

Beyond the Silence: Finding a Voice

by

Pamela Althea Joyce

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
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## Abstract

## Beyond the Silence: Finding a Voice

by

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The issue of teacher involvement in minority achievement relates to moving beyond academia's silencing tactics and entails teacher as well as student empowerment, advocacy, and use of voice. This dissertation addresses silences in a schooling context and focuses on the intricacies of my teaching practices during a five-year time frame from the perspectives of self, school, and society for the purpose of self-improvement with a keen eye on alternatives to minority underachievement. I explore my personal professional history concerning matters of learning and teaching in racially and socially diverse settings found in one public school.

This research provides an opening to identify appearances of racial injustice that affect my teaching performance, student performance, and me personally through journal writing. During the journaling process, I learn that deficit and affirming influences involving racially motivated inequalities are embedded within the school walls and they are perpetuated by people in power as well as by the powerless who mindlessly follow the "norm" and unconsciously and consciously allow injustices to flourish in the schooling setting. Ultimately, in a conscious state, my personal level of criticality is

heightened and I use that criticality to influence other lives to seek and act on new alternatives to the long-standing problem of minority underachievement.

During self-exploration, lived experiences of all who interact in my sphere of influence become intertwined within my experiences. Under these circumstances, I learn that as a teacher I have the power to implement change and attract collaborative assistance from colleagues for the purpose of transformative change. I become aware that questioning is an on going and essential process which can rarely bring about concrete answers concerning the problem of minority underachievement but even with that reality it is necessary to aggressively continue questioning, acting on valuable information, and reinterpreting new information. This form of unrelenting questioning eventually brings about alternatives.

My journey gave me the insight needed to reframe my original narrow-minded thoughts about minority underachievement, breaking away from the idea of silence and powerlessness, to the ability to connect with the interrelatedness of all aspects of life in order to be in a position of power to introduce as well as implement and sustain change in a constantly changing world.

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Dedicated to my husband, parents, and children

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## **Chapter 1 – Beyond the Silence: Finding a Voice**

### **Introduction**

This study focuses on my own teaching and other professional practices and incorporates an autobiographical method of personal journaling. In writing my autobiography, I focus on issues associated with my identity as a teacher as well as issues of racial injustice present in my school. My interest is in documenting how I can attempt to be successful over a period of time in teaching underachieving minority students alternative avenues for achievement in spite of the multiple roadblocks that continue to permeate the research site school, Storm Steele Divide Division High School, SSDD. I am also interested in how my participation and success in school-related activities and professional development activities are associated with my personal improvement as a teacher and as an initiator of change relating to the existing racist practices at my school. With this multi-focus in mind the study employs a narrative framework and an autobiographical design, which focuses on my lived experiences as a teacher using narratives about my life in both a schooling and social context. This context envelops environmental settings “inside and outside the school walls” with me as a teacher, participant, observer and researcher. As Joe Kincheloe suggests the process of reflecting on self in an everyday school environment is a way of finding out about my professional self (Roth, 2005b). I believe that by reviewing my teaching practices through the process of recollection, I gain insights into how to create an alternative environment and thus I am able to acquire the power to implement changes to improve the quality of my teaching as well as the culture of the school as it pertains to underachieving minority students (Roth, 2005b). In essence, one of the anticipated important life changing outcomes for this study

is for me to acquire an understanding of how I affect others in a schooling context.

The title of this dissertation, *Beyond the Silence: Finding a Voice*, encapsulates the meaning of the study, which centers on the silence of teachers and students who experience the destructive aftermath of racist practices within a schooling context and ultimately through that experience find a voice. Through my auto/biographical journal, I seek to reconstruct the contexts in which these silencing practices occur, acknowledge the demoralizing effects of racist practices, identify and develop an understanding of the hopelessness and pain caused by such disregard for humanity and then subsequently take action against the existing reality.

This study attempts to go beyond the deficit mindset of:

- The powerlessness of teachers
- The silenced teacher/student voice
- “Sorting out” students, who are academically in need of priority care based on statistics derived from standardized test data
- The limitations of past and present studies

This study rigorously seeks an affirming mindset, which attempts to:

- Find student as well as teacher critical voices
- Create teacher and student access to power
- Synthesize existing information
- Add new information
- Create feasible alternatives to failure

It examines the problem of minority underachievement, which has been historically tolerated and nurtured in the American education system through the mindless existence of those in power. This research calls for a paradigm shift from the mindlessness and lack of criticality of the power holders to the possible expanded roles teachers can assume in creating critical interventions concerning minority underachievement. It has a two-fold purpose first, to critically reflect on and decode teaching practices through the actual occurrences of lived experiences within the context of school for personal growth and acknowledgement of the “what is”. And the second purpose is to launch an initiative within a teacher’s sphere of influence to open up spaces for change informed by a critical eye. In order to accomplish this, I attempt to identify within a teacher’s sphere of influence the dynamics in varying school contexts and structures that influenced minority underachievement.

Reflectively, I believe my teaching is equitable and anticipatory, appropriate and timely during the five-year study period. I negotiate power struggles, opposition to implement culturally responsive instructional materials, and fight for the right to use my voice as well as promote the use of student and parent voices. As a result, I provide evidence of students using their voices, students showing more interest in class, coming to class more often and being referred less to power holders for discipline problems. I argue that these accomplishments are based on my increased self-awareness and self-empowerment as a teacher during the auto/biography period as well as peer collaborative ventures. Simply prying myself away from the sidelines and fighting to be heard became a transformational experience for all involved and at that point my previous neutral stance

seemed no longer to be a viable option.

According to Horton and Freire (1990), neutrality is an immoral act. This study emphasizes one teacher's personal journey to find and use her voice to act on behalf of self and students, who have not been afforded the opportunities needed to reach their highest potential. In this research, within the schooling context, I evolve as a power holder with a heightened level of critical consciousness and the understanding that I have the ability to take a stand for my students and myself. This level of critical consciousness helps me to promote the implementation of alternative measures concerning the problem of underachieving minority students at SSDD today as well as during the five-year study time frame.

Measures that involve closing and eventually eliminating the gap are an emerging process that requires criticality. It is a critically complex process, which based on the information and implications of this study guided me through a search for "self". It presented the desire to express personal voice in order to self-advocate, then the ability to see "what is" and determine what actions should follow, and ultimately the opening to discover personal stamina and collective knowledge needed to establish a plan that would sustain multiple interventions during changing times therefore allowing for unprecedented adjustments when necessary.

The search for self is the initial step in the emergent process of closing and eventually eliminating the gap. Self-empowerment/self-awareness of a teacher first requires

knowledge and confidence in self, and then insights can be shared among all individuals in the teacher's sphere of influence. My personal sphere of influence houses my lived experiences and is comprised of the experiences of students, teachers, and parents. It continues to expand through daily encounters with people. It expands inside as well as outside the school walls and envelops all experiences. Granted, there are an infinite number of places to stand in the sphere but in this study as the teacher/researcher I chose to stand as a change agent for my students, their parents and myself. My goal is to self-advocate with a sense of empowerment by implementing effective interventions and modeling the process for others then eventually having students assume the lead in this transformative process (Freire, 2004). This type of transformative process requires going beyond the "what is".

Horton and Freire (1990) suggest "pushing the boundaries" (p.143) which is the measure of rigor identified in this study in order for me, the teacher, to come to voice (Freire, 2004). The boundaries of power and voice exceeded sealed limits at SSDD when rigor and criticality were exercised. My voice served as a lynch pin in the process for "gap" closure but an understanding of power within the school walls was a necessary prerequisite. The use of voice was able to connect internal turbulence to "what is" and under these circumstances identified where interventions were needed. It allowed a critical mindset to be maintained as well as sustained and with a critical voice the conversation and action was set in motion. Once in motion the "others" in the sphere of influence collaborated and paved the path to bring about change and hopefully make a difference in our lifetime. In this mindset, by asserting myself in the form of initiating

programs, making the teacher and student voiceless plight visible, and continuing to model the “what can be”, I became the model and inspiration for other teachers as well as students to follow. In this way teachers [and students] become leaders and leadership skills acquired involved organizing, mobilizing, and educating individuals toward self-empowerment (Horton & Freire, 1990. p.120). I became a leader in the journey to selfhood and empowered others along the way.

In this study leadership roles and qualities are present not only to empower self but also to empower others. I do not profess to be an expert but a learner during my journey. Freire asserts that the expert knows not to be the expert (p. 128). At Storm Steele Divide Division High School, SSDD, contrary to the Freirean outlook, there were those who professed to be the experts, such as school administrators and other individuals who had the “know how” to seize power. It became apparent as I navigated through the system that modeling self-emancipatory actions, one of which was speaking up against injustices against underachieving minority students, opened up possible methods of access to power and thus suggested new and varied interventions concerning the “achievement gap”. In addition, developing support systems such as a Parent/Student Support Group, or redesigning the social “in school” network of teachers and administrators by finally paying attention to underachieving minority students, as well as adding to personal teacher growth by attending professional development workshops were all achievable goals.

In order to start and continue my journey I needed to be replenished and in the context of school, professional development, PD, was a feasible and appropriate way to meet that goal. PD served to fill in information gaps, also reintroduce and/or reinforce information about the changing times in education during the five-year study period. In sum, as teacher/participant and observer I attended twenty-five PD workshops, which covered information about curriculum development, pedagogical practices, culturally responsive teaching, leadership training, as well as race and diversity topics. This constant pedagogical replenishment helped to provide a pathway to finding voice.

I recognized through lived experiences and PD workshops that the “what is” and “what can be” concerning the minority underachievement phenomenon shared mutual space. With the acknowledgement of shared space in mind, school inequalities continued to surfaced in surround sound and it became apparent that each person was responsible to act in order to provide equal opportunities for all people, it was clear that what I did in the present would affect the future. Thus, one of the primary implications in this study was that power holders could not control everything and everyone, but rather teachers also owned a portion of the power and had the right to speak up for themselves and for their students in search for democratic practices. I came to grips with the idea that “if we allowed everyone a voice in producing new knowledge, it implied a much greater participation of the masses of the people in the process of power” (Horton & Freire, 1995, p. 97). Allowing everyone a voice would mean “to renew the understanding of power” (p.95). Thus, with this understanding teacher agency assumed a primary position in the study and I enacted teacher power to initiate and implement change and renewal of

the SSDD reality. Contributing factors in creating and insuring teacher agency was then dependent on a combination of personal persistence, teacher collaboration, non-conventional supports, inside and outside the school walls, and the ability to use my voice.

My end goal for teacher agency was to be able to organize for sustainability of what was enacted and to be able to transfer power to the “other”, which in this case was underachieving minority students and their parents. After examining the data from the study, it was my belief that sustainability coupled with the element of flexibility, in order to withstand changing times, was crucial in the gap closing process.

Often to reach sustainability it is necessary not only to explore the education domain but also simultaneously enter into the social context, which is not isolated from education (p.103). Case and point was when students who I observed during the course of the study, would manifest debilitating societal baggage, which would eventually transfer to the schooling context. In light of the merging of educational and societal elements my role as teacher expanded in order for me to determine how to analyze the social context then acknowledge the extent of the problem of minority underachievement and the possibilities of its appearance in other domains (Horton & Freire, 1995). The bloated boundaries of the minority underachievement phenomenon seemed to regurgitate from the school walls out into society and magnify the depth of its importance. As a result, the problem of minority underachievement was widespread, seemingly not stabilizing, and at times growing.

### **“The Tipping Point”**

“The Tipping Point” is the biography of an idea when a social phenomenon crosses a threshold and spreads like wildfire (Gladwell, 2002). The “achievement gap” is a social phenomenon that envelops the United States. Therefore, I question, what is the tipping point that created minority underachievement while under the watchful eyes of adults? Perhaps, slavery, from a historical perspective, considering the fervent struggle African Americans had to endure in order to gain access to literacy, planted the seeds of the problem.

What brought the minority underachievement phenomenon to epidemic proportions while politicians and educators grappled with solutions to the problem? I propose that mindlessness, disregard for human life, racism, and power hoarding by the hegemonic population, just to name a few possibilities, contributed to the minority underachievement phenomenon. But currently, disturbing statistics and spillage of a noticeable number of low achieving minorities into the American workforce are tipping points which have brought the problem to a perilous threshold and as a result has spread into all facets of society. This study is an auto/biography of a teacher whose story contains aspects of the biography of a certain phenomenon called minority underachievement, which has over time evolved as a social phenomenon that is spreading like wildfire. As evidence to the growth of this problem Villegas and Lucas report that the percentage of minority students who cannot master basic literacy skills has grown to epidemic proportions over the past two decades (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Epidemic proportions have social as well as

psychological consequences and the quality of life for all should be a constant consideration in order for all to hear the screams of the needy at any given moment.

Below is a painting by David Alfaro Siqueiros called Echo of a Scream. It represents pain.

### **Illustration #1**



***CAN YOU HEAR THE SCREAM?***

*by Pam Joyce*

“Hopelessness is a form of silence” (Greene, 1995, p.24)

Look then in the vacuous eyes of the silent students

See and hear the silence within

Hidden in basement classrooms

Classes that lack ethnic diversity

See students who have been in school since kindergarten

Still they cannot read or write

Unable to communicate their needs

See students pushed to the rear

They do not participate in school functions

After many years they have been silenced

“Obscure are the facts of exclusion and neglect” (Green, 1995, p.36)

These students are invisible

“They themselves have come to doubt their existence” (Greene, 1995, p.38)

They are the victims

Now feel their pain and enter into the

ECHO of a SCREAM

It reverberates!

In *Echo of a Scream* by David Alfaro Siqueiros (see above) a war torn image is depicted in a field of debris and a baby is positioned in the midst of this destruction. The baby’s pain appears to be so grueling that the scream the baby emits comes out and duplicates itself with an additional baby’s head, for effect. The scream and subsequent pain seems to come from the essence of the child appearing as if a deep cavernous inner sanctum of despair resides within. Greene (1995) suggests, “we are called upon to use our

imagination to enter into the world, to discover, how it looks and feels from the vantage point of the person whose world it is” (p. 4) Can we use imagination to be moved to a deeper understanding of how it feels to be identified by a deficit label and marginalized for an entire lifetime? Can we view *Echo of a Scream* as a representation of the internal combustion and internalized oppression of underachieving minority students? If we can awaken our schema, Karol Rose (Kincheloe and Rose, 2004) suggests “aesthetic experiences (can) resist the anesthesia caused by the epidural of mindless submission”(p. 43). In effect, art can open up possibilities for the mind to behold when it is used as a pathway to mindfulness and criticality.

Essentially, the problem of underachievement focuses on minority students who were not and had not been reaching their fullest potential. This dissertation explores how self, and school, including the inner workings of its structure, as well as the larger society had deficit and/or affirming influences on minority achievement in the context of school. In addition, it probed into the underlying pervasive effects of power and racism associated with minority underachievement and helped to flush out the breadth and magnitude of the problem in all its complexities. In sum, my intention as teacher/researcher was to use all information gathered in the study to create openings for student and teacher possibilities to become critically aware and ultimately engage in apparent as well as tacit self-advocacy and self-empowerment opportunities. The challenge in this case was to find the pathways to openings for critical expression.

This research proposed that a feasible pathway to finding openings for alternatives to minority underachievement could be found in a teacher's sphere of influence. As suggested by Tatum (1997), when feeling overwhelmed about the pervasiveness of racism in the culture and our institutions, one antidote is to focus on your own sphere of influence. She states, "I can't fix everything, but some things are within my control" (p. 204). In the schooling context "while many people experience themselves as powerless, everyone has some sphere of influence in which they can work for change, even if it's just in their own personal network of family and friends" (p. 204). With this idea in mind, I made a choice to initiate change while in the teacher's sphere of influence that would affect underachieving minority students. This choice involved interconnections within the teacher's personal network, which included students, parents, and colleagues, as well as community members. In my teacher sphere human interconnections required a heightened level of critical consciousness in order to see the "what is". As pinpointed in the poem, *Can You Hear The Scream?* A primary concern of this research is to address minority underachievement first through understanding and posing critical questions of the "what is". And second by acknowledging and hearing the silence enveloped in the teacher's as well as the minority student's web of reality. Then, with that insight seize the power to move along to envision "what can be" and gradually proceed to human agency.

Since the idea of labeling is significant in the study an explanation of the labels used in the text is necessary. Therefore, an understanding and clarification of the labels, "achievement gap" and the basic skills student, which is noted below was one of the preliminary steps required in order to establish cohesiveness in the journal text.

### **Achievement Gap**

Achievement Gap refers to an academic/intellectual achievement gap between black students and white students most typically determined by standardized test scores. These test scores assign a number to the extent to which educators can then establish the number of minority students who are lower achieving than their white counterparts (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003). Hence, the birth of the “achievement gap” label and a deficit mindset not to mention the continuance of racist ideologies concerning the intellectual superiority of whites over blacks is basically perpetuated. The constant visual that feeds this racist ideology, in SSDD, is the image that “gap” students are usually minority, black or Hispanic, and/or foreign-born students of color.

### **The Basic Skills Student**

Basic skill students at SSDD are those students who have scored below grade level on standardized tests and often have difficulty conforming to the traditional “in the box” environment. These students are predominantly minority students, (African American, Haitian, Hispanic, and of Caribbean decent), that come from various parts of America and the rest of the world. They speak English, Patois, Creole, Spanish, and various other languages and/or dialects of the English language and they are usually in the low to middle income bracket. Occasionally one or two white students are placed in basic skill classes but with parent and administrative approval they drop the class either in the first or second semester of the school year, which is within a five-month time frame.

Basic skill students in this study, refer to minority students of color, who have limited and predetermined choices in a traditional “in the box” environment that has minimal affirmative discourse to offer them. They are forced to cloak their untapped talents and ultimately become frustrated and begin to suffocate intellectually as well as socially as a consequence of their plight. In SSDD, basic skill students are to be seen and not heard and most of the time, they are not heard because a part of their suffocation is the muffling of their voices, which systematically renders them invisible and not seen as well.

The “achievement gap” and basic skills labels gradually ignited three overarching perspectives, self, school, and society, within my sphere of influence. In response to this threefold outlook concerns were raised in the auto/biographical research design, which I made an effort to understand ....

- How my teaching practices influenced and impacted students in affirming as well as deficit ways.
- How my interactions as a teacher in a school setting could affect change that had the possibility of altering student academic achievement.
- How participation in professional development activities could help me to be a better teacher.

The nature of these concerns suggested viewing the problem from three perspectives, self, school, and society. These perspectives emerged from the patterns/themes in the journal text, the data source, and within that context the text established self, school, and society as viable aspects of SSDD. Collectively, self, school, and society attempted to provide a broad spectrum for the purpose of acknowledging the intricate dynamics involved in the schooling context of my lived world experiences and also indicated how both individually and jointly they related and affected underachieving minority students.

The notion of self, school, and society provided a focus for this study and the teacher journal text, which generated these perspectives, represented a tool for learning about myself as well as underachieving minority students. I addressed this study from a teacher/researcher insider's viewpoint, which was from a reflective as well as emic perspective. Approaching research from this personal dual vantage point was a process that involved observation, data recording, interpretation, and making sense of research data as it pertained to me as a teacher and all who fell within my sphere of influence, which included individuals in school and society. A dual vantage point provided a magnified lens that assisted me as a teacher in seeing the world of the underachieving minority student from different perspectives. It also allowed me to move forward from my personal restrictive and exclusive boundaries to examine the journal text from broader and more inclusive lenses thereby gradually merging of all of my inner and outer voices collectively. In this sense, diverse aspects of students were exposed as they originated from the teacher's lived experience, which as it unraveled included students, parents, administrators, and other staff members, as well as varying elements of the larger society.

Following are explanations of self, school, and society perspectives and the themes that evolved from each perspective, as they were relevant to this dissertation.

### **Perspectives:**

#### **Self**

Self in this study involves inner influences that emerge from lived world experiences. These influences can appear from the combination of internalizing world myths, incubating negative stereotypical categorizations, and internalizing oppression, all of

which can result in an ontological imbalance. Under these negative conditions “self” contains affirming as well as deficit experiences and thus it can be reductionistic to deny the existence of either one of these experiences, “good” or “bad”, which could result in a distorted view of the “what is”. Themes #1, Teacher self-empowerment/self-awareness (affirming), #5 - Teacher/student/parent advocacy (affirming), and #3 - Internalized oppression (deficit) are all “self” themes that appear in this study.

The “self” perspective deals with the teacher as researcher, observer and participant as well as the SSDD student. In this sense, self is a space for storing school and societal messages and an inner space for those mixed messages to fester and be housed.

### **School**

School is a space for initiating change where self and school merge. Students, parents, and other education professionals in SSDD all interact within the school community. In this school environment inside deficit as well as affirming influences define existing school structures. But at SSDD deficit influences tend to overpower the environment and eventually led to the creation and perpetuation of inequalities in education and an undemocratic setting. Theme’s #6, power factors (deficit influence), #7- deskilling of teachers/acceptance of the “norm”(deficit influence), #8 - Lift and Platform, (affirming influence), #9 - lack of administrative support (deficit influence) are all school themes that appear in this study.

### **Society/School**

Society addresses the overall effects of self and school, which eventually spill over into society and in a circular turn of events society slowly and methodically over a period of time also spills over into self and school. Theme's #2, academic/racial/social inequalities (deficit influence), #4 - inability to navigate the system/inability to connect inside and outside forces (deficit influences), and #10 - student Labeling (deficit influence) are all societal themes that appear in this study.

Societal influences such as education policies, film, literature, popular culture, outside the school walls lived experiences, the inequality of job distribution between minorities and non-minorities, and institutional racism where governmental positions are dominated by non-minorities are just a few examples where deficit societal influences appear. This study deals with these particular aspects of society, which occur beyond the school walls, mushroom into the larger society, but somehow burrow a path back into the school system.

In sum, "self" must *find a voice*, teachers must *be persistent* within school walls and all those who inhabit the earth must *make the connections* for themselves and for young people. I attempted to approach change through actions thereby initiating multiple interventions at SSDD both within myself and within the school. As a result, interventions enacted in the study produced catalytic changes in three areas, self, school and hopefully through a trickle down effect also in society. Essentially, I found the power factors within self, school, and society in order to promote and inspire transformational change and during that process; I became more critically conscious on ontological,

political, and social levels through my lived world experiences (Slater, et al., 2002). In addition, ten themes were introduced which also helped to generate a heightened level of critical consciousness about the lived world experiences at SSDD.

During the study critical awareness of the different self, school, and societal perspectives helped to expand my personal sphere of influence and from these varied perspectives ten themes evolved. The themes evolved “in process” and stood for visible contributory dynamics that influenced the phenomenon of minority underachievement at SSDD as well as the role that teacher power and voice played within the complexity of the dynamics of each theme.

In order to identify themes, first, I read, then, reread the journal text and in the data analysis phase, I reflectively continued that process of reading and rereading and ultimately documented patterns/themes. I began to identify the structures in place, go through and magnify the layers of “what is”, evaluate my new and old schema, and observe the contexts in which these themes were evolving (Roth, 2005a). During the analysis of the journal text, a coding system was established and from that system ten themes emerged. The theme coding system surfaced from the multiple text readings and also uncovered the existence of SSDD deficit and/or affirming influences in relation to minority achievement.

The exercise of reading and rereading the data in order for ideas, themes, patterns and structures to naturally emerge helped me to establish revealing patterns in the SSDD

school community (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The themes that were revealed represented either a deficit orientation model for minority achievement thereby supporting minority academic failure or an affirming orientation mode for minority achievement thereby supporting minority academic success. As a result, based on the data seven out of the ten themes had negative influences on minority achievement and three out of the ten themes had positive influences on minority achievement. The direction of SSDD tended to move in a more deficit orientation toward minority achievement rather than affirming. The idea that each theme fell under one of the three areas, self, school, or society, which further highlighted the connections among the three perspectives was significant, demonstrating the broad parameters of the problem. Essentially, with themes, I became aware of the cyclical connections and how “self” lived world experiences merged into school experiences and then inevitably culminate in societal experiences.

In this study, deficit influences are negative forces that affect minority achievement and to some degree serve to minimize student growth. These themes incorporate a deficit discourse. Offering an opposite view, affirming influences are positive forces that affect minority underachievement and to some degree serve to maximize student growth. These influences incorporate an affirming discourse. Information gleaned from this study suggests that from a critical mindset systemic deficit influences continue to overshadow the affirming influences in the existing SSDD environment from the varying perspectives.

Coding of themes helped to make the massive amount of information more manageable.

The following list is the ten themes derived from the journal text based on the patterns of lived world experiences at SSDD.

### **Theme definitions**

#### **Theme #1 - Teacher self-empowerment/self-awareness - SELF**

(Affirming influence)

Teachers who are empowered and aware opt to find openings for teacher renewal, which in turn enable them to initiate change in the schooling context and as a result empower themselves as well as their students (Kincheloe, 2003; Freire, 2004).

#### **Theme #2 - Academic/racial/social inequalities - SCHOOL/SOCIETY**

(Deficit influence)

Race related inequalities that surface in the school specifically in academics often carry over to the larger society and visa versa (Pinar et al., 2002).

#### **Theme #3 - Internalized Oppression - SELF**

(Deficit influences)

Internalized oppression is when individuals embrace and accept, whether consciously or unconsciously, negative rhetoric and negative signals transmitted by individuals in their web of reality (Tatum, 1997).

**Theme #4 - Inability to navigate the system/Inability to connect inside and outside forces - SCHOOL/SOCIETY**

(Deficit influences)

Students and parents who lack the “culture capital” needed in order to have their needs met in the educational system find it difficult to make connections. Often, they do not grasp how what happens inside the school connects to what happens outside of the school (Delpit, 1995).

**Theme #5 - Teacher student/parent advocate - SELF**

(Affirming influence)

Teacher advocates are critically conscious about serving the needs of all students and are willing to act in their best interest (Kincheloe, 2003).

**Theme #6 - Power Factors - SCHOOL**

(Deficit influence)

Power holders are those who have the power to produce the circumstances that manifest in the placement of minority students in basic skills classes and are also those who have the power to transmit this deficit ideology to the school population (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

Power factors have the ability to enact effective change or temporarily stop the change process. “Power operates to dominate and shape consciousness” (Kincheloe/McLaren, 1994, p. 283).

Power holders are people from any ethnic background who have the power to support or end school initiatives that have the potential to negatively affect the lives of one or more individuals. They help to shape young minds and/or control the fate of individuals they have power over. In SSDD, the power holders can be teachers, supervisors, administrators, superintendents, and even other school personnel depending on the circumstances and the context of the situation (Fullan, 1999; Freire, 2004).

### **Theme #7- Deskilling of teachers/Acceptance of the “norm” - SCHOOL**

(Deficit influence)

Deskilled teachers lack criticality, demonstrate allegiance to the “norm”, and adhere blindly to the “what is” (Kincheloe, 2003).

### **Theme #8 - Lift and Platform - SCHOOL**

(Affirming influence)

Lift and platform, L&P, embraces Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development Theory. It involves, first promoting and lifting student self-esteem then introducing a platform for student self-empowerment and self-advocacy through whatever means necessary. It builds on the inner psyche of the student, searches for replenishment from the teacher, parents, and society then layers academic supports for the student. With this collaborative support system, L&P serves to benefit students, teachers, parents, and community members as well as members of the larger society. This complex multilayered theme encourages student renewal of spirit as well as mind. It begins where

the student is and transcends that space, all the while through teacher modeling, issuing subtle warnings not to self-sabotage and essentially encouraging students to use voice.

L&P ideas and lessons introduced in this study represent ways to close the “achievement gap”, which involve personal experiences “within the school walls” as well as “outside the school walls”. It is an advanced scaffolding scheme, which is a vital component in creating alternative outcomes for underachieving minority students.

### **Theme #9 - Lack of administrative support - SCHOOL**

(Deficit influence)

Absence of material or verbal supports from administrative power holders in this study is an example of the SSDD administrative stance on the effort teachers, students, and parents exert in order to abolish the minority underachievement label. When the efforts of faculty/staff favor addressing the minority underachievement phenomenon and administrations as well as other power holders in the school system acknowledge benefits to students but do not support the efforts of the faculty/staff in these ventures then a deficit mindset and ideology is implanted within the system (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

### **Theme #10 - Student Labeling - SCHOOL/SOCIETY**

(Deficit influence)

Labels that render students powerless in school as well as society and help to promote self-limiting thoughts and self-sabotaging behavior over a lifetime serve to validate the purpose of stigmatizing “others” (Mehan, 1993).

As indicated in the list of themes each theme represents a deficit or affirming influence in the context of SSDD and is categorized by an appropriate perspective, either self, school, or society. The themes represent aspects of the life of one teacher, as well as the merging aspects of the lives of other teachers, students, and power holders at the school.

### **Auto/biographical Information**

The epistemological framework for this study evolved from my personal teacher perspectives and grew to envelop a multiplicity of perspectives in different domains. Multiple perspectives, mixed influences, and varying domains combined to provide a synopsis of my life to enlighten the reader about the “self” that was motivated to choose this dissertation topic. In light of this, more should be said about my learning and growing up for the purpose of background and establishing life connections.

I was naïve like my parents who did not know how to navigate the system because they were new to this country. My mother was born in Jamaica and my father was born in Costa Rica, thus, both were not privy to the intricacies of the system. Together they had a specific parental vision peppered with their island culture and with that they had definite goals that became deeply implanted in me. I was a seed that they planted and encouraged to grow in a specific manner. Through the words and actions of my parents, I was sent on a hand picked journey shadowed by the Caribbean culture and even though the course was at times jagged and painful, it was worth it to be able to arrive at this point in time with a personal vision of doing research relating to underachieving minority students. I

embraced the known from my parents as well as the unknown from daily lived experiences and become critical in my actions in order for a personal vision to materialize. My life in the silhouette of my parent's hopes and dreams evolved overtime to where I am today. I followed a life path, which led me through a series of relationships and social networks that brought me to the writing of this dissertation with mindfulness of direction and purpose. As a result of life's journey, I found my voice and summarily now aspire to create possibilities that will open up greater possibilities for others.

Possibilities that came to fruition of interacting in an ever-evolving personal sphere of influence in the context of school fostered collective understandings of the minority underachievement problem. As a result, inherent in this comprehensive sphere, was a critical awareness of the interconnectedness of individuals in my sphere of influence, which in turn helped me in the role of teacher to understand how individuals in SSDD encountered and influenced each other in the sphere as well as added to perpetuating or eliminating the problem.

### **The Journaling Process**

In Phase 1a of the journaling process, I was in a naïve state in which my observations meant getting to know and understand the SSDD environment with all its complexities.

In Phase 1b of the journaling process, I was “in process” of finding a voice for teacher and student advocacy amidst battling persistent roadblocks that constantly presented themselves. It was during Phase 1a and Phase 1b that I came to critical consciousness and thus at various intervals experienced varying levels of power, which enabled me to be a

change agent. I was involved in action/reflection/action throughout the entire process, which unfolded diverse conclusions and implications about power, voice, racism, and emancipatory acts. In essence, in a schooling context, as a critical complex educator, I was able through trial and error to “add the notion of praxis, the complex combination of theory and practice resulting in informed action” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 110). In Phase 2, critical theory provided the base for the research and the interpretive, hermeneutic dimension helped me “to view practice through the lenses of the theoretical framework and the theoretical framework through the lenses of practice” (p.111). This theory/practice relationship was fluid, not stagnant and “the interaction was catalytic, not fixed” (p.112).

In a five-year journaling experience, I observed, minority students placed in lower tracked classes and teachers systematically ostracized from power positions because of attempting to unearth “the underlying structures that make such experiences possible” (Roth, 2005a, p. 311). With these observations, I gradually came to understanding what it meant to be classified as a disempowered minority student and deskilled teacher, without a voice, in today’s educational system in a school called, the Storm Steele Divide Division High School, SSDD.

Along with disempowerment of teachers and students came the realization of an absence of power, therefore the possibility of teacher self-empowerment became a crucial factor in this research in order to catalyze student self-empowerment. In response to the demoralizing treatment of teachers and students at SSDD, I sought multiple ways to

address the situation. Creating new curriculum and moving away from prepackaged curricular materials, getting involved in the community, going beyond school walls in teaching practices, discovering voice, and eventually coming to terms with the urgent need to explore the “what can be”, were just a few things accomplished in the 1998-1999 to 2002-2003 journaling years. During these years, issues of control and power continued to emerge and undermine teacher/student motivation.

Under these informative yet turbulent conditions, I embarked on a self-imposed challenge to make a concentrated effort to recognize deskilling tactics and address them as they occurred, not as a subordinate but as a teacher with the power of professional expertise, all the while attempting to empower others along the way. Under extreme negative forces such as these, we can take a stand, be combative, and experience “personal as well as collective transformation” (Roth, 2005a, p. 311). During the five-year journaling period there was no doubt that the systemic negative influences took their toll and had a draining effect on me as a teacher but a resilient nature was enacted throughout. “There is no doubt that positivistic deskilling will demoralize our best and brightest teachers”, but we do not have to give into extreme negative forces (Kincheloe, 2003b, p. 14). In response to the unwelcoming conditions, I as teacher/researcher implanted myself in the lived world experiences of the SSDD world and became engaged in a battle to ward off deficit influences experienced by minority underachievers.

## **Conclusion**

An accurate accounting in a nutshell of the “norm” structure of teacher disempowerment rather than empowerment at SSDD is listed below, in a Six-Step Program outlined by Howard B. Altman (2000-2001) on how to demoralize a faculty. It is presented in a cynical format that encompasses as well as highlights the degrading conditions observed during the journaling years. This six-step outline applies to all faculty members, regardless of academic rank, tenure status, gender, disciplinary background, race, religion, political affiliation, or sexual orientation. Altman suggests as a spoof that failure to follow the steps listed below could result in a contented faculty or in realistic terms, I would argue a mindless faculty.

- Close down the lines of communication – at SSDD input and feedback were not welcome and suggestions were acknowledged and then put on the backburner if they did not uphold the ideals of the existing school structure.
- Never thank anyone for anything – at SSDD teacher accomplishments were constantly discounted or not recognized. Teacher accomplishments were only recognized if they benefited the power holders.
- Always pay outside hires more than their inside colleagues – at SSDD more respect was given to newly hired teachers or visitors with more credentials than teachers who had been in the system for years.
- Stay invisible – at SSDD teachers who remained invisible, maintained a low profile, and muffled their voices, were allowed to simply exist under those conditions.

- Keep the workings of the faculty reward system secret – at SSDD faculty rewards usually went to faculty that were involved with the high achieving students and on rare occasions when faculty working with the low achieving student received rewards it was usually an SSDD major public relations move.
- Change everything frequently – at SSDD changing teacher physical space and implementing short-term school reform programs, without faculty input were considered the “norm” (Altman, 2000-2001).

