time, she slowly rose from her front porch rocking chair to move toward the work that lay on the other side of the broken screen door. “Not now child, I’ve got work to do, maybe when I’m finished” was usually her response. Though she constantly seemed to busy herself cooking, washing clothes, or ironing, she always had extra time for me - her little “bookworm” as she so affectionately called me. “Oh come on mama, one more time!!” Of course she found it hard to resist my prodding and constant pleading, as she reluctantly sat back down and gave in to my request:

“A birdie with a yellow bill
Hopped upon the window sill
Cocked his shiny eye and said:
Ain’t you shamed, you sleepy head??”

(Stevenson, 1880)

As I giggled at the antics of the silly bird and his imaginary words, I sighed and considered myself the luckiest kid in the world to have this woman in my life. Though we often struggled financially, I was richer than any other child I knew because I had a grandmother who could tell me stories and share poetry with me and not even look at the book!! The fact of the matter is that it wouldn’t have done much good for her to look at the book because her mind was her powerhouse tool! She taught me early on to make sure that I did whatever I could to keep my tool (brain) in tack. Bronfenbrenner (1979) reminds us that the microsystem is the closest layer that a child has in his development. In my case, my microsystem consisted of grandparents, my Head Start educational program and neighbors who treated me like their own child. Bronfenbrenner also concludes that those in the microsystem can affect the behaviors of the child while at the same time; the child can impact the behaviors of those within the microsystem.
This is certainly what happened in my case. I was able to encourage my grandparents to practice reading and writing and they encouraged me to learn to memorize information. We were both encouraging each other to reach higher potentials. Bronfenbrenner referred to this interaction as bi-directional influences. In essence, my grandparents and I were teaching each other. However, Bronfenbrenner makes it clear that such interactions have the greatest impact on the youth. As I reflect back, this bi-directional exchange helped me further gain the autonomy I needed to expand my academic horizon.

My grandmother was my connection to the desire for academic success. Mama Lucy was a small woman but her presence was always large and noticed. She was the one who neighbors called on in time of need and Mama Lucy was always known for her matter of fact way of saying what others were often too scared to express. To me, she was the mama I never had and the disciplinarian that I needed. Her wisdom and wonder with words, which were very much a part of my childhood, always warmed my heart. I loved it when she would spin tales of “How it used to be, and I remember that time”. The irony is that my grandmother rarely picked up a book to read, yet she was a mountain of knowledge and could remember tons of interesting facts. The poems, the Bible verses, the long stories and folktales that she would recite, while sitting there sewing or scribbling, flowed from her memory like a river that had traveled that path more than a few times. Nevertheless, she always shoved a book into my hands when I declared that I was bored or there was nothing to do. Looking back, I wonder if my grandmother used me, her little bookworm, to open up the world that she never had the privilege to fully explore; the world where literacy and language and words lived. Whatever the reason, books and words always seemed to pull us together and fill our imaginations. Perhaps, it was these long conversations that would plant the seeds in my imagination to become an author of children’s books and a language
advocate.

There is no question that the relationship that I had with my grandmother was closer than any I had ever experienced. We shared a friendship and loyalty that I have yet to replicate with anyone else, including my husband, whom I love dearly. We often sat and talked about our hopes and dreams. As the little girl growing up in the small country town that I came to know as “the sticks”, it was quite clear that the enmeshed relationship between Mama Lucy and me was one of deep rooted love. This extreme closeness or bonding that we shared taught me to value family and not be afraid of making mistakes in life. “No matter what you do in life gal, do it to the best ability you got”. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory supports the idea that the relationships that are formed in the microsystem set the foundation to help children gain the tools that they will need later in life to examine other areas of their environment. Our conversations helped direct my thinking about future goals and the determination that was needed to get the job done. Many times, I witnessed my grandmother form boundaries around our relationship. Sometimes she would plan events that would only require the two of us to attend, or sometimes on a cool summer evening, she would say, “Let’s go sit on the front porch”. The front porch was for us, our meeting place, to laugh, to read, to listen. In our household, my grandfather’s word was the law, but my grandmother always tempered the rules with lots of love and lots of extra encouragement. She encouraged me to do my best at all times and to promise to continue my education.

President Lyndon B. Johnson once said, “Every child must be encouraged to get as much education as he has the ability to take. We want this not only for his sake - but for the nation’s sake. Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not military preparedness - for armed might is worthless if we lack the brain power to build a world of peace: not our productive
economy - for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government - for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant” (Johnson, 1965).

Mama Lucy and my grandfather Amos, both knew the value of an education and they often told me, “*If you get it up here (as they pointed to the brain), no one can ever take it from you*”. My grandmother knew that learning and knowledge were the keys to many avenues of life; however, she never had the opportunity to pursue that part of her life. During the time that she grew up, she had a limited education. My grandfather barely had any education because he had to stop going to school as a young boy in order to help the family and take care of his siblings. The cotton fields were his classroom. Out there, he learned how to treat other people, what hard work looked like and the value of good old common sense. The wooden porch that we sat on at our dilapidated, yet loving home seemed to be the classroom that my Mama Lucy knew, the “gathering place” for all of those stories and poems that she had missed in her youth. I felt guilty sometimes knowing that I could read complicated text and that she barely knew how. I felt that somehow I owed her for what she had lost in her youth. I had been, to a degree, *privileged*, but through no fault of her own - she had not. Their words of wisdom would encourage me to go out into the world and find that job that would allow me to impact the lives of others – education and literacy would be that journey.

Perhaps I became an author because my grandparents taught me that words could give me power and I became an educator because they taught me that knowledge could give me direction. Perhaps it was their love, their presence or even their discipline that encouraged me to believe that I had enough inside me to overcome challenges – that thing called intrinsic motivation and self-determination had been planted in my soul and I needed to water it in order to survive.

_Sometimes I wonder what I’ll be one day when I grow up_

_Perhaps I’ll be a race car champ and win a fancy cup_
Maybe I’ll be an astronaut and walk across the moon
Or learn to play an instrument and write a catchy tune
Sometimes I think I’d really like – to be a science teacher
To do some fun experiments and study every creature
Maybe I’ll be a writer and gather all the news
I can follow all my dreams if that is what I choose
All I ask of you is to just believe in me
And I can do GREAT BIG things just watch and you will see!!

(Kimberly P. Johnson, 1983)

These were the beliefs that I harbored early in my life – I was determined that I would do something with my life. No matter what I chose to do; if I focused on my dreams and studied hard, I could make my dreams come true. My grandparents were the creators of such beliefs. However, it would also prove to be the collective group of people in my life who would help me formulate my understanding of self. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that it is the connections between the primary caregivers and other caregivers that set the tone for successes.

But for the Color of My Skin

I grew up in an environment where my grandparents implemented vast amounts of structural thinking into my life. It was this strong belief in self and ability that gave me the foundation that I needed to have in order to recognize that my race would not prohibit me from success. I was able to overcome many of the challenges that I would face in my life. They were also realistic in the idea that I would indeed face challenges based solely on the color of my skin. They informed me early on that my race would sometimes determine my experiences and opportunities but that it did not have to define my outcomes. Dr. Martin Seligman (2002) also denotes that as humans, we are often seen as creatures of the future and not necessarily relegated to being prisoners of what our past experiences delivered. Unfortunately, some classrooms are
indeed relegated to lowering their expectations of performance for minority students and creating that prison based on what is known about one’s past. This realm of deficit thinking can cause educators to create an “us” and “them” mentality when it comes to teaching (Ford, 2004). In other words, if my grandparents had not been so adamant about encouraging me to examine myself from the inside out and believe in myself, I don’t think I would have been so focused on personal success. In addition, they taught me early on that my success could be defined by my imagination and desire to go beyond being ordinary, or in our case – being poor.

My grandparents weren’t eloquent in their words, but they always encouraged me through their little nuggets of wisdom. “Don’t you ever let nobody tell you - you ain’t worth nothing – I don’t care who it is – you tell them they don’t know nothing ‘bout you!” Perhaps it was those powerful words that first set into motion my desire for self-determination and structural thinking. This dissertation journey has also revealed to me that much of my self-determination was attached to hope and optimism. I saw my grandparents use their faith to ignite their hope and I too had learned to strike up a conversation with self and discuss the many attributes that I possessed that would help me face my disparities. My mission in life would be to prove anyone wrong who thought I wasn’t good enough or smart enough to be counted or even heard. I learned early on from them that my skin color was MY skin color and that I had to find the brightest star in the sky and keep reaching for it and don’t stop ‘til you cetch it. For me, the stars consisted of getting a good education and moving out of the “sticks”. It was this desire and determination that made me seek my own degree of autonomy. Nevertheless, my autonomy would not operate within a silo; I still needed the autonomy support that would allow me to further enhance the other facets of my self-development.

Intrinsic motivation was the piece of my soul that told me that I was part of something
bigger than myself. Knowing that fact encouraged me to dig deep down and realize that, *it’s not just about me*. Growing up in poverty taught me to make the best of what I had, but it also taught me that no matter how bad my situation was, there was always something to be thankful for in life. It was the visions and dreams that my grandparents planted within me that made me search my own heart and soul for my life’s purpose. From that purpose, I could extrapolate the desire to improve my own life but help others in the process. Intrinsic motivation meant that I could put my needs to the side and help other people who were perhaps worse off than I was.

**Positive Reinforcement**

I didn’t need *stuff* to motivate me to help other people; my grandma’s praise was enough. Mama Lucy was never short on praise - that was all I needed to have in order to want and care about success – *just her praise*. Research tells us that praise is positively correlated with the self-perception of youth particularly elementary aged students (Blumenfeld, Pintrich, Meece, & Wessels, 1982). This can increase the desire and expectation for further success in one’s life. It was the good feelings that I received from getting the job done that was the driving force behind my motivation. I remember one time I walked about a mile and a half to the grocery store for my grandma to get her a bag of cornmeal so she could make some cornbread. It was the first time that she had trusted me to go by myself and she kept reminding me, *hold on to this five dollars ‘cause that’s my last five dollars*. I remember sticking the worn out wrinkled money in my pocket, then changing it to inside my shoe, then changing it back to my hand. I was so worried that I would somehow lose it, if it were not clutched in my fist. I walked so fast to the store just so I could hurry up and complete the task for my grandma. In all of my worry and frustration about getting to that grocery store, I had been bitten by bugs, ridiculed by loud mouthed boys, deafened by a train and barked at by dogs – all for the sake of a bag of cornmeal – but none of
those things distracted me from my mission – *get the job done*. Mama needed me and I had to come through for her. When I returned, Mama Lucy reached her hands out to grab the heavy bag – she took it out of my sweaty arms and hugged me close to her side. *That’s my gal – I knew you’d do it right!* Those words let me realize that if Mama Lucy trusted me to do this important task, there was nothing that I couldn’t handle! That event had a huge impact on my life – maybe forever. Could this have been a trigger that inspired me to always complete the tasks that I am given – without complaining? Could that have been the trigger that set me into motion for my future? The words that she spoke inspired me deep down to understand that positive feedback can encourage one to do more.

