African American Storytelling: A Vehicle for Providing Culturally Relevant Education in Urban Public Schools in the United States

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Abstract
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African American Storytelling: A Vehicle for Providing Culturally Relevant Education in Urban Public Schools in the United States

By

Linda H. Humes

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Jennifer Schulman

Committee Member

Dr. Janet B. Lyons

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

May 2016
Dedication

“I am because you are!” (African Proverb)

In the African tradition, I salute the ancestors. In the African American tradition, I give thanks to God from whom all blessings flow. The process and successful completion of this doctoral journey have truly been a blessing. I am only here because of the many people who has been deposited in my life.

I am eternally grateful to my beloved parents Mr. William and Mrs. Hazel Humes. It is because of their love, devotion, discipline, wisdom, and guidance that I am the first person in our family to receive a doctoral degree. The love and support of my relatives have always been a source of love and strength for me. It is my hope that this accomplishment encourages future generations of my family to reach for their personal best.

I am grateful for the love, guidance, prayers, mentorship, and encouragement of my village: my nieces Giselle and Michelle Hill, Ralph Hume, Kenny Johnson, the Page Family, Eddie Prather, Madrina Trina Feaster, Padrino Raymond Crawford, Dr. Freda Scott-Giles, Rev. Dr. Alfonso Wyatt, Dr. Sandra Epps, Dr. Cheryl Thompson, Gilbert Calcano (LMSW), Michael Sorrentino, Dr. Willis, Dr. Marta Vega, Rev. Dr. Renee Francis Washington, and my Memorial Baptist Church family, Sandra Pinnock, Jane Galvin-Lewis, Sanga of the Valley, and my Yaffa Cultural Arts family and clients, Dr. J.C. Adams, and my John Jay family.
Asante Sana to my storytelling village, Mama Linda Goss and the National Association of Black Storytellers, Dr. David Anderson, Michael McCarty, Oba King, Diane Macklin, Julie Pascal, Joy Smith, Dawn Flowers-Thompson, Dr. Caroliese Frink-Reed, Charlotte Blake Alston, Mama Sandi, Dr. Joyce Duncan, Robin Bady, Robin Moore, Laura Simms, and Regina Ress.

I am grateful for traveling this journey with Cohort Five. To the wonderful ladies in team “Make It Happen,” I have learned so much from each of you: we laughed, cried, and persisted. We will continue to make it happen! Special thanks to my assistant Jamel Love who held a Sister down! Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Edwards, for putting me on the potter’s wheel, and to Dr. Lyons for your calming spirit and brilliance. Dr. Schulman, thank you for keeping me on the potter’s wheel until you molded a scholar!

Last but not least, I dedicate this work to my precious son, William Diarra R. Humes. Remember, if Mommy could do this, the world is your oyster. Follow your bliss and never turn away from the wisdom of Jaliya!

In Memoriam:

William H. Humes, Hazel Humes, Essie Pearson, E. Braithwaite, Johnny Nicholson, Earline Benjamin, Daisy Cumberbatch, Thomas Marrow, Kenneth Hume, Claricia Hume, Miriam Johnson, Mr. & Mrs. Robbins, Montego Joe, Dr. Mary Umolu, Miriam Gilliam Abdul-Wadud, Dr. Ron Barret, Dr. Derrick Griffith

Nothing in the world is more important to me than Jaliya.* It is my only weapon.

– Gai (Jalimuso of the Kuyate Kunde of the Gambia)

*Jaliya is the term for West African storytelling (Goss & Barnes, 1989).
Biographical Sketch

Linda H. Humes is an adjunct professor in the Africana Studies Department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. As a media and education consultant, she works on multimedia projects and conducts training in personal development, literacy, culturally relevant education, diversity training, team building, and conflict resolution. Ms. Humes is the founder of Yaffa Cultural Arts Inc., a Not-for-Profit Arts in Education organization based in New York City. She was given the honorary title of Jaliya Kuumba from the legendary Suso family of storytellers in the Gambia, West Africa. She lives up to this title by using storytelling to entertain, educate, motivate, and empower. Ms. Humes attended Stony Brook University from 1973 to 1977 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Science and Africana Studies in 1977. She attended New York University from 1987 to 1989 and graduated with a Masters of Arts in Arts Administration in 1989. She came to St. John Fisher College in the Spring of 2013 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Humes pursued her research in African American storytelling in urban public schools under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Schulman and Dr. Janet B. Lyons and received the Ed.D. degree in 2016.
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of African American storytellers who provide culturally relevant education in urban public schools. This qualitative study was grounded in portraiture methodology to explore the pedagogy and lived experiences of six professional African American storytellers working in their respective cities. Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy and Bell’s (1980) critical race theory are the two theoretical frameworks that informed this study. The findings show that African American storytellers see their presence in the classroom as part of providing a caring environment for students, challenges students in critical thinking, supports character education, and fosters respect for diversity. The research also suggests that African American storytelling supports classroom teachers and promotes self-efficacy, cultural identification, and pride in the lived experiences of students. Recommendations were made to promote African American storytelling as a viable tool to enhance culturally relevant education in urban public schools in the United States.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Storytelling is an ancient universal art form that gives breadth to stories that transcend borders, religion, gender, ethnicity, culture, time, and space, and they fill the hearts, minds, and souls of generations of human beings (Gottschall, 2012). According to Gottschall (2013), throughout time, and in all parts of the world, we find similar themes, plots, motifs, and characters recalibrated into different languages, settings, and spoken word styles. The glue of these stories consists in the basic needs, personality, and conditions of what it is to be human (Dance, 2002; Goss & Barnes, 1989; Maguire, 1985). As much as story invites our tribal nature to embrace cultural identity within the social construct of our group, it also powerfully broadens our sensibilities to embrace and appreciate the oneness of all humankind (Champion, Hyter, McCabe, & Bland-Stewart, 2003; Goss & Barnes, 1989; Maguire, 1985).

According to Maguire (1985), the oldest stories on record were devised to teach lessons and influence the listener’s behavior. He explained that the cautionary tale appears in ancient writings in Chinese, Sumerian, and Sanskrit. Around the same time period, ancient Egyptian papyrus, dating from 1250 B.C., holds the story of The Tale of Two Brothers, which predates the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. Both are cautionary tales to the listener not to let emotions take one over, honor wins out, and it is never too late to make amends. In addition, Maguire stated that the ancient tribes of Israel traveled and collected stories that made their way into the Bible and other religious books.
Eventually, stories served a variety of functions in different societies; myths helped to interpret the mysteries and beauty of nature and celebrate supernatural forces. Legends immortalized ancestors, and folktales preserved customs and order (Maguire, 1985). Stories were told to children to teach them the values and morés of the people (Goss & Barnes, 1989).

According to Hale (1998), many parts of West Africa held onto their history through oral traditions. He added that in prior writings in Arabic, and later during the 1800s in European languages, West Africans held on to their history through their storytellers. The Gewel of Senegal, the Jali or Jalimuso (female) of Guinea, and the djeli of Mali carried within them the concealed stories of their peoples (Hale, 1998). West African storytellers held a distinct function in that society, specifically as historians, genealogists, advisors to nobility, entertainers, and praise singers, among others (Courlander, 1996; Goss & Barnes, 1989; Hale, 1998). When the French came to West Africa and saw the storytellers, they coined the term Griot. Enslaved Africans brought the tradition of the Griot to the Americas (Courlander, 1996). The stories, songs, and rhythms that comprised this folkloric tradition gave African Americans the information, fortitude, and faith to persevere (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Courlander, 1996; Dance, 2002; Goss & Barnes, 1989).

The tradition of the Griot has always been found in the context of applied storytelling (Barnes, personal communication, August 15, 2014). Applied storytelling is a process of storytelling application that meets communal human needs (Abdul-Malik, personal communication, July 8, 2012). Mounting evidence suggests that storytelling can address some of the communal needs of urban public schools through its intrinsic ability
to heal, inspire, motivate, and educate (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). The Jim Crow era was documented for the ability of African American teachers to teach African American students successfully in under-resourced, legally segregated schools because of its ability to inform and motivate teachers in urban public schools who are working with students who face the continued experience of racism, inequity, and segregation (Kelly, 2010; Kosol, 2005; Yosso, 2006). The narrative of the contributions of African Americans and other subordinate groups presents a counter-story to the dominant story told and retold in classrooms daily (Bell, 2003, Ladson-Billings, 2008; Yosso, 2006).

In this study, African American storytelling includes the traditional motifs of myths, space, legends, fables, and folktales as well as personal narratives and counter-stories grounded in the cultural, social, political, and diverse experiences of African Americans (Frink-Reed, personal communication, August 3, 2015). The literature supports the use of storytelling as an effective pedagogical tool (Asante, Welsh-Asante, & Asante, 1985; Champion et al., 2003; Cliatt & Shaw, 1988; Deniston-Trochta, 2003; Gardner-Neblett, Pungello, & Iruka, 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Maguire, 1985; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). For example, in their study, Cliatt and Shaw (1988) concluded that storytelling enhanced the participants’ language and logic skills as well as fostered positive attitudes toward instruction. Additional research has suggested that African American storytelling is a viable vehicle for transforming the culture in urban public schools (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Carter-Black, 2007; Ghee, Walker, & Younger, 1998; Hayes & Juarez, 2012). Counter-stories present an inclusive paradigm in which students gain knowledge of, and appreciation for, their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as those of others (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010).
This qualitative study used portraiture as the lens through which to examine the lived experiences of six African American storytellers from six different cities who, at the time of this study, had worked in urban public schools in order to examine how their work enriched culturally relevant education and aligned with the Common Core Standards in Grades 4 and 5 in English Language Arts (ELA) and social studies. The Common Core Standards were synthesized from state standards in an effort to reach a national education achievement (Toscano, 2013). The reality is that school districts and educators have experienced various levels of success in the implementation of the Common Core Standards, especially in districts serving children of color, second language learners, and low-socioeconomic communities (Fine, 2005). Experts in the field have suggested that different pedagogies, such as relevant curriculum content and storytelling, are essential to meet the needs of all students, and when these needs are met, academic standards are met (Gay, 2010; Kosol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Storytelling challenges students to embrace their own ways of knowing, and it stimulates listening skills, critical thinking, and reflection (Denison-Oshkosh, 1998). These skills are embedded in all ELA Common Core Standards across grade level.