This dissertation demonstrates the teacher in a warrior role, in postformalist attire as an agent of change. Contrary to Taylorism, which involved the “reduction of the role of the laborer”, the teacher/warrior, here the teacher is fully engaged in lived experiences within a mindful and critical state and exercising an enhanced role as teacher (Kincheloe, 2003b, p. 119). As educators we have a “moral obligation to be agents of change” and to exercise an enhanced and engaged role as teacher (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 64). If we adhere to this moral obligation then as observed in this study we need to be ready to exercise rigor and go beyond what is traditionally expected of educators. Villegas & Lucas (2002) suggest a list for teacher preparation, which can be both applicable to new and veteran teachers. She proposes in order for teachers to be change agents they should:

- Emphasize the moral dimension of education
- Guide prospective teachers in developing their own personal vision of education and teaching
- Promote the development of empathy for students of diverse backgrounds

- Nurture passion and idealism as well as a realistic understanding of obstacles to change provide evidence that schools can become more equitable, teach about change process promote activism outside as well as inside the classroom
- Emphasize the importance of and develop skills for collective action and collaboration (p.59)

This list is by no means, in a complex changing society, the extent of what is needed for teachers to promote democratic practices in the educational system but even though not an exhaustive list it provides a starting point and guide for changes agents. Personal vision, passion, moral dimensions, empathy, and eventual collective action and collaboration were strategic factors in the teacher empowerment process in this study which helped to shed light on alternatives to the minority underachievement problem. The one constant looming presence during the personal journey of unearthing the teacher change agent was that of critical consciousness.

One revelation of the study is that from a critical consciousness mindset one teacher can claim the power needed to implement transformative change and gradually transfer that insular power to others. Power to produce the circumstances that promote change has always been available to teachers but in the face of multiple deskilling tactics teacher power has often taken a back seat and succumbed to more controlling negative forces. Teacher creation and implementation of innovative curriculum, going beyond the accepted “what is”, and developing spaces for successful student/parent support groups, allows for viable pathways to transformative change as demonstrated in this dissertation.

As a result of these efforts, effective teacher empowerment is transferred to students and others in my teacher sphere of influence. Hence, with these experiences “they [teachers/students] gain consciousness of the pedagogical domain – a form of critical consciousness that moves them to a recognition of the forces that shape their identity, the various stages of reflective self-awareness and the strategies that personal empowerment demand” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997 p. 29). The lasting impact of critical consciousness is the possibility of both teachers and students gaining the ability to organize life’s fragments and “come to voice” together or at their own pace in order to deconstruct and reconstruct the “what is” into the “what can be” and formulate alternative perspectives (Roth, 2005a; Freire, 2004).

The possibilities for feasible alternative perspectives emerge reflectively while searching the journal text for themes and then again while seeking to identify the structures found working with and within them (Roth, 2005a). In this study, “I analyzed the phenomena at different levels and developed interpretations in part through the coordination of these multiple levels” (p. 211). The purpose of the study is to add to the research on minority underachievement and inform educators of what they can do to create feasible alternatives to this problem.

A summary of the dissertation chapters follows in order to present an overview as well as establish the direction of the study.

## **Overview of the Chapters**

### ***Chapter two: Intercultural Insights: A Review of the Literature***

Chapter two reviews the literature that pertains to the minority underachievement phenomenon. The information in this chapter helps to shed light on the existing problem through the fractured lenses of multiple researchers. The literature addresses fragmented ideas, aspects of dualism and positivism as well as power dynamics that frame deficit and affirming influences in the teacher's sphere of influence that interact with minority student's web of reality in a schooling context. In addition to literature specifically related to education, the literature reviewed in this chapter goes outside the educational realm and examines social, psychological, and philosophical, as well as cultural aspects of disenfranchised minority students. All the while considering how the dynamics of self, school, and society play a part in determining the fate of the underachieving minority student enrolled in the SSDD high school.

### ***Chapter three: Critical Theoretical Framework from a Teacher Perspective*** - Chapter

three provides the theoretical framework for the study. Criticality in the present state of urban education demands an understanding of the level of complexity needed in relation to underachieving minority students trapped in the "achievement gap" and their placement in the world. This dissertation is based on a critical theoretical framework, which encompasses aspects of critical theory, pedagogy, ontology, and cognition, that is needed to envision alternatives in the future for underachieving minority students. It situates the students and the teacher in this study to either accept the "norm" as the "way things are" (Delpit, 1995), or through critical consciousness change the existing "norm". With a critical theory framework, research data is introduced through the lens of critical

consciousness, which is the primary overarching aspect of the study that circulates throughout the teacher's sphere of influence. The notion of criticality is present and incorporated in this study for the purpose of creating alternatives to the "what is" then ultimately producing action from a critical perspective.

#### ***Chapter four: Layering my Approach to Research: A Bricolage***

Chapter four employs a bricolage qualitative methodological framework. The bricolage research approach is germane to this study because the idea of bricolage replicates the dynamics uncovered when dealing with minority underachievement (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2004, p. 682). The minority underachievement phenomenon is complex and from a teacher's sphere of influence it is approached by the acknowledgement of a layering of interconnected relationships. In a bricolage, learning from difference cultivates divergent forms of research and gives multiple perspectives (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2004). Bricoleurs use multiple methods to uncover new insights, expand and modify old principles, and reexamine accepted interpretations in unanticipated contexts (p.687).

#### **Auto/Biographical Dissertation Chapters:**

In the following three chapters I attempt to highlight my life as a teacher researcher, observer, and participant at SSDD. My story begins from ignorance and ends humbly enlightened but still "in process" of learning. In my web of reality, I approach my life in a schooling context within a personal sphere of influence that expands yearly during the journaling process. My story portrays a slice of my life from the beginning, to the middle,

to the end and is an evolving epic of struggles and victories for a five-year period of time in history.

### ***Chapter five: Immersed in Naivety: The Story Begins***

Chapter five situates me in my story and begins to explore my journey to critical consciousness. This chapter addresses my accomplishments and disappointments encountered during Phase 1a, the first three years of journaling. Excerpts from the journal text are used in order to expound on specific themes. Kincheloe and Greene are instrumental references in Phase 1a because they epitomize the idea of creating personal vision for the purpose of change. In addition, other authors and researchers are cited in an effort to substantiate my transgressive as well as aggressive approach to finding on-going possibilities for the opening up of teacher and student voices. Cumulatively, the understandings, new information, and insights uncovered in Phase 1a help to outline the path and primary concerns for Phase 1b, the last two years of journaling. The understanding of being “in process” in an on-going pursuit for transformational change begins to take root in this chapter and in my life as well and the initial steps of simply learning about what should be addressed and comprehending the “what is” becomes important in the process.

### ***Chapter six: Finding Voice for Teacher/Student Advocacy: Battling the Roadblocks***

Chapter six represents the middle of my story. This chapter represents Phase 1b and takes place over a period of two years. I actively engage in battling the roadblocks and find the voice that enables that to occur. Journal text excerpts are used to support deficit and affirming experiences and the seeds of collaborative work are nurtured in Phase 1b. A

critical constructivist approach to reformulate “what is” is employed in the last two years of journaling. The works of Maturana and Varela, 1987; and Kincheloe, 2003 provide the needed insight into “self” and the idea of promoting change through self-initiatives.

### ***Chapter seven: “In Process” - The Story Recirculates***

Chapter seven cements the “in process” aspect of change and reinforces the on-going elements of transformative change. There is no end in sight but the fluid movement of lived world experiences and acknowledgement of changing times within the “in process” cycle of life that constantly recirculates. In essence, those living in the sphere of influence determine what happens in the cycle, whether it results in deficit or affirming influences is up to the individual. Watt’s (2003) idea of “cascading failures” is introduced as well as the significance of the overwhelming negative information in SSDD permeating the schooling community and its ripple effects on the larger society. In addition, reiterated is the search for reconstructed social environments for minority underachievers as a viable avenue for change and a method for reconstruction of the “what is”.

### ***Chapter eight: Implications meet Teacher Persistence***

Chapter eight is a summary response to the demoralizing treatment of teachers and students in light of the deskilling practices of SSDD. I seek multiple ways to address the problem of minority underachievement. Creating new curriculum and moving away from prepackaged curricular materials, getting involved in the community, going beyond school walls in teaching practices, discovering voice, and eventually coming to terms with the need to explore the “what can be”, are just a few tasks accomplished in the

journaling years. Issues of control and power continued to emerge and undermine teacher/student motivation during the “in process” stage. As a result, recognizing deskilling tactics and address these tactics when they occurred not as a subordinate but as a qualified teacher was achieved by taking a stand and being combative when necessary. This chapter is a summary of my personal stand to combat minority underachievement and its massive consequences by claiming power and through whatever means necessary.

In summary, the thrust of this study was to avoid fragmentation of the information and strive to synthesize those aspects of the data that could provide meaningful interventions for the minority underachievement phenomenon. This study attempts to find a direction that will guide a critical affirming mindset to call forth equal educational opportunities and outcomes. Seven deficit themes and three affirming themes are introduced in the research to help synthesize the information and shed light on the “what is” which in turn provokes the consideration for needed changes. The research implies that as educators we should seek to uphold the traditional goals and values of the educational system, which is to afford the opportunity for all children to be educated in an equal manner regardless of race, gender, class, or religion.

## **Chapter 2 - Intercultural Insights: A Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

Minority underachievement is a crisis situation, which embraces racism, invites power struggles, and incorporates political issues as a part of its framework. Periodically, through incremental occurrences, minority students, labeled as underachievers, have managed to dispel negative projections about achievement by exposing untapped intellectual assets and possibilities. Sadly, these successful students have not been highlighted and have been forced to remain in the shadows due to various academic, social, political, and historical negative legacies. The situation is defined, for the purpose of this paper, as the academic underachievement of minority students, the miseducation of minority students, the “achievement gap” and/or the discrepancy between black and white academic performances. And in spite of these distinctive labels the reality that underachieving minority students can be represented outside of a deficit labeled framework in more affirming situations has become a plausible alternative based on the research in this study.

The five-year journal entries in this study provide data that attempt to identify overt and covert deficits as well as affirming influences experienced by minority students.

Ultimately the data is used as a means of identifying sources for the deficit conditions of minority underachievement and establishing more affirming alternative frameworks. The purpose of identifying deficits is not to further stigmatize the students or underline the already accepted norm. The intention is to understand the deficits and formulate the core knowledge needed to establish transformative alternatives to circumvent what has

currently become so ingrained in the educational system and in society. In sum, I am essentially attempting to highlight an alternative perspective to minority underachievement in this study, which can provide possibilities for purposeful and informed action to prevent the perpetuation and further reinforcement as well as the concretization of the deficit model mindset in the populous.

A review of the literature has provided an introduction to key factors emphasizing the exposure of an “inside and outside the school walls”, perspective, of the deficit realities surrounding minority underachievement. The school’s usual limited perspective expands in the research beyond the fractured literature reviewed to encompass aspects of societal influences as well as various aspects of the inner psyche of the minority student. The literature covers educational, psychological, historical, political, and philosophical domains and exposes the power dimensions involved in the education of minority students of African descent, namely, African American and Afro- Caribbean students as well as students living in America and born in Africa.

### **Fragmented Research**

The literature reviewed in this study represents a broad spectrum of information connected to minority underachievement or as it is commonly referred to, the “achievement gap” phenomenon. Cumulatively, the literature available, on this racially empowered topic, is exhaustive and reflects the fragmented nature of the education system (Kincheloe, 2001a). For example, what is clearly discernable in the education is fragmentation in classroom instruction, the separation of disciplines, bell schedules

separating classes, ad infinitum, all of which contribute to the threads of disconnect within the system and as a result are reflected in the research literature. What is not discernible from the literature, in its fragmented representation of the problem, is the incomprehensible portrayal of why the “gap” problem still persists in the twenty-first century.

One looming result of a fragmented structure is a distorted view of the problem whereby a trickle down effect occurs and thus effective alternatives become distorted. I argue that if there can be a rethinking and restructuring of the pieces a comprehensive view of minority underachievement can emerge. Taking all of the information into consideration, the literature covered is valuable in its present state but would be more effective if siphoned through and then pertinent points strategically merged for the purpose of viewing the complex nature of minority underachievement from multiple angles and ultimately leading to the creation of viable alternatives to eradicate the problem. The idea of merging and reevaluating the literature reviewed in this study has triggered two primary questions; what are the inherent dynamics in a school context that influence the continuity of minority underachievement from a teacher’s sphere of influence? And can the interactions within a teacher's sphere of influence provide affirming alternatives to existing institutional practices that perpetuate minority underachievement?

The scope of these questions essentially cover three perspectives, self, school, and society. It involves the selfhood of the teacher, in a schooling context, and takes into consideration outside influences from the community as well as the larger society. Since

minority underachievement is widely dispersed the inclusion of the three perspectives attempts to cover the breadth of the literature about the “gap” phenomenon. Thus, “the phenomenon we are interested in may be distributed across the material setting, may exist in interactions between individuals, may be embodied in practices and so on” within self, school, and society (Roth, 2005a, p.201). In the role of teacher, participant and observer “I disturb the phenomenon” (Roth, 2005a, p.117). The actual study disrupts the status quo first through the idea of multiple lenses, second, through critical observation and then through rigorous questioning of the “what is” from three perspectives, merging self, school and society in the process.

The literature in this study highlights self, school, and societal dynamics in a teacher’s sphere of influence by focusing on student life within the school walls, teachers and other staff members, community members, aspects of power, and racism, as well as societal influences, as having a function in the underlying causes for the minority academic “achievement gap”. The pieces or fragments of literature reviewed in this study need to be analyzed, organized, and transformed from the “what is” into the “what can be” creating an alternative perspective (Roth, 2005a).

In order to arrive at an epistemological stance on knowing about why educational inequalities exist I explore literature from the three perspectives mentioned above. First, involving “self” perspectives, which focus on internalized feelings, second, “school” perspectives, which focus on curriculum and instruction and lastly “societal” perspectives, which focus on dynamics that occur on an everyday basis outside the school

walls and filter back inside the school walls. Synthesis of these perspectives coupled with the permeating race and power dynamics of the educational system together serve to create the bigger more inclusive picture of the minority underachievement phenomenon in this study.

Given that the purpose of this dissertation is to meld the literature from self, school, and societal perspectives in order to provide viable alternatives to the minority underachievement phenomenon, it is necessary to present an interconnected merging of the literature. Therefore, rather than break up possibilities for change, this study seeks to find hidden open spaces that have the potential to provide effective alternative outcomes for minority achievement. The literature reviewed when seen in a newly constructed manner, also provides viable openings for exploration in my quest for change.

### **Identifying Minority Underachievement**

Much literature has surfaced over the past four decades in an effort to quantify the problem of minority underachievement. Often, quantitative researchers find information about minority underachievement from national databases. The Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) was the first national study to describe differences in academic achievement among children at various stages of schooling. This report documented that substantial differences in educational achievement between blacks and whites not only existed at every grade level but also increased with student age. Significantly, forty years later current studies and statistics continue to garner the same findings.

According to The National Center for Educational Statistics, NCES, in an analysis from the Prospects Longitudinal Study from 1991 to 1993 entitled, *Black-White Differences in Educational Achievement*, it was reported that black–white gaps in reading achievement appeared at every grade studied, grades 1 through 12. Thus, on the one hand, the gap grew wider between grades 1 and 2 increasing by one-third and by one–fifth between grades 3 and 5 and on the other hand, the gap narrowed in grades 9 and 12. The reading gap was one third smaller in grades 9 than in grades 2 and two-thirds smaller in grades 12 than in grades 2. The gap grew in the lower grades and narrowed as the grades got higher by low percentage achievement gains and consequently, minority students basically lagged behind their white counterparts throughout their K to 12 schooling. In conclusion, both studies, the Coleman Report in the 60s, the Prospects Longitudinal Study in the early 90s by NCES, found and continue to find the achievement gap to be present at all grade levels in varying degrees.

National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP, data has also measured achievement gaps between periods of time for more than thirty-years. For example, in the average NAEP math scores, in the mid-1990's, between Black and White 17 year-olds the gap was about a third less than it had been in the early 1970s. Again, documentation of minimal narrowing of the achievement gap is related to these findings. Historically there has been evidence of bifurcated patterns in racial as well as ethnic achievement gap trends showing narrowing of the gap in the 1970s and 1980s and widening or stabilizing in the 1990s (Lee, 1998). NAEP measures show that the Black-White achievement gap became smaller across subject areas (reading and mathematics) and age groups (9, 13, and 17) 1971 – 1986/1988

(Lee, 1998, p.4). In contrast, during the period between 1986/1988 and 1999 the gap grew and the pattern reversed. The pattern of gain reversed across racial and ethnic groups so that the lower performing students gained the least: a 4 point gain for the lower quartile, an 8 point gain for the middle two quartiles, and an 8 point gain for the upper quartile. This long term NAEP trend indicated that the change in scores were in correlation with curricular and instructional shifts.

The Mid-Atlantic Equity Center <http://www.nwrel.org/cnorsel/booklets/achieve/>, part of the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc., provides information concerning minority academic achievement. Center researchers predict that by the year 2010, Blacks and Hispanics will comprise approximately 30 percent of our population but will comprise the majority of the unskilled labor force. According to these finding, it seems that it might be detrimental to society to continue the racially charged academic deficit trend.

The diligence exercised in both the education and social contexts to quantify the idea of an “achievement gap” and continuously give voice to the negative only exacerbates the problem and narrows the probability of a more affirming outcome. One would be remiss to loose sight of the historicity of minority underachievement and the role hegemonic groups have consistently played in gathering statistics to enforce the deficit point of view. This research study supports moving beyond the negatives and pursuing “untested feasibilities”, the possibility of doing something that has not been tried before, (Slater et al., 2002, p. 8) by constructing viable alternatives. In a related context, Kincheloe (2003b) argues from another angle by suggesting that “what is” social structures are

highlighted not only to identify victimization but for the purpose of self-empowerment as well as helping others empower themselves to move beyond limitations. Therefore, on the one hand spotlighting the school's social structure and its troubling quantifiable information on minority underachievement definitely embodies a crippling foundation that victimizes and disempowers minority students. On the other hand with criticality, there is a possibility that spotlighting the problem can serve to empower rather than debilitate.

It is my contention and that of Perry, Steele, and Hilliard III (2003), that these statistics often provide useful information for improving minority academic performance in incremental steps as well as “reinforces the national ideology about Black intellectual inferiority” (p.8). Therefore, if the education system can be seen as the holder of the information that identifies the failing minority population, then they cannot say they do not know what is going on nor after over three decades can they say that they do not know what to do about the problem of minority underachievement.

The statistics mentioned serve to highlight an equity issue at stake within the educational system. Lee (1996) argues that the spirit of equity is at the heart of all gap-closing measures since inequity is being acknowledged if equity is being discussed. “Equity does not mean treating everyone in the same way. It means doing whatever it takes to get everyone to the same place” (p.33). Though, obviously, setting standards for all students in order to get everyone to the same place has not been successful in light of the fact that the education system continues to have an “achievement gap”.

In the following literature review, themes derived from the journal text, are noted under subheadings in order to establish an alignment with the overarching self, school, and societal focus of the dissertation.

**“Self” Perspectives:**

- **Student Labeling – Theme #10**

The inner world of minority students moves through the school, the family, the community, and society while in constant fluid motion. Individuals become embedded with negative labeling procedures, which inevitably serve to limit minority students “access to knowledge” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Internalized oppressions, and negative labels as well as subservient student positioning in the classroom and unequal academic opportunities due to racial and/or social inequalities are visible contributing elements “within school walls”, to minority underachievement.

Human labeling is accepted by society with its negative racial connotations. “One cannot understand the identity of one without appreciating how it is implied by the other” (Pinar, et al., 2002 p. 330). In essence, we validate a distorted self-image through labeling and in this way the “labeled” internalize the identity that the “labeler” attempts to enforce. Thus, in the context of this study, the minority group is identified as underachieving and the non-minority group is recognized as achieving or overachieving resulting in a disempowering relationship. The dynamics of labeling and identifying groups based on cognitive abilities plays out in the school system as well as society with race as a dominant factor along with economics, language, and culture. It is as if the educational system is fixated with the idea of labeling. What collective unconscious tendencies

account for this blindness or myopia? (Gresson, 2004, p.44) And how can our world move beyond that, see things in a new perspective and move into action for positive change? With the inscriptions of present day societal restrictions and the historical legacy in place, minority academic success adhering to hegemonic standards will be difficult to achieve without critical consciousness, which is the overarching theoretical framework of this study.

There are common labels that have been fostered in schools, which have helped to ingrain both internalized and externalized negative undertones in minority students as well as in society. The use of these words help to frame the discussion about underachieving minority students in the context of school and usually identifies minority students in ways which breed negativity not only in students but also in all those they come in contact with. Labels such as “at risk”, “underserved”, “disempowered”, “disenfranchised”, “underachiever”, “illiterate”, “in literary crisis”, “lower tracked classes”, “basic skill” and “achievement gap” are all used for descriptive and placement purposes of underachieving minority students.

McDermott (1993) proposes that one can find bad if they look for it. His study reveals that once questions about children are framed in deficit terms, once our inquiry is narrowed down to the question of what is wrong with this or that child, support for a deficit theory can be found wherever one looks (p.281). Cognitive difficulties separate those who can from those who cannot and make the deficits obvious and with the separation student identity becomes socially inscribed (p.281). This has become the

predicament of labeling, whereby using labels essentially sentences students to a lifelong category of underachiever.

The labeled student becomes an object seen as a label, clumped together with other students sporting the same labels thus, continuously reproducing learned behavior suitable for those categorized under specific labels (Mehan, 1993). In essence, students lose their identity to the label and like prisoners they become represented by numbers or in this case by labels. In the end, these students are simply grouped by ability or tracked according to the results of IQ or standardized tests into lower level academic situations and their labels become a part of their identities. This study demonstrates how students, teachers, administrators, and parents assume their roles through the acceptance of labels within school walls and how everyone involved in the circular motion of the self, school, and societal worlds is tracked and positioned in specific spaces. The words used for labeling carry negative weight that produce negative psychological effects, which sooner or later, tend to drag students down to unnecessary levels of underachievement. Under these existing circumstances, students often do not reach their potential and therefore attend and exit school, with cognitive and social, as well as psychological deficits. If the cacophony of “deficit” talk can be eliminated and multilevel interventions can be explored, then implemented, these students can at least begin to acknowledge their hidden potentials and be scaffolded to higher levels of achievement.

- **Internalized Oppression – Theme #3**

Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) offers a psychological perspective to the affects of the “outcast” positioning of underachieving minority students and explores aspects of the inner self. Misinformation, stereotypes, and secondhand information are a few of the outcomes that help to formulate our personal ideologies when we are not rigorous and critical enough in our behavior. When we blindly accept a traditional positivistic world as the norm then assumptions are made and people suffer. Presently minority students enrolled in lower tracked classes are suffering and being ignored. They move unnoticed throughout the school and this pattern of behavior has become an accepted norm.

“There is always someone who hasn’t noticed the stereotypical images of people of color in the media, who isn’t aware of the racial tracking pattern at the local school, who hasn’t seen the reports of rising incidents of racially motivated hate crimes in America, in short, someone who hasn’t been paying attention to issues of race” (Tatum, 1997 p.3)

This type of mindlessness is allowed to germinate and as a result the acceptance of racial tracking has been an on going problem. There are other realities, which are constructed by student positioning in the web of reality. An epistemology of complexity teaches that the reality we construct depends on our location (or placement) in the web of reality (Kincheloe, 2001 p.258). Repercussions of the achievement gap have proven this statement to be true and studies cited in this research continue to address the problem of underachieving minority students. The intricate and complex web connections of minority students are gradually and painfully unearthed in this study through a teacher’s sphere of influence.

Tatum (1997) begins to shed some light on the causes of the horrific disservice to minority students. She makes reference to “internalized oppression” which refers to “when white and black people take on stereotypical categorizations that have been repeatedly promoted by society and develop the negative categorizations that form the basis for prejudice” (p.6). One example that leads to stereotypical categorizing is when minority students are continuously tracked and labeled in negative ways in academia and society. Thus, when this occurs, the hegemonic group as well as the less privileged group create negative collective societal understandings about individuals who fall into specific categories. This occurrence is just another insight into what serves to pave the way for internalized negative feelings in oppressed peoples, hence, the origin of the term “internalized oppression”.

When “internalized oppression” occurs in minority students they develop negative categorizations about themselves and consequently internalize and endear that negative aspect to their being in an ontological sense, ultimately having that aspect become a part of who they are (p.6). Self-identity becomes tainted under these circumstances and with that experience identity becomes a consideration that is tantamount for the well being of the individual. For example, by enrolling minority students in the low level classes a vital ostensible statement is projected to individuals involved and also to those outside of this victimized state. This basically promotes the belief that minority students are not or cannot meet higher academic standards and that they cannot compete with non-minority students on an intellectual level, which supports Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) theory of black/white intellectual deficiencies. Theories such as this and negative structures

embedded within the educational institution that reinforce the notion of intellectual deficiencies help to continue a universal deficit orientation.

These negative accusations and connotations affect students in equally negative fashion and carry the internalized psychological damage of oppression into the classroom and into society predictably perpetuated through institutionalized stereotypical racist acts. The negativity of this experience transcends to individuals outside the minority experience and leaves a stain on society as a whole. In short, ultimately, the destruction moves from the individual's internalized experience to the "labeled" school community, and then sadly into societal institutional racism. Tatum (1997) refers to this as the "cycle of oppressive acts" which becomes enmeshed and embedded in the lived world, incubates, and subsequently breeds continuous racist acts against people of color.

People are involved in the self-creation of their identity and this process requires self-reflection and a resulting self-consciousness (Tatum, 1997). Consider, what the end result is for a person who has to self-create in an environment that depicts he/she in a negative light. Is there a possibility that the creation of a self-identity will assume negative characteristics? "Choices made in adolescence ripple throughout the lifespan" (p.20). Consequently, when the adolescent is in the process of formulating self-identity they make choices based on available information. They operate in the present and project the future, which under these circumstances, the present represents low-level academic placements resulting in underachieving mindsets. Underachieving minority students are positioned at the bottom and their future becomes sealed at the bottom if interventions do

not occur in which case student total or partial “shut down” may occur. Unfortunately due to these extenuating circumstances more often than not low-level productivity becomes the underachieving student’s comfort zone. Within this comfort zone there is an accepted positionality, which involves where and how individuals are situated. Whether it pertains to a physical or mental space, ultimately, it becomes an important factor in the formation of self-identity and becomes a source of internal conflict that ferments in the minds of minority underachieving students as the agonizing negative mindset of being the underachiever.

- **Self-awareness /self-empowerment/self-advocacy – Theme #1 & Theme #5**

As a teacher working with minority students who have been subjected to “the bottom of the class”, through labels, internalized oppression, lack of representation in the school community, lower level class placement, and unequal treatment in the academic arena, it is necessary to understand the multiple dynamics of “self”. When the “what is” is acknowledged and the misunderstandings and ideological notions have been identified, essentially stripped down to its original core then individual can be viewed from a lens of possibilities, ultimately, that is when the “ what can be” can be explored. The constant internal personal stretch of spirit required to emancipate oneself from the bonds of Eurocentric and Western ideologies is ongoing. This intellectual insight when acquired helps to combat repression and hopefully result in a step toward an alternate direction (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2002). Under these strained circumstances, the possibility of new horizons can open up for repressed individuals from internal or “self” sources, eventually stretching and encompassing the many directions of an individual’s web of reality.

In the works of Kincheloe (2003a) and hooks (1994), the ontological perspectives are explored with a focus on the teacher as a source of self-empowerment as well as empowerment for students. Both, Kincheloe and hooks, link “being” with criticality and connect it to the pursuit of creating and assuring democratic practices. Kincheloe (2003a) states teachers must learn to situate themselves historically and socially in order to be better equipped to make conscious decisions. He further espouses that a critical ontological vision helps us in the effort to gain new understandings and insights as to who we can become. When teachers are better equipped they are in a position to help their students and then a connected cycle of learning is activated. Such a vision helps us move beyond our present state of being, our ontological selves, as we discern the forces that have made us that way (Kincheloe, 2003a).

I would further argue that the ontological vision is a continuum ranging from high to low and that these varying levels of intensity on the continuum predict the level in which individual vision can be experienced. Location on the continuum of ontological vision determines the depth of foresight one can attain. Often, minority students have understandings and insights that are derived from in-depth critical ontological vision. These insights evolve from past as well as present realities, which in some cases on the one hand can minimize individual progress but on the other hand with adequate interventions can be altered to a more positive outcome. When students are abstracted from a context, for example the hegemonic context, they in a sense, lose their belongingness to both the world and to other people around them (Kincheloe, 2003a).

The ontological imbalance, which occurs when students are alienated on a daily basis within the walls of the school as well as outside the walls in society, is a primary dynamic in the problem of the minority underachievement phenomenon. Change comes through multiple possibilities and “self” awareness can be a starting place fostered by critically conscious teachers.

Understanding “self” is necessary because one must know whom he or she is in order to prosper. We are all made up of the parts of others therefore, one must also know and understand how all the pieces fit together. This does not suggest a Cartesian perspective of separation of mind/ body but in contrast, it suggests that everything should be considered as connectors not fitting together like puzzle pieces but providing spaces to burrow through the weaknesses and strengths and ultimately, create the space to reinvent “self” under new and constantly changing circumstances. It is the ability to allow for a more fluid, critical, and changing academic environment that can establish recognition for minority literacy learners in an environment where learning can be beneficial to them in spite of the barriers. It creates a new space for minority low achieving students to step out of the box and have educators accommodate their needs rather than expect them to assimilate to traditional norms.

Minority students are not in the mainstream discourse community that contributes to shaping and constructing their position in school and in society, rather they are in the subjugated discourse community. Due to the reality of a subjugated existence, these students under the existing school system are systematically denied access to power

through unfair practices in the sharing of various knowledges (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). They are not privy to dialogues of possibilities and without the power of dialogue they engage in a silenced discourse. Greene (1995) mentions Walker Percy's *Moviegoer*, in which the narrator discovers that to be without awareness of "possibilities of the search" is to be "in despair" (p.92). Awareness of realities hidden in plain sight and possibilities lost in silent discourse represent the "what is" at the moment. To summarize, perhaps it depends on one's perspective; being unaware can create feelings of despair and being aware can create feelings of despair. Sometimes it is a question of positionality, whether physical or mental, the search for possibilities should never cease.

Search for an empowering "self" is a functional part of the minority web of reality and at times, is in conflict with the consciousness of the collective society. The idea of double-consciousness argued by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903, a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, is a constant struggle for minorities, as the quote below crystallizes this idea,

"One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (DuBois, 1965, pp. 214-215).

Duality of self is a part of the internal consciousness of minority students. My own frustration about double consciousness as a black female also leaves me torn and questioning, how black students caught in this web of reality will be able to circumvent existing and future roadblocks of life? And whether understanding internalized injustices will be enough to begin the impetus for change?

**“School” Perspectives:**

- **Deskilling of teachers/Acceptance of the “norm” - Theme #7**

**“School/Society” Perspectives:**

- **Academic/racial/social inequalities – Theme #2**
- **Inability to navigate the system – Theme #4**

Focus on three structures is outlined in this section, curriculum, instruction, and teacher’s influence on the “gap” and incorporate the themes mentioned above. The desire to help students in need is supposedly a priority in the American democratic school system, but viable suggestions need to be reviewed before schools decide to support specific avenues of support.

Kati Haycock (2001) made four suggestions in reference to minority achievement; standards are key, all students must have a challenging curriculum, students need extra help, and teachers matter a lot. Initial research findings lead to these four suggestions where researchers found two basic underlying problems, first, educators teach underachieving students less and second, educators give underachieving students less. The standards mentioned by Haycock (2001) are acceptable only if we focus on implementing higher and broader expectations on the standardized tests rather than promoting mastery of limited basic skills, which is what is presently promoted. A clearly established focus that deals with students as human beings, respectful of their culture, language, and individual identities and not as statistics on paper is a fight that must be pursued. “What we need to examine are not the printouts of SAT scores but the lives of children” (Ohanian, 1999, p.123). There can be some measure of honesty and caring when the notion of standards

comes up, it does not always have to be relegated and stamped for approval in its entirety by scientific means. The scientific mindset often cancels out human qualities that need to be addressed therefore as an alternative a balance should be pursued.

Historically, standards have maintained a scientific mindset (Ohanian, S. (1999). They minimalize the cognitive act and do not begin to adequately address the needs of underachieving minority students struggling with reading, when the approach to meeting these standards depends on a basic skills orientation (Tatum, 2000). Only one aspect of a person is addressed through basic skills and standardized testing, which is often too limiting. Taking the whole person into consideration, individuals are multidimensional beings, they are more than a statistic. Therefore, if basic skills are continuously emphasized and testing must occur then educators run the risk of silencing a percentage of the minority population in the future by compartmentalizing and pocketing their abilities.

In summary, if politicians who push for out-dated ineffective education policies and/or educators who support these policies, decide to develop a change in attitude there is a chance according to Tatum (2000), to produce a shift in students' attitudes and eventually help them to break down the barriers that prevent their participation in reading and writing activities (p.63). When this occurs, it will become possible for minority students to release themselves from imposed low academic ceilings and move forward in the hopes of finally leaving behind a damaged self. But in order for this to happen, educators cannot discount the outside influences minority students encounter that serve to dim their hopes for greater autonomy, individual expression, and/or emancipatory discourses. Well-informed change agents, such as classroom teachers, must be able to develop a

critical vision and see the possibilities of a broader scope and the dynamics involved in minority academic achievement.

Haycock (2001), cites a high school in San Diego attempting to pursue critical vision, where they created more time, mostly within the regular school day, by doubling, even tripling, the amount of instructional time devoted to literacy for low-performing students and by training all of its teachers to help underachieving students in order to narrow the achievement gap in the school. The glaring problem in these situations is that children have to work overtime to accomplish something that they should have accomplished already. Extra instruction is often viewed as a punishment to the student. Even though, in this case, instruction is conducted during regular school hours it is still viewed as a “special event” by those students and also by the rest of the school population. This alternative often becomes a labeled as well as stigmatizing “special event” for underserved students, whereby due to a change in instructional procedures the benefits are lost in the delivery of services.

Diversifying instructional materials is another suggestion for “gap” closure. Willis (1995) argues for a reconceptualization of literacy that builds on minority students’ background and knowledge and further espouses that minority literacy learners need a closer relation to instructional materials. When one does not see oneself in literature, self-omission then becomes a part of the lived world of these students. Willis refers to this as the “sin of omission”, allowing the cultural knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse children to be ignored, devalued, and not encouraged as valid sources of literacy acquisition (p.34).

Tatum's (1997) sphere of influence suggests an alternative by searching for options within "self" to take control through strength areas rather than weak areas.

Wenglinsky (2004) as Willis (1995) also addressed instruction. He conducted studies to estimate the impact of instructional practices on the "achievement gap". His (2004) findings revealed that introduction of instructional variables does not lessen the advantage of predominately white schools over predominately African American schools but various instructional practices can make a substantial difference for African American students in both negative and positive ways. For example, Wenglinsky, argues that negative differences in instructional practices between schools due to the segregation of schools, might cause between school racial achievement gaps. He further suggests that positive instructional differences might occur in math with more in class time on task, group work, and solving real world problems. Regrettably, this information is only one aspect of the overall problem connected with minority underachievement, which stays within the boundaries of the education domain and fails to explore other domains such as political or social and the consequent effects of racist practices in varying contexts in all domains.

Harvard economist Ronald Ferguson (1998) focused his research on teachers using a handful of districts with initially high-performing (presumably relatively affluent) first graders with teachers hired from the bottom of the teacher pool as well as initially low-performing (presumably low income) first graders with teachers hired from the upper tiers of the teacher pool. By the time their students reached high school, these districts had swapped places in student achievement (Haycock, 2001 p.11). As I applaud these

findings I find it difficult to understand why the educational system continues to employ teachers that rank at the bottom of the teacher pool. Should we not first look at the system that hires teachers from the bottom of the teaching pool and then offer suggestions to rectify the institution that condones such practices.