**Words of Wisdom and Life Lessons**

When I think about the components that helped me obtain the desire to go beyond my circumstances, I can’t help but think about the things that sparked my self-determination and motivation. There were important proverbs, Bible verses or lessons that my grandparents told me constantly. Those words of wisdom encouraged me to look inside of my heart and soul and look for the piece of me that could rise up and understand the depth of life and how my choices could plant the seeds for my happiness or sadness. In all honesty, there were times that I got tired of hearing them repeat the same old stuff over and over, but now I realize that it was the reiteration of these profound words that inspired me to move forward when times became tough and to reach for success when it appeared that all was lost. It was those profound words that made me grow up and not hate my mother for leaving me for reasons, to this day, I still do not understand. I must admit, I rarely open that part of my life when my biological mother moved away and my father was an unknown for so long. My grandparents rarely spoke of that part of my life either. There was a time that I was angry at them for keeping my past from me.
However, today, I reflect back and realize that perhaps my mother saved me from her inability to give me the stability that I needed. My grandparents stood in the gap and helped me find out what it means to define self and standout – even in the face of my own great emotional loss. Research denotes that when adolescents have relationships that provide mentorship or support, they have a greater chance of having positive outcomes. For example, they face challenges easier, are interested in more experiences, help others within the community and are engaged in both school and out-of-school time activities. Research goes on to further suggest that these youth become productive in other areas of their life leading into adulthood (Murphey, Bandy, Schutzx, Moore, 2013).

It is true that even though I faced structural threats within my family dynamics, the presence of my grandparents provided the support that I needed to keep me positively engaged in building academic and social success. Understanding these areas of my life allowed me to write the poetry that would define me and provide the underpinnings that would encourage people to believe in themselves and reach for their own levels of success. I wrote the poem, Standout Kid, to encourage youth to not let the negative things they experience keep them from finding the people who truly believe in them and can support their efforts.

The Standout Kid

I’m a standout kid just look at me, there’s nothing in the world that I can’t be
People believe that I am great, so I won’t stop and I won’t wait
No one can take my hopes away – I’ll build myself up every day
With confidence and much self-pride – I’ll be well known at least world wide
And you can be a standout too- just choose the things you want to do
Choose what’s right and avoid what’s wrong, keep your smile on all day long
Focus on what you need to know and watch how fast your dreams will grow
I’m a stand out kid – just look at me
There were other words and proverbs that helped me define who I was and would become. My grandparents always had messages in everything they spoke: *Don't take no dirt into your house* – this essentially told me that when it was time for me to enter my house, I had to leave all of the negative energy - that would somehow attach itself to my mind – outside and enter the house with a positive heart and smile. My grandmother advised me that she felt like crying most of the time but she refused to let her head take away from her heart. She was often sad because of the fact that there was usually a bill each month that couldn’t get paid or just the worry of not being able to give me the things that she wanted to give me as a child. I can’t begin to tell you how many times, as an adult, that I sat outside in my garage telling myself to leave my worry and frustration in the garage and to not walk through that door with *mess on my mind*. What my grandparents didn’t realize is that this lesson taught me how to compartmentalize my thoughts and only pull from the images that produced positive energy and beliefs. Research supports the idea that self is aligned with the other people who are in a cultural grouping (Chang, 2008). My grandparent’s views became mirrored in my examination of life. I also found myself taking this premise with me to high school and to college. In fact, the lessons I learned about positive attitude have become a permanent part of my life.

*The Lord don’t like ugly* – this lesson assured me that I had to always think about how I treated other people. God was always a part of the equation of growing up. From multiple days of church throughout the week to long Sunday sermons, religion was the guiding force in my life. Mama Lucy let me know that the Lord is always watching what we do and we should think about our choices in life and try to continue to do what would make us feel proud about
ourselves. Mama Lucy often referred to being mean as *acting ugly*. She hated when people *acted ugly*, she especially hated when children acted that way. That message always made me stop in my tracks and think before I acted or even before I spoke to someone else. I needed to screen my tongue and my thoughts before I released either of them. Some people may call this action – tact. Whatever it is called – it guided many of my actions even still to this day.

*Work hard and enjoy your time!!* I remember watching my grandparents work from sunup to sundown. They instilled in me an incredible work ethic that has driven me to continue a task until it is complete and to not complain but look for the good in everything. Growing up, I was never afraid of hard work. It was as natural as breathing most of the time – I did it really without even thinking. Watching my grandparents model what hard work looked like and the outcomes of such efforts again made this task second nature to me. What I could never understand is the part where they said “enjoy your time.” How could you enjoy your time when you spent most of it working? How could you enjoy your time when you never had enough money to even pay the bills? How could you enjoy your time when you lived in poverty? It wasn’t until I was much older, perhaps around twenty-three or twenty-four that I truly understood what they meant. You see the “enjoyment” that they spoke of was not attached to stuff or materials, it was attached to talking and sharing and loving each other – THAT was the time they referred to. Those *times* happened when we sat down and ate together every night; when we gathered on the front porch to talk about our day, when we bowed our head to thank Almighty God for blessing us for what we did have. There was never a question about it, this *time* was valuable in my house. The most valuable time was dinnertime or *supper* as my grandmother called it. You didn’t walk around the house with food in your hands or talking on the telephone–dinnertime was the sacred time to sit down and talk about life.
Most of the evening conversations centered on what life was like for my grandparents growing up and what life could be like for me if I continued to look for the good things – like honesty, good grades and good friends. This time together was important to our lives. My grandparents always told me that there was nothing that could replace time together and that we needed to take every opportunity to enjoy the time we had. It was these conversations about time that encouraged me to examine the time that I spent at home, in church, at my friends’ houses and especially at school. I wrote a poem called Mr. Pete. I think Mr. Pete was the example of my grandfather, Amos, and the way he used to rush around each day getting as much done as possible before night would ‘cetch ‘em. Time was valuable to my family.

Mr. Pete held his watch in an upside down position-
And every time he left the house - the man was on a mission.
I remember telling him to not forget to rest-
He just said, “I’ll keep on going-while I’m feeling best!”
His watch was his reminder of the things he had to do-
He said he learned to value time the older that he grew!!
He told me that his walk had slowed but he hadn’t changed his ways-
And that things didn’t seem to bother him - “not too much these days”.
I learned so much from Mr. Pete during my years of growing-
The value of my time - and other things worth knowing.
Time is the only possession that man can’t grab and hold-
From the time that we are born until the time that we are old.
And time knows of no favorites or what it means to keep-
Time is knowing when to wake and knowing when to sleep.
The time that we are given must be handled with great care-
Because time can slip away from us - if we’re unaware!!!

(Kimberly P. Johnson, 2007)
Trouble don’t last always

I often watched my grandparents rise above their difficult times and look for the joys of life each day. You could never convince Mama Lucy that good times wouldn’t come, she lived by faith. Her faith told her that trouble don’t last always and you just need to wash your troubles away and trust God in the process. We often talked about God and faith when we did our house chores. Dusting furniture or washing dishes was always a prime time to think about life and the things that faith could help me accomplish. I learned that cleaning up was a lesson that would carry me a long way in life. Nobody likes a nasty person, Mama Lucy would remind me. I loved to wash dishes because it also gave me time to think about how to “wash away my simple troubles”. I remember every night after dinner, I would scoot my chair back from the table, and start gathering up dishes, and laid them on the counter by the sink. I would run the water until I could feel the warmness on my greasy fingers. I would then take the stopper and shove it down into the drain hole to keep the soapy water from slipping away. As I filled the sink with the dishes, especially in the summertime when the kitchen window was open and the breeze came through the curtains, I could hear the frogs outside starting their symphony of music. From high tones to low tones to everything in between, they were going to perform and I had a front row seat to their outdoor concert.

As I take a moment now to pause my thoughts, I can’t help but wonder if my early childhood memories and experiences inspired me to write my first children’s book about a frog? “The Adventures of the Itty Bitty Frog” published in 1997. Could those early sounds that resonated outside of my kitchen window have set me into motion to create the book that would become my signature as an author? The book talks about being determined and not giving up. This autoethnographical journey has challenged me to step back from my many experiences and truly see the magnitude of what the conversations, tribulations and triumphs have contributed to my career path. Though I had never questioned my career path before, I can’t help but wonder if this path was destined for me to follow from the beginning – my faith tells me that it was. Given that, it seems even more plausible that youth need as many positive interventions as possible to help deliver the experiences that could set into motion the platform upon which they can build their own solid futures.
After cleaning the dishes, I pushed the door of the front porch open and let it go, the loud bang and rattle made my grandfather mumble, “SHHH, folks might be trying to sleep and you gone wake everybody in the whole world up!” I have to admit, I let the door go on purpose just to hear him say that - it always seemed to make me chuckle at the idea that somehow I, little ole’ me, could do something that would wake everybody in the whole world!! Once we all got situated on the front porch, my grandfather, Mama Lucy and me, I would look up at the star filled sky. The front steps were my perching ground. “Grandpa how many words are in the world?” “Chile’ mo words than this old man can ever learn to count and spell, but maybe one day when you get ‘yo college education you can come back and tell us?” Again, those subtle lessons and messages encouraged me to go beyond the “sticks” and gain a level of knowledge that would allow me to one day stand on my own two feet and maybe truly “wake up the world - somehow”. The thing that stands out more than ever is - my grandparents always spoke about the expectation of college. They never said, until you finish high school – or IF you go to college - they always said when you get to college.

My grandparents may not have been highly educated people, but they were smart people. They told me almost every day that an education would get us to wherever we needed and wanted to go. The question then becomes, “where did they get their desires and belief system, as there is not much research that supports that this level of drive is innate?” I can only assume that their parents, my great grandparents, planted the seeds in their lives. They believed with all of their heart that each generation of their family would gain more and more knowledge and ability. They always made me think about these things. Psychologist Dr. James Dobson reminds us that we spend so much time trying to make sure that our children have all of the tangible things in life that we have forgotten to give them the intrinsic ideas and values that we grew up with in our
own homes. My grandparents did not fall short in this area, through their powerful stories of growing up on a farm, belief in God, family love and that anything could be accomplished – I learned early on about the value of self. More importantly, their messages made me think about how lucky I was to be loved by them and be in their care. My grandparents gave me the faith to not be afraid to fail and the strength to rise up and reach for the stars. They taught me that there was NO GLORY WITHOUT A STORY. In other words, everyone has to go through something in order to get to the other side of success. Mama Lucy knew that I would defy any odds that I had faced because she knew that my strength would come from her strength that she had planted in my head and my heart from the very beginning and her strength came from her mother!! She knew that the troubles she faced with literacy would NOT be the troubles that I had to face. Trouble don’t last always she said, and she was right. The examples of these powerful women in my life encouraged me to reach as high as possible.

I REACH....

I reach past all the stars that I know that I can see
And I look for the brightest one that is shining just for me.
I push past all the others that do not bear my name,
I look for the brightest one, that’s the one I’ll claim!!!
Don’t you see YOUR star, shining down for you?
There it is shining down, what are you going to do?
Don’t you let it slip away and dimly disappear
Come on now, go for it, remember have NO fear!!!
Your star won’t come to you, you must reach and grab a hold
So put your hand way up high and watch your life unfold!!!

(Poem written by Kimberly P. Johnson, 2006)

Boylorn (2004) had similar encouragement in her life. She was raised by women who served as examples of truth and strength. Boylorn also does an exceptional job describing the
feminine psyche in her work. Boylorn states that the black woman is wrapped in stereotypes but has underlying truths. “She exists in the public imagination but lives in private realities” (Boylorn, 2014, p.130). My grandmother was the strength that I needed within our home and intimate community of church and friends. However, in public, she was still the domestic worker who always said yes ma’am to her employer and no sir to the white man who ran the laundromat where we went into each week to wash and dry our clothes. Mama Lucy knew the rules in order to operate in society.

Research tells us that when black women are faced with these stereotypes it can lower their self-esteem (Thomas et al, 2004). I never saw this with Mama Lucy. She depicted what Boylorn referred to as the “Mammy” stereotype. My grandmother was the type to always put others before herself and always showed a strong side that said she was an overcomer. This mirror of strength was what I needed to see in order to know that I had the ability within in me to overcome my challenges as well. I never really saw, in my grandmother, the angry, loud or “Sapphire” image that Boylorn (2014) spoke of in her stereotypic descriptions of these female images. That is not to say that Mama Lucy did not hide those feelings from us in order to protect us from the possible backlash if our anger grew out of control in this “new generation of young people of the 70’s.” Instead, she taught me how to remain selfless and caring. In my case it was to complete high school, go to college and come back to my hometown as a success or at least an advocate for success. However, along the way I had to endure hurt feelings and sometimes even the stares of white people who would not even try to understand me. Harris-Perry (2011) denotes that the black “Mammy” is the epitome of the true strong woman.