At the time of this study, the Common Core Standards were used by 48 states, including the District of Columbia. The Standards specify the knowledge and skills that students should have at the end of each grade (K-12) and, ultimately, by graduation. Insofar as the Common Core Standards are the existing litmus test for student achievement, the heart of ELA and social studies is a synthesis of prior state standards that have been used since the early 1980s (Fine, 2005). The literature review revealed that when African American and other marginalized students are taught through a culturally
relevant pedagogy of caring, high expectations, learning styles, and respect for their cultural and lived experience, they can make the necessary connections to the concepts, vocabulary, and critical analysis needed to meet academic standards (Gay, 2010; Kosol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The literature has further made the case for storytelling as a proven conduit to implement these objectives, because of its ability to engage diverse student learning styles, develop listening skills, and build verbal cognitive and semantic skills (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Banks-Wallace, 2002; Lenox, 2000; Norfolk, Stenson, & Williams, 2006). The Common Core Standards for ELA require students to read a balance of fiction and nonfiction, build knowledge about the world through grade-appropriate texts, and engage in rich conversations based on evidence (CCSS, 2015).

The writing component of the CCSS requires students to be able to build vocabulary and use evidence from readings to inform or persuade (CCSS, 2015). The social studies standards reinforce the ELA standards. The fourth-grade standards involve an in-depth study of civics, local government, and U.S. history. The fifth-grade standards expand on the fourth-grade curriculum by stressing geographic, economic, and social/cultural understandings related to the United States, Canada, and Latin America (CCSS, 2015). These standards are discussed in more detail later in this study.

**Problem Statement**

The national goal of education in America is to give all students a high-quality education (CCSS, 2015; Edwards, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The need for the United States to stay competitive on the global stage requires young people, entering the workforce, to be critical thinkers and innovators who are technically literate and have a respect for diversity (Hayes & Juárez, 2012; Kosol, 2005). The reality, however, shows a
different picture; the children of seven million individuals living in urban poverty attend schools in 120 of the largest school districts (Ghee et al., 1998). Most of the students in these schools are students of color (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

This is an important component of the problem; scholars have argued that with the growing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students, curricula must move from emphasizing mainstream culture to representing the cultural and linguistic experiences and learning styles of these students (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Additional studies have revealed that many students of color regard school curriculum as boring because the textbooks and instruction often ignore, minimize, and misrepresent the histories, cultures, and contributions of people of color (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Howard, 2010). Scholars Gottschall (2012), Kosol (2005), and Zinn (1999) contended that the accounts in school textbooks, like the standard story of Columbus’s discovery of America, are so laden with omissions and distortions that they are closer to myth than fact. This injustice is personified when this miseducation leads to diminished dignity, pride, and self-esteem among students of color (Ghee et al., 1998).

Reports of student deficits, poor family structures, and genetic explanations about achievement and cultural mismatch theories, have suggested that there can be negative outcomes for students when important components of teaching and learning between the student and teacher are not culturally congruent (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). These stories are imbedded within the culture to preserve the stock stories of the dominant group (Caruthers, 2006; Howard, 2001a).

Many teachers do not understand the culture of African American students and do not feel confident in handling urban classroom settings (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006).
Mounting evidence has suggested that teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are related to positive student and teacher outcomes (Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Siwatu, Frazier, Osagha, & Starker, 2011). When children are treated as if they are inferior or “bad,” they begin to act on these perceptions (Caruthers, 2006). Educational researchers have noted that high attrition rates in urban schools may be the result of inadequate teacher preparation for diverse classrooms (Hayes & Juárez, 2012; Siwatu et al., 2011). Student and teacher efficacy is compounded by school communities that do not support teachers who attempt to use alternative pedagogies, such as storytelling, in their classrooms (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).

Educational reform initiatives have failed because they have not changed the culture of the school by deconstructing the behaviors, norms, and beliefs that do not serve urban African American students and their teachers (Caruthers, 2006). Studies have shown that traditional African American storytelling facilitates critical thinking, character building, efficacy, cultural identification, and respect for diversity (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Further research has argued that counter-storytelling can redirect the negative effects of miseducation and majoritarian curricula on the spiritual, social, and academic development of many African American youth (Stiler & Allen, 2006). Despite research that validates the benefits of culturally relevant pedagogy, such as African American storytelling in public schools, Arts in Education programs in urban schools are on the decline (Ghee et al., 1998). Consequently, social, cultural, and educational deficits continue to diminish the dignity, pride, motivation, and achievement of many African American students in urban public schools (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ghee et al., 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006). These issues informed the problem of this study.
Theoretical Rationale

The theoretical frameworks that informed this study are Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy theory and Bell’s (1980) critical race theory. Both frameworks are congruent in tenets that recognize social justice consciousness, critical thinking, and respect for lived experience and culture as essential to education that is effective, engaging, and liberating for all students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011; Freire, 1973; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Both of these frameworks embrace storytelling and narrative at the core of their practicum, which provides credence for the inclusion of these frameworks to explore African American storytellers as teaching artists in urban public schools (Freire, 1970; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

**Freire’s (1970) empowerment critical pedagogy theory.** Freire’s childhood in Brazil was one of severe poverty and hunger. These conditions made it difficult for Freire to learn, giving him a deep understanding of the relationship between socioeconomics and education (Bentley, 1999). Freire’s (1970) commitment to, and understanding of, the plight of social justice deepened when he was imprisoned and later exiled during the 1964 military coup in Brazil (Bentley, 1999). His educational theory was influenced by these experiences and the writings of Marx and anti-colonialist theorists. Freire (1970) wrote his famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970, while teaching at Harvard University. He believed that for pedagogy to be liberating, the oppressed masses must be involved in the process; moreover, he believed in the value of the lived experience of the subordinate groups and the power of their self-determination (Freire, 1970).

Freire (1970) espoused the observations of Rousseau and Dewey as he developed and contributed to critical pedagogy (Bentley, 1999). Fundamentally, Freire attacked
what he called “banking” education, a type of teaching that views students as empty bank accounts to be filled by the teacher (Giroux, 2010). Instead, Freire (1970) challenged educators to value their students’ knowledge and encouraged them to learn about their students’ social, cultural, and economic circumstances in order to construct learning in ways that would be meaningful for them (Giroux, 2010). In addition, Freire (1970) believed in an education that would teach students to look at their world critically and see themselves as change agents (Bentley, 1999). The tenets of Freire’s (1970) work involved using students’ experience to unlearn dominant stories, and then learn, relearn, reflect, and evaluate. In this framework, students are taught to understand the world and recognize their role in shaping it (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Critical pedagogy is embedded in challenging the subordinate and dominant groups to move to a dialogue that allows both groups to respect and embrace the notion of shared and equal access as individuals and citizens (Freire, 1970). In looking at critical pedagogy, the art form of storytelling is a tool that generates personal inquiry and dialogue into the hearts and minds of others (Gillespie, 2004). When educators understand their personal stories and take the time to acknowledge the stories and lived experiences of their students, then the possibility of learning can take place (Freire, 1970; Gay, 2010; Litner, 2004).

**Bell’s critical race theory and education.** The fundamental rationale for Bell’s (1980) critical race theory addresses the relationship between property ownership and the privilege to access education (Coffin, 2011). Historically, White males were the only individuals who could legally own property and thereby benefit from full citizenship, including education (Kosol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Today, wealthy school districts benefit from a higher level of property taxes with which to fund their schools,
thus giving students in these districts the privilege to a higher-quality standard of 
education. Disadvantaged school districts are not able to raise local property tax revenues 
to fund comparable education experiences for their students (Coffin, 2011). In New York 
State, the wealthiest school district spends seven times more per student than the poorest 
school district (New York State United Teachers [NYSUT], 2013). In 1997, the Illinois 
 ratio was 8 to 1, and in Texas, the ratio was 10 to 1 (U.S. Department of Education, 
1997). Critical race theorists have argued that the current education debt has been accrued 
by years of educational inequality (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 
2006). However, looking at the achievement gap among African American students is not 
focusing on the real issue, which is dealing with policy change and school funding 
(Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The achievement gap is based on test scores, and it does not look at what students 
actually learn in school and whether this learning process prepares them for success as 
adults. The blame is put on students and teachers and not on the need to close the 
education debt by redistributing financial, material, and human resources (Coffin, 2009). 
The education gap is correlated to property rights and the cultural disconnect between 
disenfranchised communities and schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As Ladson-Billings 
(2006) noted, the political, social, and economic inequalities in educational policies 
extend to teacher preparedness and to culturally incongruent teaching and school 
environments. The results of these micro- and macro-aggressions leave many African 
American students feeling oppressed, dehumanized, stigmatized, and apathetic (Ghee et 
al., 1998). In response to the education gap, critical race theorist, Gloria Ladson-Billings 
(1995), coined the term *culturally relevant education* to categorize an opposition
education that acknowledges the home community of students and meets the needs of students from various cultures.

Hayes, Juarez, and Cross (2012) referenced five basic elements of critical race theory in education. These five elements give subordinate groups the tools to be proactive in creating the educational experiences they deserve.

1. Centrality of race and racism – All critical race theory research within education must centralize race and acknowledge the intersection of race and other forms of subordination.

2. Valuing experiential knowledge – Recognizes the experiential knowledge of students of color as appropriate and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education; an appreciation of storytelling; and learning from the success of the past as a framework for the present.