“Good” teachers work for the notion of democracy within the workplace. Kincheloe (2003b) defines good work as self-directed, seeing the school as a place of learning, work variety, cooperation, individual work, and incorporating play in the workday. These attributes can be aligned to the “good” teacher. “Bad” teachers are those who have been enticed into acceptance of the “what is” and have stopped questioning, who basically have stunted their personal growth. Lee (1998) defines “good” teachers as those who can recognize strengths and limitations of students based on personal and collective racial history and “bad” teachers are those who cannot (p.32). Changes within the school system can only occur if the system agrees to train all of the “good” and “bad” teachers. “Good” teachers who are pulled from teaching students of higher academic standing can make a difference with lower achieving students after they are trained to be culturally responsive to those students. On the other hand, “bad” teachers can also be trained to work with lower achieving students first by changing their stereotypical mindsets and then by believing that the underachieving students can handle more challenging work. “All teachers can learn”, and all teachers can become better teachers by raising expectations, expanding student academic performance, and modeling a constructivist approach, such as co-creating staff development workshops with teachers as well as offering on-going opportunities for effective professional development (p.32).

In conjunction with teacher enrichment considerations, the individual that the problem directly affects, in this case, the student also needs to be considered. Students who are not included in the learning process tend to become invisible within the school walls. Covert and overt signs of personal knowledge construction consistently affect students while pieces of their identity are being formed in this context and one side effect of lack of inclusion is low self-esteem.

A low self-esteem usually harbors feelings of emptiness and situates the student in an unresponsive mindset. Hooks (1994) acknowledges the negative repercussions of this mindset in relation to the context of school in the following statement, “if people are not in a mind to receive information they leave class empty” (p.156). In this empty position students are in a deficit state and most times they do not realize they are empty. On one hand, in the presence of empty students, educators often take cues from plunging student energy and try to adapt uplifting teaching styles to neutralize the negative student essence. On the other hand, under these circumstances, some educators adapt less than rigorous teaching styles, which embrace the negative student essence that is represented in class, sadly, not bothering to go beyond the surface to explore underlying motivating forces that repeatedly create this debilitating situation. This teacher response might account for one of the reasons why many minority students are fazed into the banking system of education, to be simply filled up with information and not engaged in varied aspects of critical thinking (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

**“School/Society” Perspectives:**

- **Academic/racial/social inequalities – Theme #2**

**“School” Perspectives:**

- **Power Factors – Theme #6**
- **Lack of administrative support – Theme #9**

The Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, <http://www.nwrel.org/cnorsel/booklets/achieve/>, argues that institutional racism found in schools and society is a major factor contributing to low self-image of many black youth. One example of how societal outside forces enter the school is through both acknowledged and unacknowledged racist practices. This can be subtle yet pervasive and can encourage teacher and student behaviors as well as organizational norms that show up in the following ways: curricula, instructional strategies, teaching styles that are incompatible with minority students, stereotyping, academic tracking, and test bias.

According to the Center, minority underachievement is nothing short of a national crisis. In light of the disturbing research, they urge educators to work together to ensure that equitable opportunities exist for all students. Research findings from the Center reports a positive academic identity is important for all students; it is a particular critical issue for underachieving minority students. It also posits four effective instructional strategies to help enhance academic identity, namely persistence in learning, understanding cultural diversity, building positive academic self-concepts, and describing educational policies and practices which are effective with national origin students. There seems to be a measure of

consistency among many researchers about the need to enhance self-concept, to be familiar with student cultures, and the important role of the educational system, as well as teachers, in affecting the closure of the achievement gap. Also interesting is the measure of power the Center attributes to the classroom teacher when, most times, in reality the classroom teacher is as equally bound as the students to the traditional positivistic ways of the school system's antiquated ideology.

Tantamount is the effects of "student shut down", whether generated by teachers, society, or both, it magnifies itself through a multiplicity of ripple effects on the educational system, through individuals of all races, and ultimately through societal institutions.

According to Delpit (1995) some children come to school with more accoutrements of the culture of power already in place – "culture capital", as some critical theorists refer to it – some with less (p. 25). Minority students are at a disadvantage in school due to class placement and racist practices and again in society with the continuation of these practices. Within this sordid context they experience disempowerment and loss of "culture capital". If low income, low academic skills, and low social class are added, just to name a few, then the problem of minority students magnifies with enhanced feelings of disempowerment and history is formed.

History sets a precedent for a deficit model, which in the twenty-first century is evident in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, NCLB. This education policy, although deemed to be the answer to the "achievement gap", sadly continues to trivialize the existence of minorities. It labels, blames teachers for underachievement, seeks answers from narrow

spaces, and strays from the needs of minority students. Within the last four years during the Bush Administration, talk of the “achievement gap” has reappeared in the forefront of American education and has surfaced in ways perceived as positive in the schools and in the media. The goal of NCLB is to help minority students catch up to their white peers and align themselves academically with hegemonic standards. The NCLB has become a saving grace and inspiration for many teachers and students to work harder and miraculously achieve. But it is not certain how long this over zealous misdirected attention will continue. Based on the history of the “achievement gap” the recent concern for minority underachievement might not last until the projected 2014 solution date, when according to NCLB, the historical “achievement gap” will be closed.

NCLB is seen as one of the recent contemporary answers to public education reform, specifically geared toward addressing the “achievement gap”. In contrast, Macedo (1994) poses that education reform deforms leaving many schools of education “crippled with learning disabilities” and in limbo in a deficit-orientation model (p.152). Currently, the fate of all underachieving minority students is shrouded in a policy. NCLB, originating from the federal government. It is known as the education policy that helps kids, parents, and schools in poor communities, improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged, focus on the lowest performing schools and the racial dimensions of the achievement gap, and measure progress of minorities to help them eventually align with their white counterparts (Karp, 2004). I would argue that these policy goals reinforce minority-subjugated status as the norm and continues to require minorities to measure up to the white hegemonic population. Macedo (1994) as well as Freire (2004) envision a

departure from the deficit-orientation model and movement toward critical consciousness embracing a pedagogy of hope for change not a continuance of the same.

Pinar (Pinar et al., 2002) aligns with the self, school, and societal influences in a leap of thought with the excerpt below and helps to bridge the gap allowing for change.

Jessica Benjamin questions, “How is domination anchored in the hearts of those who submit to it?” (Benjamin as quoted in Pinar et al., 2002 p.356).

Booker Peek answers by pointing to the internalization of other dominant culture’s view of African Americans as inferior, a view not unlike DuBois’ notion of “double consciousness”. “Not until African American, via political education, can repudiate this internalization, can education proceed: Again speaking of academic success in terms of skills education, the basic barrier is that our political education is not what it should be”. (Peek as quoted in Pinar et al., 2002 p.356).

Benjamin seeks to understand the source of injustice and Peek points out the internalized turmoil of African Americans in the process of living as inferiors with the burden of double consciousness but also includes the broader ramifications of politics. He leans closely toward political education as a means of power and the need for African Americans to acquire political power. By referring to the acceptance of feelings of inferiority he addresses the aspect of “self” in the matter of racism along with the internalization of negative feelings. There are dynamics that are generated in the physical spaces and in the psyche of society and self that are interrelated and connected and

contribute to the phenomenon of underachieving minority students. The inferior positioning of minority students and their awareness of a lack of power are significant factors in their lives that help to construct self-identity.

This dissertation attempts to go beyond talk of deficiencies and begins to see the necessary action needed through diverse lenses rather than from a fragmented positivistic mindset. In this context of renewal, connecting the human pieces is necessary in order for people and individuals to evolve. The web of reality is diverse and requires viewing from multiple perspectives; therefore, agency must come from multiple sources as well. A move toward criticality is needed concerning all aspects of self, school, and societal lived world experiences that help to discount invasive power dynamics and permeating racist societal overtones. The point to emphasize here is the search for alternative directions. Possibilities lie in the multidimensional web of reality of teachers as well as students when contributors to the web are willing to do whatever is necessary to afford underachieving students the ability to be able to scaffold into spaces that will allow them to create and evolve with an expanded vision.

The existence and long standing history of the “gap” endorses the acceptance of the disempowering “underdog ideology”, whereby it is normal and natural for one group to be more powerful than the rest. This, in fact, is the power struggle minority students are faced with on a daily basis coupled with the additional aspect of disempowerment that results from this ideology. They are either not present in the power structure or they are perceived by the majority to be at the bottom of the power ladder. Power struggles are a

recurring issue, which usually overrides the quest for equality and thus splinters chances of cohesiveness. It allows the continuance of a fragmented and indecisive approach to solving the racial “achievement gap” under questionable existing conditions.

The conditions in question have been historically planted. The negative ramifications of slavery dating back to the late 1600s and the devastating consequences of eugenics in America since the early 1900s have resulted in a disservice to the everyday workings of society (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003). These historical underpinnings and the myriad of political side effects that have occurred and continue to occur have laid the foundation for the present day unconscionable perpetuation of minority underachievement. Overtime the power of the hegemonic population has been enhanced politically, culturally, economically as well as through the psyche of the minority population. Minority students have been isolated and distanced from the mainstream population by these naturally occurring lived experiences resulting in the lack of possibilities for societal interconnections and psychological reparation, individually and/or collectively for many minorities.

The critical deconstruction of minority achievement examines how the notion of power is key and operational in self, school and society and highlights the “real” lived world experiences of minorities in the context of race and power. Hence, by going into the literature and becoming more critical even the traditional tacit messages become explicit as one begins to recognize the repetitive and cyclical nature of the problem of minority underachievement. Therefore, using critical lenses the miseducation of a large percentage

of minority students does not appear to be a mistake but a deliberate action by the hegemonic population to secure a place at the top and render a portion of the population helpless. Under these conditions, actions that perpetuate the “achievement gap” are conspiratorial and subversive and serve to undermine the democratic ideals of the American government. In straying away from democratic practices, the “gap” interconnects humanity in a repulsive manner rather than in a nurturing manner and in doing so emphasizes the societal power gap.

Gaps in power as well as the cohesive dimensions of power are carefully contrived and linked closely to the collective construction of the underachiever’s identity, which manifests itself in an absence of power in different contexts. The lack of power is a reality of the “what is” minority world that tends to surface repeatedly in many forms, for example, in media, politics, and imagery. An alternative perspective is to seek ways to increase the number of people who participate in the process of power (Horton & Freire, 1990, p.97). When the underlying reasons for the absence of power in a specific percentage of the population is finally revealed and summarily dealt with only then will the Freirean transformative outlook come to life.

Schools have been the sites where attention has been drawn to inequities of power and they can also be the sites where these injustices can be dealt with. Schools can be the space for initiating change because they reproduce the dominant ideology through a web of lies that distort and transfigure reality (Macedo, 1994). They thrive on deceit and according to Macedo (1994) create a poisonous pedagogy that flourishes only through the

destruction of others. Greene (1995) so appropriately said, “from destruction comes new beginnings” (pp.39-40). In this study, with new beginnings in mind, an understanding and history of the negative is acknowledged and then space for new possibilities are allowed to emerge. What has emerged is a more positive outlook based on the information gathered from the past and a broader vision of the present. In conclusion, I would argue that learning about the past in order to avoid duplication in the present is a healing act.

The “achievement gap” represents a constant example of the effects of racism and the imbalance of power. It involves politics in the school system skewed for the good of the hegemonic masses and mimics the status quo while promoting the magnitude of destructive forces incurred in society. In order to heal the nation of the bruises incurred from the intellectual destruction of a portion of the human race, healing must involve some degree of “mutual respect and care, and vulnerability of equals” (Gresson, 2004, p.109). People in power must be ready and willing to release traditional power privileges in order for minority education to excel and align with a redefined hegemonic or non-hegemonic education.

**“School” Perspectives:**

- **Lift and Platform – Theme #8**

**“School/Society” Perspectives:**

- **Inability to connect inside and outside forces – Theme #4**

Willis (1995) proposes that minority students are dismissed and their knowledge and experiences are rendered inconsequential as they are silenced due to deficits (pp.39-40). The destructive forces connected to minority underachievement suggest the need for reworking social constructivist theories to include the complexities of culture as well as different strategies for training teachers by incorporating cultural information to support and nurture literacy development of all students who enter a classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). These beliefs go beyond the incremental and ultimately petition for transformational and fundamental changes. But I would further add that it requires immediate implementation including “hands on” rigorous literacy work outside school walls as well as inside school walls. As Horton (Horton & Freire, 1990) models, on the one hand, in the Highlander School an external space is necessary to present a more comprehensive plan for literacy but Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990), on the other hand, supports a dual approach to literacy by seeking external as well as internal spaces for the growth of literacy. Transgressing from nontraditional spaces, into internal as well as external spaces, might stimulate and motivate teachers and the inner workings of educational institutions to orchestrate changes that will affect substandard literacy arrangements for minority students.

Willis (1995) depicts her nine-year-old son Jake, who is African American, in a self-defining position when she relates an incident where Jake wrestles in school with an internal conflict that is framed by the sociohistorical and sociocultural inequities of U.S. society (p.33). Jake is asked to write an original story about his life and is disillusioned because everything significant to him, he believes his peers, who are predominantly white, will either not understand or challenge him on. What is interesting in this case is that Jake decides to conform to the class norms in order to try and fit in and win a prize for his story. In effect, like many minority students, Jake must struggle to maintain “self” in the classroom in the midst of the strong prevailing tainted internal baggage and hegemonic overhang of the “norm”.

In the internal school space, Jake encounters duality in identity and with subtlety this situation invites the possibility of “apprenticeship” as an alternative route for learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this context, we are all students, teachers as well as students, rethinking and reframing the “what is” in order to engage each other in the learning process. Jake’s apprenticeship relationship in this case is between him and the racially inscribed cues he receives from the society, his teacher, and his peers. He chooses to adapt to the ways and values of the hegemonic culture of the classroom. Creating situated opportunities that reflect cultural similarities as well as differences that tap into student and “expert” knowledge involves a community of practice. Jake’s community of practice is not culturally responsive and therefore does not acknowledge his “home” community of practice therefore it creates learning opportunities that are not learner directed and does not address his lived world social context (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Villegas & Lucas,

2002). Ultimately, in successful communities of practice, success within school walls encompasses the complexities and interconnectedness of diverse relationships and includes combined experiences inside and outside school walls.

The American classroom has traditionally been represented as a culturally/ prescriptive and functionally/descriptive place of instruction (Willis, 1995). Traditionally, American classrooms have been places where cultural literacy has been predominantly representative of Eurocentric ways of knowing and positivistic ideologies have been promoted and assessed throughout schooling (p. 37). Jake's inner turmoil over his assignment takes place in the context of "school" and hinges on self, school, and societal influences. Evidence of positivistic ideologies is demonstrated in the interconnections of these influences and the choice that Jake finally decides to take. In effect, this is an example of infiltration from the larger society of hegemonic cultural literacy supported in the school system which again permits the threads of "gap" phenomenon to further embed the problem of minority underachievement in society simultaneously exposing the power struggle within the "gap" between the power holders and the powerless.

Ultimately, should the challenge of the educational system be to exit from the existing problem and create alternatives to the current system? As seen by the review of the literature there are multiple options to use as exit strategies and new research emerges every day. Delpit (1995) proposes that the American school system narrowly defines middle-class European American culture as the norm and in this manner helps to perpetuate that ideology. With the presence of the "gap" under the auspices of the

American “norm” a stilling silence has developed and eroded the culture. Delpit (1995) refers to this silence as “silenced dialogue”, the commonsense response among some people of color to school literacy has been to take a “way things are” attitude, whereby one develops the understanding and acceptance that there are inequities in the educational system. With this mindset, minorities also understand that little can be done without massive school reform and if they want to advance they must learn to play the game and accept things the way they are. Willis (1995) challenges that attitude based on her proposal of reworking social theories and in addition adding a more comprehensive culturally responsive component to teacher training as Villegas and Lucas also suggest. This would at least be a start in an alternate direction. If past and present ideas have not been successful or just minimally successful so far, then Willis’s idea might have merit. Another alternative would be to continue the silence, which has been the current precedent and continue to take things for granted.

### **Conclusion**

The fragments of literature need to be analyzed, organized, and transformed from the “what is” into the “what can be” in order to create an alternative perspective (Roth, 2005a, p.196). The freshly transformed whole can serve as a catalyst to organize, merge, exercise rigor and go deeper in order to formulate a different outlook on the minority underachievement issue and open the possibility of coming to voice, conscientizacao, whereby we become aware and critical about the world and our position in it (Freire, 2004). The human condition needed to accommodate coming together for the transformation of fragmented research, the elimination of labels that produce fragmented

and distorted self-images, and the expulsion of societal myths and misconceptions about minorities, all filter into each other and cumulatively, threaten the possibility of alternative praxis and conscientizacao (Freire, 2004; Kincheloe, 2004). I contend that it is possible to add new perspectives to the topic of minority underachievement when a firm connection of the literature is established. I propose that it is depth of information and its reconfiguration that is lacking and it is my contention that depth and girth of the minority underachievement phenomenon can come from merging, rethinking, and reframing significant existing as well as new pieces of research information.

The interactivity and interconnectedness of the “gap” represented by self, school, and society contributes to the construction of the underachieving minority student. It is a combination of influences that assist in constructing a minority underachieving student’s self-identity. School influences become strategic because they are represented by the school environment and provide the space for possible change. Societal influences represent larger parameters of the population enveloping stimuli from everyday activities such as pop culture, media distortions of minority images, and racist stereotypes in film and books, to name a few. School and society messages localize in “self,” the individual, and sometimes brew unrest and negativity within. Under these circumstances, the individual internalizes that which flows throughout society and begins to demonstrate the damage in multiple ways. The internal turmoil coupled with external noises is allowed to germinate in schools and society and vicariously becomes internalized by minority students. In the end, students who have become prey to the negative movement of the “gap” and have been consumed with unfiltered negative information represented by

cacophonous surround sound from three different directions, self, school, and society, ultimately become unknowing victims of the system. In this study, I argue that teachers can initiate change in their sphere of influence, from a personally established place of power, by promoting change through advocating for students and encouraging self-empowerment and self-advocacy for self as well as students. As a critical teacher my actions during this study have evoked the uplifting of students in their “zone of proximal development” and provided a threshold to new possibilities (Vygotsky, 1978).

## **Chapter 3 - Critical Theoretical Framework from a Teacher Perspective**

### **Introduction**

This dissertation is based on a critical theoretical framework, which formulates an ideology of critical consciousness. A critical framework in this study encompasses the dynamics of critical pedagogy, ontology, and complexity as well as social cognition. The research data is introduced through the lens of critical consciousness from a teacher's perspective and this consciousness is the primary overarching aspect of the study circulating throughout self, school, and society within a teacher's sphere of influence. The notion of criticality is present and incorporated in a teacher journal for the purpose of creating alternatives to the "what is" situation of underachieving minority students.

Criticality in the present state of urban education demands an understanding of the level of complexity involved in the teacher's lived world experiences as well as an understanding of the teacher's relationship to underachieving minority students trapped in the "achievement gap". The intersecting of both worlds includes a myriad of elements, such as, cognitive, cultural, and political aspects, research findings, education policies, and historical events. These considerations propagate throughout the teacher's sphere of influence in the context of school and set the stage for ever-changing life events. "As the barriers between mind and multiple contexts are erased, there is an increased chance that more expanded forms of cognitive autopoiesis –self-constructed modes of higher-order thinking will emerge" (Roth, 2005b, p. 168). Therefore, what is noteworthy is that the complexities of interconnected life forces eventually lead to more feasible alternatives for minority students.

The teacher's sphere of influence is constantly overflowing with possibilities and intricate directionality while in search of critical emancipation, "the power to control one's own life in solidarity with a justice-oriented community" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2004, p. 282). Incorporated in this complex teacher world is on the one hand institutional roadblocks, inner turmoil, and collective resistance and on the other hand the feasibility of possibilities for institutional and/or faculty/staff "buy in" for change and resolution of inner and external upsets. The structure of the SSDD institution models this contrasting world. It constrains rather than enables human agency but within the structurally formed capacities there are openings for expansion and under those conditions the structure of the institution enables the teacher to think beyond the limitations. "If enough people or even a few people who are powerful enough act in innovative ways, their action may have the consequence of transforming the very structure that gave them the capacity to act", then change could be in sight (Sewell, 1992, p. 4). I argue, with a sense of critical enlightenment, that one teacher can within her sphere of influence, energize others to collectively create openings for transformative change. As a result, with the collective power we can circumvent the idea of stability in structure in order to "build the possibility of change into the concept of structure" (p. 3). To summarize, this study focuses not only on the oppressive aspects of power as displayed by students as well as teachers but also aspires to reach an understanding about the productive aspects of power, its ability to empower, to establish critical democracy as well as to engage marginalized people in the rethinking of their sociopolitical roles (Macedo, 1994; Freire, 2004; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2004).

## **Critical Theory**

Critical theory grounds this dissertation. Kincheloe & McLaren (2004) state, “A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (p. 281). Critical theory allows for an examination of the power factors that evolve from self, school, and society, which together interact to perpetuate the “achievement gap” phenomenon. This research focuses on examining tacit as well as overt relationships that help to construct incremental triage approaches to minority underachievement. In a triage framework students are quickly diagnosed on the basis of their skin color and historical stereotypical negative indicators, thus, repeatedly treated with a “one size fits all” mentality rather than a “one size fits few” mindset (Ohanian, 1999). The remedy that is currently in place provides a mechanistic treatment, traditionally followed by a quick release of underachieving minority students into society. Whereby, in society these students continue to experience a degrading and underdeveloped existence, which originates from narrow positivistic perspectives and confines them to predetermined futures proposed by the hegemonic community.

In this study, critical theory challenges the traditional binary perspectives of positivistic science such as "the knower and the known, the researcher and the researched, the scientific expert and the practitioner" and asserts that, “the notion of self-reflection is central to the understanding of the nature of critically grounded qualitative research” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, pp. 150 and 147). Self-reflection is required in order to

situate the teacher as well as the student to begin to see from a critical consciousness perspective and enact influences that affect minority students within school walls. It is also necessary for the purposes of this study in order to expand the limited perspective. Hence, a transformative process emerges from this critical stance as well as internal expansion of ‘self’, the SSDD students. Aspects of self in addition to an inclusion of external considerations are key requisites in the transformative process. Therefore, it is an ongoing circulatory process, moving from the space where change can begin, within the school walls, extending out to the society, a space where covert and overt racist practices occur, then to self, an inner space where school and societal messages are stored constantly recirculating throughout again and again. The direction of this process changes according to the multiplicity of input. Hence, the construction of “what can be” evolving from “what is” is seeded in the collective and constant flowing nature of the process. It is free flowing and continues to circulate and recirculate throughout the interconnections of lived world experiences of all who are present.

At SSDD, the “what is” is considered with criticality and is not taken-for-granted in order for possibilities to emerge concerning the “what can be”. A successful complex critical stance allows an individual the ability to expand in mind and from that point it enables advocacy to occur with the eventual emancipation of “self”. To gain knowledge and understanding of the lived world of subjugated people, as well as the lived world of hegemonic groups is criteria for gaining understanding to both worlds (Gresson, 2004). In essence, this proposes that it is necessary to understand the workings of both the subjugated and hegemonic worlds in order for agency and constructive change to occur

on any level. In this study both worlds are exposed in the journal text and agency, advocacy and emancipation of subjugated people, students as well as teachers are enacted as a result. Based on these lived experiences, I propose it is possible that teachers and students have the ability, motivation, and agency to reconstruct their lives. Thus, new openings for change can make a difference simply with new understandings, as well as people having the desire to see the “other” and their world through different lenses with the inclusion of all involved in the process (Freire, 2004). Under these conditions, a fresh breath of life can enter the “what can be” and new possibilities can emerge with critical consciousness.

### **Critical Consciousness: An Alternative Pathway**

Critical consciousness involves both seeing “what is” and “what can be” for the purpose of uncovering atrocities in an existing system that often serves to alienate individuals as well as hurt and separate various sectors of the population. Unfortunately, the abject reality of the education system transpires in a world that is constantly changing yet consistently interconnected on multiple levels. In order to deal with the world from a critical perspective, multiple levels of awareness coupled with an action plan are required. A critical perspective such as this can only evolve by going beneath the surface and tapping into varying levels of awareness while simultaneously reconceptualizing and reinterpreting the “norm” and established “truths” that have been generated historically and continue to persist in the twenty-first century. The notion of criticality represents the theoretical framework of this dissertation by seeking alternatives through critical consciousness, starting from “self” and moving beyond self to “other”.

The mind, as well as the body and all that surrounds us, contribute to constructing “self”. In constructivist analysis, the knower personally participates in all acts of knowing and understanding. “Knowledge does not exist “out there” in isolation from the knower” because knowing comes from multiple perspectives and knowledge constantly is compounded through diverse perspectives (Kincheloe, 2004, p.116). Furthermore, the knower participates in the making of history and is simultaneously involved with numerous on-going personal relationships involving cognition. In this dissertation, I am involved in the making of history in my classroom and within the school walls by interacting with students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community members and reconstructing “what is”. Within this context and recognizing my positionality, I enter the world of the minority student from the lens of the teacher. Interestingly, in the teacher position, occupation and education create different possibilities for transformative action and because of that I am able to implement a small measure of change within the school walls (Sewell, 1992).

Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s (1987) concept is that living things constantly remake themselves in interaction with their environments and create a new self. In a position of teacher at SSDD, it was necessary to find and use my voice in order to create personal power to pursue the path for change that would initiate alternatives to minority underachievement. The notion of a new “self” or a critical ontology is grounded on the human ability to use new social contexts and experiences to reformulate subjectivity (Kincheloe, 2003a). Kincheloe (2003a) proposes that we can lay down the conceptual foundations for a new mode of selfhood. In essence my “selfhood” as teacher

is reformulated in this study and with that lived experience a sense of revelation unravels within the teacher journals. Critical reflection and rethinking followed by critical reformulation of the “what is” represents how “self” fits into transformative ideas. Basically, change evolves from the reflective self and through the interactive relationships in the social context of the school. I argue that in order to enter into a reconstruction of social networks such as the school environment, teachers as well as students must be able to embrace critical consciousness and be willing to expand social frameworks. In doing so, individuals must reposition lived world experiences, which ultimately, depends on critically acknowledging, “what is” and then lifting critical consciousness. The opportunity for transformative ideas such as this to occur often depends on opening new and even unfamiliar spaces where relearning can take place. As I was relearning in the “what is” environment, I was simultaneously forming collective and collaborative partnerships but not excluding individual internal work. My teacher lived world experiences enveloped a composite of the school population but as far as my students were concerned their learning process was more restrictive and less conducive to change. A community of practice formed around my sphere of influence and included students, parents, administrators, and basically all individuals I came in contact with. In that space I learned to interact with deficit as well as affirming influences in order to become a change agent and begin to develop a new community of practice for learners such as underachieving minority students.

### **Exploring Possibilities of a New Community of Practice: An Alternative Pathway**

Sociocognitivists, Lave and Wenger (1991), posit the theory of situated learning, which “locates learning squarely in the processes of coparticipation, not in the heads of individuals” (p.13). An individual, in order to be situated in this learning process, needs to be in the context of a specific legitimate peripheral participation, in which the learner is engaged first as an apprentice, in the co-participation phase, and then gradually becomes an “expert” or a more accomplished learner through increased exposure to expert performances (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Situated learning involves social situations, engagements, and/or designated participation frameworks, known as legitimate peripheral participation and at SSDD student participation frameworks were often comprised of “same race” groups. These participation frameworks created a community of practice, which allowed student learners to participate in varying interactive levels during the process, crossing back and forth between the expert and the apprentice.

Lave and Wenger (1991) espouse a theory in which there is a framework of participation where learning occurs as individuals co-participate in an event, gain access to modes of behavior not otherwise available to them, and eventually develop skills adequate to certain levels of performance. In this way, students gradually learn the performance skills needed to participate in society and are eventually able to transport these skills outside of the school setting subsequently making learning portable. Minority students, like teachers, are also contained in a specific school social framework or community of practice. If students enrolled in lower-level classes, are not able to mobilize and escape

the imposed boundaries of that deficit community, then there is the possibility that underachieving minority students will not be able to reposition themselves and eventually reframe their lived world experiences unless interventions are provided. Therefore, situated learning can only provide healthy benefits to for example, tracked underachieving minority students by detracking classes and providing a more diverse community of practice where legitimate peripheral participation can truly lead to democratic experiences for these students with an opening for access to power. Presently, the positioning of minority students in lower tracked classes marginalizes them and continues to program a negative mindset in society. In addition, this demeaning position condones and firmly implants the acceptance of minority underachievement as the status quo. Hence, the element of criticality must be introduced in order for effective change to occur which for the purpose of this study most assuredly reinforces the reason for the use of critical theory.

Critical theory affords the opportunity to operate in new social contexts where marginalized students, with critical teachers as advocates, can change the status quo and reformulate student/teacher experiences. Unfortunately, in light of prevalent racist conditions, minority underachievers often tend to remain anonymous in classrooms and as a result, these students continue to be excluded from the interactive process of learning. Under these circumstances, a mind/body split occurs whereby minority students are regularly at odds with both educational and societal systems triggering disjointed feelings and consequently resulting in a void of presence (hooks, 1994). At times, the mind/body split surfaces in the classroom and manifests in the form of low grades and/or

results in tracking incidences. Underachieving minority students who repeatedly end up tracked in lower-level classes are often relegated to the “achievement gap” label unless drastic interventions can be implemented. Often these results create an opening for substandard literacy development thus, maintaining a place for students to store a warehouse of unsettled inner conflicts.

### **Creating a New “Self” Existence: An Alternative Pathway**

Drastic interventions at times come from the students themselves. Underachieving minority students are able to mobilize for change if they see themselves as complete and not fragmented by life’s varied experiences but this demands a critical mind that has the ability to distinguish what personally acquired knowledge is appropriate to use, under what circumstances at any given time. Maturana and Varela’s (1990), theory of enactivism proposes that individuals have the ability to transport select schema or inner knowledges to different spontaneous situations in order to construct individual experiences because the power to do so is within us stemming from multiple interconnected relationships. I question what one decides to unpack from schema when engaged in spontaneous life decisions brought about by negative differentiated life situations. If on one hand, schema references remain limited, according to “norm” standards, as is the case with lower tracked minority students, then these students would only be able to unpack schema from limited sources. But if on the other hand, a critical mind were at work, then the individual’s unpacked schema would at least have the opportunity to expand the limited schema.

Thus, from an enactivist perspective, the possibility of underachieving students having the ability to create a new existence from the “what is” lived world would be up to the individual and their collective past as well as their present life relationships in their web of reality. In addition, autopoiesis, self-organization or self-production, would allow individuals to be in a life-long marathon with self- (re)construction (Varela, 1999). Enactivism, then would allow individuals power to create a world, which affords, as Kincheloe (2004) proposes, a new era of immanence; “what could be” (p. 53). The concept of critical immanence would help minority students to see possibilities that might have otherwise gone unnoticed because of the lack of a critical perspective, social positioning, or presumed lack of ability to change the “what is”. Adapting to a critical transformative concept is yet another way of taking ownership and redefining power boundaries.

In essence, learners are engaged in learning all the time and conditions in which learning takes place varies according to physical and social positioning in the world and how knowledge is processed in the mind. Variations of how individual knowledges are used are based on multiple factors such as race, gender, sex, culture, political beliefs, and economics to name a few but whatever the concoctive mixture, the result is always a product of that mixture. Thus, the epistemology of knowledge with its embedded power structures contributes to the physical and mental positioning of all students. From these physical and mental sources, collective thought as well as individual thoughts develop from socially constructed signs and symbols, creating yet another space in the web of reality under the category of hyperreality.

Signs and symbols encountered through lived world experiences such as the symbol of the McDonald's golden arches suggested by Kincheloe (2002), negative images portrayed of minorities on sitcoms, commercials, and product labels such as the Aunt Jemima image on the pancake box, all combine to inscribe the "norm". These types of symbolisms repeatedly perpetuate negative stereotypical images of minorities and provide individuals with myriad ways of formulating negative ideologies. In the teacher journal it becomes apparent, with a critical eye, that popular culture, such as movies, song lyrics, and literature have an affect on students as well as teachers and serves to promote negative labels within and outside of the school walls.

In the ontological domain when the mind is affected by deeply embedded negative societal inscriptions, reframing of these tacit and explicit inputs should be a priority. Thinking from a postformalist perspective, one must consider Stanley Aronowitz's (1988) "alternative rationality". "Alternative rationalities" employs forms of analysis sensitive to signs and symbols, sees the power of context in relation to thinking, views the role of emotion and feeling in cognition activity, and values the psychoanalytical process as it taps into recesses of (un) consciousness (Kincheloe, 2004, p.119). All of which when considered provides another pathway to change and also eventually deals with the "what is" in alternative forms. There is little doubt that this new rationality with inquiry as a focus is in pursuit of critical transformative change. This change on one hand involves the interconnecting and conscious efforts of the larger society and on the other hand requires internal work on an ontological level. Merging the two, society and self, in the context of the schooling world, requires a critical understanding when dealing with

repressed negative cognitive experiences of individuals and internalized racist beliefs from both minority and non-minority perspectives. The idea that individuals come in daily contact with numerous other individuals, artifacts of learning, and collective signs and symbols attest to why these complex entities become collective representations of the web of reality. From this complex state, individuals are able to tap into world text, by “reading the word and the world”, adjusting the mind/body split, and exercising their imaginations to seek alternative realities (Freire, 2004; hooks, 1994; Greene, 2000).

### **Tapping into the Imagination: An Alternative Pathway**

Tapping into imagination permits individuals to flourish and provides another pathway to alternative realities. Greene (2000) suggests access to alternative realities through imagination. Information in the teacher journal highlights the devastation of teacher and student spirits as well as emphasizes the possibility of using imagination to change that situation. Both students and teachers can ignite a transformative process by using imagination. Individuals can take ownership of their world and moreover, open up the possibility to shape a new existence, thereby creating space for power where there was none before. Imagination is needed if underachieving students are to rise above racist institutionalized practices and forge a new path. Note, that using one’s imagination is only one viable route to change that can be combined and interrelated to other complex multidimensional aspects of change mentioned throughout this dissertation.

It is up to critical educators to help find additional pathways, which go beyond curriculum, instruction, and teacher input, to allow student expression while providing a

safe space to release imaginations and open access to power. If we can access power by being able to use imagination then emancipation will come from opening up lived worlds of reflection and transformation (Greene, 2000). We cannot allow the pain, destruction, history of racism, and lack of power to devour imagination and prevent “what can be”. Possibilities can open up to the variety and interconnectedness of theories and alternative practices, and can be scaffolded within and outside school walls. This dissertation attempts, through the critical lens of a teacher, to bridge the steps to alternative pathways related to the elimination of minority underachievement or closing the “achievement gap”.