Mama Lucy taught me the importance of not going out acting like I was angry all of the time. People expect us to act that way, she would often say. She told me that sometimes you just
have to sit back, smile and listen and you’ll learn exactly how you need to handle folks. She wasn’t telling me to be passive and let people run over me because of my race but what she did want me to understand is that I could intimidate someone more by NOT being aggressive and belligerent. She was right. There were times that I listened to people and learned from them. I learned how to process what their thoughts and emotions were and it helped me to understand how the mind sometimes works. Through those experiences, I learned how to talk to people the way they needed to be talked to in order to give me access to what I needed. This could be done without having to show signs of hostility in order to get it. I didn’t let their pain and anger become my pain and anger. As an educational advocate, I try to teach the students in our out of school time program how to use communication as their tool for success and understanding.

More importantly, we try to teach them that anger only creates more anger and the cycle just continues. It is much better to look for success through our attempts to remain positive.

In My Pocket

I reach into my pocket and grab a great big smile,
I wear it on my face for more than just a while
Sometimes I’ll meet a frowner who will look at me and say –
your life can’t be that perfect so put your smile away
But every time I wear a smile
the world seems so much brighter
And no matter what is on my mind,
the load somehow gets lighter.
The world is full of people who carry an extra frown,
but when they try to offer me one I just smile and turn it down.
So in the morning when you rise – just let a smile begin your day
and watch out for those frowners cause they’ll steal your smile away!!
(Kimberly P. Johnson 2008)

Challenging self and success

In the evenings when most of our work was completed, if it were too cold or too dark to sit on the front steps, I would sit in the house with my back propped up against my Mama Lucy’s
legs silently reading from my Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys mystery books, my grandmother would ask me to read aloud to her. “You need to practice your reading, let me hear how you sound” was always her reasoning for my reading aloud. I now know that my reading was the door that needed to be unlocked for her, the passage that she didn’t have the key to. I gladly obliged her request as I knew that doing so would relieve me of some of the guilt that I felt, the sadness of knowing that she struggled with reading some of the big words but was too proud to talk about it. Mama Lucy corrected words and pronunciations, as if like a scholar, she knew the words from the book that I held in my hand. I knew it was only from her incredible memory and her hearing me pronounce the word correctly earlier that helped her remind me of the word, if I slipped in my articulation. My guilt allowed her to correct me, but deep down, my anger spoke. I found it disturbing that she would critique me, when in actuality; she had not even completed the traditional twelve grades of school. However, theater critic and controversialist, Kenneth Tynan reminds me that a critic is “someone who knows the way but just can’t drive the car.”

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/drive.html. My grandmother knew what she was doing each time she challenged me to stretch my mind even further than sometimes I was willing to go.

“You can do anything you want to, you just gotta want to!!” was a phrase that she often repeated to me. This was her way of building and maintaining the personal identity of who I was in the family and what my future held. She reminded me that in order to become an adult in the Pearson family I had to focus on whatever I chose to do and continue to do the right thing. She promised that she would be there to support me but that I had to “pick up the stick and carry it”. It was not that she was naïve enough to believe that I wouldn’t grow up and make mistakes but she held fast to the Bible verse that helped her raise her children and now her grandchildren
(Proverbs 22:6) “Raise children up in the way that they should go and they will not depart from it”. Her words of encouragement were her way of reinforcing the personal impact that she knew she had in my life. Theorist George H. Mead let us know that we gain personal identity through communicating with others. Though I was very much a “bookworm” in school and often didn’t fit in with the “in” crowd, due to my economic status, my grandmother’s words gave me the confidence to do “anything”. According to Mead, we see ourselves first through the eyes of others. Through my grandmother’s eyes, I saw a well-rounded and very balanced young lady. That was what I needed to see in order to continue reaching for my dreams in life. I now realize that much of my character was formed from observing her ways. My work ethic was a part of her drive to “work until you get it done”. It’s funny in life how you may never truly “see” yourself until you’re old enough and mature enough to appreciate the impact that someone else had on your development.

As I grew older, I found less time or interest to spend lazy days on the old, wooden porch. I was growing up and new interests caught my attention. As I entered middle school, I began my quest to find out where I fit in in the “real world” as I came to know it. My grandparents had provided me with incredible autonomy support, now it was time for me to begin seeking my own levels of determination and using what they had equipped me with to begin gaining my own independence. The problem was that they didn’t want to let go. They were having trouble understanding that I needed other influences in my life – I needed the world beyond 411 Oak Street and beyond Amos and Lucy Pearson.

**In the middle of it**

It was probably around middle school that I began to view my grandparents in a different light. From pre-school through elementary, we grew up poor but the amazing thing is that I never
felt poor. Nevertheless, here I was in middle school and for the first time in my life – it mattered that we were poor and I began to feel the sting of what it meant to not have enough. Maybe it was puberty or immaturity or just the others kids that I began to associate with that made it plain to me that I was at a deficit in my life, at least by the standards of the other middle school students in my school. It wasn’t so much that I lacked mentorship in my life, that wasn’t the issue. James Baldwin said it even better, “Children have never really been good at listening to their elders but they have never failed to imitate them.” Yes, I felt like I needed more than my grandparents at that moment, but I never forgot the incredible lessons that they taught me about life and good character. The issue was that I felt a sense of brokenness that came from not understanding why my grandparents, who had taught me the value of hard work and treating others right, were still living in poverty being treated like the poor colored folks on the other side of town. In addition, I was working so hard to fit in at this new place (middle school), but I didn’t feel the same sense that my teachers were working equally as hard to make me feel welcome.

There were times that I looked at my grandparents and I literally got angry because I felt that it was because of them that I was broken and poor. Maybe they weren’t as hard working as I gave them credit for being, maybe they didn’t demand enough equality to take them out of the position they were in or maybe it was their fault that they raised a daughter who didn’t want to keep her child and that’s why I ended up at their doorstep. Now, I was stuck living the left over broken life that they had somehow created. I felt broken and I wanted out of this anger and pain and sudden feeling of hopelessness!! I wanted them to be more than they were and create a better life for me. At times, I was ashamed of them and wished that I could be in another family. Allison and Schultz (2004) denote that there are often times when family conflict arises in the
adolescence period. Nancie Hudson (2014) spoke of this sadness and shame in her autoethnographical work entitled, *The Trauma of Poverty as Social Identity*. She noted that poverty was about more than just not having money; it also entailed the impoverished feeling of shame that is associated with the lack of money. She also spoke about the feeling of realizing that she was poor and the pain that comes along with that realization, the knowing that others look down their nose at you and there is nothing you can do about it, so you deal with the pain on the inside. This was exactly how I felt and the middle school environment just made it worse.

Hudson (2014) reminds us that poverty is not just a state of economic being; it is also a state of identity. bell hooks (2000) further states that poverty cannot be masqued when one goes off to school. Other students know when you wear the same clothes and they know who the “free” lunch kids are and they know who gets the free Christmas and Thanksgiving food. Perhaps if I had known about Sara Breedlove, aka Madam C.J. Walker, the first female African-American self-made millionaire who was an orphan and grew up with hardly a penny, yet continued to excel in her education - that would have been enough to make me want to continue reaching higher in middle school. Perhaps if I had known that Granville T. Woods was the first African-American mechanical engineer who invented the multiplex telegraph, it would have encouraged me to be more proactive in my science classes and not worry so much about what I was wearing. Payne and Slocumbe (2000) describe the school setting as a place that should increase the feelings of belonging and attachment. She denotes that teachers can establish the parameters that can foster growth, warmth and personal relationships. This is not to say that it is solely the teachers’ fault for not teaching me about these amazing icons. It would be unfair to totally blame them, but it is true that there is a certain degree of responsibility that we, as educators, have in helping our youth gain knowledge about the great people in our history. It is
particularly important to show students that other people in the cultural history look like them and have contributed in multiple ways to the economy and to science.

The middle school years were definitely the time when I needed autonomy support that stretched beyond my grandparents. Mama Lucy was no longer the center of my world and I often felt that they just didn’t understand me. I needed someone in my life that would allow me to be independent and would understand that I wasn’t a little girl anymore who needed to wear bows and dresses with flowers. I needed my first pair of high heel shoes and I needed my own friends, the ones I could select on my own – not the ones that my grandmother approved of…. things were starting to shift. I wanted the other students to see me as more than just a lower-class kid. Orbe (2014) denotes that elementary school is more of an arena where all students come together and learn and blend together, but middle school is more of a sorting process. Students start to migrate toward students who are more like them and start to disassociate from those who are deemed lower-class. I was afraid that the “affluent others” would quickly realize that I was far from their social class and not even give me a chance to be accepted as good enough to attend their parties or their houses or sit at their tables at lunch.

**Fear came with me**

If I had to think of one word to describe how I felt the moment I walked into the building of middle school – the word would be ….. fear. Fear came from the idea of going to “junior high as it was called back in the late 70’s”. I wasn’t afraid so much because of the academic portion of school, I was prepared for that. I was afraid because of the social aspects, the wondering if I could do it by myself without my grandparents walking me to the door of the school each day, if I could fit into a world that I barely knew about because of cultural and economic differences. I was “older now” and expected by peers to show more independence and
not be a grandma’s girl. I needed to separate myself from the part of my life that labeled me as poor, motherless and black.

The fear I had inside was inescapable, the fear of being “othered” by the affluent and socially accepted white students and even the teachers. It was in middle school that I began to feel that I didn’t fit in, it was then that I felt like I was the broken toy. An object tossed back into a toy box with no one to care enough to connect with me. I needed even more support than I needed in elementary school. Most of the teachers saw middle school as the grounds for building independence. Yes it is true that the goal is to move students to areas of autonomy, but sometimes the youth are not ready to be moved and that is when teachers and programs have to be aligned with youth and their needs. As effective educators, we have to begin picking up on those cues. This kind of understanding entails being able to view youth as resources to the classroom and the community and receive additional training on how to effectively work with youth from various cultural backgrounds. Boylorn and Orbe (2014) remind us that the lived experiences are related to culture. Quinn (2004) also denotes that persons, who have the understanding that they are disenfranchised or powerless, have trouble accepting information and ideas from those who strip them of their power.

**Culture came with me**

Chang (2008) states that one cannot separate experiences from one’s culture. He surmises that the two are intertwined. Moreover, research tells us that the feeling of being socially rejected can create feelings of inadequacy and sometimes even anger (Orbe, 2014). I often feared that any association with that part of my life would deem me not worthy of being in that space. The space of junior high that I needed to validate me as a girl, who had something to offer the world. It was in the social arena that I felt if I were to falter I could possibly fail!! My
grandmother had taught me to not feel hostile and angry but I could feel those emotions creeping into my psyche and I wasn’t sure how to handle those feelings. Hudson (2014, p.3) stated, “An individual who previously had a social network of friends and suddenly experiences social rejection experiences cultural trauma that shatters well-being due to the loss of that social acceptance and connection. Cultural trauma thus alters one’s social identity.” I needed a space that would allow my cultural identity, my determination and my autonomy to thrive. I needed to be accepted like I had been accepted growing up at 411 Oak Street.