3. Challenging the dominant perspective – Critical race theory research works to challenge the stock/majoritarian stories of the dominant culture.

4. Commitment to social justice – Social justice must always be a commitment to critical race theory research. This must include a critique of liberalism, claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and any modality of self-interest.

5. Being interdisciplinary – Critical race theory crosses epistemological boundaries. It borrows from several traditions to include a more complete analysis of racism. It serves as a framework for educational equity to expose racism in education and propose solutions for this issue (Solóranzo & Yosso, 2001).
Researchers of this theory envision a social justice curricular and pedagogical work that will eliminate racism, sexism, and poverty, and empower underrepresented subordinate groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). Central to these theorists is the belief that the experiential knowledge of people of color is an appropriate, legitimate, and integral part of understanding racial inequality and moving closer to true self-determination (Hayes et al., 2012).

**Critical race theory and storytelling.** Storytelling is an important tool in critical race theory as it is in critical pedagogy. Central to understanding critical race theory in education, it is important to discuss counter-storytelling (Bell, Roberts, Irani, & Murphy, 2008). Counter-storytelling involves recounting personal stories, other stories, as well as composite stories, to discuss racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination (Gay, 2010; Negron, 2013). Counter-storytelling is a tool to tell stories that have not been told as well as to analyze and challenge the majoritarian stories of the dominant society (Negron, 2013). To understand the relevance of counter-storytelling, it is important to understand the story types that have driven the cultural literacy of stories in society (Bell et al., 2008).

The first type of story, known as the stock/majoritarian story, permeates the dominant mainstream institutions, government, workplaces, and the media (Bell et al., 2008). An example, as noted by Zinn (1999), tells a stock story as that of the story of Columbus discovering America. This version of the start of America emphasizes Columbus as the hero and deemphasizes the genocide he and his crew committed against the Arawaks (Zinn, 1999). This story highlights progress and is told from the point of view of the conquerors, government, and leaders (Zinn, 1999).
The second type of story, known a concealed story, coexists alongside stock stories (Bell et al., 2008). These stories are circulated among the subordinate group and hidden from the dominant group. An example of a concealed story is the many educators who have reached success in educating African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). These stories are rarely heard, despite the emergence of scholarship to support these findings (Hayes et al., 2012). The third type of story is resistance stories that are both historical and contemporary and tell the stories of how people have resisted racism and sexism and fought for justice (Bell et al., 2008).

In short, critical race theorists engage in counter-storytelling not only as a response to stock stories (those that permeate the societal constituent groups). The idea of simply sharing views and experiences outside of the dominant culture can also be enough to create a new narrative, or a counter-story (Negron, 2013). Counter-storytelling in education addresses the race-based inequities in access to quality education for African American students (Hayes et al., 2012). It also gives a voice to educators, students, parents, and administrators, allowing them to change the dynamic in language, pedagogy, and policy around the education of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain and analyze how African American storytellers can be effective conduits of culturally relevant teaching in urban public schools. The literature review revealed that when students are given material that reflects their culture and lived experiences, they are more engaged and motivated (Carter-Black, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Scholars have argued that many educational initiatives are not aligned with the learning styles of urban African
American students (Howard, 2001a; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lapayese, Aldana, & Lara, 2014). The use of movement, call and response, visual gestures, and voice variation in African American storytelling has the ability to reach students with multiple learning styles. This is further discussed in Chapter 2 (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010).

The data have shown that culturally relevant pedagogy is inherent in storytelling and the efficacy of the entire learning community can be transformed by the stories we tell and the stories we embrace (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Caruthers, 2006; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The narratives of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community partners play an important part in the interpersonal dynamics inherent in transforming schools (Diller, 1999; Hayes et al., 2012; Horsford, 2009; Howard, 2001a; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

African American storytelling as a resource for urban schools lies in the ability of this art form to bring cultural relevance into the curriculum (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). The present study explored in detail the ability of professional storytellers to partner with classroom teachers in presenting culturally relevant curricula that support the Common Core Standards. This study focused on the fourth and fifth grades as an example of how African American storytelling and counter-storytelling have been integrated into curricula and engage students to meet or exceed the Common Core Standards.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the lived experiences of professional African American storytellers who work as teaching artists in urban public schools?
2. How have the experiences of professional African American storytellers assisted teachers in promoting cultural awareness and self-esteem of the students they serve?

3. How can African American storytelling enhance the ELA and/or social studies curriculum within the Common Core Standards in Grades 4 and 5?

4. What can be done to promote storytelling as a tool to teach culturally relevant education in schools?

**Significance of the Study**

The education system in the United States does not reflect the demographics of the student population in urban schools (Boahene-Lewis, 2010). Despite a growing culturally and linguistically diverse student body, the curriculum continues to present a majoritarian or dominant perspective (Hunn, Guy, & Manglitz, 2014). Research has concluded that many African American children, as well as other children of color, feel alienated and bored by the present instruction in most urban classrooms (Boahene-Lewis, 2014; Diller, 1999; Glass, 2002; Howard, 2001). Conversely, when culturally relevant pedagogy is embraced, urban schools transform to learning communities, and African American students learn (Caruthers, 2006; Diller, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The ability of storytelling to engage students promotes fun in learning and active listening (Bell, 2003; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). Critical race scholars in education have asserted that storytelling and counter-storytelling are powerful tools to create urban learning environments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Studies have revealed that schools have the ability to transform the children and families they serve through the power of story (Boahene-Lewis, 2014; Howard, 2001b; Ladson-Billings,
When educators, administrators, parents, and students work with the tenets of empowerment, the learning community becomes one that births excellence, hope, and social justice (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Studies have noted that storytelling is an effective tool to help all children build social skills, positive self-identity, language skills, subject content, and character. Additional studies have also revealed that these outcomes occur specifically in urban school settings with African American students (Dockter, 2008; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012). These significant findings inform the exploration of additional data to support the immersion of storytelling and counter-storytelling in the education of African American students (L. Goss, personal communication, August 15, 2015).

**Definition of Terms**

*African American Storytelling*: An art form using narrative, oral histories, stories, songs, movement, and music steeped in the African American experience.

*Applied Storytelling*: The use of story in practical applications to meet the needs of human beings, story in education, social science, business, branding, self-improvement, and community building.

*Color Line*: A barrier created by racial segregation, custom, law, skin tone, hair texture, politics, economics, and social restrictions imposed on non-Whites.

*Concealed Stories*: Stories that often remain in the shadows of the dominant culture and provide a perspective that differs from the stock stories; by contrast, concealed stories express the aspirations, pride, victories, and struggles of subordinate groups.
Counter-Stories: New stories that are deliberately constructed to challenge stock stories.

Cultural Mix Match Theory: A theory that examines the relationship between the beliefs and cultures of students that contrast with the culture and beliefs of the school environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally Relevant Education: Teaching pedagogy that utilizes the culture, background, and lived experiences of the students (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Griot: (pronounced Gree-oh) A French term for West African storyteller/oral historian.

Learning Communities: Groups of people who share common academic goals and work together to that end.

Majoritarian Stories: The stories told by the majority rule, by the dominant group in a society, sometimes referred to a stock story (Bell, 2003).

Miseducation: The teaching of untruths or the provision of inadequate teaching.

Narrative Storytelling: The telling or recounting of events or experiences, true or fictitious.

Portraiture: A qualitative methodology of inquiry and documentation developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) that combines systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities, and scientific rigor.

Reculturing: Changes that occur as a result of educators reflecting on, evaluating, and expanding their own mental models regarding young people (Caruthers, 2006).
Reeducation: Teaching students in order to change their behavior, beliefs, or previous teaching; an antidote for mis-education.

Resistance Stories: Stories that can be historical or contemporary and relate how people have resisted racism and challenged stock stories.

Stock Stories: Stories told by the dominant group, passed on through historical and literary documents, monuments and media representations; synonym: majoritarian stories, see above (Bell, 2003).

Storytelling: A universal ancient art form that uses words and actions, is interactive between teller and listener, and is valuable to human expression.

Chapter Summary

Despite the countless efforts of school restructuring and educational reforms, the disproportionate underachievement of low-income and minority students is a consistent occurrence in U.S. schools (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2001b). The Common Core Standards were implemented in an effort to achieve a national standard of education that could prepare students to compete globally and have the necessary skills to succeed in college and the workplace (CCSS, 2015). Critics of the Common Core Standards have argued that the implementation, professional development, and cultural congruency of the standards and tests are not consistent (VanTassel-Baska, 2015). Furthermore, teacher preparedness programs are not enabling teachers to teach the diverse student composition of U.S. public schools adequately (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Several researchers have advocated for a shift in the American educational system to embrace a culturally responsive pedagogy that respects the diversity of the students and prepares them to be empowered, academically proficient global citizens (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Gay,
African American storytelling is a tool to assist urban public schools by which teachers, administrators, students, and parents can create a community of learning that is humanistic, academically vigorous, sustainable, and culturally relevant (Champion et al., 2003).

Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy theory and Bell’s (1980) critical race theory are the two theoretical frameworks guiding this study because they give a conceptual and practical analysis of the problems and solutions to closing the education debt for urban schools, and recognize and utilize aspects of storytelling as paramount in their pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Critical pedagogy utilizes a humanistic approach to education, moving teachers and students to dialogue, critical thinking, social responsibility, and individual empowerment (Freire, 1970). Critical race theorists have made a case that African American students benefit from culturally relevant pedagogy through stories providing an alternative narrative to the dominant stories that are currently the status quo in most school curricula (Gay, 2010; Ghee et al., 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Scholars have identified African American storytelling as having great significance in the education field for all students (Asante et al., 1985; Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Champion et al., 2003; Goss & Barnes, 1989).