### **Scaffolding: An Alternative Pathway**

Lev Vygotsky (1978) posits the cognitive theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which the “teacher” through a number of steps scaffolds the learner in order to accomplish a particular learned activity similar to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate peripheral participation. In my teacher journal text the idea of scaffold learning is noted as Theme #8 – Lift and Platform, and involves lifting students as well as teachers from where they are to the higher platform of self-advocacy and self-emancipation. Through these scaffolding efforts, teachers implement and promote a graduated learning process, which in turn fosters interconnections with other individuals, transference of skills to teachers and students, personal ownership of the learning process, and a voice for all involved in the direction of cumulative personal knowledge. In order for meaningful scaffolding such as this to occur, critical educators must go deeper and beyond the “traditional” as Freire (2004) poses with the construction of generative themes, where he

connects literacy directly to the student in order to promote individual empowerment and culturally responsive teaching practices (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Freire's (2004) generative themes can be broadly interpreted as formulating questions about text, interpreting text driven ideologies, and basically looked at as a vehicle to transform individual lives. They are a productive beginning for those who have been invisible for so long and it enables Freire's critical praxis to occur by moving people from the general to the specific. In this study the teacher and the students have been moved forward from general themes generated at SSDD and derived from their lived world experiences and have been moved to the understanding that use of power and voice in the school setting can produce specific transformative changes. When critical praxis occurs it is characterized as informed action that demands curricular and instructional strategies that produce not only better learning climates but a better society as well (Kincheloe, 2004, p.70). Informed action encourages student awareness that democratic practice is not based in a hegemonic sphere but transcends that narrow vision and embraces all in a culturally responsive manner with equal disbursement of power. Generative themes and critical praxis together put a pessimistic, overwhelmingly, negative historical attitude about minority underachievement to rest and offer feasible possibilities for change while involving those who are victimized.

Hooks (1994) and Freire (2004), both explore theories that involve the possibility of "new life" under present positivist conditions. Their ideas are directed toward the emancipation of the student and the displacement of arcane laws and beliefs as the

teacher journal attempts to supports through observation and documentation of real world experiences within school walls. Hooks (1994) supports the idea of “engaged pedagogy”, in which teachers actively commit to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well being before they can teach in a manner that empowers students. Freire (2004) poses conscientization, in which students are liberated from domination by their own critical awareness and engagement in coming to voice. Both hooks and Freire, have similar end goals but whereas hooks (1994) initially focuses on the teacher, Freire (2004) focuses on the student, nevertheless, in either case they share similar goals and together they serve to empower the “other” while encouraging action through a deeper engagement with life.

It is hook’s (1994) contention that professors are in the classroom to offer something of themselves to students, as the journal text is able to demonstrate in this study. Susan Ohanian (1999) states that teachers teach who they are (p. 9). If we are in agreement with the importance of accessing the ontological, then we can use teacher journaling as a way to discovering ourselves in an academic context and use that critically, self-constructed information as a portal into the minority student world. I propose in this dissertation, along with hooks (1994) and Ohanian (1999), that if we know who we are and how we fit into the world, then we can acquaint ourselves with the world of our students and commingle that information with curriculum, instruction, and various other aspects of the teacher’s sphere of influence.

## **Conclusion**

Educators can foster immediate knowledge growth spurts from underachieving minority students, if they exercise personal efforts to heighten their level of critical consciousness. They can escape from the Skinner boxes, behavioral cells that imprison teachers into accepting existing conditions and move on to their roles as transformative intellectuals becoming a part of future student transformations (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999; Giroux, 1997). To be a participant in student transformations means teachers impacting on student's lives in an affirming manner and change originating within school walls with gradual spillage into society and formation of alternative societal perspectives. The "achievement gap" phenomenon is screaming for an overhaul and a space for the pursuit of change is available within school walls only with an acquired critical consciousness in place that leads to agency. Teacher change agency eventually helps educators to come to terms with critical pedagogical issues and forces them to look at the basic democratic ideologies of the American educational system that are peering through the threadworks of our neatly put together hegemonic society.

In actuality, the education threadwork is falling apart and as a result the "what is" can be seen from new lenses when presented in a critically probing manner that honors questions and sees possibilities. During the critical probe, the emotional resonance of subjugated minorities search to find spaces to pump "new life" into "what is" and from that point on, look for possibilities to have new beginnings flourish in the "what can be".

To date, the system has not been able to enter into an effective conversation or adapt effective action for transformative change relating to minority underachievement. Silent about its own ideology, the culture of positivism provides no conceptual insight into how oppression might mask itself in the language and lived experiences of daily life (Giroux, 1997 p.12). A positivistic view does not delve below the surface but remains surface oriented and thus assists the system in perpetuating education's most damaging legacy, which is the disempowerment of minority students. Rather than comprehending the world holistically as a network of interconnections, the American people are taught to approach problems as if they exist, in isolation, detached from the social and political forces that give them meaning (Giroux, 1997 p. 13). Giroux (1997) suggests that overcoming the culture of positivism will require educators to construct alternative social frameworks and worldviews that affect both personal consciousness as well as the deep vital structure of the education institution. This suggestion puts individuals inside history and aids underachieving minority students in the social construction of the elimination of a subjugated status in school and eventually in society.

A more critical and comprehensive look at American education, incorporating a myriad of feasible alternatives with conscious inclusion of racial equality issues, which highlight diverse cultures, as well as power issues concerning economics and politics is necessary for the enactment of change inside and outside school walls. The transformation process from the point of learning deficits incurred by minority students to the possibility of reaching highest potential requires immediate agency. Multiple domains can provide insights into alternatives inside and outside school walls but it is necessary to critically

act on a diverse spectrum of possibilities in order to initiate and enact critical change that will be deemed most beneficial to a percentage of individuals as well as the larger society. It is important to recover from “cognitive illness” caused by fragmented thought and transform societal mindset to a higher level of critical consciousness (Kincheloe, 2000). Under the existing “what is”, recovery from “cognitive illness” is presently warranted as rigorous movement away from positivistic remedies.

## **Chapter 4 - Layering my Approach to Research: A Bricolage**

### **Introduction**

There are a variety of research methodologies that can introduce alternative realities to urban education as well as help to provide multiple answers to long-standing questions about eradicating the “achievement gap” or understanding the intricacies of minority academic underachievement. Frederick Erickson (1998) makes a salient point by identifying the qualitative research method as a viable alternative and/or as an additional component to other research methods and because of its breadth the qualitative method is used in this study. Historically, qualitative research methods have taken a back seat to quantitative research methods, but in these changing times researchers must consider varied research methods in order to gain access to diverse cultures and their lived experiences. Qualitative research methods are open-ended and when combined with a layering of methods they expand the overall breadth and value of research. In this research an open-ended approach is needed in order to capture the behind the scenes, hidden nuances that occur unnoticed or are somehow suppressed in a regular school day. Due to the opening of these additional avenues of expression and exploration, the result is more comprehensive research and subsequently, the opportunity for more inclusive information about minority students from a multilayered bricolage perspective. Kincheloe (2001b) professes that bricoleurs, in order “to be well prepared, must realize that knowledge is always in process, developing, culturally specific, and power inscribed” (p. 689). There is fluidity in the data due to the constantly changing landscape; it is focused on minority students of color who are Afro-Caribbean, Haitian, African, and African American.

The bricolage qualitative approach in this study represents the various methodological threads that underlie the minority student experience. Bricolage involves taking research strategies from a variety of disciplines and traditions as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation (Kincheloe, 2001b). The layering of methods allows for interrelationships to form and in doing so helps to crystallize the complexity of the teacher's sphere of influence, which is the focus of this study. The qualitative method is a "good fit" for this research because it allows for a broader critical vision and the merging of all the complex splintered pieces of the minority web of reality as seen from a teacher's perspective. It captures the multiple sides of the underachievement issue as well as grasps the complexities of the individuals observed. The bricoleur, which is the teacher in this study, is attuned to dynamic relationships connecting individuals, their contexts, and their activities instead of focusing on these separate entities in isolation from one another (Kincheloe, 2001b). This research demonstrates the elasticity of the teacher's sphere of influence by its openness to inclusion of all who partake in lived world experiences in a schooling context with the sphere.

Critical phenomenology, the study of lived experiences, melds with the naturalistic, narrative inquiry of teacher journaling in an attempt to replicate a portion of minority school life as seen from the lens of a teacher. In the analytic process the journal text is analyzed, layers are stripped away, unfolding themes, which are woven together and incorporate in the interpretive phase, critical hermeneutics. These lived experiences transpire within an overarching framework of critical theory and together these methodologies reconstruct minority life world experiences at a school called Storm Steele

Divide Division, SSDD. The methodologies employed specifically examine my life experiences as a teacher, inside and outside school walls. The SSDD school environment, as it interacts with constant fluidity of information and changing life events in a circulatory pattern, is also influenced by self and societal dynamics. It is my hope to witness unexpected and unpredicted results from this research that will contribute viable alternatives to counter present and past “norm” solutions to the problem of minority underachievement.

### **Autobiographical Method**

In this study another layer of the qualitative method used is auto/biography. This layered method explores my personal history as a professional educator by studying my own teaching practices, beliefs, values and emotions about what I consider to be the most important aspects of learning and teaching in the racially and socially diverse settings found in a particular public school. It allows me to create history on my own terms and in doing so opens the door to successes and failures along the way. The research is self-ethnography, which involves doing ethnography of myself. Leading scholars, including Wolff-Michael Roth, Joe Kincheloe, and Ken Tobin ((Roth, 2005b) have described how to do self-ethnography and have highlighted its importance in research on education. As an auto/biographer, this study explores my personal history as a professional educator.

Autobiographical information recorded and events that occurred under naturalistic circumstances, incorporated “key formative experiences” that occurred in my life (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 434). But I approached the formative

experiences with the understanding that embedded experiences in place prior to journaling would possibly contribute to my personal journey. Two embedded experiences, ethnic/cultural background and teacher positionality asserted themselves as significant elements in this research as well as in my life. My ethnic background is a hodgepodge of Caribbean, Hispanic, and Caucasian roots which label me in American society, as Afro-Caribbean and Black, as well as African American. During the study, my ancestral roots helped me to identify with minority students and acquire a deeper understanding of their world. In addition, ancestral roots often stirred up personal negative feelings, concerning racist practices, which invariably stemmed from a history of internalized racism and for this reason often had a tendency to influence what was recorded in the journal.

My position as a Reading Specialist, working eight years in the racially mixed environment of SSDD and prior to that working eight years at a predominantly black urban high school, collectively helped to shape my perspectives about minority students who were high school age and still unable to read or write on grade level. In the capacity of Reading Specialist, I was instrumental in creating and implementing innovative curricula in reading for underachieving minority students as well as developing support situations for parents and students. Essentially, I capitalized on my “insider” perspectives, based on my ethnic/cultural background, teacher positionality, personal schooling historicity, and collective SSDD lived world experiences, to attain enhanced critical enlightenment.

**Context of the study**

Critical enlightenment was acquired in a high school with a disproportionate number of minority students who were enrolled in lower tracked classes. Student work, memos, charts, minutes, attendance books, personal reflections, student anecdotes, and research literature are a few examples of information documented in the journal entries over a five- year period. Additional information for the research was acquired from the teacher's room conversations, classroom activities, student cafeteria, faculty meetings, professional development workshops, and basically all areas that encapsulated the SSDD physical environment. My position evolved from a teacher at the research site to a teacher as researcher as well as teacher as change agent and during that process my position also mushroomed into a student/parent advocate in a racially mixed, urban/suburban high school.

**SSDD School District**

The town represented in this study is labeled "urban/suburban" as a means of classification due to the economic and racial make up of the town. It has approximately 40,000 residents; 35% of which are Black, 55% Caucasian, and 10% other. It is a culturally diverse neighborhood that due to race and money, or the haves and have-nots, there is an economic divide that separates the town into three distinct areas creating pockets of ethnic groups, such as, a high income area (predominately non-minority), the middle income area (racially diverse), and the lower income area (predominately minority). This racial divide throws the town's, "race-doesn't-matter" chatter, off-kilter because it basically separates rather than unites the town's people.

Urban usually refers to a city-type environment but the town called Haven is quite the contrary. The streets are lined with private homes surrounded by trees and greenery, which range in price and style from modest to extravagant. There are small sections in the town where multiple dwellings exist but they also range from low to high rents and some are condominiums or townhouses, which are not for rent but for purchase only.

It would seem as if the classification of the town as urban/suburban transfers to the school, which then allows the school to be eligible to receive funds that assists in the education of the low-income minority students who live in the “ghetto” areas of the town. Therefore, the label of urban/suburban involves distribution of funds and more specifically becomes a source for money, which enables SSDD to receive additional school funds. In effect, the school is then eligible for special funding for minority students labeled as underachievers.

This questionable funding arrangement becomes even more disturbing when there are funds earmarked to benefit minority students but they never seem to reach many of the needy students. Funding methods help to clarify the joust with semantics, with the use of the word “urban”, money flows and SSDD perceptions are hyped that the school is addressing minority underachievement. It appears, with these ample funds that all efforts are moving toward closing the “achievement gap” caused by mostly low-income and a small percentage of middle-income minority students. Sadly, appearances can be deceiving as is the reality at SSDD, it appears that all student needs are being met but in reality there are deficit influences which prevent democratic educational practices.

**SSDD – Research Site**

SSDD is the site of the study. The student body is 46.3% African American, 43.6% White, 5.1% Hispanic, and 4.6% Asian/Other and presently, these statistics categorize the school as “racially mixed”. The idea of racial diversity, in this case, is in the eyes of the beholder and is subjective. Actual race mixing at SSDD is limited, as demonstrated both socially and in the racial breakdown of the classes.

A diverse group of people at SSDD at some point managed to acquire a set of blinders to what was actually going on under their noses. Many of these people became accomplished at masking the truth and the students followed suit along with the parents and people of the community.

If one would choose to take off the blinders and walk through SSDD with open eyes it would be possible to see “what is” happening and feel the pain of the students most affected. False pretenses and well-meaning programs have clouded the vision of many and created the myths that fester within the school walls. During an SSDD “walk about” one will see class distinctions, racial polarization and white privilege modeled after society, students and teachers with crushed spirits, and covert experimentation with young lives.

The extensive school profile below reflects the racial inequalities as well as undemocratic practices that stir within the walls of SSDD and somehow, for the most part, under this

silent turbulence the racial turmoil is kept under wraps very similar to the way the town geographically divides without question based on race.

### **SSDD School Profile – based on teacher observations**

- District goal is to reduce the flight of white students as well as middle class black students
- Main thrust is to bring back the flight students as opposed to bringing up the academic standards of the existing student population
- Questions come up about what to do with the percentage of underachieving, low income, minority students, who have moved in from the surrounding urban areas but the questions lack answers
- The achievement gap is a priority on paper only
- The achievement gap is acknowledged with lip service and programs that attract public attention
- Minority students, who are responsible for the “achievement gap”, are in actuality an after thought of the school
- There is low representation of minority students in the National Honors Society
- Inequities are the accepted “norm”
- Priority treatment is commonly given to those students who have ready access to lawyers or other higher order connections
- Minority students have a hard time competing because of white privilege
- School rules are enforced mostly when dealing with minority students

(Ex. Adherence to the “no hat” and dress code rules are enforced more with the minority students than the white students)

- College is explored as a viable option only for the upper and middle class white and black families
- The lower income minority students are clueless about their opportunities because they have less people advocating for them and educating them about their rights
- Parent meetings at the school cater to white parents and a chosen few black parents
- The administration is racially mixed but they continue to cater to the constituents with the most power (the people with the highest level of visibility and the loudest voices, who happen to be non-minority)
- Classes are divided by race, for example, Advanced Placement and high honors classes are predominantly white with the occasional minority student
- These classes are located on the upper level floors while lower level courses with predominantly minority students are located on the lower level floors
- There is a pared-down image of racism whereby the problem is skillfully minimized, glossed over, and not seen as a major concern to be dealt with.

During the five-year journaling period, questions and revelations unfolded, I was employed at the SSDD High School, where the lived experiences occurred. The idea of racial mixing, even with the fairly balanced statistics, was not visible in social groupings, lower tracked classes and/or higher tracked classes. “In class” race mixing at the high school was limited and only visible in a small percentage of classes that were

academically heterogeneously grouped. As the journal evolved, it became apparent that there were recurring negative themes involving racial inequities in the classroom.

SSDD is a well-known racially mixed, urban/suburban school but even with that distinction most classes were then in the school years, 1998 to 2003, and still are in 2006 actually segregated according to race. Sadly, in respect to academic achievement, a high percentage of white students were enrolled in the advance placement, high honors, and honors classes, whereas a high percentage of black students were enrolled in regular, basic skills, and special education classes, with only an occasional scattered few minority students in the upper echelon of classes. This was the reality at SSDD and therefore the reality of all who attended and worked at this school, teachers and students alike.

Essentially, this was the “norm”, the taken-for-granted, the “what is” in a school where there was an overall attitude of acceptance concerning the skewed racial grouping of students and blatant inequities of intellectual competency between the races.

These blatant and disturbing racially triggered occurrences gradually became apparent in my daily work schedule through journaling and after five years these realities helped to nurture the idea for a more extensive study. It was the magnitude of the racially charged circumstances that compelled me to further explore what was actually happening. For example, why were minority students over-represented in lower tracked classes in a racially diverse school that had previously been nationally deemed a model school for race relations? So puzzling was this phenomenon that I chose to go deeper and to engage in multiple qualitative methods of research in order to unearth the tacit answers to the

questions that were beginning to float to the surface as a result of reflecting on the lived experiences at SSDD. In this study, deeper meant going beyond the limitations of a single method (Kincheloe, 2001b).

### **My Students**

The names of the study participants, identifiable activities, and actual sites were masked for either ethical reasons and/or to protect the rights of the people and institution mentioned in the journal. I taught one hundred and eighty six students over the five-year time frame dating from September 1998 to June 2003. Each year a total of approximately thirty-five students were in my classes during this on-going study. A large number of black students, a lesser percentage of “other” minorities, namely Hispanic and Asian, and one or two white students comprised this relatively small group of students each year. I did not influence the student actions or outcomes during the study and interactions with students were naturalistic as defined by student/teacher relationships during everyday classroom activities and varied “in school” situations.

The “my students” chart depicted below is an outline of the students which I encountered over a five-year period. The students were below grade level in reading and writing as indicated by their standardized test scores therefore assigned to a basic skills class for remedial instruction in reading and writing. The basic skills instruction program at SSDD was not the traditional “pull out” situation but involved an “inclusive” instruction format. The total numbers of students assigned to the basic skills classes and their racial breakdown are indicated on the chart below. The racial breakdown listed on the chart

includes the number of black students in the basic skills classes in order to highlight the number of minority students in the remedial program. The high percentage of black students enrolled in the lower tracked classes was quite noticeable in SSDD only because of the racially balanced student population.

The magnitude of racial tracking in the basic skills classes compelled me to further explore what was actually happening. For example, I was moved to question, after analyzing the “my students” chart, first, “why are black students over-represented in the basic skills classes in a school that is obviously racially diverse and secondly “are there any white underachieving students at SSDD?”

### Chart #1

#### My Students

School Year	Total Number of Basic Skills Students	Racial Breakdown of Students in Basic Skills Classes
1998/1999 Phase 1a	43 students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19 black females</li> <li>• 17 black males</li> </ul>	2 white/5 other 36 black students
1999/2000 Phase 1a	43 students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20 black females</li> <li>• 19 black males</li> </ul>	1 white/3 other 39 black students
2000/2001 Phase 1a	33 students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20 black males</li> <li>• 10 black females</li> </ul>	3 other 30 black students
2001/2002 Phase 1b	32 students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 18 black males</li> <li>• 12 black females</li> </ul>	2 other 30 black students
2002/2003 Phase 1b	35 students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 black males</li> <li>• 6 black females</li> </ul>	2 white/3 other 30 black students

Note: *These statistics were generated from a racially diverse student body!*  
(46.3% African American, 43.6% White, 5.1% Hispanic, and 4.6% Asian/Other)

## **Teacher Journal**

The journal is comprised of 369 journal entries. It covers a five-year span of self-selected day-to-day events that occurred at SSDD. The 1998/1999 to 2002/2003 school year journal entries are listed sequentially and include highlighted four and five-year recaps of noteworthy events. The five-year cumulative teaching experience became a fervent mission to find a credible voice to share information about a distinct group of students who were traditionally left for dead, mentally brain dead, in the SSDD school system.

The initial rationale for the teacher journal was to make room for personal improvement within the educational realm by reflecting on my teaching practices. However, after journaling for five years, the initial rationale expanded to exploring the dynamics of minority underachievement and from that the idea of a research project evolved seeded by the troubling racial discrepancies that surfaced and became apparent on a daily basis at SSDD.

Describing and exploring the ever expanding “what is” situation of minority underachievement through journaling also created the possibility for enhanced critical consciousness. Through critical consciousness, I gradually realized that specific themes as well as openings for human agency were emerging from the journal and the magnitude of these circumstances compelled me to further explore what was actually happening at SSDD with increased rigor. The journal entries were derived from discussions in the teacher’s room, classroom activities, varied student interactions, observations of the cafeteria, attendance at faculty meetings, and professional development workshops as

well as from outside sources lurking beyond the schoolhouse doors, such as excerpts and critiques of movies, books, and timely articles.

Consequently, my thoughts coupled with these documented lived experiences converged to inadvertently create a text that had the possibility to enact transformational change within the educational realm. These new insights, with bountiful revelations for positive change were a part of an evolving process. This process expanded the self-made boundaries of the original purpose of my journal and presented new pathways for me to pursue, student and faculty encounters, in order to generate alternative perspectives on the existing situation of minority underachievement.

My teacher journaling guided the research in the direction of critical thought and provided the foundation for inquiry “inside and outside school walls” and highlights my lived world experiences as well as the experiences of the minority students in a specific high school in New Jersey through a teacher’s sphere of influence. Self-reporting documentation provoked ongoing and reflective ideas and was a journey that required mindful behavior that gradually created awakenings and sensitivities to “what is” and “what can be” for underachieving minority students in the context of school. The self-reporting journal format critically examined my ontological perspectives within the SSDD context. In this way, it re-situated students, various staff members, parents, and administrators in different school locations in order to help me better understand the complex epistemological contexts of minority underachievement. The journal as text, “addresses both personal and social issues by looking inward and outward, and addresses

temporal issues by looking not only to the event but to its past and to its future.”

(Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.50). Furthermore, upon analysis the journal text sheds light on minority identity formation as well as on the seeds that help to form school culture.

In the journaling process, the teacher and students as participants in the school environment examine life and teacher power while simultaneously analyzing and synthesizing information to create openings for alternatives. As teacher/researcher, I look for significant emerging themes and patterns in the journal entries and create a vantage point for myself as a critical teacher situated inside a specific school. The inside vantage point, in this study, provides a first hand view of the atrocities that feed into the prevalence of minority underachievement and the powerlessness of the disempowered teachers. By assuming an analytical view of the everyday and of institutional requirements and activities, thought is not fragmented and conceptual synthesis can occur (Kincheloe, 2001a). In effect, narrative inquiry through journaling provides critical awareness and a revelation of the complexity of school life for minority students, thereby, consequently resulting in an opening for alternative spaces.

The journal text also gives rise to the need for criticality whereby the “what is” can expand its vision into “what can be”. In order to deal with the world from a critically conscious perspective, incorporate challenging questions, open up to fresh insights and thereby assume multiple levels of awareness, an action plan is required. A critical perspective that incorporates a plan of action can only develop by going beneath the

surface and tapping into various levels of awareness. There is a need to simultaneously conceptualize, reconceptualize, interpret, and reinterpret the “norm” and alleged established “truths” that have been generated from history and subsequently persist today. For example, one “norm” that has evolved in the educational system is the “achievement gap”, defined as minority students who score below their white counterparts in reading and writing. A multiplicity of factors aid in embracing and enforcing this “norm” which become increasingly apparent in the teacher journal often making these factors contingent on socially constructed positions. In sum, equal access to power and knowledge often depend on repositioning oneself both inside and outside of school walls within a critically reconstructed web of reality in opposition to the “norm”.

My teacher journal reveals teacher and student strategic positioning in the school and is the learning tool chosen for this research to capture the lived experiences of the minority student tracked in lower level classes. It is seen as a text to highlight the various ways in which these specific students become affected on a daily basis by internal and external inputs ultimately contributing to below grade level performance. The text itself exemplifies teacher as researcher in search of a credible voice to share information about a distinct group of people in a school system and overtime provides insights into the world of the minority student.

### **Van Manen's Descriptive Techniques**

The teacher journal demonstrates a natural progression of data collection, which injects the inclusion of in-depth rather than surface level inquiry into my teaching practices as well as challenges the “norm” of minority underachievement to transformative outcomes. Thus, in order to ultimately move in the direction of transformative outcomes, I use the four following suggestions by Van Manen (1990) in the journal writing process for producing a description of lived-world experiences.

1. Describe the experience as you live (d) through it.

The journal presents a personal view of what happens at SSDD during a five-year period. My voice is set free in the writing process and awareness that teacher lived experiences interconnect and intersect with students, parents, staff and faculty lived experiences is revealed. With this revelation the minority student world through first hand and insider experiences became a part of my world. For the most part, the journal descriptions are detailed according to what transpires in any given situation from my teacher perspective and there is an attempt to eliminate personal feelings from the equation. However, I include personal interpretations in the form of “what is” comments in which case, that personalization might tend to influence the interpretation of the data.

2. Describe the experience from the inside, as it were: almost like a state of mind; the feelings, the mood, the emotions, etc.

As an insider, a teacher at the research site, I believe that the closer one is to a situation, the more one internalizes the circumstances. Feelings and emotions are intertwined with the actual events documented in the journal. I experienced inner stirrings while witnessing racist practices toward the minority students at the school and those feelings rose again when recording the incidences. In this way, as both a veteran teacher and a

person of Afro-Caribbean decent, my feelings became intermixed with my students and are entered in the journal in that manner.

3. Focus on a particular example or incident of the object of experience: describe specific events, an adventure, a happening, and a particular experience.

The descriptions of the faculty meetings are examples of specific events that illuminate what happened from a teacher's point of view. The focus on faculty meetings throughout the journal is only a slice of what life is about at SSDD in the minority student's expanded web of reality. Occasionally, faculty meetings focus on the absence of minority students in Advanced Placement classes at the school or on how minority students are missing from the mainstream population both physically and mentally in specific settings and contexts in the school. An affirming experience to counter the negative talk at faculty meetings was the Support Team meetings, where teachers, students, and parents got together off-site and on-site to share information about navigating the school system.

4. Focus on an example, which stands out for its vividness, or as it was the first time.

In human science, if we can see with fresh eyes, then we can experience anything for the "first time". In the journal, one can experience for the first time the pain of the labeled and stigmatized students through their own voices, in their classroom discourse, and in their unsettling questions. It is always a first time experience for me when I witness the marginalization of a student (pp. 64-65).

Focusing on Van Manen's descriptive techniques was a priority in the reflective stage of the study, which helped to focus the journal entries. It was challenging to weigh lived

world experiences and extract descriptive information that was pertinent to the research questions addressed in the study. Van Manen's suggestions helped the researcher to stay focused and also provided a checklist for staying within the realm of an adequate and realistic description of the lived world. Ultimately, the use of phenomenology greatly facilitated the process of identifying and describing specific lived world experiences from the first to the fifth year of the study and with that provided the potential for change.

### **Data Production/Analysis**

Van Manen (1990) suggests that the research process is connected to the writing process and that coupled with the text (teacher journal), there must be an accompanying interpretive task. Therefore, he recommends organizing the research to relate to the fundamental structure of the phenomenon itself. In following this recommendation, setting up a data production/analysis chart after the five-year journaling experience helped to introduce a sense of organization to the study and provide structure to the phenomenon of minority underachievement. (See data production/analysis chart below).

## Chart #2/ Phase 1a

## Data Production Chart

Data sources	Date/Phases/ # of Entries	Locations	Duration	Journal Chapters
Journal entries, presentations notes, charts, reflective comments, interpretive inserts, lift and platform entries/advocacy, teacher feedback, meeting notes, faculty, informal lunch talks	9/98-6/99  <b>Phase 1a/year 1 Teacher Journaling</b>  <b>37 journal entries</b>	SSDD Meeting sites	2 to 3 hrs per week writing journal entries	Teaching within the Sheltered Space of Naivety  Change – for whose benefit?
Journal entries, charts, lifts and platform entries. advocacy, presentations, reflective comments, interpretive inserts, reading materials, diagrams	9/99-6/00  <b>Phase 1a/year 2 Teacher Journaling</b>  <b>32 journal entries</b>	SSDD Meeting sites Local college	2 to 3 hrs, per week writing journal entries	Transforming the Basic Skills Program  Initiatives Pan Out
Journal entries, charts, reflective comments, interpretive inserts, lift and platform entries/advocacy	9/00-6/01  <b>Phase 1a/year 3 Teacher Journaling</b>  <b>22 journal entries</b>	SSDD Meeting sites Local college Community sites	2 to 3 hrs, per week writing journal entries	Inequalities Cited  Parental Supports

**Chart #2/ Phase 1b****Data Production Chart**

Anecdotal narratives Journal entries, charts, lifts and platform entries/advocacy, presentation information, reflective comments, interpretive insert, diagrams	9/01-6/02  <b>Phase 1b/year 4 Teacher Journaling</b>  <b>60 journal entries</b>	SSDD Meeting sites Local college Community sites	15 hrs. per week writing journal entries	Churning with Inner Turmoil  Turbulent Contemplations
Teacher feedback, reflective comments, charts, statistics, larger community, movies, lift and platform entries, support group, presentations, gap casualty entries, reading materials (books/articles)	9/02-6/03  <b>Phase 1b/year 5 Teacher Journaling</b>  <b>218 journal entries</b>	SSDD Meeting sites Local college Community sites	20 hrs. per week writing journal entries	Life's Circle  A Search for Power

**Chart #3/ Phase 2****Data Analysis Chart**

Reading journal text  Teacher journal, library materials, annotating journal entries, creating chapters in the journal, inserting chapter names	9/03 – 6/06  <b>Phase 2 Teacher as Researcher</b>  Editing data Coding data Analyzing data Interpreting data	Library Home SSDD	<b>Estimated time:</b> Approximately 10 hrs. per week coding the data by chapter  10-15 hrs. per week editing and rewriting all chapters  Library research to explore data implications  Final rewrites
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Based on the data production/analysis chart, this research process was basically split into two phases, which involved formulating text through writing and then critically analyzing and interpreting the data generated. In Phase #1a -1b there is an awareness that emerges which involves a personal heightened critical consciousness. Implementing Phases 1a and 1b then Phase 2, sequentially allowed as researcher to gradually develop an understanding of the essence of the minority underachievement problem. Essentially the research process needed the writing, reflective, and interpretive phases in order to be able to make sense of the written text and eventually reconstruct the “what is” into the “what can be”. In the analysis of the data the information gathered each year is examined and that information serves to create a bigger picture of what causes and aids in perpetuating minority underachievement in SSDD (Roth, 2005a).

### **Journal Phases**

In Phase 1a and 1b, critical phenomenology is apparent through teacher lived experiences documented in a day-to-day chronological format. Phase 1a, occurred over a three-year time period, where approximately two to three hours per week was devoted to collecting, filing, and storing information concerning lived world experiences that occurred in my teacher's sphere of influence. Journal entries were stored on scraps of paper at first in school, then moved to an at home filing and storage system. In Phase 1b, during the fourth year of the study approximately fifteen hours were spent per week recording data either that occurred that day or that had to be re-collected mostly in the evening and in the fifth year that time increased to approximately twenty hours per week. Within the phase 1a-1b time period, themes began to emerge. In Phase 2, which occurred in the sixth to eighth years of the study, reading, arranging and organizing data took the better part of the sixth year and coding, analyzing and interpreting the data was the focus of the seventh and eight years. In the Phase 2 three-year time span, new categories and additional themes emerged along with interpretations informed by the data.

Phase 1a and 1b is considered the journal writing phase of the study. The journal entries during the fourth school year 2001/2002 were influenced by the "9/11" tragedy, the most unusually turbulent times in the world and they coincided with a personal transformation in teacher criticality. The actual disaster and subsequent aftermath of 9/11 was indeed a significant event conjuring up dormant internalized revelations about my life, my being and the significance of my career. It also seeded a personal unrest within SSDD school walls. Consequently, this and other lived experiences were woven throughout the journal

text documenting my experiences as well as minority student experiences in specific contexts through the lens of a teacher.

During Phase 1a and 1b, I took occasional random notes and filed all faculty memos not as a researcher but as a teacher reflecting on my teaching. I taught 186 students in classroom settings and interacted with a number of students in social situations around the school. In a faculty and staff comprised of approximately 175 people, I observed and interacted closely only with approximately 20 to 40 teachers in various disciplines during the study. I observed the attitudes and reactions of my students in relation to their designated “achievement gap” labels as well as faculty attitudes and their reactions toward minority students during lunchroom social chatter and/or during brief hallway encounters. As a result of these observations, critical awareness was raised and I became more conscious about my life, the people surrounding me, and the lives of the lower tracked students as well as my personal role in minority underachievement.

I became a witness to what was happening to minority students who were tracked in lower level classes and in addition became aware of the “what is” at SSDD in relation to academic tracking of minority students. Gradually, I realized that I was a participant in the formulation and perpetuation of the problem. The dichotomy between teacher as witness to the atrocities and teacher as participant in the persistence of the problem prompted me to take a closer look at what my role was under these circumstances. Admittedly, in the first two years I sometimes felt like an outsider simply observing but over a period of time realized I was a player in the game, a participant in this particular

scenario and because of my daily presence in the place called school I was totally or at least partially responsible for what was going on and the subsequent outcome. I recognized the collective negligence of all who worked at SSDD because those who were witnessing the problem had like me not yet sought to directly address it. We were merely skirting around the parameters trying not to get our hands dirty. In this moment of revelation, writing was an outlet helping to purge my pain and soothe my conscience in the realization that I was a teacher who, due to mindless living, was up until now, a naïve accomplice, and a dutiful witness to the conditions at SSDD. Essentially, I was virtually too mesmerized with the “norm” and too accepting of the daily events at the school to take significant action to help the children.

The bigger problem outside of the school and myself, which connected to the minority underachievement phenomenon, was the effects of the phenomenon that trickled down into society. The consequences of the societal spill meant that if the immediate problem did not get nipped within the school system, it had the potential to linger, grow, and go beyond the school walls, gathering multiple negative appendices as it traveled along life’s winding road. Over the five-year period, as the research information unfolded the problem of minority underachievement seemed to venture beyond the walls of the school and into society as revealed in the journal entries. This was also the case in reverse whereby societal deficit influences trickled into the school from the outside.

Subsequently, this reality continuously redirected its flow all the while managing to flow from the inside and out again. Based on this awareness, the spillage of the problem into the mainstream society and back into the school was acknowledged in this study and

themes were determined to identify journal entries that involved self, school, and societal perspectives.

Phase 2, was the reflective phase of the study, which involved narrative inquiry and interpretation of data through critical hermeneutics. In this phase, the teacher reflects on the text and its multiple meanings and interprets recurring themes having to do with teacher advocacy, student sharing of voice, awareness of new literacies, and teacher/student support activities. Additional insights revealing societal origins unfolded such as the ingrained institutionalized racial inequalities, socially accepted positioning of individuals, and other institutionalized mechanisms that kept injustices alive in many schools.

Discovering and organizing themes was a time consuming process during Phase 2. Reflecting, analyzing, and interpreting the text involved reading and rereading the journal entries and writing notes in the margins in an attempt to discover underlying themes as well as new insights emerging from each reading. After multiple readings of the text, interpretations of themes were entered at the end of a number of journal entries in an effort to determine further significance of the data. The interpretations of these emerging themes or patterns were linked to appropriate theories, significant research findings, critical pedagogy, and/or specific literature and added to the end of each journal chapter. Later, in an effort to connect similar themes and extract similar categories, I collected that information, group it together, and then labeled it in preparation for further interpretations as the world continued to change within the research time frame of 1998 to 2003. In

essence, information uncovered in the journal text was essential in generating on-going critical interpretations of the “what is”, the “what can be”, and the action needed to get there.