**What do you see?**

I was torn between trying to fit in with the kids from my community who looked and acted like me, yet seemed to have no drive to move beyond the poverty that we had grown accustomed to seeing and experiencing. I was torn by the affluent white kids who would accept me because I was as smart as them but would never invite me to their home for fear that some of my true culture would slip out and require explanation. Perhaps the biggest struggles were seeing the teachers who looked at me with the honest to goodness lack of cultural responsiveness and awareness that teaching should require. Through those lenses of deficit thinking they looked at me and said, “Bless her heart, bless her heart- those poor children are doing the best they can”. Freire (1970/2002) notes that this desire for humanization and the disdain for alienation can create much confusion for youth and even lead to feelings of anger. Yes, I was angry!! I didn’t need for them to feel sorry for me for being poor or black or for my lack of experiences. I needed for them to push me and prod me and tell me that additional effort was required to meet my desired levels of success. I needed for them to teach me so that I could feel liberated when I walked into their classrooms. However, it became abundantly clear that I wasn’t in a position to receive that, instead there were stereotypes that needed to be disbanded before I could reach that
element of equality. Moore (2009) states that when one actually teaches for liberation he is seeking to authorize ordinary people to self-reflect and uncover some of their own solutions to political and social justice questions. I do not feel that teachers, at that time – mid to late 70’s, were driven to help black and brown children uncover the answers to such unsettling questions since the scabs of segregation were still so fresh. Morgan and Bennett (2006) state that stereotypes are often used to silence those who are the targets of the stereotypes. Stereotypes, according to them, do not just tell one how to see someone but it also suggests how to control that particular group.

The ethnographic study by Ferguson (2000) discovered that teachers had difficult time understanding African-Americans, particularly males. Ferguson suggested that white teachers did not understand the experiences that African-Americans had because most of society had the vision of focusing on its whiteness. I was there, it seemed, to figure out which social realm best suited me and try to be fully accepted into society’s whiteness. I had to find a way to assimilate into the Deep Southern areas that had really just begun to accept integration as a part of its norm. For the African-American students who did not assimilate into the white culture, they faced struggles with identity. Research suggests that when African-American youth struggle with being accepted as themselves, there are issues with noncompliance with those teachers (Lipman, 1998, Ferguson, 2000, Wynn 1992, Kunjufu, 1989). Some students I knew even began to doubt their self-worth based on what the other teachers felt about them. Freire (2000) spoke quite a bit about the phenom known as self-deprecation. Freire referred to this as the views and negative stereotypes that the oppressors hold over the oppressed. In other words, when students hear for so long that they are lazy or inadequate or incapable – they begin to internalize those thoughts and feel that they indeed are unfit (Pitre, A., Cook, F., & McCree, C. 2009)
These struggles were never mentioned by my grandparents because I often listened to my grandparents talk about segregated schools and how the teachers were always so loving toward the children and how there was a certain standard that had to be met and there were always expectations for excellence. I didn’t want a segregated school but I did want the opportunity to grab the advantages that were presented without having to compromise my culture or blackness. It was the intersectionality between races, class and gender that made me wonder if this whole junior high process would allow me to experience both intellect and culture simultaneously in a positive and productive way. I wanted independence but I needed support in order to guide me on the strategies of how to get it.

Freire (2000) stated that education should be a sign of practicing freedom and not seen as a sign of creating or practicing domination. Freire also acknowledges that such liberating education can prove to be threatening to those who hope to keep others enslaved or oppressed. Through this dissertation journey, I have begun to clearly understand what my grandparents meant when they often told me that if I got a great education NO ONE could ever take it from me. It was the freedom of learning that would be embedded in my every thought, choice and decision. It was this freedom of being detached from the demands of the oppressors that would allow me to become independent and choose the life that was best suited for me – education was the ticket – but in junior high, I just didn’t know the power that it would possess.

Justice, Lindsey and Morrow (1999) posit that any program that focuses on academic success must also look at building self-esteem in the youth. These researchers are curious to know why programs, especially as related to African-American youth, do not spend more time focusing on implementing and raising the self-awareness in this population. Perhaps the reason that more energy is not spent on dismantling the negative self is that the stereotypes that are
formed about African-Americans are derived from viewing people from the outside in. Boylorn (2014) suggests that we challenge these perspectives by viewing from the inside out. It is this autoethnographic journey that will allow me to view myself, as it is linked to culture, from the inside out. Through my work in the out of school time programs, I am able to help youth explore their own visions and dreams of success and then build their academic plan around those visions.

Help me be me

Author Daniel Pink (2005) says that the opposite of being autonomous is being controlling. He surmises that seeking autonomy leads to further engagement and less desire to control. For me to thrive in junior high, I needed to seek autonomy in order to be a better student. I needed teachers who could explain the assignments without trying to think of a way to use “simpler” language. I sought teachers in my junior high who could provide me with the autonomy support that I needed in order to grow intellectually. I needed for my mind to be challenged. There were a few teachers who absolutely helped me engage in my work. They wouldn’t allow me to be ordinary. They told me that they would accept no excuses from me and that I needed to find ways to transform the world. I liked that word…transform.. it made me feel important, smart and worthy. These were the white teachers that I clung to, I needed for them to fuss at me when I accepted ordinary grades or forgot to turn in assignments. Their harsh words told me that they would NOT let my blackness be an excuse for substandard work. They were determined to help me create a better me.

However, in that same building, there were teachers who were still dealing with creating their own strategies for survival in the midst of coming out of segregation in a small southern town. Most of the time they were silent but their actions and stares let me know that they did not believe that I would make it beyond the poor side of the tracks. They never said anything directly
to me, but the strange thing about being an adolescent is that your feelings sometimes become so keen and you find every single stare sending a message. Some of them may be misinterpreted but nonetheless, you feel inadequate to some degree. I felt that some of the teachers were not happy to have classrooms filled with students who were “too loud” or “disrespectful” or perhaps too “poor”. Many of the students that I went to school with who were just like me, remained quiet for the most part and operated as a group – inside of the lunchroom, outside of the lunchroom, on the bus and sometimes on the playground. Those were the places where it didn’t matter who you were – you had the chance to just be yourself. You didn’t have to worry if your words were too black for others, or articulated wrong; you could just be you, because you always hung together.

Outside of that comfortable space, you were required to adhere to the societal expectations, to assimilate into what was expected of you.

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) remind us that it takes a whole group of people who are oppressed to speak up and make their visions and voices heard. But what happens when those voices refuse to speak up? What happens when they settle for the status quo and forget to look for the opportunities that change can bring? My belief is that things remain the same. My grandparents taught me to not let my voice always lie dormant, not to be disrespectful – but to be vocal. This would allow me to speak up and explain to the critics that I was just as important as they were and that my work would one day matter. My work could perhaps even change the world! They always taught me to do it with tact and not let my anger rule the conversation. When you live in a community that is obviously divided, it is hard to sometimes find someone on the other side of the tracks, the more affluent, popular, well-to do folks, who are willing to offer what you need in order to thrive. For that reason, I was taught, as an African-American girl, that my people had been silent for too long and that I had something important to say and that I
needed to find a way to say it. My grandmother never told me who to be, she allowed me to explore those arenas of my life, but she did guide me with questions that challenged my thought and stories that struck a chord in my mind.

Some of the adults that I encountered in junior high emerged as the voices that made me question my abilities and stripped me of my cultural confidence. Cultural confidence being the ability to wake up every day proud of my skin and excited that my hair was kinky and that my family talked loud when we got together. Now, I started to question the kinky hair and the loudness. Around particular adults, if I was too loud, I was chastised. If I sang the songs I liked, I was told that they were not “appropriate”. If I talked about all of the “delicious food” for Thanksgiving dinner at my house – I was met with a wrinkled face and a, “that’s gross!” There were teachers who made me feel that my culture needed to be screened before I was allowed to share it openly with others who were not like me. I didn’t need for them to approve of me as a black student, I didn’t need them to scrutinize my culture, I just needed them to help me be me.

Freire (1970/2002) suggests that when educators strive to humanize literacies they are able to teach in ways that are out of the box and nontraditional. In doing so, youth begin to see value in their lived experiences and furthermore can find strategies to deal with their feelings about unjust conditions within their world.

**Hidden curriculum hidden from self**

“What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be what the community wants for all its children” John Dewey (1907)

It would seem plausible that as I progressed through school that my community and teachers would continue the efforts that my grandparents put forth. This was not necessarily the case. *Junior high* started presenting gaps in what I was learning about self and community. It was
in middle school that I started seeing the pockets of disparity within my community between the poor and the more affluent. It was even apparent in my classroom learning – within the curriculum itself. My middle school teachers rarely talked about poor African-Americans who had impacted our nation, or for me, the African-American women who changed our world. I only heard about the “famous” black and brown people that we were “required” to learn about. Youth should begin seeing themselves through the eyes of these less famous African-American or other cultural persons that helped impact our country and communities.

Greene (1971) states that we view learning as something that we can dichotomize or give to an individual as opposed to understanding that the individual must take the knowledge and break through it until they gain their own understanding. In other words, we view it as a traditional method in which we ask the students to accumulate the information and master it. In essence, it should be viewed as a method to be integrated with existing knowledge. The curriculum should not be viewed in a vacuum. It should be seen as a solution that can help address many issues encountered by children during the learning process.

Dewey (1902) stated, “Solution comes only by getting away from the meaning of terms that are already fixed upon and coming to see the conditions from another point of view, and hence in a fresh light.” (p. 127). What Dewey was essentially saying in his philosophy is that choice needs to be a part of the learning process for youth. Giving youth a choice of some of the things that they would like to learn about can help expand knowledge and perhaps even their determination and autonomy. I believe that sometimes as educational leaders, we get so wrapped up in the traditional definition of a curriculum that we forget that learning is a broad approach and not the narrow process that we often use to instruct youth. Curriculum should include issues that are pertinent to the backgrounds of the students who must study the materials and it should
challenge the youth to think about issues using their higher order of thinking and problem solving (Villegas, 1991). Students can use their own perspectives on situations, based on their cultural understanding, to gain a broader view of issues and how they can impact the community and the world that the student lives in (Nieto, 1999). Perhaps the biggest benefit of incorporating various cultural perspectives into a classroom is that it allows other students to begin to tear down stereotypes and cultural barriers that may have been formed from outside influences. When schools set their focus on achievement and add cultural understanding to that achievement, students have a chance at greater success (Delpit, 2012). Therefore, finding ways to build their own definitions of success and determination.

According to Good & Brophy (1997), educators sometimes form preconceptions about children, particularly those living in poverty. The educators then begin lowering their expectations for those children. It is these deficit views about intellect, economics and cultural background that can contribute to institutionalized oppression and prohibit some youth from excelling in many areas of leadership or motivation (Dworin & Boomer, 2008). My grandparents were determined to not let me use these disparities as an excuse, but for the first time I began to understand what discovering self would mean for my life. Discovering self — would mean that my self-determination and motivation would become valuable to me and that learning to complete tasks on my own would make autonomy essential to my success. According to Dewey, the matter of teaching must entail the child’s outside experiences. I believe that some of us as educational leaders become so consumed with the routine and chaos of rubrics and theory that we forget to implement the “dynamic quality, the developing force inherent in the child’s present experiences” (Dewey, 1929). The inability to incorporate these cultural dynamics into the curriculum can begin to separate youth from their own culture. Many students will find
themselves beginning to assimilate into the culture that is at the school as opposed to holding on to the culture they bring with them. I too found myself doing this in junior high school. I think it was because I felt that my culture had no value in that particular setting. When youth feel like this it takes away from their belief in self and their cognitive development (Sheets, 1999). In order for me to help the youth that I work with continue to raise their personal standards, I must accept what they bring to the school and use it to further enhance their growth.