The tradition of the Griot in America has informed, enriched, and empowered African American people as a tradition of survival. This tradition continues as modern-day professional African American storytellers bring the Griot tradition into urban public schools as teaching artists. It has been established that different pedagogical strategies are needed to embrace the cultural and learning diversity of African American students (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).
Several studies have indicated that storytelling is an effective pedagogical strategy, enhancing literacy skills that are congruent with the literacy targets of the Common Core Standards (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Stenson & Norfolk, 2012). Educators who use nontraditional pedagogies, such as African American storytelling, have more success in closing the academic achievement among marginalized students (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Teacher preparedness programs are not consistent in giving teachers the opportunity to examine their personal biases or learn nontraditional strategies, such as storytelling, to reach their diverse student bodies (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). According to Charlotte Alston Blake (personal communication, August 14, 2015), there is a gap in the literature regarding the phenomenon of modern-day Griots who are providing culturally relevant education as teaching artists in urban public schools.

To examine this phenomenon, the research questions that guided this study are:

1. How have the experiences of professional African American storytellers assisted teachers in promoting cultural awareness and self-esteem of the students they serve?

2. How can African American storytelling enhance the ELA and/or social studies curriculum within the Common Core Standards in Grades 4 and 5?

3. What can be done to promote storytelling as an enhancement of cultural awareness of African American students in schools?

4. What are the lived experiences of professional African American storytellers who work as teaching artists in urban public schools?
The urgency for additional pedagogical strategies for urban public schools was the motivation for this study. Thus, the importance of this study was based on the assumption that one of the missing links for African American students might very well be found in the oral tradition of their ancestors and the modern-day Griots who keep that tradition alive (Frink-Reed, personal communication, August 3, 2015; L. Goss, personal communication, August 3, 2015; Jamal-Koram, personal correspondence, July 19, 2015).

A review of the literature is presented in Chapter 2. The research design, methodology, and analysis are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents a detailed analysis of the results and findings, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The research reviewed in this chapter provides an historical perspective of the tradition of African American storytelling and the education of Black students in America. Additionally, the literature examines the extent to which African American storytelling can be a tool of transformation for public schools regarding culturally relevant teaching, curriculum integration, and meeting academic standards. Traditional African education is explored as a precursor to, and connecting thread for, the two theories that underpin this review. Critical pedagogy theory (Freire, 1970) and critical race theory (Bell, 1980) give a modern context and socially conscious grounding for the use of African American storytelling in urban public schools (Gay, 2010).

Storytelling is an ancient and universal art form that is interactive, informative, and healing (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Dance, 2003; Goss & Barnes, 1989). The function of storytelling is quickly being recognized as having transformative properties that can promote change in individuals, communities, and corporations (Denning, 2011; Frink-Reed, personal communication, August 3, 2015). The term applied storytelling was coined to define storytelling that addresses human needs (Shiponi, 2011). This idea of storytelling serving humanity and being used for social change is not new, but it is fundamental to African storytelling, and it was an important function of the traditional Griot and Jali of West Africa. (Abdul-Malik, personal communication, August 15, 2012; Asante et al., 1985; Frink-Reed, personal communication, August 3, 2015).

Historical perspective. The term Griot was coined by the French colonizers when they went into West Africa. They encountered the oral historians who traveled and
told the stories of the families and villages (Hale, 1998). There are many indigenous names for the West African storyteller: the Wolof term is *Guewel*; the Mande term is *Jeli/Jali*; and in parts of Ghana, the term is *Agenaou* (Hale, 1998) is used. The *Griot* was a genealogist, historian, advisor, diplomat, mediator, interpreter, exhorter, official, and teacher (Hale, 1998). The first accounts of the West African storyteller go back to the ancient Mali Empire and the reign of King Mansa Musa; however, archeologists maintain this tradition is as old as the ancient cities of Jenne-Jeno that date before the birth of Christ (Hale, 1998).

The storyteller was integral to every important event and ritual of a village (Champion et al., 2003). In many cases, the art and responsibility of transmitting the oral traditions came from family lineage (Boadu, 1985; Goss & Barnes, 1989). Names, like “Susu” from the Gambia, are renowned as the surname of respected Gewels who can trace their lineage for generations (P. Suso, personal communication, August 7, 2015). These particular oral historians had amazing memories and were genealogists for families, historians for villages, and they initiated ritual ceremonies. These rituals included pouring libations for ancestors, performing naming ceremonies for newborns, and participating in rituals for weddings and funerals (Boadu, 1985; Goss & Barnes, 1989). Whether the *Griots* were from a familial caste system or came into oral artistry through choice, they met the needs of their society as educators, entertainers, and historians (Hale, 1998).

Samuel Osei Boadu (1985) coined the term *oral art* as an art form that embraces all the activities that depend on the spoken word for transmitting messages to the collective and maintaining societal continuity from one generation to the next. The
aesthetics of traditional African oral art include music, song, and sometimes dance. The traditional oral artist played certain instruments to accompany the spoken word and song. Male *Griots* traditionally played the *Balafon* (a precursor of the xylophone) and a stringed instrument called a *Kora*, while female *Griottes* typically played a stringed instrument called an *Ardin* (Hale, 1998).

According to Boadu (1985), the primary obligation and responsibility of the *Griot* was to serve the society. He noted that the oral artist was committed to the art and moral, social, and cultural enrichment of the people. While monetary compensation was accepted, it was not the sole motivation for the oral artist. An example of this is with the Bambara farmers of the Upper Volta, who leave their fields during the dry season and supplement their livelihood with live performances (Boadu, 1985). Festivals and storytelling events involved villagers inviting the oral artists to special occasions. The entire community would come to the storytelling and enjoy the food, drink, stories, music, and dance (Goss & Barnes, 1989).

Beyond the *Griot* and oral artist, stories were part of the everyday fabric of the people as the elders, mothers, and big sisters told and shared stories while they prepared meals or relaxed in the evening (Boadu, 1985). Men drank tea or smoked their pipes as they shared stories in the moonlight, and people rested after a long day’s work with extended family listening to the stories (Champion et al., 2003; Goss & Barnes, 1989). As the research has stated, children learned the values of their society by hearing these tales. In this way, storytelling entertained, taught, and added to the cohesiveness of the family unit (Goss & Barnes, 1989).
African oral art or storytelling encompasses the universal components of storytelling as an ancient human expression that is interactive, uses language and action, evokes imagination, and presents a narrative (National Storytelling Network, 2011). African storytelling has certain characteristics that are fundamentally aligned with African aesthetics (Asante et al., 1985).

The foundations of African aesthetics can be found in the culture, value system, and religious ethos of the people (Asante et al., 1985). In his book, *African Oral Literature*, Okpewho (1992) outlined nine stylistic characteristics of oral storytelling in Africa. The first characteristic is repetition, which achieves a rhythmic effect that is appealing to the audience and makes the message easy to remember. The second characteristic is parallelism, in which the uses of identical words are transposed within the same or adjacent statements. The third characteristic is piling and association. Okpewho defined this characteristic as putting one detail onto another to build the narrative to a climax. Tonality and idiophones refer to the storyteller changing intonation throughout the story as well as using sound to convey meaning. The next characteristic is digression, in which the storyteller departs from the central theme of the story to address an object or a person in the audience or an issue related to the theme of the story. The last three characteristics—imagery, allusion, and symbolism—are also present in written literature. Imagery is described as painting a mental picture that appeals to our feelings and understanding, which is many times achieved through similes and metaphors. A simile is a direct comparison whereas a metaphor makes an implicit or a hidden comparison. Allusion entails the usage of ideas from real experience or from literature such as folktales. The last characteristic that Okpewho (1992) suggested is symbolism,
which is the use of a concrete or familiar object as an explanation for an abstract idea or less familiar object or event. According to this author, these characteristics make for rich, complex, and timeless storytelling that meets the needs of the people through the seasons and events of life. In different languages and synchronized lessons, Anansi the spider, monkey, lion, and Brer Rabbit were passed down through the generations and across the waters with African people to new lands (Dance, 2003).

**Anansi crosses the waters.** There was an African presence in the Americas before slavery. However, the majority of people of African descent were brought to the shores of South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and North America through the transatlantic slave trade (Bennett, 1982). The majority of enslaved Africans was brought to America from the regions of Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Senegal, Gambia, and Nigeria (Champion et al., 2003). During these tumultuous trips, Africans endured unthinkable treatment, stripped of family, friends, language, and religion (Dance, 2003). The slave traders did not know that the enslaved Africans were not totally alone; Guyanese author A. J. Seymour suggested that there were “unregistered passengers of the middle passage” (Dance, 2003, p. 1). These passengers were Anansi the spider, monkey, lion, Brer Rabbit, and other revered friends who crossed the waters in the minds and memories of African people (Dance, 2003). The stories of these beloved animal friends and the characteristics of oral artistry continued to hold similar functionality for transplanted Africans in the Diaspora (Champion et al., 2003; Dance, 2003).

The stories took on the language of the oppressor interwoven with the patterns of native African languages as they comforted, taught, and recorded the histories in their
new homes (Champion et al., 2003; Dance, 2003; Goss & Barnes, 1989). The tales of the smaller animals defeating the more powerful animals was an empowering theme that fortified enslaved Africans (Champion et al., 2003). The enslaved Africans sought ways to survive their conditions and defeat the dominant group in the same way that the animals of their stories sought ways to outwit their adversaries (Champion et al., 2003; Dance, 2003). During slavery times, enslaved Africans were not allowed to read, write, or play drums. Instead, they embedded messages in their songs and stories. Slave owners perceived songs such as “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” to be pure entertainment for the slaves; instead, the song was actually information about escaping to the North (Logan, 1998). The fables depicting the victorious Brer Rabbit over his adversaries hid the true feelings of the slaves toward their slave owners and conditions. These stories were sometimes told within earshot of the master; however, other stories were concealed stories for the enslaved African’s ear only (Dance, 2003). The folktales of John, Jack, Sam, Efan, or Rastus did not use symbolism, but boldly and humorously showed these protagonists cajoling, scheming, lying, and tricking “ole massa” (Dance, 2003).