### **Critical Phenomenology/Critical Hermeneutics**

Noting lived experiences in a journaling format enabled me as a teacher/researcher to better understand the present state of minority education in SSDD and thus create the possibility for self, school, and societal issues to be included in the journal writing and interpretive process. The phenomenologist, with the capacity to tap into the lived experiences of minority students, projects an intuit ability to go below the surface and thus, in this study I entered the minority student’s world through the teacher’s sphere of influence with the intention of not only understanding “what is” but also understanding the possibility for “what can be”. As a result, one advantage of exploring the lived world of lower tracked students through a mixture of cultural, racial, political, and historical lenses is to be able to get a realistic glimpse of the “what is” in their world before the “what can be” can even be determined. In this complex situation, the use of phenomenology in research teaches us that we cannot understand an educational act without understanding the framework, and the context within which teachers, students, and administrators make sense of their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Kincheloe, 2001a p. 222). In essence, both the teacher and student lived world experiences must be taken into consideration when observing, questioning, analyzing, and interpreting. Thus, in sum, if we are to uncover the intricacies of individuals as they relate to educational and societal life along with that willingness to see the “what is”, we must also be ready to

implement meaningful change and embark on that comprehensive process of transformation.

The comprehensive process of recording lived world experiences and then as a result becoming a part of transformational change was both intriguing and compelling for and transpired during this research project. It is said that every interpretation is historical and relative in the sense that it always presupposes historically transmitted preconceptions, and in order to be relevant, the interpreter applies it in the present tense (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000 p.85). In other words, a continuum manifests in the process and immediately connects the past and the present in which case interpretation of data inevitably adds to the complexity of the teacher's sphere of influence and extends the continuum with its multiple themes. Keeping in mind the idea that history, ontological perspectives, and the "other" influence interpretation; it is all the more reason to be critically present if and when the role of agency is assumed during this process. In reality, everything comes full circle, the historicity of the teacher/researcher, the lives of the students observed in the study, as well as the history of urban education and the complexity of society, all eventually collapse into the teacher's sphere of influence. Hence, being mindful of the comprehensive lived world of self and students is a key component of this study.

Fundamentally, being mindful of life's unpredictable connections is a step toward the complexity of criticality, which paces itself and eventually envelops this research in multiple ways. Critical theory in education as defined by Van Manen (1990) states that,

“it has a thrust that aims at promoting critical consciousness, and struggles to break down the institutional structures and arrangements which reproduce oppressive ideologies and the social inequalities that are sustained and produced by these social structures and ideologies” (p.176). In a similar context, Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) refer to critical theory as critical hermeneutics with an emancipatory interest present that is void of rigid and judgmental formulaic solutions (p.110).

Incorporating the notion of critical consciousness, I purposely chose specific information to be highlighted in the teacher journal and other information to be ignored and in doing this exercised criticality by reading and rereading data for the purpose of repeatedly going deeper. My choice of journal information was based on patterns that lie within the school as well as personal schema (Roth, 2005a). These choices demonstrated awareness and rejection of oppressive structures and support emancipatory efforts in the interest of change.

The thought process of looking at the world using resources and schema comes full circle and so aptly points to the hermeneutic circle where it appears that “the part can only be understood from the whole, and then whole only from the parts.” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, p.53) Thus, analyzing the multiple sides of minority underachievement, which comprise the “parts”, combined with the complexities that slowly come to light in the interpretive phase and comprise the “whole”, inevitably provide a constantly changing expanded context as well as broader perspectives about the phenomenon of underachieving minority students.

Critical phenomenology and critical hermeneutics include lived world experiences known as the “what is” and project for the “what can be” under the pervasiveness of critically. In a nutshell, the process that was encountered in this study began with the naturally derived journal entries from lived world experiences, then moved on to explore the means in which the entries were collected, I then analyzed the information gathered, and finally, resolved to interpret “what can be” done with the collected information. In this manner, the text broadened the scope of the research and I became both teacher and researcher with altered vision, “oriented to the world in a pedagogic way” (Van Manen, 1990, p.151). In sum, opting for critical pedagogic orientation is to ultimately arrive at an understanding of the relationships and connections that are part to whole and whole to part, all combining and coming full circle, essentially witnessing the hermeneutic process through multiple avenues eventually linking lived world experiences in a myriad of ways.

The hermeneutic circle, which involves the circularity of the interpretation of information as well as its multiple layers of interpretive possibilities, helps to concretize the complexity of the interpretation of all variables. In effect, the circle provides a template for critical interpretation and emphasizes the broad scope and intricacies of human existence in general. It connects pre-understanding and new understandings or innate, surface, and in-depth understandings. Undoubtedly, the interpretive circle shies away from positivistic notions of fragmented bits of information without establishment of connection and moves toward mindful interconnectedness of existence coupled with constantly changing world information. The hermeneutic layers provide pathways to the

embedded variety of settings and allow for the exposure of a particular historical period and specific culture or collision of cultures (Kincheloe, 2003a). The variety of settings experienced by minority students in the five-year time frame related to a specific time in history and thus constructed a specific school culture. For example, I observed that the historic event of 9/11 had a noticeable and unique impact on the SSDD school culture and starting from that September of 2001, I increased my journal entries. In addition inside the school walls, settings in classrooms, hallways, lunchrooms, and social areas, such as playgrounds, auditoriums, and offices provided a backdrop for the formation of history and culture and enabled minority students as well as other teachers to separately and collectively construct their reality. The teacher journal used in this dissertation acted as a catalyst to develop interpretive thought from a critical consciousness as well as expose the realities of SSDD from multiple perspectives.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

The work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) of narrative inquiry is strongly influenced by John Dewey. These authors create a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third” using Deweyan ideas of interaction and continuity as a frame of reference (p.50). In this study, the personal and social represents the flow of interactions that occurs inside and outside the schooling context, which eventually becomes text in the form of a teacher journal.

Temporality refers to the flow that occurs between the past, present, and future simultaneously with the flow of the personal and social events. The place, which is seen as a physical boundary, in this research, is the SSDD High School, which is what Clandinin and Connelly (2002) refer as the “inquiry landscape” or the research site. In this space, the teacher/researcher’s personal, private, and professional life flows across the boundaries into the research site where the narrative inquiry boundaries expand and contract and become interactively permeable.

“Field text is data that is created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of field experience” (p. 92). Life experiences are the source of my field text in this study and are selective reconstructions of field experiences which embody an interpretive process” (p. 99). My teacher journal represents the field text or data in this research and is a storytelling of the teacher’s lived world experiences, which are “shaped by the selective interest of the researcher” (p. 94). The journal is not only a personal rendition of “what is” at SSDD from the lens of a teacher but it also contains excerpts of collected documents such as faculty meeting minutes, information from faculty newsletters and other pertinent schooling artifacts. Therefore it is shaped by a combination of artifacts that I interact with along with personalized recollections of my experiences.

## **Conclusion**

### **“From Destruction Come New Beginnings” (Greene, 1995)**

After journaling for five-years and then reflectively re-reading the journal text, my evolved critical mind gradually opened up to new realities and dispelled the destructive myths about the futility associated with minority achievement. In this manner, through journaling, I came to realize what was happening with a specific isolated and silenced population in SSDD. Essentially, I began to see the potential for change only after I witnessed the overwhelming destruction.

Undoubtedly, in the overall complexity of this research, through lived experiences come depth of understanding and the level of criticality one needs to forge ahead toward a commitment to advocacy and emancipatory practices with an open mindset. Based on these factors, this study is not only a description of the “what is,” it is an uncovering of the possibilities for “what can be” and a call for action. It is not just a place to deposit thoughts and words on paper, but rather an opening for the possibility for change. Hopefully, the information presented in this study will be a catalytic experience and provoke its own kind of natural trickle down effect and move others to human agency.

## **Chapter 5 - Immersed in Naivety: The Story Begins**

### **Introduction: Phase 1a**

This dissertation is first about my search for teacher voice within school walls and second understanding the power of my voice within those walls. As a result of my search, I discovered while interpreting my journaling notes that teacher voice could provide feasible alternative outcomes for lower tracked minority students. Therefore, early on in Phase 1a of the journaling process, finding voice was identified as a primary factor to be explored. Mouth open or closed, either way, I sought to understand the significance of my voice and how additional spaces could be created through teacher agency for other to hear my voice, which in turn would eventually lead a path to student self-empowerment and self-advocacy. Within the SSDD schooling context voice was characterized on the one hand as a silenced and on the other as the opening up of voice. Under the auspices of my teacher agency, student self-empowerment and self-advocacy was anticipated and the enhancement of my teacher voice was necessary in order for me to access power to achieve these ends. Thus, critical inquiry of self was born in my naive state and grew in its initial phase from a lack of personal criticality to a heightened level of critical consciousness.

Critical consciousness attained through journaling helped me to evolve from the mindset of the teacher loyalty oaths from the 1920s and 1930s (Ravitch, 2000), mindlessly professing and demonstrating loyalty to the educational beliefs of the time. It caused me to adhere to my innate moral fibers knowing what was morally acceptable for the betterment of my students and myself and urged me to reflect on the journal entries while

considering the reality of acts against children that were blatantly “wrong”. Thus, again practicing teacher agency in an effort to transform the existing system into viable spaces that helped to enhance the well being of all human beings both intellectually and socially.

Paramount to this study was my persistence in finding pathways to openings for me as teacher/researcher to develop understandings about teacher agency through critical consciousness. Surprisingly, I realized in order to understand ways to advocate for my students first I had to acknowledge SSDD teacher-deskilling tactics and accept the idea that I played an active part in the deskilling process of my students as well myself.

Subsequently, in stages, I was motivated to undo embedded deskilling practices at SSDD with the understanding that these changes would affect both teachers and students. I assumed the power to change these practices by taking action and using a critical voice. The next step, as demonstrated within the themes of the data, was for me to transfer aspects of how I nurtured self-advocacy and self-empowerment to underachieving minority students for the purpose of creating affirming rather than deficit academic life alternatives.

As a Reading Specialist, I was concerned with the shockingly low literacy performance of a number of minority students in my classes at SSDD. The low performance was even more disturbing in light of the African American history of literacy. In reality, history reveals that from slavery to the Civil Rights Era blacks were denied an education and as a result they struggled to be literate as a viable means to gain their freedom (Perry, Steele,

& Hilliard III, 2003). Therefore, African Americans were in constant pursuit of literacy skills. Today, in the post Civil Rights Era, literacy for African Americans does not guarantee freedom or economic mobility (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003).

I believe that present day ...

“Counternarratives about African Americans as intellectuals can have sufficient power to contest the negative narratives about African American that are expressed in the media and encoded in the ideologies and practices of schools” (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003, p. 51).

With this belief and in an effort to disband the historical notion of literacy for oppression and the present day dead end notion of African American literacy, I formulated a new plan and personal stance concerning this problem to take action in hopes of altering the outcome of the standardized test results that provided the documentation for this phenomenon to continue. I believed that a broad and flexible view of the process of knowledge construction was necessary, in light of new and expanding variables in the areas of politics, social life, diverse cultural and aspects and self. I considered Freire’s codification process and wondered how choosing an affirming focus for codification would affect the negative societal views of minority students. Whereas, Freire’s codification “process depicted problems and contradictions in the lived worlds of students” (Kincheloe, 2004, pp.70-71), maybe depicting accomplishments would foster more positive outcomes.

With multiple choices available, in order to successfully formulate a workable plan, first, I temporarily took on a reductionist attitude. I broke down the distinctive parts of the possible positions I could assume as well as actions I could take in order for change to

occur, then I moved to the sidelines to analyze what my role meant under these circumstances. In this manner, I approached the problem from what would be considered a linear viewpoint, focusing only within the school walls but soon realized that a broader nonlinear perspective was necessary. With this mindset, I went outside of the box and developed a multidimensional perspective about teacher agency, which encompassed the consideration of not only aspects of self but also school and society.

Constantly changing and fluid in movement was my nonlinear perspective during the journaling years. My journey was similar to climbing a ladder with a weight attached to me pulling me in all directions in an effort to sabotage all progress. In the first year of journaling, I stood at the bottom rung and in that position I was like a naïve newborn baby, brand new to the environment and eager to move along. I had to learn how to see again in this confusing mixed-message reality, to navigate the system, to experiment with curriculum and educational theories and connect with human beings in the SSDD surroundings. In this naïve state I lingered for three years while learning about equity issues and the effects of race and class issues on a school population. Engaging in these experiences allowed me to ascend several steps up the ladder but even with this ascension a pinnacle was nowhere in sight. It was apparent that I needed to go deeper with my “what is” inquiry and become more rigorous with my teacher agency to act on the “what can be”.

Phenomenological reflection allowed me to go deeper providing a method of inquiry into actual lived world events occurring at SSDD and in addition helped me to bring collected data into perspective.

Human Science studies “persons” or beings that have “consciousness” and that “act purposefully” in and on the world by creating objects of “meaning” that are “expressions” of how human beings exist in the world (Van Manen, 1990, p. 3-4)

This study is about me as a teacher who encounters others who have “consciousness” which in turn creates meaningful lived experiences that merge with my meaningful lived experiences. I have documented the purposeful acts of these different “persons” along with my own in a journaling format as a representation of how these objects of “meaning” and “expression” create the lived world at SSDD.

The collected data in my teacher journal about daily school occurrences over the five-year period at SSDD provided me with an assortment of perspectives and managed to crystallize Tatum’s (1997) idea of the sphere of influence. In my teacher sphere of influence I observed multiple, in school and outside of school, layers of deficit and affirming influences constantly emerging and reminding me that I had a measure of responsibility in what happened at SSDD. Hence, in light of the numerous layers of life information produced within the school walls seemed to indicate a lack of concern for human beings. The student population, which school was designated to service, was neglected and I observed crucial mind-boggling incidences involving social injustices on a daily basis. This was the SSDD reality, which resulted in human tragedies and it was within this reality that I began to question the humanity of the system.

As my journal writing progressed over the years, it became apparent that injustices against human beings were not discriminating and even those that could not be heard, which in this case was my voice as a teacher as well as the voices of my students were included. Under these circumstances, at times, I was weakened and journal writing became a reprieve for me. As Greene (1995) indicated when she felt the spaces of choice narrowing she wrote to name alternatives and to open herself to possibilities (p.107). The awareness of student/teacher silence, which emerged through journaling, helped me as a black female to meld the bond between minority students and myself in more nontraditional rather than traditional ways both inside and outside the classroom. I would argue that this bond was due to my ability to identify with much of the feelings my students experienced.

The fact that my students and I shared the same race often helped to align my feelings and perspectives with how they perceived the routine, taken-for-granted, activities at SSDD. Race was a factor that overshadowed classroom learning situations, student course scheduling, student achievement, student club memberships, who received detentions, and basically all aspects of school life, related to academic and/or social activities, that touched the lives of minority students. The controlling and larger than life presence of the destructive forces of race at the school became increasingly disturbing. I observed minority students opting to succumb to the predetermined underdog positionality, with the outward acceptance of negative labels and stereotypes due to the feeling of normalcy these atrocities represented. At the helm, the SSDD power holders controlled the organization of the school by having racial inscriptions as well as the

school's racist ideology serve to perpetuate the "what is" at SSDD (Pinar et al., 2002). The school, under these circumstances, became both the site for continued negative reproductions of racist acts against children and thus on a broader scale predicted the future of race relations in SSDD (Pinar et al., 2002).

In the current American society, as it unfolds at SSDD, labels affirm and at times determine who we are. Given these circumstances I observed minority students acknowledge their situation, bond to the reality of the moment and ultimately internalize the underlying messages of their lived world experiences. In this ostensibly deterministic environment, I initiated academic as well as social interventions, and students convened at decisive life altering crossroads. Consequently, during these periodic interventions, such as the Parent/Student Support Group or implementation of a pilot course, they either continued along the traditional path or made a paradigm shift depending on the magnitude of my teacher interventions. On these occasions, the effectiveness of teacher agency was apparent through student as well as administrator responses.

When my eyes were opened to the effectiveness of teacher agency that simply served to whet my appetite to take further action. Therefore, I embraced that critical mindful perspective and was able to perfect the implementation of critical changes within the SSDD that impacted my life and the lives of my students as well as the parents. I embarked on a one-woman teacher crusade for change and in order to continue self-motivation I thought of Vivian Paley's (1979) words ...

"This is the way we shall advance, one voice at a time,  
explaining what is important about ourselves" (p. xvi).

Initially with one voice, I observed myself as a teacher and reacquainted myself with my roots. I observed my students, heard their voices, felt their pain and from there I was able to continue the journey of taking personal responsibility for change by becoming aware of the “what is” at SSDD through a personal lens. I advanced cautiously listening to all voices and gradually my one voice multiplied and joined others.

### **“What Is”**

In a journal entry from *September 15, 1998* listed below, I noted the racial imbalance of my classes (see chart #1). This was an early sign that teacher agency was needed on my part in order to intervene on behalf of my students. The following account represented the “what is” at SSDD.

### **Journal Excerpt #1**

I am teaching five basic skills classes, with a total of forty-three students, and an enrollment of less than 15 students per class. One positive aspect about the basic skills classes is the class size. Small class size is an asset in working with students who are below grade level in reading and/or writing. The racial breakdown of the classes in the September 98/June 99-school year was thirty-six Black students, five other, and two white. Seventeen of the thirty-six Black students are Black males, which is racially disproportionate based on the SSDD student body.

In the second year again there were forty-three students enrolled in my basic skill classes, thirty-nine of which were Black and in the following year there were thirty-three students enrolled thirty of which were Black students. The fourth year had an enrollment of thirty-two students, thirty of which were Black and in the last year of the study the basic skill class enrollment was thirty-five students, thirty of which were Black. The

overrepresentation of Black students in basic skill classes was one of my first eye opening introductions to the inequities at SSDD concerning minority students. The use of privilege and the lack of emotional affect in underachieving minority students as well as the sabotaging efforts of the power holders were just a few of the cancerous sores festering within the walls of SSDD.

In *June 1998* at the end of the school year, I made the following observation about privilege in relationship to race, which is documented in the journal entry below ...

### **Journal Excerpt #2**

This year I discovered that SSDD dispersed an assortment of privileges to select groups of students, the high achieving white students and/or the students with vocal parents, who were in the majority of cases the parents of the high achieving white students were usually the favored group. Repeatedly these select groups were granted enrollment in higher tracked classes and the privileged parents were more likely to be represented on decision making governing school boards. In this scenario, privilege manifested itself in such places as the classroom, in matters concerning school policies, and in the implementation of discipline, in the matter of who gets detention and who does not for infractions of the rules. I would soon be faced with this reality and how it resulted in the damaging effects to the school community as well as the awareness of my compliance in the continuance of this particular problem. This idea of privilege, so embedded in the SSDD school culture, successfully detracted from the cohesiveness of the school community and managed to privilege one race over another. As a result, I was distracted from the important issue of social justice, which should have been my priority.

The subtle and sometimes obvious deficit pervasiveness of the SSDD environment captured the naïve aspects of my essence in an unconscious and intoxicating manner but eventually the injustices that I observed helped to surface my critical mindful state and gradually propel me into action. In this state of transition, I opened up my imagination to see the possibilities (Greene, 1995). I traipsed through a panacea of tacit student and teacher opportunities in this new environment and embraced the excitement of each moment in search of possible opportunities for teacher agency. My energy was effervescent and ready to flow wherever the openings presented themselves.

In contrast to my upbeat feelings, I was reluctantly aware but dismissive of the flickers of discontent and underlying frenzy from a number of faculty members, which lurked in the underbrush of the SSDD surroundings. The prevalence of unrest was a contradiction to the warm and fuzzy feelings I had experienced in September of my first year at this school. On one hand this apparent discrepancy managed to bristle the hairs on the back of my neck but on the other hand, like a fire suddenly ignited, I quickly became enthralled with the sparks of change rather than the inevitable destruction. Under these sordid conditions I continued to move forward dowsing the worries and leaving them to smolder at least temporarily. It appeared at least on the surface that opportunities were overflowing and were there for the taking but in actuality opportunities were only slated for the few, who met the criteria a specific of race, gender, and economic status. I contemplated the situation at hand and with these mixed messages abounding, I decided to seize opportune moments as they presented themselves.

In the first year changes were minimal and involved using teacher voice to represent my students by making presentations to the SSDD power holders. In addition, in an effort to build on my own knowledge about culturally responsive teaching I attended workshops and courses for professional development. My first initiative, which promoted student innovative academic enrichment, was to develop a Reading Lab at the school. The Reading Lab was actually requested by the power holders but surprisingly when it opened they only gave minimal support to ensure its success. The history of the Lab unfolded within a five-year period and is documented below in an excerpt from the journal text of *June 2003*.

### **Journal Excerpt #3**

#### A Brief History of the Reading Lab

Things that looked good on the surface were readily incorporated into the SSDD overall plan and swept under the all-mighty “good” school perception umbrella, whereas anything that could offer a facelift to the school and assist in maintaining the school’s “good” name inside as well as outside the school walls was considered a valid undertaking. The creation of the Reading Lab fit into this category and whether the Lab was functional or not was not the priority. Whether the basic skills students were serviced or not was not the priority. If it looked “good”, it became a part of SSDD but only in name and that is the category in which the Lab fell under, in name only as a benefit to the student body. The most frustrating thing was in faculty meetings when administrators continued to refer to the Reading Lab as if it were up and running and servicing basic skills students. The power holders wanted the Lab to be perceived as one of their accomplishments in the closing of the “achievement gap” and for a while they were

successful with that premise. In actuality, the Lab was successful for about one year, there were paid staff members, students coming in to be serviced, assistance provided from the local college, and some benefits to the students were apparent. But as usual the next year we lost the full use of the room that housed the Lab. In addition, administrators claimed they did not have money to pay the Lab assistants anymore and the great Lab aspirations began to plummet.

The Reading Lab was sabotaged from two ends; the power holders and the veteran teachers. It was demonstrated through these actions that the power holders saw more benefits and higher visibility in supporting the non-minority student population therefore they dropped the Reading Lab venture as if suddenly infected with a rare contagious disease and moved on to other reform efforts that would benefit the student population with the most voice. Understandably, under these wavering conditions, most of the veteran teachers did not support the Lab from the beginning, perhaps because the veteran teachers with the foresight to see the destiny of the Lab, did not want to waste their time on something that would not be top priority in a couple of years. In the end, the intuition of the veteran teachers proved to be correct and the Lab experienced a short history. Sadly, the outcome reeked of what happens when the odds are against those without power and in this case those without power were the underachieving minority students and the outcome was the closure of the Lab.

Curiously even though the Lab was not fully functional and it lacked administrative support, the power holders continued to list the Lab on the SSDD faculty agenda and request presentations to be made about the Lab in support of the illusion of the “model

school” promotion. This continued to occur long after the Lab was non-existent. The most ludicrous aspect of the story involved my participation in one of these faculty dog and pony shows. At this show, I presented information about the Lab as if hypnotized and acting on automatic pilot. The powers that be coaxed me to participate in this smoke and mirrors event by dangling a carrot in front of me promising that the outcome of the presentation would help to solicit the support I needed for the continuation of the Reading Lab. Alas, these false promises were not fulfilled and I learned another lesson about deception.

In the midst of this deceptive behavior, I continued to make presentations, attend professional development workshops and access creative resources to assist Reading Lab students all the while steadily observing and attempting to circumvent the problems. Under these circumstances of deceit I observed that minority students were still falling by the wayside and in my eyes change could not come soon enough. Time was of the essence. What I observed in Phase 1a, about the damaging effects to my students in reference to the deficit culture of the school while as a novice at teacher agency is summarized in the following journal entry from *December 1999*.

#### **Journal Excerpt #4**

Imagine students in a vacuous state, “near death”, who come to school without pen or paper, leave school everyday without books, and manage to maintain a certain level of invisibility during the school day. These students are lost, without a life purpose, and experiencing a void. When I see these “near death” students in front of me, I want to scream out, “please don’t die on me”! These students have been rendered powerless by the educational system and project a stereophonic

resonance that affects the core of society. In their presence my spirit becomes weakened in the midst of their apparent despair and at times I am paralyzed by my feelings and the hesitation that surrounds me adds to my vacillation. Action is needed to remedy this type of situation. The cry is loud and the call to turn something negative into something positive screams out to me. As a teacher, I chose to get involved in the process and stand firm until results are visible. With this critical mindset I am required to go far beyond traditional limitations and create new boundaries because in the twenty-first century the existing boundaries should be rendered extinct. In this situation, I think about the words from a book entitled, *The Saint The Surfer and The CEO*, listed below, and then seek motivation and vow to go beyond my personal limits.

Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the  
limits of the world. But a few do not. Join them (Sharma, 2003, p.34)

It was obvious by December 1999 that at this point I needed to go beyond the limitations presented within the basic skills program at SSDD. Based on two factors, lack of development of the existing basic skills program whereas the program did not have curriculum guidelines, and student enrollment in the basic skills program was still overrepresented by minority students, change was needed. My concentrated efforts revolved around that program which included not only academic enhancement but which also involved developing a “culturally responsive” curriculum along with the implementation of other support systems (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The Reading Lab, the Redesign/School Reform efforts, my own professional development, implementation of the Parent/Student Support Group, as well as my self-evaluation and self-improvement efforts all became an integral part of my personal teacher agency. As a result of these interventions an extended supportive environment evolved as well as the beginnings of an

enriched basic skills program fostering affirming purposes and goals to achieve student dignity. These interventions in retrospect provided further information and insights into the various aspects that contributed to minority underachievement on a daily basis.

At this crucial point, curriculum writing and development were not my only concerns. Additional support systems for parents and students to assist them in navigating the SSDD school system was also a concern and in this area because I began to notice the lack of visibility of the parents of color in the power leveraging facets of the school. I was particularly alarmed by the absence of minority parents in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and other school planning gatherings. It seemed as if these parents were strategically and purposefully eliminated from the governing and decision-making processes of the school. In an effort to assure the visibility of the low profile minority parents, I created a parent/student support group. This group was another personal proactive venture on my part, which over a four-year period expanded and attracted other teachers to get involved for the purpose of enhancing teacher agency and voice in the everyday life of the school and introducing the voices of minority parents and students to the SSDD power holders. I believe as Keiser, “in theory, once teachers decide (if they do) to “actively work against” social injustice, they can become advocates not only for their students, but mentors as well, modeling for them to work for social justice” (Michelli & Keiser, 2005, p. 50).

My dream initiative was to engage all hard to reach parents in their children’s academic lives and in the workings of the school in order to enhance the self-esteem of the students

through this parent/student support group. My idea was to simultaneously get students to empower themselves while also getting the parents to advocate for their children at the school. This meant having students empower adults who would care enough about them to be willing to attend the parent/student support meetings with them. This process turned out to be very difficult and tedious—but worthwhile and successful for a time.

A model was created to build support teams for each student. The support team was comprised of a volunteer teacher, an adult, a community representative, and a student. The premise would be that students and caring adults would be able to access the support team teachers for accompaniment to school conferences and advice on academic or discipline problems. Each year the word spread about the support group and the participant numbers increased, but it was still challenging to hold onto our numbers.

Of course the school had other parent organizations but these groups did not have outreach for parents who were reluctant—for a variety of reasons—to broach the school steps. Sadly, this was the mindset of many of the support group parents. The support team allowed students a first hand glimpse at what steps were needed to manage and control their destinies and that information also opened up the unknown world of privilege to the parents of the basic skills students as well in order for them to be effective advocates for their children. The support team had its focus on the promotion of high achievement for basic skills students and one unique aspect was student involvement was required. Students were included in their team because the ultimate goal was for them to become self-empowered, take ownership for their future and ultimately act as advocates for

themselves. It required much determination, energy, and passion to follow my dream but in the end it was powerful to witness students, especially those who have been neglected in the past, advocating for themselves. This type of self-motivated empowerment made the rewards outweigh the difficult paths encountered in reaching the dream.

During the middle—the third year—of the journaling experience a new set of challenges occurred. I realized at this point that I had much more to learn and subsequently decided to get more rigorous about documenting the “what is”. In the beginning, I was under the impression that I was powerless to make personal changes in my pedagogical, social, and political practices let alone influence administrative practices at SSDD, but the results and benefits of my actions proved my early beliefs to be wrong. My epiphany came when I realized I actually had the power to initiate and implement changes that could alter the academic outcome of my students. What I realized was that the changes I had enacted ranged from dealing with matters within the school walls and also outside of the school walls. I knew just from the results of my initial efforts at teacher agency that I owed my best “self” to all students, and with my continued “self” growth I could find additional ways to express agency.

My professional aspirations to pursue the exploration of my teaching practices and also the responsibilities to myself for personal improvement and my personal commitment to the SSDD minority student population become a continuously unfolding priority. This priority demanded access to a path for self-empowerment and self-advocacy, which burned like a fever within me when I realized the extent of the problem to my students

and me as well. As a result, a strong desire to squelch the bureaucratic strongholds that continued to cut off the higher potential of basic skills minority students festered in me. And as I internalized this feeling, it became more important to formulate a synergistic relationship with self, school, and society, align myself with the more affirming influences in the school and seek the changes that would produce more positive life long alternatives for minority students.

At this time I again began to experience the recurring feelings of overwhelming responsibility and needed to replenish my motivation to pursue teacher agency. Through the words of Angel Kyodo Williams (2000) in *being black*, which is listed below from a journal entry of *February 17, 2000*, I was able to find inspiration and to continue my quest for voice and power.

#### **Journal Excerpt #5**

“You would never dream of making your living at a company run by known child molesters. In the same way, you have to think of what it means to work for someone that molests whole communities and the world by tearing down rain forests that provide balance for ecosystems and nourish life”(p. 115).

After reading this I asked myself “Does my job create evil in the world? Am I working for a company or people that add more suffering to the world? This thought provoking excerpt ruffled my existence. It made me stop and think about the questions raised and I had to admit that my answer, under present circumstances at SSDD, was that teaching helped to create evil in the world. The labels, the stigmas, the untapped talents of minority students, and the multiple negative forces in place at the school would eventually be the source of negative outcomes and thus add up to

additional pain in the world. I was tormented at the idea of being a part of something evil in connection to children and preceded to take personal responsibility for the creation of evil and embark on a close examination of how I fit into this reality and also continue to reexamine how I could make a difference by changing that reality.

This reading experience brought me back to a place of beginning, back to a place where I could trace my steps. How did I arrive at this place? I felt like a hypocrite, a person who was in charge of laying out the future for others, a person who was supposed to nurture and ensure the highest potential of those I came in contact with but I was not living up to that commitment. Even though I took my goals seriously, the “taken for granted” attitude had touched me along the way and tainted my response behavior. I had to look within and explore the road to personal repair in order to insure that I would be able to fulfill my one hundred percent commitment to my students—a commitment focused on finding their voices and thus helping them gain the possibility of self-empowerment and self-advocacy.

To summarize, a salient journal entry comes to mind from *November 10, 2002*, which reiterates my responsibility to my students and emphasizes the need to use voice in search of power for self-actualization and self-fulfillment.

### **Journal Excerpt #6**

Underachieving minority students are often defenseless among the existing deficit odds they have been dealt. But as a teacher, a “so-called” educated person, I know exactly what I am doing when I turn my head away from these neglected children. In essence I am saying that it is somebody else’s responsibility. I am saying my students are the

responsibility of the parents, power holders at the school, or even the government, anybody else but me. With all the old and new research information floating around about minority underachievement and the high tech access to this information, it is time to step back, take a good look, and see how I, as a teacher, fit into the bigger picture. Each person fits into the teacher's sphere of influence. I am in the students' world as well and essentially, in that space I can hear their silent pleas for help. When trapped in this silence, is it possible to circumvent the turbulent waters that paralyze our thoughts and actions and render us ill equipped to take action?

I argue that we can circumvent the turbulent waters of despair. I was able to become a catalyst for change by journaling and reflecting on the process. I kept a journal about my experiences in teaching and learning, navigating the system, taking action steps to enhance student worth, embarking on leadership projects, and experiencing personal teacher growth and with those lived experiences I was able to maximize the experience and touch other lives. Based on actual events, this study introduced background information needed to highlight the negative effects of racial, political, and bureaucratic entanglements due to precedents designated by those in power over underachieving minority students. It identified and analyzed vision blockers, people with myopic or limited vision, who aided in obstructing academic achievement, and showed how consequently they contribute to the ever famous "achievement gap" between black and white students. I propose my teacher journal, comprised of first hand ethnographic anecdotal experiences offered a personal gateway into teacher agency for me, making it possible for me to escape the restraints of the Skinner boxes, thus breaking free of the

chains that virtually bound me to the acceptance of existing conditions (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999). As a result, I was able to impact my students' lives in an affirming way and help "to prepare them to be participating citizens in our social and political democracy" (Michelli & Keiser, 2005, p. 3).

### **Making History**

Admittedly, originally the journal insights were solely for my personal growth but by acting on information learned I was able to share the benefits and failures with my colleagues and students as well as their parents to create alternatives. The journal insights became history in the making and I shared the insights. Dewey said, "To study history is not to amass information, but to use information in constructing a vivid picture of how and why men did thus and so; achieved their successes and came to their failures" (Dewey, 1900, p. 151). I attempted to use the history generated from my lived experiences to create a vivid picture of the hypocrisies and covert/overt growth opportunities obscured in a building historically earmarked for educating children.

SSDD undertook a school redesign program and during this four-year Redesign period of school reform at the school, history was in the making. The restrictive nature of the school structure became apparent during the change process. I came to understand during this era the reality of the damaging effects of incremental change. In the school's Redesign Era there was evidence of incremental changes and essentially, at the end of that era, the result was the eradication of progressive ideas, little remaining remnants of positive change, benefiting only a choice few, and emphasis on the powerlessness of

teachers, all of which combined had a profound impact on the SSDD school ideology and culture.

In the Redesign Era, I learned that the power holders, usually administrators were either oblivious to the damaging legacies they were creating through their callous actions or they simply did not care about the fate of the underachieving minority students. As the reflective phase of the study progressed the journal text continued to reveal that similar experiences equating to the SSDD school reform process were responsible for disturbing life-changing outcomes.

It was during that experience that I decided to construct rather than absorb the knowledge presented to me (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999). So devastating to the students and teachers was the backlash of the SSDD school reform that I made a conscious decision to continue my quest to access the dormant teacher power embedded within me and self-produce the “what can be” within and outside of the schooling institutional boundaries. Interestingly, in this crisis situation I did not hesitate or doubt, as in the past, the existence of the power within me. In retrospect, I can only attribute that personal level of self-assurance to the enhanced level of criticality I attained through my journaling experiences, which at that time, made it possible for a multitude of affirming alternative experiences for both my students and myself.

### **Self-Empowering Position – Using Voice**

In this self-empowering position I felt the passion of educators Susan Ohanian (1999), Vivian Paley (1979) and Michele Foster (1997) and their desire to use their voices to be active rather than passive participants in making a difference in the educational system. My passion flowed not only in matters concerning the wrongs of school reform at SSDD but also in the classroom setting where my basic skills students did not excel academically and standardized tests, of a “one size fits all” nature, continued to keep them tracked in lower level classes. Ohanian (1999) maintains that the Standardistos, who rely on skills charts and standardized test scores for their notion of children (p.1), plan to abandon students, refusing them a high school diploma if they fail to pass standardized tests (p. 3). This was the practice at SSDD which aligned with the standardistos and is currently still in place. What is also continuously disturbing is the lack of support systems that would help to insure the benchmarks for success as established by standardized tests.