Apple (2004) surmises that the racial set-up of the faculty also determines what the curriculum will look like. He states that it is the racial dynamics of the people from that particular school that determine the hidden curriculum that is taught. Hidden curriculum is rarely talked about but certainly does exist. Howard (2006) states that it is this very curriculum that often prohibits students of color from fully learning about their culture or the culture of other races. This hidden curriculum also keeps white teachers from dismantling assumptions of superiority. For example, dominant social groups will find information in textbooks and curriculum that will bolster their self-esteem and autonomy, while marginalized groups may rarely find information that boosts their confidence or independence. Moreover, a successful setting requires more than just an environment that is safe or that has a strong athletic team or good teachers and values. A well-focused environment must tout actions that include reinforcement of positive messages (intrinsic motivation), traditions and school ceremonies that will encourage youth to see themselves climbing to greater heights (self-determination) and belief systems that are fostered by caring and culturally aware teachers (autonomy support) (Jerald, 2006). Furthermore, in order to dispel some of the stereotypes and provide youth with other beliefs and discussions of self- they need to learn about the ordinary people, even within their communities, who have impacted a culture – not just learn about the iconic figures that our
world deems worthy of recognition. Doing so will help youth believe that they do have the capacity to excel – this further builds intrinsic motivation and self-determination. Once those elements are fostered, it is easier to add many layers of success to include academics and autonomy.

My premise, of balancing the curriculum so that all youth will learn about information that is indicative of many cultures, to include their own. A balanced curriculum is supported by the idea that youth are motivated to learn through their own interests and desires for success (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Given that, they must see themselves and people from their ethnicity as trendsetters, pathfinders and trailblazers. More importantly, this information may engage students in many opportunities to believe in themselves and find materials that will allow them to expand their levels of learning and expression. Furthermore, curriculum can give students information that guides their thinking and skill sets. This curriculum can also provide much autonomy support for some youth.

What support systems or dialogue enabled me to pursue my own levels of self-determination and autonomy?

In junior high, I rarely learned about anyone from African-American history other than the icons such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Rosa Parks, or Thurgood Marshall and even then it was only during certain times of the year that they were discussed. It was this skimming of my cultural information that did not allow me to get into the depths of who I was as an African-American. My grandparents taught me what they could and that set into motion some of my self-determination and belief in self. Much of my understanding of my culture and past came from the stories that my grandparents shared and stories from people in my community. It is this tradition of oral and written history that can help create culturally sound environments that will allow youth to engage in up close and personal encounters of their history – therefore fostering
various levels of personal success. In order for schools to truly depict their professed cultural engagement, they must go out into the community and find supportive individuals who can share stories that will improve instruction and create collaborative partnerships (Jerald, 2006).

However, when I entered junior high and rarely heard about local icons, who looked like me, this kept me from believing that other black people could be bankers, lawyers or even authors. Dr. King’s powerful messages of, why we can’t wait and the power of using the mind as the tool for change, often got lost in the iconic speech, “I Have a Dream” that repeatedly found its way back to our classroom during Black History Month. Unfortunately, on my own - I wasn’t academically hungry enough to pursue information about powerful local icons. Research tells us that “learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experiences” (Duffy and Jonassen, 1992). This lack of experiences can lead to the lack of meaning which creates gaps in the quest to prepare youth for adulthood. This impact can be even greater for students who are already deemed marginalized due to economic status and therefore do not have varied experiences. However, diverse curriculum and additional youth programming can help fill in those gaps with opportunities for students to understand how communities are developed and how decision-making improves leadership abilities and the knowledge base (Damon, 2004).

Connecting with culture

It was not until I reached high school that my lack of experiences was no longer prohibitive. It was there that I entered into a Black History Class taught by a black educator who had himself been a marginalized student but found it to be his life’s mission to teach. He taught about the power of connecting with culture. It was there that I felt the liberation of what my blackness meant and the ability that I possessed to create change – even in my poor neighborhood. It was there that I learned that Dr. King was a lot deeper than the monumental I
Have a Dream Speech. I learned that he spoke of the unjust laws and the need to rise up now to make a difference. It was in that small classroom of curious students that I learned that change doesn’t necessarily have a color or a gender or an economic status. This teacher told us that we were our only enemies when we continued to complain as opposed to rising above our challenges and that our power to excel was the power that we possessed inside. He encouraged us to be aware of change and what it could mean to everyone involved. His definition of change was: passion, purpose and the ability to see racism and the damage that it can do to a population of people. It was in this class that I began to find a resurgence of my self-determination and autonomy that had been planted by my early grade teachers, grandparents and community leaders. The classes that this teacher taught in high school made me question the abilities of an oppressed people and it made me look at myself through different lenses. I no longer saw myself as a poor, black girl who could possibly be swallowed up by her challenges. I began seeing an academically rich, African-American girl who could excel and go to that predominantly white prestigious college that I only dreamt of or watched on television – The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

As educational leaders it is our call to action to find methods, through experiences and curriculum, to improve the leadership abilities of our youth. We must find ways to help youth connect with their culture as opposed to viewing culture from a glass box that can only be opened by those who deem certain information as valuable. In doing so, we can help eradicate some of the deficit thinking that is suffocating our educational system. It is this very inadequate curriculum and lack of cultural understanding that separates students from the very fibers that create their self-images and determination. Researchers remind us that re-culturing requires the attention of a concerned staff that is not afraid to venture into the cultural realms that they are not
familiar with. Re-culturing requires tenacity, patience and creativity, but it can yield the results a school or educational setting is looking for when it defines cohesiveness and success (Jerald, 2006).

**The Capacity to Challenge Perspectives of Self**

“And I say to you, my young friends, doors are opening to you – doors of opportunities that were not open to your mothers and your fathers – and the great challenge facing you is to be ready to face these doors as they open.” Martin Luther King, Jr. NOW Curriculum Guide – The King Center Nonviolence 365 Training

As I reflect on my work as an educator and the incredible doors that have opened for me – I must ask myself: How has my career been a reflection of the support that I have received as a youth growing up in a marginalized household and community?

Today, I understand that the things I studied in school did not always support what I needed in order to feel confident. I needed to learn more about the people who were like me or who grew up in similar marginalized environments. My career has been a constant extension of the messages and meanings that I have gained over the years from my grandparents and strong teachers who weren’t afraid to accept differences. Now that I have advanced in my own career endeavors as an educator and author, my goal is to deepen the work that I do in the community by creating curriculum materials that help youth understand that leadership is based on understanding of self. As an educator, I want students and other educators to understand the authenticity of my study and above all understand that they have within them the capacity to build areas of success that stretch beyond data and charts. In addition, I want my reflections of growing up in a marginalized setting to shed light on the various areas of success that can encourage youth to engage in discussions about culture and community support. Success can exist for students even when they are faced with challenges of hidden curriculum, stereotypes or lack of autonomy support. I often tell the students that I work with, “You can’t love yourselves when you don’t know yourselves”. The goal is that this information will challenge students to
get to know themselves and will also challenge educators to devote more time toward understanding youth in their cultural settings. Some youth serving programs differentiate between students based on the student’s demographic, economic or cultural background.

My career has been a reflection because I have come to understand that it is my job to help youth see their abilities to thrive – even when they do not see their own potential. In the past, I have been involved with programs that have failed to provide students, from diverse backgrounds, the cultural materials they need in order to support their cultural heritage. Furthermore, I have seen youth programs push marginalized students toward labor focused careers such as hairdressers, barbers, factory workers, etc. On the other hand, more affluent students are pushed toward white collar careers such as management, finance and medicine (Kozol, 2005). The question becomes, whether or not one student’s views or abilities to lead are more important or valuable than another student’s views or abilities (Yosso, 2005). Youth need to be able to understand that their achievements are deeply rooted in the history that they bear. However, in order to understand it more, youth need to see doctors, lawyers, scientist and entrepreneurs who depict brilliance and can represent the stories of success that many of our black and brown students lack in current curricula (Delpit, 2012). I remember when I was a little girl, I never heard about black female authors who were poor like me and reached levels of success. Had these women been a part of my academics, perhaps I would have begun this journalistic journey a lot sooner.

Now, I am a director of programming that has the opportunity to develop sessions that can share cultural knowledge, build intrinsic motivation and support the students in various ways. According to some researchers, all children are capable of presenting powerful views and ideas which can lead to creating stronger leadership skills (Nieto, 2010). This development can
ultimately impact academic success. Unfortunately, it is the marginalized students who do not always find opportunities to serve as leaders because sometimes they are viewed as incapable of reaching success or providing valuable input (Kozol, 2005). Research by C. Kirabo Jackson (2009) from Cornell University demonstrates that high quality teachers sometimes transfer out of schools where minority populations increased. This depiction of inferiority can diminish self-determination and autonomy. Moreover, marginalized youth may not see or hear about blue collar workers who have made a great impact in the work force. With my programming potential and my career path, I have the ability to change the trajectories of some of those trends. By exposing the youth in our program to many faces and factors of mathematicians, female innovators and ordinary community advocates, we can begin to assist our youth in their discovery of cultural balance. Culturally responsive educators can introduce such interesting people to students in a way that will encourage youth to seek their own levels of determination, intrinsic motivation and autonomy.

What experiences and areas of motivation led me to gain an interest in helping build stronger out of school time programs for marginalized youth?

In York County, South Carolina, there are too few programs that offer opportunities for marginalized students to serve as community advocates and leaders. Weissberg, Elias & O’Brien (2006) state that 21st century schools and community programs face daunting challenges, especially if they are hoping to be sustainable. These challenges include funding, quality teachers and committed mentors. Our Falcon TEAMS program was developed to focus on middle school students because there were very few programs that were designed to help them transition from elementary to middle school and then to high school. We wanted our students to enter high school with strong leadership skills. The hope is that those skills will motivate the youth to complete high school and then focus on college or the workforce. I now realize that it was my
positionality, as a poor student from a rural area, which proved to be my strength in building this Falcon TEAMS program. I began to organize a program that provided what the marginalized children were lacking and I could do it because I had once been one of them and realized the needs had not changed that much. The curriculum for the program was designed to give the students opportunities to problem solve community issues, to participate in one-on-one workshops with community leaders and to enhance their academic ability. The overarching goal of the program is to build confidence in all areas. The curriculum that we want to use has to provide opportunities for experiential learning. Through the development of Falcon TEAMS (teaching, enriching and mentoring students) four years ago, our community took a proactive approach to out of school time (OST) for our students. The program devised civic engagement opportunities such as taking youth to nursing homes to plant flowers and helping youth create their own future business plans. By focusing on these areas of development, we are able to build capacities for motivation, determination and autonomy support.

Having staff members serve as strong mentors and models inspired the foundation of what success could look like for our York County teens. Youth today need strong models to follow in order to obtain positive developmental outcomes (Hollander & Torsney, 2000). Once we were apprised of what the parents really wanted to see happen through our program, we began enhancing the already developed areas of the program. If leadership building was to be our foundation of expansion, we needed the people who understood the dynamics of leadership. Through our recruitment of Winthrop University’s Civic Engagement participants and Leadership Facilitators (residence assistants), we were able to extend a leadership entity to our program. The caring relationships that Winthrop college students formed with the rising middle school students proved to be beneficial in several ways for all parties involved. Not only were
the college students great listeners but they talked about their own mistakes in life and directed the middle school students to more practical problem-solving solutions.

With that vision in mind, we knew that our program had to consist of curriculum components that reinforced these leadership aspects of learning. In order to make sure that our program participants experienced good values and positive behavior, we had to incorporate those facets into our planning. If we want to make sure that our marginalized youth experience supportive models within the community who have done extraordinary things to support their community, we have to go out and find them in order for them to provide the autonomy support that is requested. Too often, if teachers do not directly know of people within the community who are impactful, they go to the ones that are continuously written about. The trouble with that premise is that students don’t often get to experience the local icons that can serve as great examples of success or community building. According to materials related to Teske and Williamson (2006), educational leaders must engage in some basic tasks to uncover the models that some learners need. Those tasks include being alert to opportunities within the community and beyond, being prepared to take risks to fill in the necessary gaps, and the ability to build organizations and strong networks (p 46).