Creation stories are universal to cultures all over the world. However, the explanation of why enslaved Africans found themselves in the condition of slavery set the stage for a new form of etiological tale to be created (Champion et al., 2003; Dance, 2003). The etiological tale sought to explain why and how the “Negro” found himself or herself enslaved in a country that was supposedly founded on freedom and equality (Dance, 2003). These tales might give the initial impression of self-debasing and accepting one’s lot in society; however, scholars in African American folklore have suggested that these tales, instead, were satirical accounts that mocked the stereotypes,
social constructs, hypocrisy, and prejudices of White society (Dance, 1978; Goss & Barnes, 1989; Zinn, 1999). Gomez (1998) spoke of the seasoning of Africans to African Americans and suggested that the transformation from African to African American entailed four stages of acculturation: the initial capture, the barracoon stage, the transatlantic voyage, and the seasoning stage. After the first stage of the initial capture of the Africans, the barracoon stage occurred when the enslaved Africans were taken to the slave castles along the coast of West Africa. The transatlantic voyage or Middle Passage was the horrific voyage in which the slave ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The seasoning stage could last from 1 to 3 years, during which the enslaved African adjusted to different clothes, food, and language (Gomez, 1998). Also during this fourth stage, the enslaved African added nuances, sounds, and expressions to the new language, creating a dialect called African American English (Champion et al., 2003, Gomez, 1998). This new dialect embedded the concealed stories of resistance, survival, and community that created African American culture. As the status of enslaved Africans transitioned from Negro to Black to African American, the transition of African storytelling transformed into the hybrid of African American storytelling or Black storytelling (Frink-Reed, personal communication, August 3, 2015). The function, rhythm, and African aesthetic maintained as ghost stories, sermons, tall tales, legends, and family stories round out the potpourri of African American oral artistry and continue in these forms as well as in the forms of today’s genres of poetry and rap (Oyewole, personal communication, September 5, 2015).

Slave owners attempted to take away the language and drum of enslaved Africans to defer communication and solidarity (Asante et al., 1985). Inasmuch as this effort was
successful, Africa managed to manifest itself through the sensibilities, spirit, resilience, brilliance, and creativity of the enslaved African (Logan, 1998). Historically, the United States has a legacy of educational inequality (Zinn, 1999). Slave owners understood that knowledge was power; consequently, slave codes in the colonies were instituted forbidding slaves to read or write and making it a crime for others to teach them (Simkin, 2015). The legislation enacting literacy for slaves as a criminal act did not take away their desire to seek ways to educate themselves and fight for their freedom (Zinn, 1999). Enslaved Africans secretly listened to their masters’ (owners) conversations, informed each other through coded communication, and when possible, sought ways to learn how to read and write (Simkin, 2015). Some slaveholders allowed Bible reading among slaves and established informal plantation schools, in part, motivated by Christian convictions and practically motivated by the need for literate slaves to perform certain needed tasks such as record keeping (Simkin, 2015).

After emancipation, the freedmen schools were set up to maintain a servant class (Kelly, 2009). The antebellum era in American history refers to the period after the War of 1812 to the beginning of the Civil War (Hine, Hine, & Harrold, 2011). The Jim Crow era emerged after the Civil War by disgruntled lawmakers in the Southern states. The Jim Crow laws separated the races in all walks of life, and they were not abolished until Supreme Court legislation in the 1960s (Hine et al., 2011). During the Jim Crow era, African American students received second-hand books and materials. In the rural South, many African American children worked on farms and went to school for four months out of the year (Ladson-Billings, 2006).
Traditional African cultural education. Traditional African cultural education happened through storytelling and the lived experience of children participating in the rituals and ceremonies of the village (Boateng, 1983). Education was intergenerational and involved proverbs, folktales, myths, legends, and rites of passage (Boateng, 1983). The rites of passage graduated the young girls and boys into their roles as young women and men in the society and built efficacy, pride, and purpose in the young initiates (Boateng, 1983). The traditional African educational components of strong interpersonal relations, communal values, ritual, culture, high expectations, and purpose were key elements for success in educating African children (Kelly, 2009). Many of these components are visible in the formal and informal education of African American children from slavery times and throughout the Jim Crow era (Kelly, 2009).

Despite the pragmatic and consistent institutionalized assault on African Americans receiving quality education, they held on to their African ways of knowing—a knowing about how to educate their young, a knowing about extended family and interpersonal relationships, and an unconscious knowing of African spirituality (Leary, 2005). According to Leary (2005), the African spiritual ontology is congruent with many indigenous belief systems that rank God first, spirits second, man in the center, then animals and plants, and last, inanimate objects. The paramount differences in how Africans perceived their world in comparison to Europeans inform every aspect of life, including how they maintained cultural norms and educated their young (Jamal-Koram, personal communication, July 22, 2015). European modes of thought and expression tend to be linear, as opposed to African concepts that are expressed symbolically (Ani, 1992). African culture is full of symbolic behaviors that allow people to use metaphor and ritual
to capture the ambiguities of phenomenal existence, the connection with nature, and the interconnectedness with all beings (Ani, 1992). There is respect for all things and a respect for the individual, with great focus on maintaining a balance and communal interconnectedness (Leary, 2005). Many African languages only have names for Mother and Father, and Sister and Brother, thus reinforcing the notion of shared responsibility for all the children and shared accountability to each other (Leary, 2005).

The African Diaspora refers to the communities, throughout the world from historic movements of people from the continent of Africa, particularly descendants of the West and Central Africans who were enslaved and shipped to the Americas in the Atlantic slave trade (Hine et al., 2011). Africans in the Diaspora represented the embodiment of the confrontation of two divergent world-views (Ani, 1992). Through the oppression and dehumanizing circumstances of slavery and colonization, transported Africans were able to find fragmented pieces of their world-view and manifest creative expression with language, music, dance, thought patterns, laughter, spirituality, flair, and story (Ani, 1992).

An example of a counter-story is that, prior to Brown v. Board of Education (1954), some schools, despite the odds, used social, cultural, and human capital to teach Black children successfully (Horsford, 2010). Frederick Douglass argued that the advocacy for mixed schools was not because Colored schools or Colored instructors were inferior; rather, the struggle was about doing away with a system that exalted one class and debased another (Daley, 2006). According to Daley (2006), Jim Crow schools were segregated schools in the South; most of them were overcrowded one-room school houses with toddlers to eighth graders in the same room. The White schools controlled
whatever hand-me-down books were sent to the Black schools. The Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution were not allowed in the Black schools, for fear that the students would confirm they were being denied the rights due all citizens of the United States. Daley also noted that education was also scheduled around the farming season. Many Black children were pulled out of school to work on the farms alongside their parents. The goals of the Southern states were only to teach Black students the skills they would need for agriculture and domestic work. Only a few northern philanthropies donated money to assist selected Jim Crow schools, so administrators and teachers were forced to be self-reliant and resourceful. Black teachers were not given adequate education and received low salaries. However, the dedication of the Jim Crow teachers, the desire of parents to have their children educated, and the thirst of the students for an education resulted in higher literacy rates. Nevertheless, these literacy rates still lagged behind White schools that invested three times as much in White schools as Black schools (Daley, 2006).

The wisdom and strategies of Jim Crow teachers were examined in a study conducted by Kelly (2009), which is documented later in this chapter. However, it is important to note the basic information of this historical legal case in American history. Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was a groundbreaking case led by Charles H. Houston and later by Thurgood Marshall that dismantled the legal basis for segregation in schools and other public facilities (Williams, 2007). The rationale of Brown v. Board of Education was getting Black students to schools where the school boards were allocating the appropriate funding to assure a quality education, and those schools were White schools (Williams, 2007). The promise of Brown v. Board of Education was usurped by
institutionalized racism, economic inequality, and a dysfunctional bureaucracy governing most urban school districts (Edwards, 2011; Kosol, 2005). In the 20 years after Brown vs Board of Education, American public schools became more segregated and more unequal even as the nation became more racially diverse (Edwards, 2011; Kosol, 2005; Williams, 2007).

The data have clearly shown that educators in the African American community know how to educate African American children (Hayes et al., 2012; Rex, Murnen, Jobbs, & McEachen, 2002). There are many examples of academic success stories among African American students (Stinson, 2006). The dilemma lies in institutions, bureaucracies, and school communities that do not support the wisdom and lived experiences of these educators, parents, and administrators (Barton & O’Neill, 2011; Hayes et al., 2012; Horsford, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In lieu of the scattered pockets of successful learning communities, the inability of major urban school reform continues to prevail (Lapayese et al., 2014).

Kelly (2009) conducted a study with 44 Jim Crow teachers—former teachers of legally segregated schools for Blacks in the coastal plains of North Carolina. The study explained how the teachers prepared and motivated students despite funding and resource deprivation, and it revealed that these teachers working with limited resources and facing social and political inequalities because of the Jim Crow laws used pedagogies that were successful in educating their students. Some of the ways Kelly discovered that these teachers were successful with their students included generating supplies, situating curriculum and instruction to the lived experiences of their students, and mobilizing human resources from the community. Modern-day teachers working in urban schools
suffering from limited resources and social and political inequalities can learn from these teachers (Kelly, 2009). The teachers used a pedagogy that embraced the oppression and privilege of their students. Moreover, they were able to generate materials, mobilize human resources, and provide strong curriculum and instruction. The teachers came through the same system as their students and shared a common expectation for their students. They felt that all the students could learn and it was the job of the teacher to make that happen. The teachers used their own monies and solicited the community for funds. They also reached out to professionals in the community to come and talk to the students. The teachers spoke about the idea of teaching the whole child and not to a test. They were preparing their students with skills, knowledge, racial identity, as well as social, moral, and spiritual values and a solid understanding of how to survive in a society of legal segregation, racial discrimination, and economic deprivation (Kelly, 2009).