I observed that at SSDD underachieving minority students were being neglected and abandoned within the educational system and also after graduation in societal institutions as well. “Standardistos turn a deaf ear to our stories because without these stories we are invisible and without our stories our students are invisible and voiceless” (p. 3).

Ohanian’s proposition concerning this racially charged dilemma is to fight back with teacher voices and tell student stories, which is what I attempt to do in this dissertation. The dismissive practice of the voiceless serves the purpose of labeling underachieving minority students for public slaughter. The mass public executions that I observed during

my five-year journaling process were not of the body but rather that which involved the destruction of the mind. In numerous cases, mental destruction introduced itself in subtle ways, for example, the fact that many basic skills minority students were reluctant to share their voices in class discussions and/or outside of classroom, or that they did not join school organizations throughout the course of the four-year high school experience were small indications of a deficit school culture that had taken root. I repeatedly witnessed in my sphere of influence in the context of school that the student mind was very impressionable simply by such occurrences.

### **Conclusion/Phase 1a Questions**

It is my vision to extinguish Finney's (1928) beliefs that "the great majority are predestined never to rise at all" (p.180). In curriculum terms, Finney envisioned one curriculum for leadership and another for "followership" (Kleibard, 1995, p. 95). I disagree with Finney and believe that it is possible to lift all students to a higher standard, whatever their calling. The most important idea is to see students for who they are when they come to you for instruction and from that point begin the challenge of lifting them. In Phase 1a of the journaling process, I developed curriculum for a pilot class, which would allow for racial diversity and scaffolded instruction. This pilot course ran for the first time in year three of the journaling process and managed to survive within SSDD over the years. That experience allowed students to experience leadership as well as followership but not to feel wedded to one or the other. In effect, it allowed students to make informed choices where they wanted to situate themselves and self-organize their lives.

During the entire journaling process, I actively constructed my research from tools at hand (Kincheloe, 2001b). I naturally layered practices of teacher agency through innovative instructional practices, curriculum development, and self-improvement with professional development workshops. This study presents my lived experience as well as interconnections with the lived experiences of my students. I present it as a teacher/researcher as well as a participant/observer reporting and documenting classroom and teacher-student incidents, as well as teacher interactions with the power holders of SSDD. It is essentially written documentation of how I was oriented or situated in SSDD in a schooling context.

According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience. Initially through journal entries this study presented itself pre-reflectively, as the uncut version of the lived experiences of myself as a teacher seeking to find teacher agency through the use of voice and adopting a proactive stance concerning issues of teacher/student self-empowerment and self-advocacy. The research was viewed actively rather than passively throughout the duration of my study. In essence, I gave myself permission to be creative and pursue, by whatever means necessary, alternative scenarios for myself as a teacher agent to open possibilities for minority underachieving students.

While pursuing alternative scenarios, I occasionally witnessed the purchasing of new high tech programs, which professed to meet the new academic demands for all students without total disregard for the notion of culturally responsive teaching practices. In

addition, I witness a repetition of age-old teaching practices that did not work in the past and still do not work today all of which have been considered effective responses to minority student academic needs. Sadly, to date students have not been approached as individuals with “unique selves”. The tragedy is they have been stripped of their individuality and rendered invisible and inconsequential, essentially having to wait until they fail in order to be noticed. These are the recurring sabotaging agents at work again and the aspects of education that I would like to change in a dramatic way. I would like to carve out a slice of this reality which encompassing past and present, and begin to formulate a fluid-working scenario that will address student needs in a positive and affirming manner. Where should I start?

I chose to start with action and continuous questions. Below is a set of questions that I generated from Phase 1a, the first three years of journaling.

1. How can we change the mindset of students in a basic skills program and create a program that will be a positive and worthwhile experience for each student involved?
2. Can we motivate students in the basic skills program to learn, achieve, and master skills under the existing conditions?
3. Should schools avoid changes that benefit some students and create victims of others?

4. Can teachers abide by “the demographic imperative” to take the initiative to effectively make changes directly or indirectly relating to minority achievement through multiple resources available inside and outside the school walls? (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 236).
5. Do teachers have the power to implement school change?
6. What is involved in the change process?
7. What needs to be in place, in the school, in order for change to take place and to benefit underachieving minority high school students?
8. How can self-serving discourses in the school be distinguished?
9. When and how should teachers act on opportune moments that will eventually lead to transformational change?

The phrase “**the demographic imperative**” has been used to make the case that teacher educators and others must take action to alter disparities in opportunities and outcomes for minority students deeply embedded in the American educational system. (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

The questions represent an ongoing quest for “in process” schooling reform. Kincheloe states, without a postformal challenge schools perpetuate a pseudo-rigor that teaches students to compartmentalize knowledge and to ignore the developmental, “in process”

nature of the interconnected world (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999, p. xviii).

Continuous questioning is one feasible way that I was able to challenge the “what is.” In the process I become more aware of a complex and ever-changing society and its nuanced relationship to schooling in general and my students in particular. My questions challenged fragmented curriculum, racist ideologies, and distribution of power. Teacher journaling provided a means for introspective examination of what I represented in the context of education, as a teacher, learner, facilitator, researcher, leader, follower, nurturer, and curriculum developer collectively to my students. The relationship of these dimensions of myself as a teacher were fundamental in being a teacher change agent and represented the interconnected nature of schema in education.

## **Chapter 6 - Finding Voice for Teacher/Student Advocacy: Battling the Roadblocks**

This study exposes the “cognitive illness” (Kincheloe, 2000) that exists within the SSDD school walls and specifically addresses how I mindlessly assimilate the characteristics of a teacher who accepts the dominant status quo of the school and unthinkingly forfeits my power to enact possible change. I shield my eyes to avoid seeing that a certain percentage of the student population at SSDD remains in intellectual bondage. Meanwhile, I witness the problem of minority underachievement as it unfolds in my classes as well as in other parts of the school and stand idly by in the midst of oppressive acts against children. In essence, the journaling process in this study, with its overarching critical consciousness, helped me to find the power and the means to release from bondage the young promising minds of minority students that have been chained to existing antiquated academic standards as well as come to a profound awareness about myself in the process.

Overtime, I grew to believe that the shackles of educational injustices could be broken by the marriage of clear vision and an action plan through the use of teacher voice.

Therefore, with this belief, I attempt to intensify my personal mission by becoming proactive, claiming power, and initiating affirming interventions for underachieving minority students. It is at this point where my “criticality met auto/biography” in my study of self “not simply for self-knowledge but for a transformative outcome”, for both my students and myself (Roth, 2005b, p. 166).

Gradually, my decision, which transpired in a schooling as well as ontological context, to observe myself as a teacher in an autobiographical format became an integral part of coming to voice amidst battling multiple roadblocks. Cumulatively, I looked at how these

roadblocks influenced and impacted minority achievement. I noticed daily, “taken for granted”, occurrences from a new perspective and from that welcomed fresh perspective I began to view myself as a contributor to varied injustices occurring at the school that ultimately resulted in negative affects on minority students. It was a case where I realized if I refused to use my voice concerning issues that affected minority students in a negative manner then I automatically would become a contributing factor to the problem. In turn, from this state of critical consciousness, recognizing the negative affects of passive behavior, I began to see the SSDD power holders differently, rather than as those in possession of all controlling power, I began to see their power from a broader perspective and thus acknowledge their limitations. As a result, my definition of power holders, at this juncture of the research, expanded to include teachers as well as school administrators. Therefore, it became apparent that the reality at SSDD, where aspects of power were disproportionately dispersed among staff as well as faculty members, required other individuals to claim and use power in order to have access to it.

During Phase 1b, journal entries highlighted the importance of a relationship between voice and action along with creating openings for overcoming the ever-present roadblocks involved in elevating the caliber of education for underachieving minority students. Journaling also brought about realization of the understandings needed in order to achieve significant voice in a space where traditionally dominant voices were favored over other so called insignificant voices due to racial stereotypical misconceptions. In addition, journaling prompted awareness of the responsibilities that accompanied being a critical teacher who at times mindlessly became an accomplice to the disempowerment of

students. These responsibilities helped me as a critical practitioner “to act in a more informed manner, to engage in critical action that transforms not only one’s own life but also the lives of others” (Roth, 2005b, p.155). It also helped me to be alert and in search of opportunities to question “what is” while constantly reflecting on my goal of teacher self-renewal.

In light of my goal for critical self-renewal, I was feverishly motivated to get to the higher rungs of life’s ladder, thus edging slowly toward gaining new insights of “self” and “others”. Each journaling year I experienced further clarity and approached each rung with a more crystallized purpose. I saw things that were probably always there but were never apparent to me due to my early naiveté. I was finally ready to venture forth and take hold of the dreams that had been churning within me throughout my years of teaching and I felt ready to meet the institutional challenges head on as well.

Specifically, I wanted to further expand my agency in the area of self-evaluation of my teaching practices, the development and writing of curriculum, attendance at professional development workshops, and involvement with building home/school connections. These were fairly accessible and safe niches that I had discovered where I could make a difference but although fairly safe they were not void of challenges. Progress and success in these areas helped to form a connecting thread in my career that prior to this had been missing, thus, assuring advancement toward teacher self-empowerment and self-advocacy with the ultimate outcome of the elimination and closing of the minority academic “achievement gap”. The preferred order of action steps was inconsequential as

long as the outcome created alternatives to the SSDD “norm”, and resulted in the empowerment of students, parents, educators, and myself. Therefore, in respect to my journey, the steps were endless and not in any particular order but accompanied by an evolving “understanding of the historical, sociological, political, and psychological dimensions” of what was going on in SSDD (Roth, 2005b, p.161).

To recap, in Phase 1a, I attempted to identify and plant the seeds for change within the school in various ways, while in Phase 1b, I increased my momentum and decided to cultivate the areas in which the seeds had been planted. I continued the development of the parent/student support group and expanded the SSDD insular network by sharing the support group’s information with colleagues outside of my school, which was an unexpected opportunity to share with colleagues and a welcomed outcome of my teacher agency.

In Phase 1b, I developed a Professional Development workshop based on the parent/student support group along with three other teachers addressing the intricacies, operation, management, and growth of the group. The teacher team and I conducted a total of four workshops, two professional development workshops, one at SSDD and the other at the local college. The third workshop was a regional presentation for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, TESOL, and the fourth was a faculty presentation. Conducting workshops, which required using voice outside as well as the inside space of the school, was an example of history in the making, which identified a point in time where I was able to restructure my situation and read the word and the

world as a part of a transformative act (Freire, 2004). The workshop presentations were a scaled down albeit effective way of spreading the word and providing direction to other educators on how to encourage the silenced parent and student voices to open up in an attempt for self-advocacy and self-empowerment through understanding the world. In this sense, the world referred to the “school world” including all of its intricacies, which within the walls mimicked the larger society.

In sum, noticeable expression of agency unfolded partly when I began to make sense of the Phase 1a information and became cognizant that I had to express a rigorous and persistent sense of commitment accompanied by a firm base of criticality in order to find alternatives to the existing problem of minority underachievement. Greene (1995) summarizes my epiphanous moment with the following words, “a space of freedom opens up before the person moved to choose in the light of possibility: she or he feels what it signifies to be an initiator and an agent, existing among others but with the power to choose for herself or himself” (p.22). In this sense, I embraced the power to change a situation by opening a space and I both “affirmed and questioned” (Roth, 2005b, p.162) within that space. The existence of a cyclical framework, one where the initiator of change congers up power for oneself and that power can transcend from one person and transfer to others was what happened in my case at SSDD. Subsequently, as an auto/biographer I gained insight into the social construction of knowledge, understanding, and human subjectivity, as well as gained a consciousness of my own and other’s historicity” (Roth, 2005b, p.164).

### **A Catalyst for Change**

I believe this is how my life played a part in this particular critical cyclical framework of change because the power to act as a catalyst for change was gradually transferred to me through my lived experiences at the school. Undoubtedly, over time, the narrative format of the journal unraveled the cycle of the repetitive nature of minority underachievement and identified the spaces that served to house the taken-for-granted deficit influences. As the “hermeneutic circle employs a conversation between diverse parts of a system to construct meaning” (Kincheloe, 2003a) so to did the critical cyclical framework of my experiences create a conversation with a number of people in my sphere of influence and thereby allowed me to reconstruct new understandings from these relationships.

Power holders had a distinctive role in SSDD and new understandings about them surfaced during my journaling efforts bringing to light the various directions of their support. I discovered that power holders had a tendency to wage their support in one of three ways, selectively, where specific groups would be privileged for support, or with a complete lack of support if not beneficial to the dominant population of the school, or lastly by showing initial support with a steady decline. This wavering type of support was again a wake up call to reality. It did not help to build my confidence as a change agent but it did instill in me the need to be persistent and open to alternative pathways to achieve change.

**“What Is”**

The following journal entry of *September 8, 2001* encapsulated my personal reactions to my observations of the SSDD power holder support system breakdown.

**Journal Excerpt #7:**

What was happening under my nose was no longer acceptable. I had to make a decision to use my voice and gain inner motivation and strength from my lived experiences, all in anticipation that others would eventually follow my lead.

It took me a period of four years to get to a point of utter frustration. After personal observations, workshops, conferences, speakers, study groups, college classes, and informal and formal discussion groups with teachers, I said, “enough”! I wondered when would it be time to take action and move toward the goal of making students the priority. I lost sleep over this dilemma, had conversations with other teachers, pointed fingers at others and waited for help to arrive for the students, who were not being serviced, those students with spirits soaring downward. I finally realized I could not wait for everyone to be in the same place at the same time. I had to take a stand on my own and hope to ignite others.

The reality of the school proceedings provided me with the means to understand what was really going on inside the walls and helped me to remove the vision blockers and clear my mind. I wondered about my colleagues and looked to them to open their mouths and let the secret out of the bag. We were working in a toxic environment that eventually affected teachers and students as well as power holders. I was working in a toxic environment that tainted teacher and student perspectives and by virtue of its ideology essentially allowed a deficit environment to exist. I was supposed to be the guiding light for my students but under these circumstances I was falling short of that commitment. My own personal judgments and criticisms had been a safe haven for me up until now but

in actuality one of the things that I realized was that I was responsible for my students and I had to speak up in order for changes to occur.

The hypocrisy was that the system pledged to educate all individuals but at some point education had taken on broader and more all-encompassing guidelines, which deemed some educators to fall short of their responsibilities. Society's negative message to underachieving youth, false promises of education policy to improvement schools, lack of teacher support, shortage of instructional equipment and materials in many low income area schools, and personal disillusionment all contributed to the erupting deficits in education. In retrospect, these unfortunate results were additionally supported by racial tracking at SSDD, deficit loopholes in NCLB, and the history of societal racism in the educational system to date, just to name a few realities of life. Therefore, when I finally understood the hypocrisy of education within the walls of SSDD and reviewed how I arrived at that awareness I could not go on as a part of and contributor to the hypocrisy.

I was aware that journaling exposed me and in some cases reintroduced me to the realities of SSDD but the most disturbing reality gained from this process was that the basic skills students at SSDD were not being serviced adequately. With this revelation at large, it was disconcerting for me to be in a "model" school without a matching "model" environment.

Tracking of minority students was one of the mismatches of the SSDD "model" school façade. Teachers, administrators, other school personnel, parents, and even students played a role in perpetuating the "bad habit" of accepting as normalcy the tracking of underachieving minority students. The mere fact that adults, faculty and parents as well as administrators, were present and witnessed what was taking place at the school was an

indication of the acceptance of the problem. Blind acceptance of the problem and the silent presence of faculty members were two conditions that enveloped the problem of minority underachievement, which served to concretize the oppressive school culture.

The condition of faculty silence that existed was extremely disconcerting. Amidst the day-to-day chatter and deafening noise from the periodic changing of classes there was an unbelievable silence and an extreme sense of denial that permeated the building. The silence was pregnant with painful feelings of isolation and after five years of observing and participating in the day-to-day accepted silence many, including myself, gradually began to feel the pain and see what was actually happening to the various communities of students ensconced in the school. Each independent nuclear community, for example, the community of basic skills students was identified by their positionality in school as well as in society. The interaction of teachers, students, parents, and all those in a web of reality showed how everyone was connected, we all shared in the creation of reality, and thereby was affected by each others lived experiences in the web.

As a teacher-researcher, operating from the critical ontological and cognitive context, I “came to understand the social construction of the world and self” (Roth, 2005b, p.157), and what kind of world produced acceptance of the SSDD “norm”. This experience allowed me to redefine power boundaries and project immanence, “what could be” (Kincheloe, 2004) and in this context understand the importance of individual power as well as collective use of power in an effort to create possibilities for feasible changes.

Below is a journal entry from *November 10, 2001*, which expressed my feelings at the time as well as represented a disturbing social aspect of the SSDD school culture.

### **Journal Excerpt #8**

#### **Conspiracy**

Within the walls of SSDD a conspiracy is on going. It was amazing what I was able to see when I chose to be present and wanted to be aware of what was going on around me. My awareness acted as a vessel for me to house the new findings that were revealing themselves and it allowed me easy access as well to see what actually was in front of me when similar situations arouse later on.

SSDD is involved in a conspiracy, which is equipped with cover up, lies, and deceit. In essence, when the school does not address the needs of the underachieving minority students to the best of their ability it is simply saying that these students are both physically and mentally absent from the scene. This is where the cover up begins, when the school begins to deny the existence of a specific segment of the population and in doing so neglects to address the needs of this population.

Educators spout out about inequality in education and an imbalance in the playing field with matters concerning minority students versus white students. They want to level the playing field. How noble! So where do they start? Well, as in most cases when a problem arises one must identify the problem. So they begin with that and identify the problem to death. They attach a negative label, the “achievement gap”, to the problem. After they label the students, then, they put them in special classes, thereby isolating them from the rest of the “achieving” population. The cover up is multi-faceted, on one hand the power holders present a concerned front for the underachieving students by acknowledging the situation. On the other hand they physically hide these students, scheduling their classes in

the basement of the school and mentally diminish student self-confidence. In this way the school aids in their disappearance rendering them out of sight and out of mind.

What a plan! Physical and mental elimination as opposed to helping students feel all warm and fuzzy and connected. The usual response to this imposed “excluded” status is negative behavior and reduced skills. This is the sad scenario as any teacher walking through the halls of SSDD can tell you without blinking an eye. But if one would ask SSDD powers holders what our school is doing to close the “achievement gap”, they would give you data, upon data for proof of progress. They would produce carefully manipulated statistics, present multiple programs that piggy back each other, produce dog and pony shows for the reform efforts such as the “Redesign” small learning communities, organize professional development workshops, on carefully chosen self-serving topics, with renowned guest speakers and to add insult to injury in the end ask for and even document “non-usable” teacher suggestions for constructive feedback. All of these atrocities would occur under the premise of helping minority students in need.

What a cover up and surprisingly it worked!

What I needed were educators who were willing to be trailblazers and when I could not find any, I decided I was willing to take on the challenge myself. I was ready to blaze a trail with multiple scaffolded experiences in my quest for directional changes. After embarking on this trail, I experienced one roadblock after another and in this way, I

became an “expert” trailblazer learning as I prodded along, navigating haphazardly through the established SSDD system. At times, these experiences situated me in a position of power perilously accompanied by hovering roadblocks. In these situations, I experienced power by initiating scaffolded experiences at the school, which served as a source of self-empowerment to me as well as to my students.

Scaffolded experiences were noted in my journal as Lift and Platform, L&P, and resulted in affirming influences to underachieving minority students as well as myself in the role of teacher. L&P embraced Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development Theory, which involved an apprenticeship relationship between teacher and student. L&P first involved promoting and lifting student self-esteem then introducing a platform for student self-empowerment and self-advocacy through whatever means necessary. It built on the inner psyche of the student, searched for internal and external replenishment from the teacher, parents, and society, then layered academic supports for the student in this sense L&P went beyond the teacher/student relationship and included societal influences. With this collaborative support system, L&P ideas and lessons introduced in this study represented ways to close the “achievement gap”, which involved personal experiences “inside the school walls” as well as a variety of “outside the school walls” experiences. It was an advanced scaffolding scheme, which became a vital component in creating alternative outcomes for underachieving minority students during the study.

The complexity of L&P encouraged teacher and student renewal of spirit as well as mind through the use of teacher modeling and voice. It began where the student was at that

moment and worked toward transcending that particular space all the while issuing subtle warnings not for students or teachers to engage in self-sabotaging behavior.

### **Journal Excerpt #9**

The journal excerpt below from *December 10, 2001* is an example of L&P.

### **Ideas for Lift and Platform/ Pilot Course Follow Up**

The *lift and platform* idea involves, first promoting and lifting student self-esteem and then, introducing a platform for student self-advocacy through whatever means necessary. The suggestions below offer a means to enhance student self-esteem and provide an avenue for teacher and/or student voices in the system.

#### ***L & P:***

Prior to the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester I devoted my efforts to getting a pilot course offered for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time even though it already had a turbulent history as far as power holder support was concerned. It was designed to incorporate students, who were not testing well on standardized tests, into an academically and racially diverse environment.

Other teachers at SSDD had also designed pilot courses and small learning communities and these undertakings had become a nightmarish experience for all who had dared to step out of the box and go the extra mile. This particular pilot course was sanctioned by the administration under the SSDD “Redesign” program but during its development power holders had begun to pull back on the initial promised support.

The entire creative process of curriculum development became very business-like and extremely demanding during the SSDD Redesign period. The roadblocks became apparent when the fight to get the course established occurred and then subsequently when I had to fight to keep the course in place. Power holder

demands first presented themselves through the presentations I was required to make to parents, other faculty members and power holders. In the end, the pilot course that was supposed to breathe hope into the inadequate basic skills program had now become a minor concern to the administration, a source of stress for me, and definitely not a positive experience for the students.

For the 3<sup>rd</sup> time since its inception the power holders sabotaged the pilot course. The course was designed to accommodate a heterogeneous group of students, racially mixed and of varied grade and academic levels. One would think this request would be easy for a school that prided themselves on their multicultural, heterogeneous environment but there was a problem. I was told that it was not legal to hand pick African American, Hispanic, White, or Asian students for a class. I could not see the reasoning in that statement because in our school we had a case of blatant, rampant tracking going on which was embedded within the SSDD system, which in my opinion involved sorting by race. Therefore, what was the problem or the difference with this particular situation? I became a little demanding when advocating for the students and possibly in light of my persistent behavior, I was granted the pilot class in the following semester to its specification. I was excited because the class seemed as if it was going to be even more successful than the first time.

### **Roadblocks – Mixed Messages**

The rumblings and upsets of my inner being were definitely being roused by the inconsistencies and mixed messages surrounding my work environment. As a result, the sabotaging tactics of the power holders began to reduce my attempts at teacher agency for short periods of time at varying intervals. These disconcerting effects sabotaged the pilot

course that I had designed and implemented because my energy level was not high enough to tackle the power holders. Under these weakened circumstances, journaling became a cathartic experience and an important motivator as upsetting incidences continued in differing contexts.

I incorporated through trial and error, based on mixed messages from the power holders, various ways to approach as well as circumvent administrative roadblocks at SSDD. One counter roadblock tactic that was emphasized in the journal text was teacher persistence. It seemed as if when I had the strength to stand my ground, gather forces to back me up, and fight for what I believed in then I would have a chance to sustain the changes that I had implemented and thus reduce my susceptibility to powerlessness. It was at this point that I understood that I needed to create a secure space for change, a space that would protect minority children, like Willis's (1995, Spring) son Jake, from uncomfortable degrading situations that might have the potential to be a life-long crippling legacy. Through these ordeals, I realized the expansive nature of power and how much power I would need in order to influence change that would eventually spread from me to others.

Even though roadblocks continued to appear, I maintained my quest and offered suggestions for change by using my voice, designing innovative curriculum, attending professional development workshops, conducting professional development workshops, and boldly identifying areas of student need. Using these actions as measures of progress in addressing minority underachievement and as examples of teacher agency, I would argue that there were many feasible alternatives introduced during the five-year

journaling period. Evidence of my interests in change, in student as well as parent support outlets, and in teacher self-improvement, were all present during this study and all experiences that required the use of voice resulted in the enhancement of power for those individuals involved in my teacher's sphere of influence. Finding voice, posing questions, and creating access to knowledge through fair and just means were my goals as teacher change agent and were met under challenging circumstances. In the end, some attempts were temporarily successful and those that were in fact successful are still "in process" of being changed and changing, of being analyzed, of being constructed, of learning and teaching, of disembedding and connecting" (Roth, 2005b, p.160; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999). On the road to finding my critical voice, the mind, as well as the body and all that surrounded me, contributed to this on going or "in process" mode where I was naturally constructing and/or reconstructing lived experiences in my sphere of influence.

In constructivist analysis, the knower personally participates in all acts of knowing and understanding. "Knowledge does not exist "out there" in isolation from the knower" because knowing comes from multiple perspectives and knowledge constantly is compounded through these diverse perspectives (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 116). Furthermore, the knower, which was myself as teacher, participated in the making of history because I was simultaneously involved with numerous "in-process" personal relationships. In this study, I was the knower seeking understandings and often clarifications. Thus, my relationships with other colleagues, students, and parents as well as power holders at SSDD brought about new understandings on how to negotiate with existing racist

practices at my school that continued to hold minority students to lower academic standards. In sum, a remaking of the “norm” which first involved remaking of self “in interaction with my environment” was needed and that is what transpired in my lived world experiences over the five-year research period (Maturana & Varela, 1990).

According to Maturana and Varela’s concept that living things constantly remake themselves in interaction with their environments, our notion of a new self or a critical ontology is grounded on the human ability to use new social contexts and experiences to reformulate subjectivity (Kincheloe, 2003a p. 8). This study involved the “evolutionary concept of autopoiesis, which is the self-organizing or self-making of life” (Roth, 2005b, p. 163). This is a cognitive act requiring, as Kincheloe (Roth, 2005b), suggests the process of self-production. Under this definition, information in this study that is self-produced will require a paradigm shift from mindlessness and lack of criticality to the understanding that teachers through self-exploration can acquire the power to implement transformative change in the schooling context. I propose based on my experiences, that I was able to start from the remaking of myself and then witness how new experiences evolving from the new self, helped to change the social context of the school environment that was in my sphere of influence as well as myself. In essence, while individuals are certainly capable of functioning in new and even unfamiliar spaces they must also have opportunities to permit that to happen. During this study, I was able to create opportunities outside of the “norm” to allow new openings to occur at SSDD.

## **Professional Development**

Even though it was “norm” at SSDD to have multiple yearly professional development opportunities offered, it was not the norm for a teacher to participate in twenty-five professional development, PD, opportunities, over the course of five years, which was what my cumulative personal PD record reflected. It was also not the norm to use the information provided from professional development to benefit students.

Participating in professional development training was only one way for me to approach self-improvement and gain the additional knowledge of how to create alternatives to the “what is”. The SSDD school, in various ways, helped to provide twenty-three of the twenty-five professional development experiences. This was an interesting contrast to the lack of support the school power holders usually provided teachers who were proactive in matters concerning underachieving minority students. On the one hand SSDD power holders provided opportunities for teacher self-improvement and on the other hand they did not follow through with the educational benefits PD could provide for the students. I learned that simply making provisions for an activity to occur is not where improvement should end.

The repertoire of my professional development was mainly based on issues of race, power, equity, alternative instructional practices, and culturally responsive teaching. These were pertinent issues permeating the SSDD school environment during the five-year journaling period. The PD issues were important because they related in various ways directly and indirectly, to minority underachievement and constant exposure to

these concerns helped to make the SSDD staff/faculty conscious about race as well as expose the intricacies of power use in the SSDD experience. PD topics also facilitated the establishment of a community of practice that was steeped in the notion of faculty members becoming aware of effective teaching practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where the racial face of the student population was drastically changing to a dominant minority rather than non-minority population (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This was especially significant at SSDD with its almost fifty percent minority and fifty percent non-minority student population.

One would think that the availability of PD and encouragement by school administrators for teachers to engage in professional development opportunities at SSDD would have been an action step that should have resulted in visible benefits for underachieving minority students but instead there was a stalemate and the fluidity of the action ended after the PD. It was simply training and more training opportunities but no action in the form of follow up, thus, children continued to be ignored and/or not adequately serviced and often hidden in the midst of academia.

Flitner (1982) recounts how Langeveld once likened the products of much educational research [or professional development in this case] to a puzzle - each puzzle carries the same caption: "Can you find the child?" Where and how does theorizing and research connect with the lifeworld's of children (Van Manen, 1990, p.139)? In other words are the needs of the children being addressed either in educational research or in professional development for teachers? Sadly, at SSDD, when educators continue to be

“professionally developed” and education research is the basis of a number of the professional development workshops, what transpires is that the workshop information does not transfer into the context of school. Regrettably, the students do not reap the benefits. The purpose of PD is for professional improvement but in most cases in order to extend that enrichment to students, transference needs to take place. The supportive environment for transference of PD information to students was often lacking at SSDD. In light of these circumstances, Van Manen (1990) questions, “So where are we now?” He responds as follows,

In the name of children we gather at learned conferences where we give speeches, proclaim truths, and study or listen to those so much wiser than we are. For the sake of our children, we teach teachers, read and write articles, purchase and publish books. We feel humbled at the powerful surge of influence. In these texts, in these spaces, great teachers of teachers assemble to influence those who influence children. Incredible arrogance or pitiful drama? (p.140)

It is arrogant to pontificate with the assumption that educators who attend PD workshops supposedly help students if they do not use that experience to enhance personal knowledge and growth as well as the enhancement of student knowledge and growth. In agreement, Kunjufu (1984) poses that “the movement from theory to practice has not been achieved” yet (p.83). In essence, it becomes a tragic event when so much time and energy is exerted and nothing results from it or at best the information is simply housed or stored within the minds of the workshop participants. The twenty-five PD workshops I attended, required the investment of much time and effort, therefore a desired outcome would have been to be able to use a certain percentage of the information shared to evaluate “what is” and move if necessary forward toward “what can be” and then be able,

in due course, to take the action steps needed in order for that to happen. In my case that is what happened, I moved forward with the information and experienced personal growth as well as shared the information with students. In my case, exposure to PD coupled with heightened critical consciousness helped to enrich my personal schema and as a result, I was able to turn the information from these experiences into teacher advocacy.

### **Merging the Fragments**

In the literature review, I mentioned Ferguson (1998) and Wenglinsky (2004), and the fragmented nature of their research. I would argue that they presented a piece of the puzzle from restricted lenses. Ferguson (1998) centered his research on the teacher's ability to enact student change and heralded the feasibility of that possibility but he neglected to mention the roadblocks, one of which involved the lack of administrative support systems. Wenglinsky (2004) centered a portion of his research on teacher instructional practices but neglected to emphasize the impact of outside influences, such as popular culture or current movies on psyche of minority students. Information from both the Wenglinsky and Ferguson research studies focused on academics and neglected to attract the broader scope of teacher sensitivity needed for matters such as student labeling and tracking.

This study introduces a well-rounded and inclusive approach to the idea of one teacher's impact on the problem of minority underachievement. It recognizes that the focus of finding feasible alternatives is to be able to see the bigger picture in multiple contexts and

domains and be willing to act. It moves beyond the teacher as the holder of the knowledge base and attempts to combine research findings for the purpose of exposing new possibilities concerning minority underachievement. With this sense of criticality, my mind opened up to the possibility of a new theory informed by the identification of the affirming and deficit influences, insights and understandings garnered from constantly pending roadblocks (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, III, 2003). *My new theory is that minority academic performance hinges on the ability of minority students to navigate the intricacies of the education system through the use of voice.* This theory does not negate the considerations of Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, III, who explore the theories of cultural difference and/or social mobility of black people in relation to the school performance of African American students (p.52). My theory is not in replacement of the aforementioned theories but another consideration in search for alternatives, which approach the problem from a wider lens and views the teacher in the context of school as a powerful voice in the “in process” change journey.

The complexity and fragmented nature of educational research dealing with teacher self-improvement as it relates to and transfers the possibility of the self-improvement of underachieving minority students into a reality became reasonable factors for my consideration as my study progressed. During the journaling period the interaction of multiple individuals stemming from the commingling of parents, students, faculty and staff as well as community members provided me with a more expanded personal perspective. This new perspective invariably helped to shine light on pockets of awareness concerning personal heightened critical consciousness as well as exposed

numerous roadblocks involved in the search for power. As a result of these new understandings, I became enveloped in subtle and often blatant school/societal influences, both affirming and deficit. Wrapped in a new critical consciousness, I also witnessed the suffering of society, which resulted when power holders declined support to implement effective measures that would help close the minority academic “achievement gap”. These influences represented increased teacher power and the realization that teachers could make transformative differences in the schooling context.

### **“What Is”**

The constant presence of deficit and affirming influences in the SSDD schooling context was another example of the critical complexity of the power struggle swirling in my teacher’s sphere of influence. One of my struggles was that minority students and parents who were not able to navigate the school system would continuously fall prey to the injustices of the system.

One lengthy journal entry from *October 14, 2001* depicts the double profile of a “gap student” who is not aware of the intricacies of navigating the system. Thus, in this vulnerable state the fate of many minority students could result in either a casualty or a success story. Below are definitions of a “gap student” at SSDD and the introduction of the idea of gap student casualties.

### **Journal Excerpt #10**

Gap students have a profile and these students are considered top priority in most schools because they cannot pass the standardized tests. The result of profiling and labeling minority students in SSDD more often than not are that students eventually assumed the profile assigned to them. When a student profile is distorted and slanted in a negative direction then, students align with that and a negative outcome is inevitable. This type of negative profile usually makes it difficult for the student to navigate the system.

### **Gap Student Profile - “Gap students” are usually identified as minority students**

- Having low standardized test scores
- Scoring below their white peers
- Overrepresented in basic skills or remedial classes
- Absent from leadership positions in the school
- Rarely involved in school clubs and/or community projects
- Accepted in 2 year colleges and not in Ivy League colleges
- Not participating in the early decision process of colleges
- Who have the minimum amount of credits needed for graduation
- Overrepresented in special education classes
- Maintaining 2.0 grade point averages in order to meet school athletic academic requirements
- Overrepresented in Saturday and “in school” detention
- Overrepresented in alternative education programs
- At times physically isolated from the main student population in basement classrooms or same race environments

When students fall into the “achievement gap” category the stigma of that weighted burden is magnified on a daily basis within self, in the school and in society as well. Consequently, these students, who have been lumped into the deficit category, assume the predetermined role that accompanies the label and with this acceptance many teachers jump to unwarranted, stereotypical conclusions about gap students. What else could be expected? It is a set up for low achievement. The build up of negative words, negative labels and negative behavior toward gap students of color over time usually does not leave much room for positive growth or affirming experiences.

I strongly feel and identify with the heavy burden of having to rise in the morning, proceed with at home daily morning activities and then go to a place that does not recognize who you are. This situation is magnified when this place not only does not recognize who you are but it also does not acknowledge your existence as a human being and does not believe in your potential to achieve. At best, I would say this place, called school, stingily and begrudgingly provides a space for these students to visit for a short period of time each day.

I was disturbed by the “gap student” profile that I had observed. It was overwhelming to think about the multiple sources of the problem but I had to go beyond the negative to avoid being sidetracked from the overall problem that I come face to face with on a daily basis. My mission was to continue revising the “gap student profile” because I believed that no human being should have to face such degrading and negative self-fulfilling prophecies in their youth. As a teacher change agent, I emerged from the adult imposed student wreckages and sought to construct untapped areas of strength within self and students for the purpose of opening up new vistas of life for minority students.