**Intergenerational connections toward determination and motivation**

As an author and program director, I am in the unique position of taking the experiences that I encounter and finding a way to express those stories through literacy. Recently, I wrote a book called, *No Fear For Freedom: The Story of the Friendship 9*. It is the story of nine young Friendship Junior College students who walked into a diner in 1961 in Rock Hill, SC and decided that the time was NOW for change. They sat down at the counter and asked for service. As the Jim Crow laws would have it, they were denied service and hauled off to jail. However,
instead of paying the bail, they opted for the 30 day jail sentence that the judge handed down. It was at that moment that these ordinary young college students set into motion a strategy and premise called *Jail No Bail*. This strategy determined that they would serve the hard labor sentence as opposed to paying the bail that just continued to reinforce the system of oppression. They were the first group of men, during the Civil Rights Movement, who decided to serve this full jail term for trying to eat at a segregated lunch counter. Perhaps, it was this effort that became the underpinning of Dr. King’s, *Letter From Birmingham Jail*. These men, the Friendship 9, were young men who lived in poverty stricken neighborhoods, with little opportunity. I interviewed them and saw many similarities in how they grew up and my own childhood experiences. These men were often supported by parents and community members who instilled in them self-determination to rise above their circumstances. These men also understood that intrinsic motivation would plant in them the seeds to gain success just because it was empowering to be successful and leave a mark in the community. Above all, they gained autonomy from the many teachers who taught them to stand up for justice and embrace their ethnicity. They too had role models who demanded excellence and refused to let them use color or anger as an excuse. Boylorn (2014) used the examples of the people who lived in her household as: struggling, yet emotionless. In other words, they never let their mountains become the blocks that kept them from surviving. This is the lesson that I also learned from my elders. These lessons helped me look at challenges as opportunities to pray more, live more and above all learn more. My interviews with these strong, unbroken men let me know that strength takes on many forms and genders and understandings but through it all, the strength can teach survival. I had learned about the strength needed to survive.
Apple (2004) notes that encountering conflict, in order to gain social change, is often the part that is left out of African-American history. He denotes that this information would prove valuable to demonstrating the power of organization and strategy. The Friendship 9 members were tired of being refused service, they were tired of not having the ability to try on clothes in the store and they were humiliated when they had to step off of the sidewalk to let white people pass. Their desire to organize against these Jim Crow laws was the conflict that created change. Again, it is imperative to have culturally responsive teachers who are not afraid to delve into the depths of history, particularly history of the ordinary people who were not afraid to push the barometer of change. In no way am I suggesting that segregation was a good thing but it is safe to state that when schools were segregated there was a greater respect and pedagogical tradition that was valued by the community and by the families.

It is the hope that we, as educators, can once again gain the kind of passion and determination that creates positive change. The desire is to do it without the racial divides that prohibit us from learning how to support each other and our endeavors. The goal of this study is not to tell white teachers that they do not know how to educate our black or brown children. It is not to say that black and brown children know exactly what they need to learn. However, this work is merely an opportunity for all of us to collaborate and see how we can empower each other. I implore educators not to walk into a classroom thinking that they know exactly what students lack based on test scores or disciplinary referrals. One must examine the ecological parameters that make up that child and his environment. As Boylorn (2014) suggests, get to know students from the inside out and allow them to help formulate areas of the learning process so that their experiences and culture are valued and matter (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In doing so, we may be able to trigger some of the innate abilities that exist in them and their determination
and motivation will ignite a plethora of curiosity that only responsive teachers can appreciate and embrace. As I gain the understanding of who I am as an educator and more importantly as an advocate for youth, I also realize that this journey has helped me find out the depth and breathe of who I have transitioned into over the years. Through that experience I have begun to understand where I am destined to go in my life.
Chapter 5

THE JOURNEY THROUGH THEMES

*Inasmuch as human life is experiential, we develop our understandings in the contexts of the experiences in which we participate (Anders, Bryan and Noblit)*

This journey

As I embark on this final stretch of my dissertation journey, I have come to realize that this experience has allowed me to download some of the ideas, beliefs and barriers that have kept me from teaching youth from a culturally responsive perspective. This journey has expanded my thinking which has allowed room for me to mentally upload new ideas, beliefs and solutions. The analytic files that I have created in my mind are now in place to help me collect information and data that can truly assist me in becoming an educational change agent, not just a bearer of titles and useless data that does not impact the depth and breadth of our marginalized black and brown children. Indeed this journey has allowed me to further gather the necessary tools to help me develop strategies, search for connections and link my experiences to the experiences that youth face today in the 21st century. This journey has been an awakening for my own thinking and writing. Though my story started with a central focus of adolescence and helping them delve into the things that trigger success for them, I have re-visited my initial study questions and extrapolated more meaning from this research (Glesne, 1999).

I took my research questions and dug even further into understanding and discovery. Now when I ask myself: *What experiences and areas of motivation led me to gain an interest in helping build stronger out of school time programs for marginalized youth?* I can answer that with the clarity that I am a stronger educator and program planner because I have come to realize that I do not have to try and separate my culture from myself. In fact the data determines that I
am more equipped to teach youth who face challenges when I do understand that my experiences can be used as formidable tools to build a relationship between myself and the youth that I serve. This information befits my work in that I can now build out of school time programs and educational settings with my focus not so much on the “problems or barriers” that students bring but now on the connections and commonalities that I see between the students and myself, as educator. I have learned that it is within those connections that my teaching process begins. This also solidifies the fact that students are at different levels when they arrive into our setting – we cannot throw out a blanket formula and expect all students to be on the same level when learning occurs. This is the way that my former teachers and grandparents taught me – they met me where I was and started to teach me from that point. I am learning that the method of meeting youth where they are proves to be effective in the holistic development of youth.

This dissertation journey has taught me that many factors impact a student’s outcomes. What we must understand is that everything a student brings with them to the classroom or to the OST program will inevitably become part of the learning processes and experiences. When I step back and see how my life has been impacted by the many ecological systems that Bronfenbrenner (1979) spoke about, it makes me realize that many of our youth need models and mentors who can help them foster their own sense of development. Intrinsic motivation, autonomy and self-determination are all components that can help build learner empowerment and stimulate intellect (Frymier, Shulman & Houser, 1996; Houser & Frymier, 2009).

**Educational Reflections**

This doctoral process has taught me that in order for us to engage our youth in their self-discovery, we need to be willing to step back and examine the triggers in our own lives that helped us face adversities and climb toward higher levels of success. Until we embrace the
realization that educators have to love “teaching” again and students have got to love “learning”, we will be trapped in the continuous dichotomy of educational views and reform changes. That is why I am so excited that I had this opportunity to take this journey. It is through this process that I have been able to answer my own questions and examine the triggers in my own life that have led me to the doors of success as a writer and as educator. I ask: *How has my career been a reflection of the support that I received as a youth growing up in a marginalized household and community?* Educators must constantly ask themselves, “What was it inside me that gave me the motivation and determination to excel in areas of learning?” It is those fundamental things that may provide the springboard needed in order to propel the youth, whom we teach, into their own sense of independence and development. It is not impossible to prepare our youth for success, but we must be willing to step out of our old habits and beliefs and release the hidden curriculum that is so narrowly focused and excludes some of our children from the messages. We must change the habits that make us boring teachers who are mundane and monotone. It is only when we step outside of the box of routine that we will be able to energize our youth to learn about topics that will make them proud to be in the skin that they are in and rekindle our own passion for teaching others. Creating classrooms that will connect youth to the real world through books that interest them and embrace their cultural diversity can prove to be a phenomenal resource for youth or are trying to discover who they truly are and their own sense of success. Research tells us that adolescents want to read materials that are pertinent to their own lives and that provide much variety (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999). It is then that we will be able to understand that education is not a one size fits all operation. Instead, it is an opportunity to help youth create their own levels of understanding tempered with the wisdom of their teachers, parents, grandparents and the other support entities of their lives.
When I asked myself my final research question again, *What support systems or dialogue enabled me to pursue my own levels of self-determination and autonomy?* I examined it through different eyes upon the completion of this dissertation journey. I realized that as an educator, I had become that *other*. The educator who now had the ability to be the impacter as opposed to just the impacted. I now had within my reach the ability to become that support system that many youth that I served needed. I had to examine my methods and beliefs in order to convey to the youth the factors that could truly add to their routines and fully equip them with the tools they needed to help direct their lives. Educators should focus on the components needed to equip youth with the many tools that they need to prepare for a lifetime of learning and skills (Pitre, Pitre, & Hilton-Pitre, 2009). When we examine teachers and their classroom behavior, we must not negate the fact that a teacher can either reinforce the classroom with positive energy and the desire to learn or literally suck the life out of the learning process and learning space. When there are educators who are not fully committed to engaging and supporting the development of the youth, youth will not connect with those educators and there continues to be a gap in the elements of the classroom setting.

Ashton and Webb (1986) verify that students learn more from educators who are excited about learning and who themselves show motivation and determination. These characteristics tend to flow through the teacher into the students. That is another reason that solidifies that the teacher experiences can impact the learning process. But what happens if the educator does not have the same experiences as the student? That is where cultural responsiveness comes into play. Biggs (1992) surmises that educators need to be more aware of how media depicts black and brown children and how that information often impacts the attitudes and self-beliefs of youth. In doing so, educators can begin to re-shape the settings in which youth find themselves rooted.
This particular positive energy and positive enthusiasm fosters the self-belief that is needed to increase the desire to learn. In addition classrooms thrive when there are educators who value the students and what they bring to the classroom. Perhaps it is the strong teachers that I encountered in my educational experience that helped me form the strength that I needed to foster my own sense of self-determination and autonomy. This is not to say that I am done with the reflection and examination of myself as an educator - both are an ongoing process.

**Uncovering themes**

As I worked through this research and reflected back on my past there were certain ideas and themes that were salient throughout. As I moved through the areas of this study in a systematic way, certain words resonated throughout. Once the head notes were examined, the poems read and re-read, the analysis process began and it became the focal point of this study. It was from there that I began laying out the information to observe themes and interpretations. This section of this study will observe in an in-depth manner the information that was gathered from the self-data, mental notes and archived information collected. As Creswell (2007) suggests, data is analyzed as it is being collected and this process was prominent throughout this autoethnographic study.

The purpose was to find the main themes in the information collected and get an idea of where the information would lead. The strategy was to find out what happened in my life and why it appeared to be happening. From there, I can further try to understand the barriers that some youth today face based on my past experiences. It is through those similarities that I can begin creating codes and themes. In addition, triangulating the information (Creswell, 1999) allows one to take information from different areas and see if they are connected and if there is a fit between the themes and the subcategories. Through the methodological triangulation format,
information was cross-checked and indeed showed a connection. There were connections between my home, school and community interactions. When the information connected, it provided stronger evidence that the information and experiences had validity. It was when I began experiencing redundancy in the information that I realized that it was time to stop collecting information and begin looking for my overall categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to this point as theoretical saturation. I examined the work of some of the most prominent researchers in the fields as they relate to adolescents and autoethnography. I began to hear them talk about the same patterns of information as it relates to cultural responsiveness, adolescents, academics and self-determination. I realized at that point I needed to step back from the literature and begin making sense of the information that I had gathered. It was time for me to see how the poems, stories and experiences all connected.