Hayes et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study examining the pedagogy of two African American educators from different generations of the same family. They wanted to examine how the personal and professional experiences of these two African American teachers influence their respective understandings of their work and provide the basis for successful teaching of African American students. The researchers used a methodology based on narrative analysis of data collected from three formal semi-structured interviews with each participant. The theoretical framework for the study was critical race theory and counter-storytelling. The study was conducted at the homes of the teachers in Mississippi. Olivia Smith (a/k/a Big Mama) and her granddaughter, Christine Hayes, gave oral histories about their teaching pedagogies. Big Mama started her career during
the Jim Crow era teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Mississippi; she retired after 60 years as a full-time teacher. Her granddaughter, Christine, taught in an urban setting; she used her grandmother’s stories and the lived experiences of the Jim Crow generation of teachers as the foundation for her educational philosophy. Both Big Mama and Christine had high expectations for their students and did not allow students to use poverty as an excuse for failure (Hayes & Juárez, 2012). Christine, like her grandmother before her, socialized her students to understand the existence of White privilege and racism and not to allow society to impose an inferiority complex on them. They encouraged their students to see that education was a way out of poverty and they had a responsibility to become change agents. The inequities that existed in Big Mama and Christine’s schools did not stop them from providing a rigorous educational experience for their students (Hayes et al., 2012). The Jim Crow teachers were early role models for the development of Black achievement and social mobility in the United States by not succumbing to the racism, inequity, and lack of resources they faced (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Decades after Brown v. Board of Education (1954), the U.S. educational system continues to fail African American students; statistics continue to show disproportionate gaps between the academic achievements of African American students compared to their White counterparts in high-resourced, affluent public school districts (Ghee et al., 1998; Kosol, 2005). The overriding data have shown that African American students make up 16.5% of the nation’s public school enrollment and 28.7% represent children in special education (Ghee et al., 1998). After the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) in the nation’s 25 largest school districts, African American and Latino students
showed a 10% decrease in graduation rate (Ghee et al., 1998). African American children are expelled at twice the rate of White and Latino children (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006). Many of the nation’s urban public schools have created a dynamic in which the culture of the parents and students is not valued and parents do not feel welcome or empowered to be part of the transformation of their neighborhood schools (Edwards, 2011; Kosol, 2005).

The bridge for connecting the teaching styles used in the African village, on the plantation, or in the situated pedagogy of the Jim Crow teachers lies in the narratives that we tell about urban children and their families as well as the stories we use to teach and empower them (Juarez, 2011). These teaching styles are consistent with the tenets of critical theory and critical race theory. This transformative model includes, first, equity in access to a challenging and nourishing educational experience (Hayes et al., 2012). Second, there is activism, which prepares students to understand the inequities in society and how to access the resources and opportunities to begin to fix those inequities. Last, these educational practices include social literacy, a preparation of students to acquire the language and values necessary to have a strong identity to resist a mentality over materialism and consumerism (Hayes et al., 2012). The transformative teaching practices of these educators are consistent with Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy theory and critical race theory.

**Freire’s education theory and critical pedagogy theory.** Freire (1970) was intimately aware of the dehumanization that deprivation creates as he survived a childhood of extreme poverty. At a young age, he vowed to dedicate himself to the struggle of the oppressed (Freire, 1970). Freire worked in promoting liberty and anti-
colonialism in South America and Africa (Goulet, 1974). His humanist philosophy was influenced by and evolved from his experiences as well as the works of Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, and an eclectic combination of ideologies throughout his life, including liberalism, existentialism, Catholicism, progressive education, feminism, and critical race theory (Schugurensky, 2011). Through his work and research in South America and Africa, Freire (1970) honed an educational philosophy that transforms individuals through a process of dialogue, reflection, and action. Interest in critical theory and education began to spread to the United States. However, it was not called critical pedagogy until 1983 when Henry Giroux coined the term in his first book, Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy of Oppression (Jennings & Lynn, 2005).

Pedagogy of the Oppressed is regarded by many scholars as Freire’s seminal work and the bible of critical theory in education (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). Freire viewed education as both an oppressive and a liberating force in society (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). This work was predated by two essays that were the groundwork for his educational theory (Goulet, 1974). Freire’s lived childhood experiences gave him his first sensibilities about education. He often told the story of his own father who encouraged open communication with his children (Holst, 2006). Freire tells the story of how his father would take a piece of wood and draw words in the sand. In this way, Freire learned the alphabet before he went school (Holst, 2006). These formative ideas were further realized when he became chief of the Department of Education and Culture in Brazil. In this capacity, he involved students and parents in discussions about education and societal matters (Gerbardt, 1993). He felt that the issues of child labor and malnutrition had to be solved with the involvement of the parents. He developed a technique for
literacy in which parents and teachers worked on curriculum development for kindergarten through adult education. He used the lived experiences, folk art, and visual images to develop vocabulary. Finally, he created an environment where dialogue moved the students to reject their role as victims and embrace a role in which they create their own destinies (Holst, 2006). Freire’s educational programs were very successful in Brazil. Threatened by this occurrence, the military imprisoned Freire and then exiled him in 1964 (Jennings & Lynn, 2005).

During his 1964 exile, Freire further developed his educational philosophy, leaning to a Marxist-influenced analysis of the political nature of education that moved more towards revolutionary change as opposed to capitalized modernization (Gerbardt, 1993). During this time, Freire further developed his educational methodologies and educated thousands of illiterate Chilean peasants (Furtado, 1976). In his work, he utilized his major concepts such as banking education, problem-posing education, generative words, cultural circles, culture of silence, cultural action, and thematic universe (Gerbardt, 1993). It was in Chile that Freire wrote some of his most important educational works, starting with his first essay in 1965 entitled “Education as Practice of Freedom” (Goulet, 1974). This essay gave an historical, political, and socioeconomic account of how Brazil’s colonial past, its reliance on slavery, and the governing elite created a society that was fundamentally non-democratic (Freire, 1976). Freire went on to examine how Brazil transitioned to a more industrialized democratic society without an indigenous culture and with paralyzing illiteracy. The second essay, Extension or Communication, written in 1973, explored the agro-extension programs in Latin America. The argument that Freire raised in this essay is that the education in these agro-
extension programs was more oppressive than liberating in that the recipients were looked at as objects without the dialogue, respect for experience, and communication necessary for true liberating education (Freire, 1976). Both of these essays were the foundation for Freire’s education philosophy and for Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Goulet, 1974).

The idea of Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) empowers subordinate groups to rise from a socialized self-defacing image of themselves to a thought process that sees themselves as survivors of oppression and capable of changing their situation. In the Freirean context, the term oppressed is used to describe those whose voices are muted, living in a culture of silence because they are forced to speak with a voice that is not their own (Rugut & Osman, 2013). Freire (1970) contended that when the oppressed realize they have been subjected to dehumanization through injustice, oppression, and violence, they can move to seeing themselves as capable of changing their situation. He coined the term conscientization to describe the process of the oppressed developing a critical awareness of their social reality through reflection and action. Conscientization teaches transformation of the educational social order by dialogical education, which is unifying, cooperative, reflective, and action-driven (Freire, 1970). Through this key process, marginalized groups can develop a critical awareness of the world based on the concrete experiences of their everyday lives (Freire, 1970). Freire believed that oppression dehumanizes both the oppressed and the oppressor and stifles their humanity; moreover, the oppressed has to lead the struggle for a fuller humanity for both. Freire (1970) encouraged those of the dominant classes who want to join in the struggle for liberation to examine their preconceived notions about the people they seek to help. In
addition, he contended that when those from the dominant group join the struggle for liberation, they must trust, respect, and have confidence in the people and work with the people (Freire, 1970).

This concept translates directly to Freire’s (1970) humanistic approach to educational philosophy, which values the reality and sociocultural resources of the student, builds critical consciousness, and provides meaningful and relevant content. Building caring and trusting relationships between student and teacher and challenging inequity in the educational system are key to Freire’s vision of how transformation can take place in education (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Freire urged teachers and students to unlearn their race, class, and gender, privileges and to engage in a dialogue with those whose experiences are different from their own (Rugut & Osman, 2013). Freire referred to the conventional way of education as a tool of oppression set up to benefit the status quo. In this system, people are demobilized and conditioned to accept the cultural, social, and political status quo of the dominant group (Rugut & Osman, 2013). In this scenario, no critical learning or empowerment can take place (Freire, 1970). Freire called this system of education *banking education* because students are the depositories and teachers are the depositors (Freire, 1970). This monologue process of education teaches students to regurgitate information—to receive, memorize, and repeat. Students’ creative powers are minimized in this system and they do not have the opportunity to evaluate their world critically or see themselves as able to change their lives for the better (Freire, 1970).

Instead, Freire (1970) explained that for education to be liberating, teachers and students must have an “Easter experience” in which they examine themselves constantly and have a profound rebirth. According to Freire, teaching is a noble profession, and
those who wish to go into teaching must conduct themselves in an exemplary fashion and be good role models for their students. He felt that this could only be accomplished by constant personal reflection (Freire, 1970; Rugut & Osman, 2013). He urged educators to create culture groups in and outside of the classroom as safe units in which the group is empowered to success and everyone makes progress—not just a few “star pupils” (Gibson, 2007).