### **Journal Excerpt #11**

#### **“Gap Students”/Casualties**

The nation is fully aware that there is an “achievement gap”. In SSDD it is common knowledge to all that there are a percentage of minority students who are underachieving. The members of this exclusive group have become the poster kids for the nation’s “achievement gap”.

Is that something one would desire to be known for? I wonder how it feels to be the human representation of failure?

Failure is disempowering and the natural progression of failure is minority disempowerment, which nurtures “passive consumers” (hooks, 1994). The hegemonic group has nurtured the construct of passive consumer, hinging on the many historical aspects of racism. Traditional practices in education echo injustices of slavery and have helped to construct the distorted mindset of many minority students. Passivity has been set in place as a minority defense mechanism to avoid instances of interaction, thereby ultimately assisting society in its quest to reduce the human spirit to a base level indistinguishable from the dominant group, and to create an accepted atmosphere for mediocrity. In light of the prevalent conditions of passivity, minority students continue to remain anonymous in the classroom and are allowed to do just enough work to remain unnoticed. The educational system, acting as a microcosm of society, has managed to continue societal myths involving the nefarious existence of democracy for all and simultaneously has been able to secure historical racist overtones in the schools of the twenty-first century (Macedo, 1994). Thus, continuing to exclude minority students from the interactive process of learning and reducing their ability to succeed in specific environments such as school is business as usual in the democratic society of today and yesteryear. In sum, student gap profiles, student gap causalities, and student passivity all raised the red flag of caution for me as a teacher and increased my fervor for adherence to democratic practices in SSDD.

My insights relating to racial issues, inside school walls, gradually broadened its lens and these issues began spilling outside the school walls, thus, enhancing the impact of my existence in the school. Personal journal entries began to reflect outside school

experiences, which I sometimes incorporated in my school lessons. I made references to movies, literature, and personal encounters that mimicked the SSDD experience. Day after day these lived world events began to relate more and more to course topics and larger connections surfaced for my students and myself. But my most profound insight was when I realized how minority student academic status was affected by everything that touched their lives and I first had to experience this revelation in my own life as a deskilled teacher in order for me to make this connection.

An “outside the school walls” incident that crystallized a connector piece for me occurred on *January 9, 2002* when I saw a movie as a part of a PD workshop experience and documented my reactions in a journal entry, which is excerpted below.

### **Journal Excerpt #12**

Today, I attended a workshop at the local college. One of the activities was to analyze Spike Lee’s movie, *Bamboozled*. In a college environment, surrounded by a racially mixed audience, college professors, and other educators the movie did not elicit the humor that it was probably meant to inspire. I do not think Spike Lee only had humorous intentions when he made the movie and that was one of the reasons we were assembled to determine the messages underlying the humor.

The movie depicted society’s gravest injustices and long-standing stereotypes about black people. It presented examples of educated black people who were expected to fit into negative stereotypes based solely on the color of their skin. Rage was one of my initial feelings while viewing the movie and I attribute that reaction to my heightened level of consciousness, which I acquired from the journaling process. Needless to say, this movie had a powerful impact on me, and still affects me now as I write I relive the pain and recall a quotation by James

Baldwin, “to be black and conscious in America is to live in a constant state of rage”.

I wondered if the audience at this viewing really understood how painful this movie was for many black people to watch? The age-old stereotypes portrayed in the movie were a blatant reminder of Delpit’s (1995) idea of minorities taking a “way things are” attitude. The mere fact the movie aired to the general public and did not cause public controversy was disturbing and again more evidence of the presence of societal “cognitive illness” (Kincheloe, 2000).

After the movie we had a short time to share our feelings but I felt like my turbulent emotions did not have the space to surface due to the short time frame allotted. Before I knew it time was up and I was still experiencing the internal uproar.

What was the purpose of the assignment? Could we expand the experience and develop an action plan for the future? Again, there were many great minds together, with many great ideas, enclosed in one room without a plan. This was a very familiar setting and often the problem with professional development experiences.

I was concerned that many of my students had seen that movie or would eventually see that movie in the future and I wondered what their reaction had been or would be. The potential for action had become a major concern to me. Could having minority as well as non-minority students view this movie and having them discuss the negative and positive aspects of the movie be a feasible action step? Everything in the movie was something black children could relate to in some way. Exposing the lies and myths of society as well as its racist practices and stereotypes would be one way to rise above the infiltration of negative messages and possibly guard against ultimate human destruction.

I realized it was not productive to sit still in silence and passivity and harbor negative thoughts. I had to release my fears and heal myself of the scars of racism. I had become a scarred spirit carrying my wounds on the inside until they were prompted to surface from the quiet folds of my unconscious mind by a barrage of events that jarred my being to consciousness. This time it happened to be the movie, *Bamboozled*, that again caused me to alter my life steps. Next time it might be a racist experience “in a store, in a restaurant, or any other public place” (Essed as quoted in Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003, p. 78). The dilemma of achievement is located in the society’s ideology about African Americans’ intellectual and cultural inferiority (Perry, Steele, Hilliard III, 200, p. 78) and societal incidences often occurring in public places help to embed the negative. These experiences simply substantiate that education or learning can come from various places in which case admittedly textbooks are not the only sources of knowledge because we are all connected in a multiplicity of ways in the world, such as the Internet, movies, eating establishments, and in many other ways, therefore knowledge is continuously being shared along the intricate paths of our life circles.

### **Life Circles**

Life Circles represent connections that bind regular daily-lived experiences together. I believe that life connections are based on a focal point called the life circle. Everyone has the capacity to have and be in a personal life circle. The circle is a symbol for the repetitive nature of life’s events and it promotes the idea that what goes around comes around but what goes around and continues to reproduce itself gets magnified in the

circle as it goes around. What I finally began to realize throughout the journaling process was that making meaning of my life circle required me to incorporate what mattered into my circle. What I discovered was that everything mattered because everything was in the circle or in my sphere of influence. Popular culture, lesson plans, personal readings, teacher/student relationships, and parent advocacy mattered and therefore together these considerations helped to merge life experiences and cement a questioning and ever-changing perspective in place.

The events in my sphere of influence were my lived experiences and they merged with my naïve beginnings of learning the system as well. Gradually these experiences took root and evolved into personal growth as well as growth for those who I encountered in my sphere. In this manner I was in my sphere at that moment affecting other lives and reconstructing my own life. My circle, which became multidimensional was represented by my sphere of influence and encompassed those who I happened to come in contact with at the time, namely, students, parents, friends, family, and colleagues as well as self. These experiences empowered me to move in fluid motion in my sphere of influence. In this instance the words of Margaret Mead came to mind

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Like a boomerang life insights swirled within me and opened my mind to how my cumulative actions could impact my students and all who came in contact with me. In many cases, I witnessed my actions multiply and that demonstrated how one person could influence others to take action. My journal provided a cathartic venue for me to share

insights as well as a variety of frustrating experiences deemed hazardous to minority students. In sum, It was clear that teacher and student lived world experiences could be brought together in order to create the possibility of reestablishing personal mindfulness and thus breaking down existing racial stereotypes (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins 1999, p.11).

The coming together of teacher/student lived world experiences were generated from personal awareness, inner struggles, and an overall understanding of the minority underachievement problem. All of these experiences combined originated from two areas, one from the setting and the other from a more human aspect. The classroom and school setting were ostensibly the most visible arenas for detection for problems of racial injustices. Continuous over representation of black students in basic skills classes and the human aspect of silence, lack of discourse, and blind acceptance of the situation by the faculty, parents, and the students were covert and secretive contributing pieces of the problem. Setting, context, and human aspect allowed for the harboring of a tumultuous undercurrent of injustices just waiting to erupt at any given moment.

### **Conclusion / Phase 1b Questions**

The SSDD setting took place in a conformist spin cycle in a deficit context, tracking and labeling underachieving minority students. The spin cycle, similar to a washing machine swishing and churning and melding everything together, was indicative of the lack of freethinking that had been accepted. As a participant in this spin cycle I often became frustrated and started to erupt at various moments. The cycle would begin with a very

normal humdrum “in class” learning activity although clouded by remnants of institutional racism and self-fulfilling prophecies. Then, the cycle would continue to move forward and affect the social and cognitive aspects of minority students rendering them disgruntled and unable to keep up with the mainstream school population. This spin cycle created a paradigm for the underachieving minority students and commissioned the faculty, parents, power holders, and students to take part in the recurring events as participants as well as observers. The SSDD setting and varying contexts automatically guaranteed and/or sealed the fate of underachieving minority students and managed to attract a high buy in rate of compliance from the hegemonic and subjugated population as well. In light of these occurrences, I made a decision to stop that machine in its spin cycle.

Greene (1995) summarizes my decision moment with these words; a space of freedom opens up before the person moved to choose in the light of possibility: she or he feels what it signifies to be an initiator and an agent, existing among others but with the power to choose for herself or himself (p.22). In this sense, I recaptured the power to change a situation and I affirmed that the initiator creates power for her or himself and that power can transcend from one person and be transferred to others. I believe this is how my life played a part in this particular cyclical framework and in my personal sphere of influence because the power to act as a catalyst for change was gradually transferred to me through my lived experience at the school.

I argue that it is necessary for critical educators to acknowledge, expose, and change these predetermined realities. As a critical educator, I was exposed to an understanding of power structures and power dynamics that joined together to create the accepted and unchallenged “norm” of individuals and hegemonic groups. Within this “norm” the system was not balanced, discrepancies involving equity issues and the imbalance of power existed in the SSDD system. Under these circumstances, it was a challenge to remain flexible and adapt to a fluid mindset for the purpose of attempting to reconstruct self and ultimately the system. Fluidity supports an “in process” format. The fluid nature of the mind allows it to be ever changing to suit the changing society. It is not fragmented or compartmentalized but fluid with information flowing to produce knowledge from natural places and create a connecting force among all aspects in a sphere of influence. The relationship of all aspects of the sphere represents the interconnected schema of life from the past, in the present, and projected toward the future. In sum, after many sordid experiences and observations as well as time taken to reflect on my journal entries, I believed fluidity, when in motion, would create an experience whereby I would be conscious of constantly changing affirming and deficit dynamics surrounding the complexity of the SSDD existing situation. One necessary component needed for fluidity in information is the continuous flow of questions.

In Phase 1b my questions continued as the complexity increased and they helped to simmer my unrest concerning the issues of minority underachievement.

- How do district practices contribute to substandard literacy development of minority students enrolled in high school basic skills classes?

- What scaffold experiences need to be in place in order for underachieving minority high school students to attain academic success?
- Is there a time period for the change process and does the time factor influence the success of the process?
- What specific hierarchical school dynamics influence the demoralization and disempowerment of teachers as well as students?

These questions represent a means by which to focus on areas that might need to change based on changing times. The idea that self, school, and society are included as a focus for the questions above is a significant message when considering the scope of the minority underachievement problem and the expansive range this suggests. Along this journey to enlightenment and critical consciousness, teacher journaling through the process of reflection/action/reflection has been a roadmap gradually unfolding directing a path to follow.

## **Chapter 7 – “In Process” / The Story Recirculates**

### **Introduction – Phase 2**

My story is on going, “in process” and constantly recirculating and in need of reprioritizing. “In process”, I “began to walk in the circle” with the possibility of going beyond the circle (Horton & Freire, 1995). This personal journey was about the recognition and understanding of pivotal moments in my teaching practices that impacted students as well as other individuals that I interacted with in the SSDD setting. Reflecting on my varied experiences from an evolving perspective, I eventually took responsibility for participating in numerous repeated acts, which were considered to produce deficit influences in the lives of these students. Although, when this was occurring, I was in a state of denial and mindlessness, I was at that time an accomplice in the perpetuation of undemocratic, racist principles. These repeated acts involved me being a party to, for example, the silencing of minority student voices, the acceptance of a “no comment” teacher attitude, and essentially not seizing opportunities to advocate for students who were not equipped to navigate the education system without help. In the end a personal call to action and the need for alternatives that would result in more affirming outcomes for underachieving minority students was apparent. The need for action and alternatives became “in process” events that required making room for constant life changes and essentially becoming fluid in the moment with a critical eye probing beyond life’s circle of events.

By the fourth and fifth school years of my journey, aspects in the SSDD circle began to repeat and the flow of life was interrupted by the “norm”. Injustices were prevalent and

minority students were still not being embraced into the dominant school community and parent as well as student voices remained untapped and virtually silent. The power holders settled into the “norm” and in this “normed” space parents of minority basic skills students were not encouraged to see the bigger picture of how participation would give them a voice. Under these deficit circumstances, many parents failed to see that their children needed them as advocates in order to assist them in the savvy art of navigating the system. The school responded with only minimal effort to encourage the participation of the SSDD “hard to reach” parents, as I had labeled the non-participating minority parents. It became obvious that if silence was allowed to hang over SSDD like a cloud waiting to burst then teachers like myself needed to assert and use our voices proactively in order to advocate for minority students.

In order to meet the needs of the student, it was necessary to tap into their realities and attempt to understand their needs as well as include their world into the classroom and the school. With the help of my journaling efforts, I was able to address and identify student needs. Through this awareness, I was able to exercise criticality, go beyond the “what is”, and co-opt student worlds into the classroom as well as enlist the elements of fluidity and embrace the changes of the twenty-first century. The multiple opportunities for change that become available when the depth and breathe of my sphere of influence became apparent became endless. As Freire suggests, “educators have to invent and create methods in which they maximize the limited space for possible change that is available to them” (Macedo, 1994 p. 120).

In the spaces of possibilities, Macedo recognizes the ever-present relationship of myth and reality within the American educational system. It is a dichotomous aspect of the “what is”, where on the one hand, represented by myth is the “achievement gap”, which has been allowed to continue and be nurtured throughout the years and has become a reality. On the other hand the reality of the “achievement gap” has been in the past and in the present for the most part distorted lies or myths generated by the hegemonic population determined by hegemonic standards. In essence, the myth of minority underachievement has been globally pronounced and specific measures have been taken to secure that perspective therefore as a result in many cases under the traditional mindset the myth has become the reality. In conclusion, students are seen as underachieving because they fit into one, two, or more combinations of the negative defining aspects associated with these distinctive labels. Sadly, eventually students begin to fit into the myth/reality syndrome of the “achievement gap” and many times develop a sense of complacency and belonging to the underachieving group.

### **“What Can Be” – In my sphere of influence**

While I encountered many educators, like myself, who had managed to cultivate new dimensions of social change, I also experienced those who were content to let things continue as they were because they did not have the ability to understanding the “in process” fluidity of lived experiences. The lack of understanding about the flow of change seemingly added to the pretentious behavior of the power holders but served to refocus my sights in new directions. In this polarized environment, lived experiences were often fragmented and/or compartmentalized and not fluid, as indicated in the review

of the literature, with the flow of information knowledge was produced from lived world experiences. The fragments of affirming and deficit influences did not create connecting forces within the SSDD school community. But through journaling, I recognized that in my school the fluid nature of education allowed for changing events that would suit the changing society, only if I and other educators were willing to exercise critical consciousness. Hence, being “in process” interconnected the schema of my educational lived experiences from the past as well as the present thereby securing hope for the future. Ultimately, the flow of my empowerment released itself onto human beings in my sphere of influence and through that accomplishment, I was able to claim the power needed, along with others, in order to initiate transformational change at SSDD that would affect the lives of underachieving minority students.

I gradually discovered that my sphere of influence could be quite extensive and that it could extend as far as my imagination permitted. Also harvested from this study was the idea that the minority underachievement was often equated with a disability and under these conditions underachieving minority students were often labeled as disabled and viewed as needy (Mehan, 1993). Minority disabilities in many cases were determined in the past as well as today as low intellectual ability, most often determined by “one size fits all” standardized tests, cultures differing from the dominant culture, and not speaking English as the first language, therefore, making bidialectal and bilingual language not acceptable in mainstream society (Villanueva, 1993).

Yet another way of determining the notion of minority disability within racist institutions besides through language differences has been through science. “The framing of race and disability by the scientific establishment contributed to lowered expectation for, and oppressive practices toward, students with disabilities and children of color” (Ferri & Connor, 2006, p.193). In SSDD, I observed the detriment and the deficit mindset that emerged from the notion of disability as a stigmatizing label and as devastation socially constructed through the culture of the school then after reinforced in many areas of society. Thus, often in that reality without possibility of teacher interventions, students labeled as disabled usually accept the mindset of the dominant culture and fall prey to the devastating results that society witnesses on a daily basis.

Back tracking through educational history uncovers numerous failed attempts at creating positive spaces for specific underserved student populations. Today, as in the past, space seems to more often than not be created for the negative and not the positive through highly unrealistic student/teacher demands that could not possibly be met under existing conditions. These presently poor learning conditions must change drastically in order for nurturing educational environments to flourish rather than flounder. As suggested by James Allen we have choices to create either affirming or deficit outcomes,

“A man’s mind may be likened to a garden, which may be intelligently cultivated or allowed to run wild: but whether cultivated or neglected, it must and will, bring forth. If no useful seeds are put into it, then an abundance of useless weed-seeds will fall therein, and will continue to produce their kind” (Allen as quoted in Greene, 1995)

Allen notes that whether this metaphorical garden is cultivated or neglected by its gardeners or in this case, teachers, it must and will bring forth. Therefore, useful seeds must be planted into students or we will all reap what we sow and an abundance of weed-seeds will fall therein, continuing to produce their kind of misguided vegetation posing as students. Essentially, what society and academia choose to feed into students will eventually become the buds of either positive or negative harvests. Students will then regurgitate what has been given to them and if we cannot contribute anything productive, we will not receive the rewards of a successful harvest. It is important to remember that children very often live up to the expectations placed on them and we will not see equal achievement in our schools, in the workplace, and in the larger society until we expect the same level of accomplishment from all students and offer them the same opportunities to learn as well (Chideya, 1995).

Unfortunately, teaching underachieving minority students placed in basic skills classes, I argue, there has yet to be an across the board successful harvest or outcome. Instead, the legacy of disservice to underachieving students, especially to a percentage of minority students, has been both consciously and unconsciously embraced and thus, perpetuated by the American educational system in many schools across the country, as is the case in SSDD. This type of embedded pattern is never easily broken. Even when productive, innovative, and creative teaching is taking place, it is difficult for underachieving students to shed the stigma of being sentenced to high school lower level classes year after year. Retention of minority students in basic skill classes from freshmen to senior year is what I observed at SSDD. Moreover, the effect of this injustice under the ever-

watchful eyes of the student body is just as negative if not equally as damaging in terms of developing a dominant group that models what they have lived with matching negative actions. Essentially, in SSDD, I was a witness to acts that allowed the nurturing of future potential politicians and educators to be culturally insensitive to the “other”, non-dominant population.

In my journaling period, I had high school minority students who were at a third grade or lower reading level. These students felt stigmatized and acknowledged their status verbally by downgrading themselves, saying, “I’m dumb” or “I’m in the dummy class”. As a consequence they were reluctant to do their work to the best of their ability. They put in minimal effort, which resulted in substandard work, which after years of low expectations, they thought the teacher expected and/or due to lowered teacher and school requirements in the past they automatically fell into a pattern of underachievement. They were in regular or special education classes, often wrongly classified, without multiple support systems and without a voice to self-advocate. Frequently, under these demeaning circumstances student internalized feelings of mediocrity erupted and manifested through anger and/or aggressive behavior. This reactive reality cannot be repressed because in essence, what is presently a classroom reality concerning the substandard literacy development of minority students is an accurate projection of our future and is the painful history and legacy encapsulated in the experience of every minority student.

## **Creating Healing Spaces**

Historically, we have seen that the incremental “good” does not overshadow or eradicate the “bad”. On the contrary, what we have seen, is that the “good” becomes lost in the process and devoured by the toxins produced in the “bad”. Eventually the “bad”, which in this case might be considered illiteracy, filters out into the society and begins to eat up the “good”. As Greene (1995) states,

“When habit swathes everything, one day follows another identical day and predictability swallows any hint of an opening possibility. Only when the given or the taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on it, does it show itself as what it is” (p. 23)

When habit shows itself and exposes the ugliness we have been taking-for-granted we must be able and ready to address that revelation as “what is”, not only for the student’s sake but also for the sake of the connected world. Under the guise of habit in many cases the basic skills classroom becomes a dumping ground for underachieving students and these students bear the burden of the label that comes with that placement. The problem swells when they begin to internalize the feelings of worthlessness, despair, and underachievement and in short accept all that is given to them in the unabridged and unedited version, thus resulting in the formation of the acceptance of deficit perspectives. At this point the fates of basic skills students are sealed when emancipating actions do not take precedence, thus establishing their deficit positions in the world without openings for future possibilities.

Underachieving minority students at SSDD, who hunger for attention, have the desire to be seen and constantly struggle with pent up thoughts, which they are unable to express due to the lack of healing spaces available to release their negative ontological and epistemological perspectives. As the years progressed I became more proficient at providing that space for my students in the classroom, through support groups, and by example motivating other educators to act. In the beginning in a naïve state I did not see the lack of space or the narrowness of the setting. I did not see the constricting nature of the undemocratic practices that served to literally perpetuate the negative as well as promote past racist injustices. What I saw was that education at SSDD existed only to create space for the negative and not the positive.

I learned that there are openings for change if I make them and that I can reconstruct “what is” and from the power position of “self-production” determine “what can be” (Varela, 1999). Students do not have to remain in bondage as a captive to history and its repetition. I would argue that it is the responsibility of educators in the schooling context to change history, literally make history and stop the spin cycle. I took a stand in accordance with this belief by adapting a critical and mindful personal stance in one public high school. This dissertation reflects the multiplicity of ways to view the inherent far-reaching dynamics that have created the acceptance of the idea of “intellectually inferior” minority students. It is my hope that through teacher and then human agency innocence can be replenished, broken minds mended, and the future of the world secured under more affirming circumstances. In summary, I would add that on a student, a

school, and societal level it is imperative that the injustices of the school system be addressed in order to promote transformational change on a broader scope.

### **From “Self” to “Others” – Collaborative Actions**

In this study, movement from “self” to the inclusion of a wider scope of “others” was an infectious act whereby, my actions in collaboration with other colleagues, coupled with the persistence of the group was what helped to reconstruct the “what is”. The collaborative efforts of a few SSDD faculty and staff members concerning issues relating to minority underachievement resulted in the idea of Freirean transformation rather than incremental alternatives.

There have been many studies relating to the inadequate intellectual abilities of minorities over the past century that have helped to undermine minority achievement and promote minority achievement (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). What is necessary is a meeting of the minds or in this case as expressed in the review of the literature a sorting, reevaluating, updating, and merging of education research in order to develop informed alternatives and eventually lead us to reconceptualize the information available and steer us ultimately to critical human agency.

Giroux (1997) states, “if radical educators are to understand the dominant ideology at work in schools, they will need to attend to the voices that emerge from three different ideological spheres and settings: these include the school voice, the student voice, and the teacher voice” (p. 141). In the context of this dissertation “school voice” is predominately

referred to as the voice of the power holders, which includes administrators, supervisors, dominant students and parents but what I discovered on my journey, was that at times classroom teachers hold the power. In the beginning of my story the “teacher voice” and the “student voice” were silenced but over time I learned it was actually dormant just waiting to be awakened. Essentially, visible as well as invisible barriers needed to be removed from teachers, parents, and students in order for basic skill students to begin to wake up and advocate for themselves.

### **Aspects of Voice**

In a democratic environment, the silenced voices of the basic skills minority students as well as the louder voices of the higher achieving students needed to be addressed. The basic skill students were not addressed at SSDD and consequently I began to notice their silenced voices as I walked the halls of the high school. Moreover, I would argue in relation to under-serviced students, that the surroundings and lived world academic experiences of these students were most assuredly not context-free, not impersonal, and not void of history. These surroundings highlighted the complexity of the ideological sphere of the SSDD minority student and accompanying these perspectives were built-in constraints that surfaced from Giroux’s three ideological spheres. Consequently, the ideological constraints on public schooling in reference to minority students who had been consistently enrolled in lower level classes were glaring and in perpetual motion with little chance of change for the future in my present teacher setting unless teacher agency were to be exercised.

Multiple issues and themes emerged in this study but the primacy of the use of teacher and student voice ultimately was the dominant factor needed to transform the negative outcomes of underachieving minority students at SSDD. Through the disquieting circumstances of the minority underachievement phenomenon demonstrated and observed within the walls of SSDD, what finally became apparent was that minority basic skills students were pinned down and held steadfast in a lower achieving academic cycle. It was a twofold dilemma, first, the subjugated positions of these students were almost guaranteed by the many facets at work in the lived world of the school and secondly, there were additional forces at work outside of the school reinforcing these subjugated positions which eventually become apparent in the structure of various institutions in the larger society. These school and societal as well as self constraints merged and lingered within the walls of the educational system, spawned students who had low self-esteem and continued to reproduce the factors that perpetuated the phenomenon of the over-representation of minority students in high school basic skills classes at SSDD. Reflectively, a breakdown of cognitive activity among minority students from all economic backgrounds, lower, middle and upper economic strata's at the high school level occurred. I concluded based on five years of recording my observations and personal feelings that the cumulative baggage of deficit experiences had caught up with SSDD minority students and rendered them trapped and powerless without an effective voice to begin to rise out of the rubble.

The cultural and social inscriptions at SSDD served to preserve a space for failure among the basic skills minority students. Therefore, it made sense, that minority students would

fulfill the historical self-fulfilling prophecy of falling to the lower achievement levels reflected by the academic “norms” of the dominant society. In conjunction with the overwhelming negative labeling system and the lack of sufficient support systems in the school this deficit self-fulfilling prophesy in the existing culture of positivism was destined to become a reality. Not surprisingly, silent about its own ideology, the culture of positivism provides no conceptual insight into how oppression might mask itself in the language and lived experiences of daily life (Giroux, 1997, p.12). The culture of positivism ignores the history of education of minorities and incorporates the belief that minority students naturally gravitate to lower level classes because of various aspects in their lives, such as, language, culture, and economics to name a few. This skewed view does not delve below the surface but remains surface oriented and thus assists the system in perpetuating education’s most damaging offense against people of color, which is the disempowerment of minority students. Giroux suggests in order to overcome the culture of positivism educators will have to construct alternative social formations and worldviews that affect both the consciousness as well as the deep vital structure of needs in their students. He also acknowledges rather than addressing the reality and comprehending the world holistically as a network of interconnections, the American people are taught to approach problems as if they existed in isolation, detached from the social and political forces that give them meaning (p. 13). Which brings me back to the fragmented and isolated nature of how the research concerning minority underachievement is approached and viewed.

The idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy is simply a projection of “what is” derived from multiple perspectives. The feedback from SSDD teachers, students, parents, and administrators combined helped to shed light on how far the prophecy had rooted itself ontologically in the lived world of underachieving minority students as well as in the culture of the school. My personal teacher lens and my culminating teacher ideology that surfaced from many hours of research presented a dual voice, one as a teacher as participant and another as teacher as researcher. As the teacher/researcher I observed and was informed by my teacher voice, which allowed me a more expansive lens, and as a teacher/participant I was reflective and moved toward action. The emergent teacher ideology, in this context, was an active force in the construction of human agency and critique (Giroux, 1997, p.73). One idea, which I developed from observation, reflection and action, is that the use of effective voice is necessary among students, parents, teachers, and the power holders in order to concretize future positions of power for minority basic skills students and teachers.

### **The Connected Age**

In the connected age of the twenty-first century what happens and how it happens depends on the network or established systems and the network in turns depends on what happened previously (Watts, 2003, p. 28). In SSDD the formation of the school’s ideology of underachieving minority students hinged on affirming and deficit networks that were already formed and had existed within the system for years. A solid affirming connection was what basic skills students lacked at the high school therefore their networks were underdeveloped and they “failed” in school according to the existing

academic and social as well as psychologically embedded standards of the school. Watts questions, “what is it about the system that enables this failure to occur”(p. 23)? He refers to a term, “cascading failures”, where one needs to consider combinations of failures not just single failures. He suggests that “an initial failure makes subsequent failures more likely, and once they have occurred that makes further failures more likely still, and so on” (p.23). In essence Watts alludes to the complexity of life and the many influences that play an integral part in the lives of these students. Such forces help to put them on a specific path, in this case the path of failure. Here they embark on an educational journey that tends to seal their fate and lessen their control over their situations. At issue are the number of failures underachieving minority students have accrued during their educational lived experiences and the additional failures, which inevitably materialize in their lives outside of school. In my research, I observed students who had internalized the idea of failure due to the internal and external forces within the school, which eventually contributed to life-altering consequences and ultimately led to disempowerment. These forces manifested through power plays and racist acts and ultimately, contributed to the distorted educational frame of reference for a percentage of minority students.

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning involves relationships with learning and the social networks in which learning occurs. They believe learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. The theory incorporates a participation framework known as legitimate peripheral participation in which learning occurs as individuals co-participate in an event, gain access to modes of behavior not otherwise available to them, and eventually develop

skills adequate to certain kinds and levels of performance (p.18). Learning creates a community environment and involves co-participants in the process, similar to Vygotsky's (1978), "Zone of Proximal Development", where learning is scaffolded and mediated with the help of others. But, I question, what if the community is inadequate because particular people are excluded and legitimate peripherality cannot be accomplished? This is the case of the SSDD underachieving minority students predestined to placement in basic skill classes. They have been ostracized from the community of learning and have been cast onto the periphery. The problem is the periphery is a permanent place for underachieving minority students and they rarely have the opportunity to graduate from the sidelines. I would argue that individual existence has to be legitimized first in order to be a participant in a learning process. In the case of minority students destined to lower level classes, their existence has been minimalized and at times abolished. Thus, under these circumstances a learning relationship would be severely compromised due to the lack of legitimate positionality. Therefore, what would be more likely, which has been documented for many decades is Watts's idea of "cascading failure" rather than successful learning relationships.

### **Conclusion/Phase 2 Questions**

Minority students who experience inequities in education are lead like lambs to slaughter steadily plodding toward a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure, which has been systemically fed intravenously to them and to society by traditional institutions. It is estimated by Kunjufu (1984) that if we multiply years of schooling by the average six hour day, thirty-hour week, or twelve hundred hour year, we would derive a sum of

22,800 hours. He suggests based on these numbers that “children spend large amounts of time in school, and how they feel about themselves can easily be determined within these 22,800 hours” (p. 31). Essentially, the concentrated direct feed of negativity by combined forces assures the end result of failure for minority students. When society has historically perpetuated a tainted and distorted image of minorities and a number of teachers maintain a negative self-fulfilling prophecy it is difficult to execute positive change. Coupled with overwhelming negative statistics and at times a universal negative mindset, often, as a result, a large percentage of minority students develop alienated and dysfunctional positions in society, thus experiencing individual as well as collective disempowerment as a natural life progression.

In order to dispel the “achievement gap” and expose the deficit dynamics of the many elements that have merged together to create and concretize the term and position, educators must take on a notion of criticality that embraces advocacy and emancipatory ideals and adhere to alternative avenues for student expression. From a critical perspective the “achievement gap” can be addressed on multiple levels, government policies, societal discourses, and school instruction, as well as the use of voice. These levels, which are not exhaustive, can merge as part of an alternative plan for transformative change and hopefully have the far-reaching capacity to illustrate how a broader perspective can affect the level of literacy competency.

Macedo (1994) writes in a poem “Traveler, there is no road, the road is made as one walks” (p.183). On my current road, I walk with a critical eye in search of viable

alternatives for the “achievement gap” phenomenon and miraculously they appear because my eyes are open and I am open to change.

While “in process” on life’s road, questions become the “norm” as my criticality is enhanced and I make history while it recirculating in the midst of the roadblocks.

Ultimately, I pose these questions in Phase 2...

- What myths/lies are currently in place that permit the continuity of minority achievement?
- What can be done “NOW” about the myths/lies?
- Is there a time period for the change process and does the duration of time influence the success of the process?
- How can we maintain effective change in the schooling context?

## **Chapter 8 – Implications Meet Teacher Persistence**

### **Introduction**

In the twenty-first century being enrolled as a minority student at the Storm Steel Divide Division High School, SSDD, means being labeled and trapped within a deficit framework. Verbal, visual, environmental, physical, overt and covert negative indicators and embedded inscriptors of minority academic underachievement are present at SSDD. In a school culture beset by inequalities and resting on racist undertones characterized by power struggles, underachieving minority students enter the school world surrounded by a deficit framework. In this critical framework, minorities are subjected to deficit labels, which are discernible through race, economic status and academic ranking. As a result underachieving minority students in this setting are marginalized, subjugated, and minimalized, as well as robbed of voice. Additionally, in the wake of these deficits, these students are labeled as underachievers based on the traditional standards of the dominant society. In response to these inequalities, I argue that teacher agency, through the power of inquiry, should critically question decisions pertaining to marginalized students in order to start the process of leveling the playing field and equalizing the “what is” experiences at SSDD (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Suffice it to say, that by taking conscious steps to live life in more humane, just, and democratic ways and choosing not to allow external forces and structures to determine personal life tracks we can have “agency: the ability to shape the direction of [our] lives” (Kincheloe, 2001a, p. 56).

In this chapter, I revisit the key research questions and note the broad implications of the study. Initially, I approached the research in a naïve state and along my journey that has proven to be a consistent experience, which has made this study a humbling experience. Now, in the concluding research phase I fully understand the words of Jon Wagner (1993) who suggests that researcher should seek “the reduction of ignorance rather than the production of truth” (p.15). He proposes that as researchers we should “generate new knowledge about education...” Therefore “to understand when research is likely to achieve this purpose, educational researchers must begin with ignorance, not truth” (p.15). Consequently, the insights of this research emerged from my ignorant beginnings, naïve origins, and provided a vast arena for the possibilities of numerous interventions and discoveries. In retrospect, the initial overall objective of this research was simply to acknowledge my situated “self” in the context of school. Although, gradually it expanded to incorporate the rigor needed to go beyond the accepted teacher position and realized the influences of self, school, and society within that sphere of influence. The idea of this study was to take the teacher/researcher beyond the traditional view of teaching in the schooling context and create viable alternatives to the often accepted powerlessness of teachers and students and their inability to access power as well as the learned helplessness of underachieving minority students.

Throughout this study I was privileged to witness the expansion of my personal sphere of influence, as I became more critically conscious in each journaling year. In this critically conscious state awareness of self, school, and society became a part of my experiences through the presence of SSDD students, educators, parents, and administrators. As a

result, through this critically expanded lens my research began to make sense for me as well as all I observed.

Interestingly, Wagner (1993) makes sense of educational research by distinguishing between two types of ignorance, blind spots and blank spots. On the one hand, blank spots are the questions researchers know enough to question but do not know the answer. On the other hand, blind spots provoke researchers ‘to ask new questions and illuminate blind spots, areas in which existing theories, methods, and perceptions actually keep us from seeing phenomena as clearly as we might’ (p.16). In this study, blank spots, pose the questions, lead the research and propel this work. Simultaneously, blind spots emerge from these questions then new questions are introduced over time in each journaling year during the period of 1998 to 2003. All too often the dilemma of theory without practice, which in many cases is an occurrence that has served to inhibit any chance at addressing the problem, becomes a disparaging result of educational research. But in this research, blind and blank spots are filled in over time and lived experiences are noted to afford the actual practice of theory and surpass the theory without practice dilemma. By illuminating blind and blank spots, as Wagner suggests, we learn about ignorance and make sense of educational research (Gough, 2002, p. 4). The “sense” of research in reference to minority underachievement has been apparent for many decades but educational research still struggles to synthesize the bits of information that have been gathered over time. In this study, critical consciousness acts as a guiding light to meld the pieces together.