I chose to write my research through the process of categorizing. This allowed me to tell my story in a linear way that helps explain how I arrived at each facet of my life. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) wrote that sometimes the separating and coding of data can be taken for granted. However, researchers need to be able to read the research and organize and manage the information provided. This, in turn, will allow the researcher to gain more meaning from the study. As the information was noticed and collected, it needed to be placed into categories to gain a better understanding of its meaning. Mental notes were carefully scrutinized to help create these category topics. Preset and emergent categories were combined to create the final themes that were prevalent throughout this work. Preset topics and categories started this research analysis and others were added as they became apparent and as I uncovered the various layers of my life experiences. The preset categories included academic success and leadership roles. The thematic analysis was conducted as suggested by Coffey and Atkinson (1996). During the
analysis process, the categories also showed a linkage between internal and external assets as described by the Search Institute. There were initially multiple categories created throughout the study. However, they were consolidated and combined down to four major themes and subcategories that resonated throughout this study. From the themes I created subcategories that helped me place together like-minded clumps of information that were evident throughout the study. The subcategories were the reflections and insights that evolved from those themes. Those major themes or categories resonated throughout this work and were noted as follows:

A. social interactions,
B. community/teacher/ parent or grandparent connections (or ecological systems),
C. academic success
D. adolescent independence/autonomy.

I will look at each of these areas and recant how they played a pivotal role in helping me develop the autoethnographic information that I included in this research work. Furthermore, I will elaborate on how these themes or categories will contribute to the information already known in the field of development of adolescents and the factors that contribute to overall youth success.

When my grandparents set out to prepare me for the learning process, they did not have the luxury of providing me the academic underpinnings to get me started, but they did have the motivation and autonomy support that helped me learn to stand on my own. It was through those aspects that I began to gain the structure that would help me examine my choices and understand my abilities. A true educator knows that development, particularly in adolescents, is comprised of constant contradictions. Adolescents are seeking independence but needing autonomy support, looking to fit in but asking to be sorted, looking for constant personal rewards but seeking to do things for the betterment of the group (San Antonio, 2006).
In Table 1 the overarching theme was social interaction. This theme supports the concept that afterschool programs can provide additional assistance that youth may not be able to receive during a school day. Given the value of what students bring, educators must realize that adolescent students do not necessarily come into the classroom eager to jump into academics. On the contrary, research says that the stress associated with fitting in with peers is the single most factor at the forefront of their minds (San Antonio, 2006). Eccles and Gootman (2002) state that youth aren’t generally motivated to do well if their social environment doesn’t mesh with their psychological needs. In addition, if the school setting doesn’t mesh with the developmental and social needs of youth, they are not interested in the setting (Miller, 2003). Knowing that, it is plausible that educators should focus on ways to build self-determination and intrinsic motivation as ways to reinforce the social aspects of entering middle school. Research denotes that self-determination can create the confidence and motivation that allows youth to interact with others therefore yielding more social interaction and change (Wehmeyer, Shogren, Zager, Smith, & Simpson, 2010).

With self-determination as an additional factor of success, youth can learn to pull from within to build areas of success based on what success means to them. In addition, intrinsic motivation is about active engagement, but the engagement has to be something that will interest the person. Had my grandparents not engaged me in the love of helping others, reading stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>TABLE 1: THEME A:</strong></th>
<th><strong>SUBCATEGORIES:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Interactions</td>
<td>• Self-determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive views of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Capacities for change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The above subcategories were important to helping adolescents learn to build confidence and desire for change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
out loud and poetry, I would not have that desire within me. Now as an educator, I am motivated from the inside out to help other youth find this part of their abilities that encourages them to grow. Deci and Ryan (2000) denote that once one gains the desire to operate through intrinsic motivation, they do not require someone constantly prodding them in order to accomplish the task. In addition, intrinsic motivation has been linked to critical thinking skills which could ultimately encourage adolescents to persist in tasks for longer periods of time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2: THEME B:</th>
<th>SUBCATEGORIES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connectors</td>
<td>• Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intergenerational connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is through these connectors as outlined by Bronfenbrenner(1979) that we understand that all entities are important for the overall and holistic success of youth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The connections between communities, schools and families creates a sense of ownership for everyone. Given that, an assumption is that parents, teachers, mentors or community leaders can have a direct impact on helping youth meet the daily challenges they face because they are the closest to the youth (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Again, the goal of our Falcon Teams OST program is not to tell the youth how to be leaders, but to show them through their own abilities and hopefully guide them into the process of leadership. Theokas and Lerner (2006) indicate that when youth have positive experiences within one area of their life, they are likely to see those positive experiences in other areas of their life. Their research goes on to state that when youth do not have experiences and opportunities to grow from, it is difficult for them to develop in those areas.
When youth feel that they are valued, they are more committed to getting involved in activities to improve the community as opposed to destroying or threatening the community. From visiting the elderly to community clean-ups, youth are shown to be an essential part of making the community better, therefore creating stronger connections. It is important to note that the Falcon Teams OST program is continuously fostering opportunities for growth and development, within the family, school and community. By incorporating new strategies for social and academic enhancement, youth are continually finding new ways to establish growth in various areas of development. From more opportunities to advance their technological skills to more social interaction, the youth are gaining skills that can be used daily.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3: THEME C:</th>
<th>SUBCATEGORIES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Success</td>
<td>• Creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Culturally responsive teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Removal of hidden curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Problem-Solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive verbal reinforcement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These subcategories are important to supporting the academic growth and development of adolescents.

In Table 3 the overarching theme was *academic success*. As this study has elaborated on, there are other factors that outweigh the academics of youth development. As depicted in our OST programs, we strive to provide an environment that may not parallel a typical school setting. This can allow youth to participate in small group settings which can promote intellectual confidence and the ability to engage in classroom interactions. Research supports the idea that intellectual stimulation is often related to factors outside of academics (Bolkan, Goodboy & Griffin, 2011). However, none of these factors are new. Our youth of the 21st Century have been relegated to becoming academic drones in which they are only supposed to focus on the academic tests and not the exploration of the many opportunities that are
intertwined in social understanding, creative restoration or cultural diversity. To allow youth the opportunities to solve their own problems, be creative within the setting, gain positive feedback and exposure from culturally responsive teachers, sets them up to gain further academic reinforcement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4: THEME D</th>
<th>SUBCATEGORIES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adolescence independence</td>
<td>• Autonomy support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perceptions of self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding autonomy was also instrumental to this autoethnographical research. The bottom line of education would benefit from asking the question, did youth learn how the world works in a way that will benefit them? In other words, did they learn how to be autonomous so they too one day may impact the world in a broader aspect. It was through the autonomy support from my grandparents and other elders that has encouraged me to make sure that I am able to complete tasks in the right manner. Through those experiences, my team has tried to construct an afterschool program that will support autonomy for youth and also give them these strong mentors to glean from on their journey into adulthood.

**Learning How to Change things - the struggle to undo habits**

The conclusions of this study indicate that the educators can model positive reinforcement and scaffolding practices with adolescent participants in order to assist in leadership and social development. The belief is that this study provides empirical support that self-determination, intrinsic motivation and autonomy can encourage the success of youth. In addition, the findings in this paper are consistent with what prior research has said about the effectiveness of afterschool programs. Of the qualitative studies that were found that focused
specifically on leadership and social skills, it is apparent that facets of a youth’s development must be cohesive and that one facet of development hinges on the success of another facet (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Nevertheless, there still needs to be more in-depth research done on the impacts of what leadership and social skills components can contribute to the overall success in helping prepare youth for successful adulthood. This research is a way to link together the thoughts and ideas that have emerged over time as related to what can trigger overall success in youth.

Through the additional support of out of school time programs, youth can engage in activities that promote stronger academics and leadership. Furthermore, such opportunities for growth and development can make a positive impact in the lives of its participants. My life growing up exhibits many of the components that our quality afterschool program exhibits. From caring staff members, to goal setting to high levels of expectation and leadership abilities, the program is developing competence among youth. Research tells us that such components can create successful adults (Carruthers, & Busser, 2000).

The afterschool program attempts to provide opportunities for development that will help youth encompass some of the life skills that are displayed in the TLS Model (APPENDIX A). As referenced in the literature review, it is important to focus on the development of the youth in various aspects as opposed to just one area. This interconnectedness helps bond the youth with family and community. These important findings indicate that youth reach higher levels of success when all entities are involved in their success (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The information in this dissertation further supports the concept that solid programs and interactions are important for the continued overall development of confidence and social/leadership skills. This includes schools, parents and community programs. With the continued recognition that OST programs
can promote development of youth as described in the Developmental Assets Chart (APPENDIX B), it is equally important to make sure that youth are surrounded by caring mentors and adults (Carruthers, & Busser, 2000). Just like in my own life, there were many people who supported my efforts. Also, the reality denotes that there were some who were not supportive of my developmental efforts.

The first step in order to build a setting that can truly support the efforts of our middle school youth is to provide materials that will allow youth to see themselves in such positions of success. I need not mention the fact that many educators are burnt out and are finding it difficult to add more information to what they already have to teach. However, unless we are willing to give our black and brown youth the experiences that many of them lack, we will only continue building academic benchmarks that youth have no desire in meeting – thus, the gap widens. We need to examine the value of human development alongside the academic development, for it is only when the two are reach harmony through balance can we dismantle the inequalities that place youth at a disadvantage before they even walk into the classroom. Duffy and Jonassen (1992) denote that learning needs to be active in order to be productive. This occurs through many experiences. Had not my early learning teachers provided me with many experiences, I would not have gained the extended skills I needed to take with me to elementary and then on to middle school.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

Beyond the Books

It is the positive involvement in other areas of development that can support what Finn (1989) refers to as participatory belonging. This term describes positive involvement in school and beyond and also activities that can develop peer interaction. This concept supports the depth and value of the out of school time programs, similar to the one that I operate in York County, SC. Moreover, it is one’s own performance that helps set the platform for mastering an activity. If youth feel successful in an activity, they look for more activities that they can engage in. Bandura states that when adolescents are not committed to an activity that they find worthwhile and valuable, they will quickly become bored and look for reasons to be cynical. Moreover, if youth fail at specific activities or tasks, they avoid them (Pajares and Urdan, 2006).

Theokas and Lerner (2006) indicate through their work that if youth have positive experiences within one area of their life, they are likely to see those positive experiences in other areas of their life. Their research goes on to state that youth who lack experiences and opportunities to grow from, will face difficulty when trying to develop in those particular areas. Theokas and Lerner also reveal in their research a dimension of ecological assets called “collective activity.” This type of collaboration between families, schools and communities can promote civic interaction. It can also reinforce positive social networking. The belief is that a good youth development framework occurs when resources are aligned with youth and community needs. Furthermore, this type of alignment can lead to a decrease in negative behavior and may promote positive behaviors among youth and families. Theokas and Lerner (2006) solidified the premise that there must be a balance created in order for youth to begin to
reap the benefits of the holistic approach to development. Out of school programs can provide some of the experiences that youth lack in their lives.

My grandparents and community provided me with many chances to engage in helping my community grow. It was through those experiences that I gained the ideas and values that encouraged me to be determined in my life. The purpose of our afterschool program is to also give youth many opportunities to gain success through community efforts and activities so they will look for other ways to prove that they can do well in life. This may ultimately lead them to other academic areas of challenge and success. When motivation, emotional and academic areas are reinforced, well-being is fostered (Pajares and Urdan, 2006). Educators can do this by giving youth many chances to see themselves in a positive light. This may mean presenting them with other models who are similar to them. This process brings us back to the call to action to be more culturally responsive in our interactions with students.