Through the culture circles process initiated by Freire, Nicaraguan illiteracy was reduced from 40% to 13% in two months (Rugut & Osman, 2013). In the culture circles, investigation is made of the students’ thematic universe for generative themes. These general statements or themes of the students can reveal larger patterns of inequities that can be addressed by the group (Freire, 1970). The generative themes relate to nature, culture, work, and relationships, and are discovered through the cooperative research of educators and students (Rugut & Osman, 2013). These themes are then represented in the form of codifications (usually visual representation). However, music and other forms of expression can be used to meet the needs of the students and catalyze discussion in the culture group (Freire, 1970). As students decode these representations, they recognize situations in which they are involved and how they can make possible interventions (Rugut & Osman, 2013).

Freire (1970) cautioned that race in itself as well as gender or ethnicity should not be looked on as a unifying force or monolithic entity. Individuals of subordinate groups may align themselves with the dominant group and perceive their experience to be more in common than with those of their group (Freire, 1970). In essence, even though Freire and critical pedagogues recognize the existence of racism and sexism, capitalism and
classism are looked upon as the primary organizing tool for society, thereby becoming the primary lens that frames their ideologies and research (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). Additionally, critical pedagogues have been criticized for minimizing or ignoring that oppressed groups have produced critical ways of learning that have been transformed into practice (Jennings & Lynn, 2005).

The African American community is a concrete example of this by establishing a strong tradition of pedagogies of resistance theorized by African American educators and activists such as W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Ida B. Wells, and Marcus Garvey (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). These scholars were part of an important intellectual tradition that emphasized education and reform; however, their work is rarely viewed as part of the historical legacy of critical pedagogy (Jennings & Lynn, 2005).

To the extent that the social construct of racism based on economics has evolved to an institutionalized system of oppression for African American students in the United States, scholars of color have concluded that theory was a need to frame how we talk about race and racial inequities in ways that are useful and liberating (Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Freire (1970) outlined a viable pedagogy that is universal in its application and has proven his success abroad as well as in a 13-week residency in the public school system in New York City, in which he used the language and lives of high school students to raise their reading levels from functioning illiteracy to sixth or seventh grade. Critical pedagogy has been used successfully in various educational settings with dialogue and narrative at the heart of the process; this makes it a viable theoretical framework for examining African American storytelling in urban schools (Brown, 2011).
Brown conducted a two-year study from 2008-2010 in an urban charter high school in New York City. She used cultural circles to engage five students in a 7-week workshop discussing various urban books in which generative themes prevailed. Brown concluded that the five students were able to identify and critique oppression in society; however, she believed in the individual’s ability to transcend his or her situation (Brown, 2011). The inclusion of critical race theory as a parallel theory of examination of this topic expands the breadth of perspective necessary to analyze the lived experiences of African American storytellers working in urban public schools.

Critical race theory and counter-storytelling. Derrick Bell (1976b) is credited as the “father of critical race theory” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). In the mid-1970s, he, along with Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Robert Williams, Mari Matsuda, Kimberle Crenshaw, and other legal scholars, saw that many of the advances of the Civil Rights era came to a stall (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). In some cases, it seemed that some rights were being rolled back. They saw a need for new theories and strategies to deal with these issues.

Bell was the first tenured law professor at Harvard Law School. His legal expertise, advocacy, and scholarship in American history motivated him to write his first article making a case for critical race theory (Yosso, 2006). Through a legal lens, the 1976 article “Racial Remediation: An Historical Perspective on Current Conditions” is a historical overview of racial injustices from the days of the founding fathers through the Civil Rights movement. Bell argued that White Americans only supported racial and social justice to the extent that it benefited themselves (Bell, 1976a). He stated that the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and the Interest
Convergence Dilemma, 93 Harv.518 (1980 B) was driven more by the nation’s concerns as an anti-Communist military superpower than genuine equality for Blacks (Bell, 1976). Bell (1978) advocated for improving all schools as opposed to arbitrary desegregation. Subsequently, Bell recognized a need for another perspective in teaching and implementing the law. Bell wrote Race, Racism and the American Law Book (1980) to fill this gap (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). He used this book to teach his courses, and scholars of color from different universities used this book as a theoretical framework in their teaching. In 1980, Bell left Harvard to become dean of the University of Oregon Law School. Prior to his leaving, he taught courses in constitutional law and minority issues. Harvard’s administration replaced him with two distinguished White civil rights litigators to teach a 3-week mini-course on civil rights litigation. Student activists and students of color demanded that Bell be replaced with a teacher of color. The university responded that there were no qualified Black scholars who merited Harvard’s interest. The students retaliated by boycotting the mini-course. With the support of outside funding and sympathetic Harvard teachers, the Alternative Course was created as a continuation of Bell’s course, focusing on the American law through the lens of race. Among the guest speakers were scholars that would become founding contributors to critical race theory, including Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, and Kimberle Crenshaw. Scholars of critical race theory reflect on this lecture series as its genesis (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Critical race theory concentrates on the social construction of race, and the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). Furthermore, it challenges people to explore the influences of society’s racism and sexism in the law
policies and fiber of American life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). In the mid-1990s, Ladson-Billings and Tate set the foundation for critical race theory in education (Gay, 2010). They argued that a) race is a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States; (b) U.S. society is based upon property rights; and (c) the intersection of race and property creates a vehicle for analysis in which social and school inequality can be examined (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48).

Critical race theory in education has five basic elements, as discussed by Hayes et al. (2012). These five elements parallel the components of Freire’s (1973) education theory:

1. Centrality of race and racism – All critical race theory research within education must centralize race and acknowledge the intersection of race and other forms of subordination.

2. Valuing experiential knowledge – Recognizes the experiential knowledge of students of color as appropriate and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education; an appreciation of storytelling; learning from the success of the past as a framework for the present.

3. Challenging the dominant perspective – Critical race theory research works to challenge the stock/majoritarian stories of the dominant culture.

4. Commitment to social justice – Social justice must always be a commitment to critical race theory research. This must include a critique of liberalism, claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and any modality of self-interest.
5. Being interdisciplinary – Critical race theory crosses epistemological boundaries. It borrows from several traditions to include a more complete analysis of racism. It serves as a framework for educational equity to expose racism in education and propose solutions for this issue (Solóranzo & Yosso, 2001).

Critical race theory envisions a social justice curriculum and pedagogical work that lead to the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty, and the empowerment of underrepresented subordinate groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). Central to critical race theorists is that the experiential knowledge of people of color is appropriate, legitimate, and integral to understanding racial inequality and moving closer to true self-determination (Hayes et al., 2012).

In order to integrate critical race theory and critical pedagogy, critical race theorists use a technique called counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This method was originally used in the social sciences, the humanities, and law storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling is a tool to tell stories that have not been told as well as to analyze and challenge the majoritarian stories of the dominant society (Negron, 2013). To understand the relevance of counter-storytelling, it is important to understand the story types that drive the cultural literacy of stories in society (Bell et al., 2008).

An example of a stock story is that of Columbus discovering America. This version of the start of America emphasizes Columbus as the hero and de-emphasizes the genocide he and his soldiers perpetrated against the Arawaks. This story highlights progress and is told from the point of view of the conquerors, government, and leaders
Majoritarian stories are so laden with omissions and distortions that they are closer to myth than history (Gottschall, 2012). Stock or majoritarian stories convey history as progressive and depict U.S. society as fair and meritocratic, with the assumption of a trajectory of forward progress in which injustices are recognized and rectified over time. These stories are more palpable to the sensibilities of most Whites living in denial of White privilege and institutionalized racism (Bell, 2003).

Concealed stories coexist alongside stock stories, and they are circulated among the subordinate group and hidden from the dominant group. An example of a concealed story is the history of the Black townships in the West in which over 40,000 Blacks known as Exodusters migrated to Kansas between 1865 and 1880 (Hine et al., 2011). Resistance stories are both historical and contemporary, and tell the stories of how people have resisted racism and sexism and fought for justice (Bell et al., 2008).

Critical race theorists engage in counter-storytelling not only in response to stock stories. The idea of simply sharing views and experiences outside of the dominant culture can be enough to create a new narrative or counter-story (Negron, 2013). According to Solóranzo and Yosso (2001), counter-storytelling serves five pedagogical functions, which include building community among subordinate groups, challenging the perceived wisdom of the dominant culture, and exposing a new reality to the subordinate groups that goes beyond their current circumstance and helps them feel a sense of belonging. In addition to these, these researchers discussed the ability of counter-storytelling to teach others by combining elements from both stories so that a new world can be constructed that is richer than the story or reality itself. Finally, these researchers discussed counter-
storytelling as a way to provide a context for understanding and transforming established belief systems.

Counter-storytelling involves recounting personal stories, the stories of others, and composite stories to discuss racism, sexism, classism and other forms of subordination (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling in education addresses race-based inequities in access to quality education for African American students (Hayes et al., 2012). It also gives a voice to educators, students, parents, and administrators to change the dynamic in language, pedagogy, and policy around the education of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The following two studies demonstrated the ability of counter-storytelling to inform how we see others and ourselves and continue the discourse of how stories can be utilized for individual and collective social change.

Using participatory inquiry as his methodology, Stinson (2008) conducted a study looking at how counter-storytelling was used to change the discourse around African American male math achievement. The study was motivated by the author’s five-year experience as a White mathematics teacher in a Black high school. The Black male and female students performed as well and sometimes better than their White peers did. This experience was not consistent with the majority of the research literature on African American students, and African American male students in particular (Stinson, 2006). Stinson documented the counter-stories of four academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students. Using participative inquiry, the researcher asked the participants to read, reflect on, and respond to a variety of research literature regarding African American student experiences. The data collection included a combination of written artifacts and interviews. The four participants wrote brief
autobiographies and answered surveys that revealed demographic and school information. Further data were collected over a 6-month period requiring 30-40 hours of each participant’s time. The article concluded that the success of the sample group lay in its ability to defiantly negate the negative sociocultural discourses, recognize race as a component of U.S. society, and not be defined by these negative discourses (Stinson, 2008).