During the first three years of research an increase in critical consciousness became apparent, which can only be attributed to my willingness to work “within a set of less than optimal conditions to make transformative teaching happen” (Michelli and Keiser, 2005, p.122). In this research, roadblocks emerged through school policies, curriculum changes, and physical placement of students, often presenting less than optimal conditions for transformative change. At the three-year juncture, I focused on teacher/student access and agency as well as achievement recognizable through student self-empowerment under a myriad of subversive conditions. “Reinvisioning equity through access, achievement, and agency” involves moving students mentally and physically away from self-destructive forces (p.108). The Communications Lab/Literacy Center was an attempt to scaffold or lift and platform minority students away from deficit influences in order to support their academic endeavors. The Lab provided access to needed literacy skills under an alternative situation as well as provided a working model for emancipatory practices, basically, a “safe” place for students to exercise voice. Openings for change provided by the SSDD Communications Lab, allowed for affirming influences to take precedent over deficit influences but the temporary nature of change at the high school was a problem and at times self-defeating. Critical theory, the framework of this study, strives to go below the layers but at SSDD the pattern was to brush the surface.

Critical theory provides a pathway as well as a framework to enable the teacher/researcher to identify the existing deficit as well as affirming influences at SSDD connected to the minority underachievement phenomenon. It is an attempt to synthesize

information collected, create new information, and use that combined information to produce alternative outcomes. In order to accomplish this, based on the information generated in this study, a heightened level of criticality is needed to unearth affirming possibilities in a deficit school orientation. The ability to move toward a calculated action stance from the existing “what is” requires multi-layered experiences. The bricolage research method was an additional asset to the research because with its layered format it guided me to and through the deep embedded layers of the school structure. I approached this challenge through the use of ten recurring themes that surfaced from deep within the SSDD school structure. Conclusions and implications from these themes follow.

### **Theme Insights**

**A. Student Labeling**– Theme #10

**Academic/Racial/Social Inequalities** – Theme #2

**Internalized Oppression** – Theme #3

Appendix Chart #A, Student Labels, journal entry 12/99, represents a teacher-made chart based on fourteen months of observations which was derived from the existing dominant school culture, blatantly promoting inequality. This chart separates the haves from the have-nots, which generally depicts the conditions at SSDD and is an example of the overt labeling system at this particular high school. There are five categories charted, labeled A to E, which establishes this divisive school perspective.

In sum, students in *Category A* get the best that education can offer because they fit into the “accepted” student mold and in *Category B* are students who are on the border line of *Category A* with the ability and possibility to move up to *Category A* with minimal

intervention. Students who have been neglected by the school system because of various prejudices, stemming from race, economics, culture, and physical or mental handicaps fall into *Category C* and students in *Category D* arrive with broken spirits into a system that perpetuates and at times compounds this dismal state of being. Finally, in *Category E*, are students who do not fit the traditional school mold and will never fit the mold according to existing standards in society. In sum, the first two categories, *A* and *B*, represent the students with power and/or having the potential to be power holders. Whereas, students represented in the last three categories, *C*, *D* and *E*, render students powerless in society and over a lifetime these designated categories contribute to self-limiting thoughts and/or the acceptance of “what is”. The reality is in SSDD minority students are overrepresented in the *C*, *D*, and *E* categories. Evidence of minority overrepresentation in powerless situations is based on the number of minority students enrollment in the lower tracked classes over the five-year study (See “My Students” Chart for basic skills enrollment). This labeled school environment tends to alienate and stigmatize students and inevitably results in low self-esteem, below grade level academic performance, and a “cycle of oppression” (Tatum, 1997).

Delpit (1995) refers to education for black students as often occurring in alienating environments as the *C* to *E* categories indicate. She refers to the “silenced dialogue”, where the commonsense response among some people of color to school literacy has been to take a “way things are” attitude. Often minorities develop the understanding that there are in fact inequities in the educational system; however, they assume that little can

be done without massive school reform and if they want to advance they must learn to play the game.

Five aspects of power proposed by Delpit (1995), which she calls “the culture of power” are derived from an understanding of the “silenced dialogue”. It represents a connecting and complex theme for the understanding of the alienation and miscommunication of the “silenced dialogue”.

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power”.
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge- its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 24)

Delpit (1995) acknowledges that the last two tenets are seldom addressed. In the journal text tenets four and five are also the least addressed whereas tenets numbered 1, 2, and 3 are highly visible in the SSDD school culture. The SSDD power holders enforce rules

that reflect the status quo of the school as well as societal community and they do this with the least amount of confrontation.

In addition to this study's strong connection to the idea of a "culture of power", the journal text revealed another connecting and complex theme called, lift and platform. The lift and platform, theme #8, incorporated Vygotskian (1978) scaffolding experiences, which encouraged educators to advocate for minority students by whatever means necessary in order to threshold them to the next level of self-empowerment. Basically this meant that lift and platform went beyond the pre-packaged methods of addressing problems. Thus, through the teacher, lift and platform modeled for the voiceless minority school community a myriad of ways to reach academic success using resources "inside and outside" the school walls. It essentially, required creative use of what was available in the teacher's sphere of influence. One example of lift and platform was the parent/student support group, which acted as a catalyst for many students and parents to understand the power of knowledge and the voice that it subsequently brings with it. In the end, power controls, such as the lack of administrative support, were at work and thus resulted in the premature ending of the support group.

Scaffolding for uplifting experiences was often deterred by the systemic labeling system. In SSDD basic skills classes that were comprised of predominately all black students become alienating environments because often the clustering of minority students in one space served to label those spaces as "same race" environments. "Same race" basic skills classes, negative student profiling and labeling, lack of support for effective basic skills

programs, all contributed to a deficit-orientation model. The deficit orientation model was rooted in mindlessness and helped to secure the existing positivist pedagogy where minorities were positioned in the background or simply left to gradually dissipate into invisibility. “An ideological shift that would prevent educators from accommodating to the deficit-orientation model and that would make them able to embrace a pedagogy of hope, one in which all educators can believe that all students can learn”, is needed in the twenty-first century (Macedo, 1994, p. 140). Educational ideology has to be one that benefits all or justice cannot be served. In effect, fair distribution of benefits in education represents good for every single person affected by the schooling system (Michelli & Keiser, 2005). Currently, repercussions that emerge from a deficit mindset will continue to hurt minorities and in many ways act as a disservice to non-minority students as well.

The five-year racial breakdown chart entitled, *My Students*, found in Chapter 4, *Layering my Approach to Research: A Bricolage*, is an example of academic and racial inequalities, which shows overrepresentation of black students in lower tracked classes and represents another deficit influence that helps to perpetuate minority underachievement in SSDD. The overrepresentation of minority students in lowered tracked classes is an example of unfair distribution of benefits. In this sense minority students are deprived of an education equal to non-minority students. Inequities, in the quality of education between minority and non-minority students, have historically been ongoing and ever-present in American education.

As a teacher/researcher, I was moved to question, after analyzing the “My Students” chart, why are black students overrepresented in the basic skills classes in a school that is racially diverse? Taking the emerging text information into consideration, I would argue that all contributors to the teacher’s sphere of influence parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and the larger society as well as students to a certain extent had overt and covert influences on issues affecting minority student class placement.

It is not surprising with such a dim scenario that minority students often opt for deficit alternatives. Questions such, as “Isn’t this a basic skill class”? “Why do we have to do so much work”? “It’s only a basic skill class”, (Journal text entry excerpt – 10/2/98) are disturbing but common. Negative questions such as these made by minority students are a blatant sign that something has gone painfully wrong with the system. An accumulation of events as well as negative visual and verbal harmful messages have led these students to accept the existing realities of the SSDD “what is” and the all too often negative option of task avoidance toward their academic work, whereby students simply chose to not work. As a result, “those who are afraid of demanding tasks and consequently resort to task-avoidant and passive behavior are likely to underachieve” (Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, Puttonen, 2002). Invariably, task avoidance is the result of various life experiences such as years of invisibility in the classroom, teacher/student/ school acceptance of low performance, low scores, and a host of other possibilities. But underneath these deficit circumstances the outcome inevitably manifests in underachievement and/or learned helplessness, which is when students incorporate behaviors that they have been exposed to and internalize them and basically continue to

have them surface in their lives. This depressing scenario presents a challenge to educators to move in the direction of agency and find openings to uplift fallen students by any means necessary.

**B. Inability to Navigate the System/Inability to Connect Inside and Outside Forces – Theme #4**

In a world defined by multiple “people labels” subjugated knowledges of indigenous peoples become lost, devalued, and/or sometimes diminished through physical and mental positioning of students and teachers as well. In SSDD parents of basic skills students, through various exclusionary actions enforced by the school, end up assuming the labels of their children and as a result they vicariously experience the ostracism their children feel. Parents and students affected by exclusionary actions fall by the wayside until an intervention can occur. One way to uplift fallen students is by co-opting the help of the parents and then both parents and students usually benefit. There is an underlying ideology that emerges when parent voices are not encouraged in the school community. It blatantly professes that ostracized parents are not intelligent enough to stand up for their children and under these circumstances when they attempt to advocate for their children they are ignored. A school stance that chooses to ignore the voices of subjugated people espouses arrogance and insensitivity to marginalized groups. Below is the Parent/Student Support Group /Four-Year Recap Chart, which documents the four-year mini history of a teacher initiated parent/student support group.

**Chart Explanation:** The chart below shows the progress of the support group over a period of four years. The chart highlights the increase in the number of events, students, teachers/staff, and the support group model presentations over a specific period of time. An unexpected bonus resulting from the group was offsite requests to share the support group model with colleagues locally and regionally.

#### Chart #4

**Lift and Platform: Teacher as Change Agent** – Theme #8  
**Teacher/Student/Parent (Advocacy/Empowerment)** – Theme #5

**Support Group / Four-Year Recap**

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003
<b>Number of events per year</b>	4	4	6	9
<b>Number of students involved</b>	45	60	75	125
<b>Number of teachers/staff involved</b>	2	3	4	6
<b>Number of presentations of support group model</b>	N/A	N/A	2	3

Predispositions, that hinder change, are sometimes contrived concerning specific parent groups when educators believe that the “hard to reach/low profile” parents are not interested in the well being of their children. I would argue that when underserved parents and students do not feel they are a part of the dominant community of practice they disengage from the mainstream community. When individuals do not feel as if they are a part of the hegemonic group they are not drawn toward the group and actually shy away. Consequently more than likely these individuals do not have the tools needed to

share their voices in the unfamiliar and varied schooling contexts, which was the case at SSDD.

Teacher agency is crucial under these extreme conditions. When parents cannot access power in the school to advocate for their children, it then becomes the responsibility of those in power to open up access to power. When educators situate themselves in the context of school and in that space they do not take a critical stance on inequitable conditions they then become contributors to the problems. It is the responsibility of teachers, parents, and administrators to take active roles in the lives of all students including those students who are not achieving to their fullest potential due to school and societal inequalities. Teachers can as demonstrated by implementation of the parent/student support group make a difference in the lives of parents and students in their sphere of influence. But do teachers need to go beyond parents and students?

In the journaling reflective process it becomes apparent that change is multilayered and that school “reform represents a cosmetic change, leaving the inherent ideology that informs education unproblematic and unchanged” (Macedo, 1994, p. 140). In SSDD basic skills classes continued to be overrepresented by minority students, which presented an inherent deficit ideology at the school. Student profiling and student labeling, who I often became mindlessly a part of, was embedded within the SSDD school culture. Under these circumstances, in order for negativity to continue to reign, the myths assumed more power than the reality and the “what is” was clouded over with more palatable facades. The seriousness of the inequities was made more palatable by evoking a blind eye to the

problems and in a dismissive manner the problems were simply seen as the “norm” at SSDD and that became the reality. The myth in this case was that everything was acceptable and beneficial to all involved. An example of this deceiving mindset is listed below in a journal text excerpt from year five, which is a documentation of the troubled history of the family of a “gap” student and their unsuccessful yearlong attempt to get support from SSDD.

### **“What Is”**

#### **Journal Excerpt #13 Gap Student Background- John**

John’s Student Profile:

John is a 10<sup>th</sup> grade Afro-Caribbean male, in my basic skills class. In the beginning of the semester, due to his lack of elementary literacy skills, I was curious about his academic history. I observed him in class for 10 weeks and noticed that he was not able to master tests and quizzes or complete many of the course assignments. His decoding skills were limited which was a result of poor comprehension skills. I wondered where John had graduated from middle school because he did not seem like an eligible candidate for 8th grade graduation.

There were many students over the journaling period that had similar situations to John. I labeled these students “gap” student hope/casualty, which is defined below.

#### **“Gap” Student Hope/Casualty - Definition**

“Gap” student hope/casualty is a heading found in the fourth and fifth year journal entries. This affirming/deficit heading represents the labeled underachieving minority student, who is often on the border of having hope or experiencing devastation as two feasible life possibilities.

“Gap” student *Hope* in this study refers to those minority students who have found a voice and are self-empowered and have the ability to self-advocate.

“Gap” student *Casualty* in this study refers to those minority students who remain trapped in deficit dynamics and require continued interventions in order to lift themselves up out of the devastation and gradually reach their highest potential.

#### **Journal Excerpt #14**

**Dec. 2, 2002**

##### **“Gap” Student Hope/Casualty**

I put my feelers out after the 10-week period, discovered he had been in our school district since elementary school, and had a paper trail residing in the middle school that addressed his questionable academic performance. He was recommended for a special education program in the past but his family did not want him to be classified. He had been allowed to move up through the system without mastering subject requirements.

I decided to wage my own campaign for his well being and I went to the powers holders who in turn sent me to John’s guidance counselor who then spoke to one of the power holders and that is where the saga rested for a while. They finally got back to me and told me this situation had to be handled by the new Intervention Committee, which was not yet active. The powers holders promised to get back to me when the committee was ready. After a couple of weeks, I realized this case had again become stagnant as it had in the middle school.

John’s SSDD history dragged on for months. A summary of events is listed below.

### Journal Excerpt #15

#### **“Gap” Student Casualty - John**

##### **Chronicled events:**

**9/02 - 12/02** – I collected background Information on John

- Investigated John's family history
- Gathered information from John's academic past
- Evaluated John's current school-work

**12/2/02-** I submitted an initial academic report on John to the power holders

- Submitted a 3-page report
- Included copies of John's work in the report

**1/9/03** - a notice was sent for each teacher to call John's parents about his failing grades

**1/16/03** - I made a telephone call to John's parents about my concerns

**1/20/03** - I made a follow up call to John's parents to make sure they attended the meeting with all the teachers

**1/22/03** - parent meeting was held with John's teachers

**3/19/03** - meeting scheduled /parents no show

**3/28/03** - meeting scheduled / parents no show

**4/4/03** - meeting with John and parents (estimated 90 days for completion of testing)

**5/13/03** - John hasn't been to class for a while

**5/21/03** - John hasn't returned to class yet

**5/28/03** - John came to class

**6/6/03** - Another meeting scheduled for John and his parents

**6/11/03** - John and parents were a no show at the meeting and testing was completed

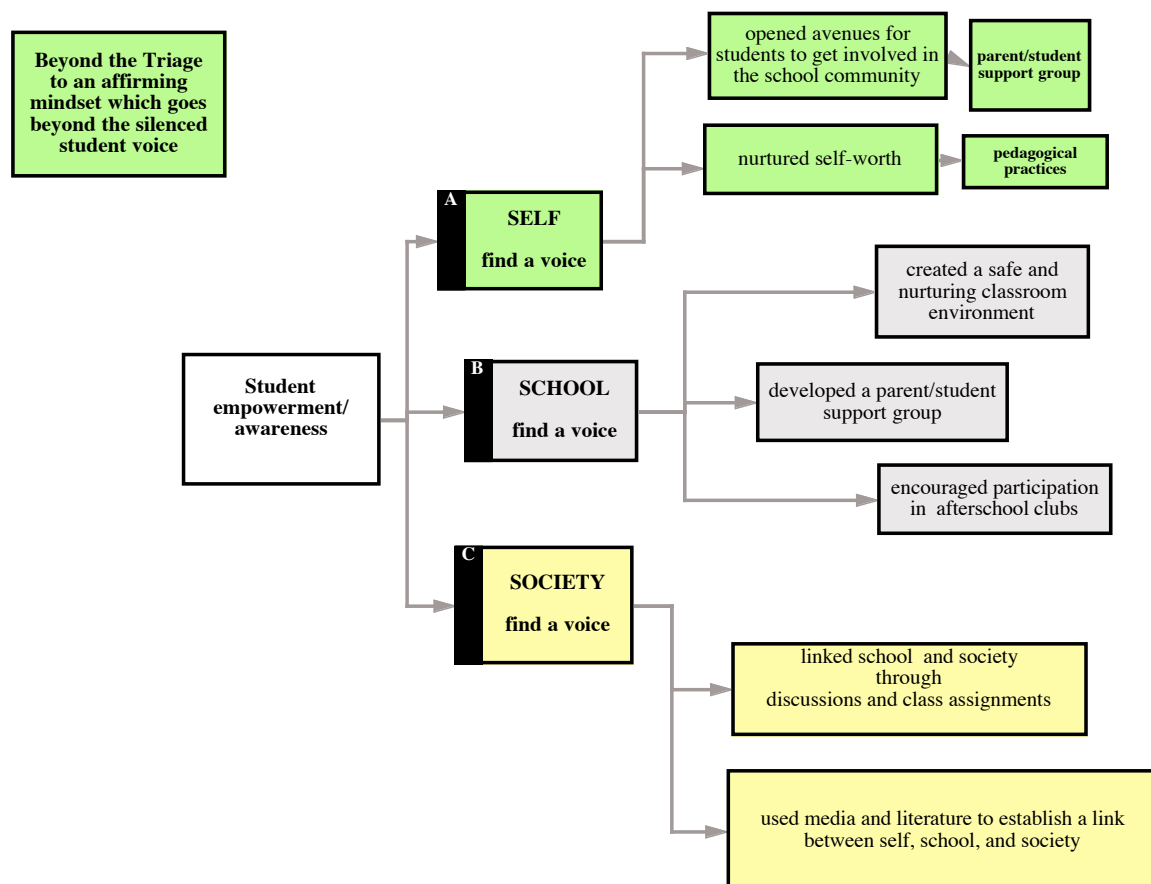
The epilogue to this story is that I spotted John the following school year in the hallway still enrolled in regular education SSDD classes and still failing. This type of “gap student casualty” story was repeated every year for five years and in each case only the student names or genders changed but the race, which was black, never changed.

Getting beyond the “triage” idea of a quick fix within a deficit mindset, which sought to further silence the student voice, was challenging. Lack of administrative support made it difficult to follow up on the results of student self-empowerment. But with teacher

persistence each year new students were given the tools for self-advocacy and self-empowerment. The diagram below provides a summary of how students moved beyond their silenced voices into the three focus areas of the study, self, school, and society.

## Diagram #1

### Steps Leading to Student Self-Empowerment/Awareness



I argue it is necessary to note that student experiences of empowerment are only beneficial if they are not neutralized by unfair and discriminatory practices occurring in the school and the larger society (Perry, Claude, Hilliard III, 2003, p.79).

**C. Power Factors – Theme #6**  
**Lack of Administrative Support – Theme #9**

The school structure of power concerning minority achievement revealed its complexities in student casualties such as John's, in student labeling, exclusion of minority parent input, and in the absence of forums for parents and students to learn about navigating the system. In addition, the school's imbalanced power structure was further revealed in this study in theme's # 6 and #9, which involved power that was primarily centered with school administrators. SSDD power themes for the most part emerged because they were the "what is" at the school, which portrayed the deficit ideology that dominated the existing social community of underachieving minority students. This "what is" revelation emerged out of distinctive affirming relationships that subsequently formed between teachers and administrators through for example, professional development, PD, experiences as well as deficit frameworks that were embedded within the walls of the school. Thus, cumulatively, over the journaling time period, affirming effects of professional development workshops, took a turn for the worse and with that pivotal fork in the road the once affirming experience then served to feed teacher despair and eventually cancel out affirming influences. In effect, due to the lack of power holder support, deficit influences dominated and ultimately, but not surprisingly resulted in negative outcomes.

As a teacher/researcher I was involved in various Lift and Platform outreach activities over a five-year time frame. Twenty-five professional development experiences were noted and a number of other teacher initiated activities, such as curriculum development, workshop presentations on minority underachievement, and the creation of a

parent/student support group, just to name a few. Below is an abbreviated version of the Lift and Platform activities isolating PD experiences only.

**Chart #5 - D. Teacher Self-Empowerment/ Self-Awareness – Theme #1**

Professional development – five years

1. Culturally Responsive Teaching
2. School Reform
3. Understanding by Design Summer Academy – Wiggins and McTighe
4. Lincoln Center Institute – Introduction to Aesthetic Education
5. Leadership Training
6. Small Learning Communities
7. Action Research
8. ATE 2000 Powerful Teacher Educators Leading in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century annual conference in Orlando, Florida
9. Alternative Schools – Visit to the Met School in Rhode Island.
10. Culturally Responsive Teacher Study Group
11. Why Race Matters: 3 part mini course
12. Education mentor
13. Cooperating teacher
14. Difficult Discussions: Talking Openly with Our Students and Colleagues About Race and Privilege
15. Culturally Responsive Teacher Study Group
16. Closing the Achievement Gap
17. The Language of Critique: Standards and Rigor in Educational Settings
18. Faculty Book Discussion Series on Equity and Diversity in Schools
19. Training in S.E.E.D./ Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity
20. Stories of Power, Languages & Culture: Impact on Universities, Schools and Communities
21. “Becoming American: Citizenship & National Identity
22. Philosophizing with Children: How to promote thinking in a community of Inquiry- a 3 part mini course
23. Theme Based Academics: Outside the Box Design for Motivating Students
24. Maximizing Learning Time: Choosing Instructional Activities for Flexibility in the Classroom
25. Unraveling the Mysteries of Data: Making Data Work to Improve Teaching and Learning at SSDD

Although these experiences were beneficial as a means of self-empowerment and a source of new knowledge, which adhered to the changing times, administrative support was lacking in order to implement the new knowledge. In this case, the administrative power holders choose to end support upon completion of the PD workshops. Therefore

money, time, and effort involved produced limited support for Lift and Platform teacher advocacy activities. The communications lab, the pilot course (See below, Chart 6, for pilot course details), and other innovative teacher programs were not able to run their course and continue to assist minority underachievers. Their short histories and blatant evidence of success were an indication that administrative power holders had the power to continue the successful programs mentioned above but chose not to. The lack of support with successful programs pertaining to minority underachievers implied the school's desire to comply with the status quo and remain in a racist and non-empowering mindset. I questioned, if I should broaden my scope and address the societal status quo that had so heavily influenced the school's as well as the nation's ideology?

**Chart #6 - Journal Excerpt #16 – History of SSDD Pilot Course**

<b>School Year</b>	<b>Pilot course Update</b>	<b>Basic Skills Supports</b>
1999/2000		<b>- Pilot course written</b>
2000/2001	<b>Semester 2</b> 9 Students  4 black students and 5 white students  Note: the class was great	<b>- Pilot course began</b>
2001/2002	<b>Semester 1</b> 6 students 3 black/1 other/2 white students  <b>Semester 2</b> 14 students 3 white males dropped the class  Out of 11 remaining students 7 were black and 1 other /3 white students remained in the class	<b>- Pilot course continues</b>
2002/2003	Course not available	<b>- Pilot course phased out this year</b>
2003/2004	<b>Semester 1</b>	<b>- Pilot course scheduled to run again</b>

In order to heal the nation, healing must involve some degree of “mutual respect and care, and vulnerability of equals” (Gresson, 2004, p.109). People in power must be ready and willing to release traditional power privileges in order for minority education to excel and align with a redefined education. The “achievement gap” represents a constant example of the effects of racism and the imbalance of power. For this “gap” to remain in place, the politics of school must remain in place for the good of the hegemonic masses and school must continue to mimic the status quo while promoting the magnitude of destructive forces incurred in society.

### **E. Deskillling of Teachers/Acceptance of the “Norm” – Theme #7**

In the SSDD school setting educators are commissioned to deal with the so-called minority deficits under a status quo environment. Although in reality, educators are trained to acknowledge only the traditional or the “norm” anything or anyone that appears to contradict fixed and preconceived “norms” are basically ignored or penalized as seen in the year 1, semester two, journal text a synopsis of the Resign Process. During this time teachers as well as students were penalized for the mishaps of a change process called Redesign.

#### **Journal Excerpt #17**

##### **Redesign Five -Year Recap: An Explanation**

The SSDD Redesign was based on the concept of change and at the end of its life cycle the fluid idea of change was broken down into a series of phases. The phases represented noticeable changes that had transpired over the Redesign period at the high school.

Chart #7 below covers the Redesign highlights from February/99 to June/03. The anticipated glorious outcome withers away at the hands of the power holders, who manage to craftily annihilate and alienate everything and everyone in their path as well as attract a following to align with them. The underlying fibers of deceit and injustice in SSDD are highlighted throughout the Redesign process when grant money favors specific student populations, teachers support the process without question to gain benefits and those who do not support the process are punished, and in the end the plight of underachieving students remains the same. The only

redeeming factor of the change process is that at least a percentage of students actually glean academic benefits from Redesign.

Chart #7 highlights the failures of a change plan that initially had potential to benefit all involved. What follows is the short version of what I came to know as the SSDD reality about change during the five years when the entire faculty/staff were skillfully manipulated and physically maneuvered through the Redesign Process.

**SCHOOL CHANGE**  
**Redesign**  
**5-year summary**

**Chart #7**

2/99 – 6/99 Phase 1	9/99 – 6/00 Phase 2	9/00 – 6/01 Phase 3	9/01 – 6/02 Phase 4	9/02 – 6/03 Phase 5
Rally for Support	Job Description	Action/ Implementation	The Phase Out	The Devastation
Inflation of faculty expectations	Three distinctive faculty groups emerged	Inconsistencies exposed	Program supports withdrawn	Poison spreads
Faculty readings assigned about SLC's and the change process	Supporters	Regrouping	Progress regresses	Staff disperses/ Lack of unity
Faculty unrest apparent	Non-supporters	We all have a voice to shape the future. Truth or Myth?	Organizers disappear	Regrouping of faculty
Faculty sorting and categorizing into support groups	Fence sitters	Student visibility low	Faculty trust level low	Ripple effects are visible in the student body
Focus: was not on students  Faculty and students become victims	Result: all became victims	Result: benefit to minority students minimized  Pockets of segregation exposed	Focus: not on students	Focus: not on students

***SLC = Small Learning Community***

In year one, evidence of teacher deskilling gradually started to emerge and continued to surface throughout the five-year time period and was especially apparent during the five-year Redesign process. Top-down standards dominated change procedures and cumulative teacher/student experiences at SSDD were earmarked by the positivistic mindset of the school. Teachers were corralled into groups, assigned projects, and with

subtlety instructed on the desired outcomes of the projects. As a result, awareness of restricted potentials, which occurred at different intervals for all involved, specifically allowed many to “to name their discontent, to act on such an articulation” (Kincheloe, 2003b, p. 2). I voiced my concerns and took baby steps toward being proactive. In effect, I found a voice and took action in efforts to fight for more democratic practices at SSDD. Finding voice or “coming to voice” was one of the primary insights of the study (Freire, 2004). The Redesign change experience helped faculty, staff, parents, and students to realize the potential damage to the human psyche in a restrictive environment full of empty promises while engulfed in a voiceless state.

Often various types of internal as well as external changes act as a motivating force to prompt people to work toward change. Taking into consideration the complexities surrounding change, it is not surprising that some potential agents get sidetracked from their ambitious change ventures. Although in contrast often, “Complexity creates change” (Fullan, 1999, p.25), which was one of the motivating forces for my need to become a change agent at SSDD. As the effects of change from Redesign with all its complexities enveloped my life, changing times, new teachers, entering and veteran teachers, and curriculum adjustments were in process. Lessons were constantly emerging that could help me with the success of future efforts for transformational change. In reference to change lessons, Fullan (1999) suggested complex change lessons, which support the lessons learned at SSDD and are as follows:

- The more complex the change the less you can force it.
- Change is non-linear, loaded with uncertainty and excitement and sometimes perverse
- Problems are inevitable and you can't learn without them
- Vision and strategic planning come later (everything is not preplanned without the input of those involved)
- There are no one-sided solutions to isolation and groupthink
- Both top-down and bottom up strategies are necessary
- The best organizations learn externally as well as internally
- Every person is a change agent (p.18)

Fullan's (1999) change lessons, in a nutshell, have been the lessons I have learned throughout this research project. The idea that we are all change agents and therefore responsible for outcome and the isolated problem is usually a part of the bigger picture are two profound revelations that have come out of this study. In addition, the notion that problems are needed for growth is the basis of my inquiry. The direction of the study is geared toward addressing problems enveloping minority underachievement and then finding alternatives to this pressing problem.

## **Research Implications**

This research indicates more work needed in order to seriously address the problem of minority underachievement. It identifies three major categories self, school, and society and ten recurrent themes shared by each category that can assist in the search for alternative outcomes. Each category and each theme mingles and interacts to formulate the existing deficit and affirming influences that permeate the teacher's sphere of influence. This study provides information about ways in which teachers within their personal sphere of influence can impact underachieving minority students with affirming rather than deficit influences. The critical questions raised in this research concern the complex relationship between teaching and "our capacity to transform the experiences of education through a deep commitment to social justice, personal thoughtfulness, and an openness to difference, contradictions, risks, and change" (Britzman, 2003). This idea presents the notion of transformation as a bigger idea one that transcends the immediate teacher experience and moves into the educational realm itself. For the purposes of this study I focus on myself, the teacher, as a change agent for initiating and implementing transformational change. A list of categorized implications listed below suggests that self is a pivotal consideration when attempting to create alternatives to change the cycle of minority underachievement. These implications also address the involvement of school and society but emphasis is on self. Implications for this study hone in on the idea that one person can make a difference and as indicated by this research that person can attract collaborative effort from others. Research implications listed below categorized as self, school, and society encapsulate a broad picture of what was implied by this study.

## **Self**

- Teacher agency can initiate a transformational change process
- Teachers can dispel the myths of democracy in education and address the reality of racist practices in the education system
- Teachers can increase individual power through voice and action (human agency)
- Teachers have power to influence the direction of the school culture
- Journal writing can generate information that can lead to change
- Teachers can incorporate multiple voices to help secure a future for all students

## **School**

- Transformational changes are temporary in the school context
- Effective change needs time to mature
- Inside and outside forces merge in the school context and influence each person's web of reality in either a negative or positive manner

## **Society**

- Teachers can identify societal institutional patterns that cause minority underachievement (inside and outside school walls)
- School structure replicates societal structure
- Each person needs to have a part in the change process if transformative change is to occur (inside and outside school walls)

The implications listed above represent “what can be”. In order to deconstruct the “what is” and establish “what can be” or reconstruct reality we must “strive for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (Freire, 2004, p.81). The reality of SSDD is that deficit and affirming occurrences appear simultaneously, which make it more difficult to stay focused in a change direction. This dose of reality makes resistance,

to the “cycle of oppression” for minority students and teachers a constant challenge (Tatum, 1997).

The reality is there is a racist ideology embedded in the “cycle of oppression” and it is enmeshed in the lived world of minorities (Tatum, 1997). As a result, it incubates and breeds continuous racist acts against all, but more noteworthy is that it aids in annihilating the spirits of those who embrace it. The overall outcome according to Troyna and Hatcher’s (1992) theoretical assumption is that “racist ideologies are not passively received, children employ them”, in which case the innocence of the children and society is lost in the ashes of these man-made destructive forces like the visual of the baby in the ashes of the Echo of a Scream artwork (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 331).

### **Conclusion**

In sum, offering alternatives to current undemocratic conditions in the school system refute the reductionist view, which often serves to limit teacher initiatives (Kincheloe, 2003b). “In-school” initiatives, mentioned in this chapter, implemented during the journaling years were an attempt by one teacher to establish a change in direction of minority underachievement from the existing top-down procedure to not only a bottom-up approach but to an approach more inclusive as well as more representative of the times.

Kincheloe (2003b) states that there is a crisis in the educational world of the twenty-first century. “There is a general lack of consciousness – a garbled inability of purpose, of

direction” (p.1). I would agree that when educators cease to acknowledge the pain students experience caused by established racist practices in the educational system or when teachers proceed mindlessly about their jobs in an unconscious state disavowing the existence of such practices, priorities have been muddled. Currently, priorities that adhere to narrow and restrictive positivistic occurrences hinder student growth as well as stifle the possibility for teacher agency and dismiss the possibility of fluidity in the lived world.

Fluidity in the lived world is time sensitive due to continuous life changes and is included in the natural progression. Lived world experiences are a human science that avoid a narrow cognitive interpretation of a person and expands that interpretation to derive meaning to and from the “things” of the world (Van Manen, 1990 p.14). With the idea of lived world experiences is the understanding that there can be multiple perspectives and that the world changes with time. Thus, perspectives of educators must be flexible, pliable, and fluid enough to meet the needs of the times and in addition, jointly embrace diverse experiences to ultimately construct “self” as a new social being within multiple contexts. The idea of considering context, leads me to acknowledge the web of reality and the sphere of influence and to understand that students are complex human beings made up of all aspects of the universe (Kincheloe, 2003b; Tatum, 1997). The complexity of the minority student’s web of reality includes historical, cognitive and cultural aspects, research findings, and hermeneutics, as well as education policies. These domains help to set the stage for life’s performances and the diverse concepts, which propagate in the teacher’s sphere of influence. Therefore, taking the present state of education at SSDD with its affinity to traditional practices into consideration, forced me to arrive at an

understanding of the level of complexity involved in relationship to underachieving minority students trapped in the “achievement gap”.

## Appendix:

**Journal Entry/December/1999**  
**STUDENT LABELS – Chart #A**

Category A “the desirable student”	Category B “the semi desirable student”	Category C “the less desirable student”	Category D “the undesirable student”	Category E “the least desirable student”
Students who get the best that education can offer because they fit into the “accepted” mold	Students who are on the border line of Category A	Students who have been neglected in the school system because of various prejudices, stemming from race, economics, culture, and physical or mental handicaps	Students who arrived with broken spirits into the system and the system perpetuated and at times compounded the situation	Students who do not fit the traditional school mold and will never fit the mold according to society
Students who have high IQ’s, no learning disabilities, and parent/caregiver support	Students who have parent/caregiver support, intellectual potential, and avenues through which their potential can be tapped	Students who are mostly from minority backgrounds fall into Category C	Students who have been wounded and their fate is sealed in the current system	Students who have been labeled in school and in society
Students who have teachers who have been taught to teach in a traditional manner	Students who are missing one of the above mentioned assets	Students with parent/caregivers who are often rendered powerless due to lack of expertise in navigating the system	Students who have teachers who do not know how to teach Category D students	Students who do not have a solid academic background and usually do not have the economic means to change that situation
			Students whose parent/caregiver are often rendered powerless due to lack of expertise in navigating the system	Students who sometimes do not have parent/caregiver support, therefore they lack advocates to intercede for them
				Students who have a number of teachers who are not qualified to teach the nontraditional student

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