Empirical evidence shows that self-determination, motivation and the support that youth receive can make them more confident in their abilities to excel, persevere, or reach for success. On the other hand, the lack of these elements can increase deficit thinking, lack of motivation and overall stress (Pajares and Urdan, 2006). Pajares and Urdan (2006) also state that academics should energize not paralyze participants. Furthermore, research tells us that if we want to see youth excel in academics we must first focus on their areas of self-belief. Given that, interventions that involve youth should be highly focused on this premise as opposed to placing most of the emphasis on the academic realm. With the afterschool program in York County, the focus is to help youth understand that they can have both work and play operating in the same space. Youth need to know that work also entails their efforts. Educators can destroy the self-determination of youth by constantly associating success with phrases that align with intellect or
smarts. It is more beneficial to praise youth for their efforts, hard work and focus. Afterschool programs can offer youth the confidence that they need to build those areas of motivation and determination. However, the programs must offer high interests to the students and provide opportunities for service learning they can feel connected to.

Psychologist Angela Duckworth states that it is better to praise efforts as opposed to just praising achievements. When youth can grasp this concept, they will begin to place much faith in their efforts as opposed to whether or not they are the BEST. Bandura also reminds us that self-confidence is about balancing both confidence and knowledge (Pajares and Urdan, 2006). Without that balance, educators may not be able to successfully engage youth in their levels of learning. Unlike my time in junior high, youth today have the opportunities to gain extensive knowledge about people and places throughout the world. The internet and other modes of technology have given us the broader chances to interact with all types of people and visit many interesting places. It is the detriment of demoralization that can strip youth of their intrinsic motivation. That is why it is imperative that educators remind youth that they are capable of tasks and can take some control of their own learning. My grandparents were constantly telling me that I could do whatever I set my mind to. It was this internal belief system that helped me move beyond my circumstances. It is when youth have cultures that are perceived as rich and valuable that they can enter the classrooms and facilitate their own learning. When they can connect the things they already know with the things they don’t yet know, the interests of the youth can flourish (Delpit, 2012).

Parents of Adolescents Please Stand up

As important as it was for my grandparents to motivate me and encourage me to dig deep to find my own sense of value, today’s youth need that type of motivation even more than I did.
My grandparents were not comfortable in the school setting, but this did not negate them from doing what they could to build my self-determination and motivation. 21st century parents must realize that cultural differences and discomfort in the school setting cannot be enough to keep them from interacting in their child’s academic success. Nieto (1996) states that parental involvement entails promoting internal success, high expectations and pride in academics. The unfortunate thing is that many parents doubt their own abilities and this flows down into the mindset of our youth. When parents experience self-doubt or negative self-feelings that state that academics are not important, youth begin to believe that same thing and lose their enthusiasm to excel (Kaplan, Liu & Kaplan, 2001). When parents are going through challenges and their child witnesses that, they essentially transfer those uncertainties and conflicts onto their children (Stierlin, Levi, & Savard, 1971). My grandparents did a great job of keeping what they referred to as “grown folks business” away from me. This, in essence, kept the burden of worrying about being poor and disenfranchised away from me so that I could focus on being successful and academically sound. Our youth in the 21st century have a lot of extra baggage to carry in the way of societal problems and family challenges. When parents are confident enough to speak up for the balance that their students need, they can serve as positive support systems for their youth (Mayhew & Lempers, 1998).

Continued family engagement is important through the school years. Longitudinal studies show that when children grow up in low-income households, where there is limited formal education, they can still experience a great deal of success if parents are connected to the school and community. It is important for schools to work hand-in-hand with families and the community. This solid type of relationship can build trusting relationships (Fantuzzo,
McWayne, Perry & Childs, 2004). It was imperative for me to have the support in my household that I experienced. It was through those experiences that my grandparents formed strong relationships with my elementary teachers. However, upon my arrival to junior high school, my grandparents began to feel a sense of inadequacy and that feeling kept them from pursuing a place in the junior high setting. Perhaps my teachers could have welcomed my grandparents into the classroom in a more productive and accepting way. Perhaps my grandparents shouldn’t have felt so intimidated by those teachers. In any event, it is important that both entities work together through the whole learning aspects. It is this interaction and collaboration between family and school that can monitor the overall success of youth from the time they enter school until they graduate and even beyond, in some cases.

**Implications for Further Research**

The hope is that this autoethnography will contribute to educational research in various ways. Scheper-Hughes (1992) denotes that this type of work can give voice to many who have no voice as related to their situations. Moreover, this type of text can draw in witnesses who themselves may have had such experiences and can allow them to lend insight to others with similar situations. The experiences in my own life created themes that align with what the literature says about the needs of youth during adolescent years. Such themes included the concept that when youth are provided with caring and successful environments they can thrive. This work further contributes to the concept that confidence in *self* can help youth learn to become independent individuals who begin to set and achieve goals and soon gain their own autonomy. With the building of confidence, positive attitudes and competence can emerge.

Another contribution of this type of research is that this opportunity to witness the experiences of the youth that we serve in our OST program provides many opportunities for rich
dialogue which can help create problem-solving strategies. These conversations as related to race, economics or ethnicity can guide youth in ways to find support within the school setting, therefore leading to more openness and reflection. Such openness can also lead to possible improvement of leadership and academic skills that can promote success in other skill areas. OST programs must stretch beyond the academic and recreational realm in order to serve the whole child first. This study contributes to the existing literature by showing the relevance of having supportive school settings in addition to families and communities. This complete support can help change the trajectories of negative behavior or poor academic engagement.

The information in this study supports the idea that specific training within a program can further enhance life skills. By having a specific leadership training embedded within the program or classroom, youth are learning to become assets to the community. However, it is only when educators apply what research says, and their own experiences, to their classroom application can learning become an effective input and output process. The goal is for research to be interwoven into the motivation and self-determination of youth. This makes academics and motivation a part of every aspect of learning. This work is intended to not serve as only a theoretical perspective but also a means of practical application (Glesne, 1999). This work is not intended to serve as a research piece that will be read and filed away in a cabinet. It is the intention that this is merely the springboard for continued research in uncovering and understanding the various triggers that can propel learners into uncovering their own methods of success.

Adolescence is a time of constant conflict. Youth are seeking independence, yet looking for approval and support. They are compassionate and concerned about the state of the world, yet verbally cruel to classmates. Some adolescents are self-determined and eager to complete tasks,
yet at times, ill-prepared procrastinators. The contradictions that these youth weave in and out of everyday are normal trajectories for their development (San Antonio, 2006). Since it is a natural transition for youth to redirect their focus from family to more peer, community and social entities, educators must be ready to help students navigate through these environments. Educators are required more now than ever to operate as parents, coaches and mentors to every student who walks through their door. They must be culturally responsive enough to understand that youth cannot be separated from their culture and they must also understand that there are different kinds of learners in every class. To make it simple, educators must be equipped to help students formulate both academic and social roles. Within these roles, youth are also required to understand their responsibilities and obligations to master some of their own pressures and challenges.

Though we do not like watching our youth deal with stress and pressure, we do not necessarily have to view stress and pressure as a detriment to youth. Freud (1958) and Erickson (1968) tell us that stress can be a growth-producing process if it doesn’t last too long and that there are signs of development within the environment. In order to conquer this natural pressure, youth must build their own sense of motivation, to complete homework and class assignments – self-determination to ask questions and gain clearer understanding of assignments and tasks and the autonomy to step outside of their comfort zone and find better ways to problem solve. It is through these areas of success that youth will become more confident in their abilities to increase their cognitive growth and navigate successfully through the middle school arena (San Antonio, 2006). To go even further, Bandura (1972) tells us that such challenges can even build self-efficacy. Through this self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation is also fostered and together these elements can develop a stronger self-concept. (Rist, 1971).
References

Adolescence and Education: Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Adolescents (2006). Edited by Frank Pajares and Tim Urdan. A Volume in the Series Adolescence and Education Published By Information Age Publishing, Greenwich, CT


Barber, B.K. (2005) Whence Connectedness, Hence Connectedness. National Research Council & Institute of Medicine Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of


Cultural Psychology, 32, 618-635.


Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and

adults’ orientations toward control versus autonomy with children: Reflections on
intrinsic motivation and perceived competence. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 73*,
642-650.

38 (pp. 237-288). Lincoln, NE: University Of Nebraska Press.


University Press.

York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton

Delpit, L.D., & Dowdy, J. K. (2002). *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts On Language and

Delpit, L.D. (2012). “Multiplication is for White People” Raising Expectations for Other


Hargreaves, A. (2009). The fourth way of change: towards an age of inspiration and sustainability. In A. Hargreaves & M. Fullan (Eds.), Change Wars (pp. 11-43). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree


Carolina at Chapel Hill.


National Kids Count: http://datacenter.kidscount.org/


Left Coast Press.


Shaffer, David (2002). Developmental psychology: Childhood and adolescence. Wadsworth


cultural wealth. Race Ethnicity and Education, 8(1), 69-91.

Zaff, J.F., & Michelsen, E.( 2002). Encouraging Civic Engagement:

How Teens Are (or Are Not) Becoming Responsible Citizens. Retrieved Feb. 11, 2010

http://www.childtrends.org/_portalcat.cfm?LID=6330675F-E927-4F65-B13AEC022256A8FF&arc=Y


Challenges to scholars. Journal of Adolescent Research, 10(1), 6-14.

Source: President LYNDON B. JOHNSON, special message to the Congress, Toward Full

Educational Opportunity, January 12, 1965. Public Papers of the Presidents of the United


http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/drive.html


<http://www.quotes.net/quote/10438>.
APPENDIX A: TLS Model
APPENDIX: B
Assets Checklist

CHECKLIST OF 40 DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

Many people find it helpful to use a simple checklist to reflect on the assets young people experience. This checklist simplifies the asset list to help prompt conversation in families, organizations, and communities. NOTE: This checklist is not a scientific or accurate measurement of developmental assets. The assets are measured through administration of a 156-item survey.

To use this list, if you are a young person, answer about your current situation. If you are an adult, answer about what it was like for you when you were a teenager.

_____ 1. I receive high levels of love and support from family members.

_____ 2. I can go to my parent(s) or guardian(s) for advice and support and have frequent, in-depth conversations with them.

_____ 3. I know some nonparent adults I can go to for advice and support.

_____ 4. My neighbors encourage and support me.

_____ 5. My school provides a caring, encouraging environment.

_____ 6. My parent(s) or guardian(s) help me succeed in school.

_____ 7. I feel valued by adults in my community.

_____ 8. I am given useful roles in my community.

_____ 9. I serve in the community one hour or more each week.

_____ 10. I feel safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

_____ 11. My family sets standards for appropriate conduct and monitors my whereabouts.

_____ 12. My school has clear rules and consequences for behavior.

_____ 13. Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring my behavior.

_____ 14. Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.

_____ 15. My best friends model responsible behavior.

_____ 16. My parent(s)/guardian(s) and teachers encourage me to do well.

_____ 17. I spend three hours or more each week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
18. I spend three hours or more each week in school or community sports, clubs, or organizations.
19. I spend one hour or more each week in religious services or participating in spiritual activities.
20. I go out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights each week.
21. I want to do well in school.
22. I am actively engaged in learning.
23. I do an hour or more of homework each school day.
24. I care about my school.
25. I read for pleasure three or more hours each week.
26. I believe it is really important to help other people.
27. I want to help promote equality and reduce world poverty and hunger.
28. I can stand up for what I believe.
29. I tell the truth even when it’s not easy.
30. I can accept and take personal responsibility.
31. I believe it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
32. I am good at planning ahead and making decisions.
33. I am good at making and keeping friends.
34. I know and am comfortable with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
35. I can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
36. I try to resolve conflict nonviolently.
37. I believe I have control over many things that happen to me.
38. I feel good about myself.
39. I believe my life has a purpose.
40. I am optimistic about my future.