Bell (2003) conducted a study analyzing the stories of participants around race and racism. Respondents were specifically chosen from the fields of educational and human service institutions. Their positions included public school teachers, administrators, university faculty, administrators and staff, direct care providers, clinicians, and administrators in human service agencies. This was strategic as the attitudes and behaviors of people in these occupations have material consequences for the opportunity, access, and treatment of others such as students, clients, and peers (Bell, 2003). The data were drawn from 106 interviews; participants included 63% female, 37% male, 65% White, 25% Black, 8% Latino, one Asian American, and one Native American. The respondents voluntarily participated in 1- to 2-hour audiotaped interviews, which were coded and transcribed. Segments were delineated and identified as stories, which included the elements of plot, complication, resolution or conclusion, and were used to illustrate an opinion or a broader point.

In Bell’s (2003) study, the themes in the stories that people of color and Whites told about race and racism reflected divergent views of reality. The stories told by people of color revealed personal danger, vulnerability, differential treatment, and assaults on dignity. There were also recurring stories that revealed the occasional difficulty to make
clear distinctions between insensitivity, incompetence, cruelty or acts of conscious or unconscious bias. Respondents found themselves experiencing inner turmoil about how to maintain dignity in the face of dehumanizing encounters. In cases of a question about the intent of the White person’s action, the majority of the respondents gave the person the benefit of the doubt. The people of color narratives also revealed that they understood their experience through an awareness of past and continued discrimination that affected every aspect of their lives. They understood history repeating itself through oscillating cycles of progress and retreat (Bell, 2003).

By contrast, the White respondents told stories of history that indicated that the country was moving in the direction of social progress (Bell, 2003). The hegemonic or dominant stories of the White respondents revealed they strongly believed colorblindness was a virtue and were unaware of their White privilege. Other respondents observed race interactions within their daily lives and felt pressure from other Whites to be silent. Last, some White respondents had a clear willingness to see and challenge racism and White privilege. These respondents learned about racism through a close relationship with a person of color and this connection enabled them to see on a daily basis through the eyes of people positioned socially and racially differently from themselves. The data from this study suggested that it is important for both people of color and Whites to be supported in learning about and constructing counter-stories by learning the history of race and ethnicity in the United States and of members of their own race who fought against racism (Bell, 2003).

Bell (2003) contended that the stories we tell are not only individual productions, but also cultural and ideological because they are imbedded in a social context. Stories
are a bridge between individual experience and systemic social patterns (Bell, 2003; Delgado, 1995). In conclusion, this study showed that the stories of people of color bear witness to their ongoing experience of racism, while most of the White stories reveal denial and colorblindness. The examination of these stories can inform the individual as well as the collective in creating new stories that have the power to heal, educate, celebrate our diversity, and embrace our common humanity (Bell, 2003).

**Culturally relevant education and counter-storytelling.** The combination of opportunity, economics, military, and Eurocentric epistemology tells stories that support the agenda of the dominant group (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) challenged her audience to think of the ramifications of starting the story about Africa with the failure of the African state as opposed to the colonial creation of the African state. She made the case to her audience in her Ted Talk that the danger of the single story lies in the fact that when we hear a single story, a single perspective, a dominant story, we are put in the critically dangerous position of misunderstanding and misjudging people and history. Instead, she argued for what Chinue Achebe calls a *balance of stories* (Adichie, 2009).

This balance of stories is missing in American education (Gay, 2010). One of the most consistent findings across the literature reviewed is the culture of Whiteness that pervades curricula, teaching methodologies, codes of discipline, administrative practices, and policymaking in schools (Bell, 2003; Brown, 2011; Caruthers, 2006; Juarez & Hayes, 2010; Journell, 2009; LaSpina, 2003). Whiteness is the invisible category against which difference is constructed (Brown, 2011). This constructed position of privilege and power
creates a collective racial epistemology rooted in a history of violence, dominance, and
discrimination over subordinate groups (Juárez & Hayes, 2010).

LaSpina (2003) cited a story reviewing a textbook used by California school
districts. The textbook depicts two men standing in front of the Grand Canyon. One is the
European American explorer, John Wesley Powell, who, according to the textbook, was
the first American to explore the Grand Canyon. The caption failed to identify the second
man in the picture who was visibly Native American. The Native American was Tau-Gu,
a chief of the Paiute peoples located along the Colorado River who lived in the West long
before European settlers crossed the Mississippi River (LaSpina, 2003). Similarly, when
Robert E. Peary was reported to discover the North Pole, five people were standing next
to him—a Black man named Matthew A. Henson and four Inuit comrades.
Unfortunately, it was not until 1937 that Henson’s contribution was acknowledged,
although the Inuits were completely forgotten (Ferris, 1999). According to the research,
the version of American history taught in public schools demonstrates a status quo
Eurocentric perspective dominated by a White male point of view (Brown, 2011;
Caruthers, 2006).

Students, who are socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse and come from
low-income backgrounds, are marginalized, and many fall through the cracks in public
schools in the United States (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Influenced by mis-education,
African American students are deficient in their cultural knowledge, which leads to
diminished dignity, pride, and self-esteem (Ghee et al., 1998). According to some
researchers, stories of student deficits, poor family structures, genetic explanations about
achievement, and cultural mismatch theories (which suggest that when important
components of teaching and learning between student and teacher are not culturally congruent, students can have negative outcomes) often persist within the culture to preserve the stock stories of the dominant group (Caruthers, 2006; Howard, 2001a). When children are treated as if they are inferior or “bad,” they begin to act on these perceptions (Caruthers, 2006). Cultural discontinuity can produce apathy, academic disengagement, and school disconnect (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Conversely, cultural identification plays an important role in building efficacy among African American students (Siwatu et al., 2011).

Ladson-Billings (1992), as one of the architects of critical race theory in education, continued the counter-story that proven pedagogies work with African American students, as previously cited with the Jim Crow teachers, Big Mama and Christine (Gay, 2010; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Building on the work of many educators and anthropologists looking at the connection between home culture and school, Ladson-Billings (1992) coined the term culturally relevant education to identify an effective teaching pedagogy conducive for African American students. Culturally relevant pedagogy is defined as a teaching methodology committed to individual and collective empowerment, developing the intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning of students by using cultural resources to teach knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant pedagogy rests on the criteria of students’ academic success, the development and maintenance of a cultural competence, and their ability to develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. In support of these claims, Ladson-
Billings stated that students develop skills differently, but all students need literacy, numeracy, and technological, social, and political skills in order to be active participants in a democracy, and that culturally relevant teaching involves getting students to choose academic excellence. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) explained a phenomenon among African American students in which they fear being ostracized by peers and called “acting White” if they demonstrate interest and succeed in academics. Teachers who understand this dynamic can use the students’ culture as a vehicle for learning. This imperative mandates that students are prepared to be active citizens with a broad sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is consistent with Freire’s (1970) notion of conscientization, which is a process that invites learners to engage the world and others critically.

Ladson-Billings (1995) conducted a 3-year study of successful teachers of African American students from 1989-1992. The selection process started with recommendations made by African American parents who felt the teachers were exceptional. They perceived teachers to be exceptional because of the enthusiasm their children showed in school, the respect the teachers showed them, and their perception that the teachers understood the need for the students to operate in the dual world of their home community and the “White” community. In addition to parent recommendations, principal recommendations were also considered. Principals recommended teachers who had low discipline referrals, high attendance rates, and high standardized test scores. Teachers who were on both lists were asked to participate. Ladson-Billings’s (1995)
findings were later documented in her 2009 book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*.

This ethnographic study described above used teacher interviews, classroom observations, videotapes, and collective interpretation and analysis. Eight teachers in a northern California urban school district were documented. These teachers were highly effective in building their students’ self-efficacy as well as their academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Each of the eight teachers had the opportunity to teach in a more affluent district but chose to stay in their district. One of the teachers in the study was a White woman, whose classroom consisted mainly of African American boys. She recognized that the boys had social power and challenged them to demonstrate academic power by drawing on issues and ideas they found meaningful—in other words, creating a classroom that emphasizes cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992). As the boys took on academic leadership roles, other students saw this as a positive trait and developed similar traits. This teacher used the skills and abilities of her students and channeled them academically (Ladson-Billings, 1992). This is evidence that it is not the color of a teacher’s skin that equips them to teach children of color; rather, it is the teacher’s commitment to learn what works with his or her students (Diller, 1999; Gay, 2010; Groce, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Another teacher in Ladson-Billings’s (1995) study used rap music with her second-grade students to discuss literal and figurative meanings, rhyme scheme, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. This class exceeded the local and state standards in literacy because of her culturally relevant teaching, as documented by the researcher. A third teacher, similar to the Jim Crow teachers, reached out to the local community to
bring people into the classroom and present to the children. One parent showed the class how to make her famous sweet potato pie which led to lessons about George Washington Carver, marketing plans for selling the pies, thank-you notes to the parent, and a career lesson on culinary arts (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

All of the eight teachers in the study saw their work as a calling, and had high self-esteem and high regard for others (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The researcher’s findings indicated that the teachers saw themselves as part of the community and gave back to their community while also encouraging their students to do the same. They saw teaching as an art and their job was to pull knowledge out of their students. The teacher-student relationship was fluid as they recruited students to neighborhood Girl Scouts and brought students on outings. They had a strong focus on student learning, developing cultural competences, and cultivating a sociopolitical awareness with their students. They devised a system of “each one, teach one” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), in which students had a sense of responsibility for one another. These teachers created cultures in their classrooms built on a narrative of respect, high expectations, culturally relevant teaching, and caring (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Gay (2010) built on the work of Ladson-Billings (1995) to study institutions around the country whose mission was to use the cultural experiences of ethnically diverse students to teach academic knowledge and skills as well as content from the students’ cultural heritage. The researcher described the institutions that serve predominately African American students as African American-centric programs (Gay, 2010). African American-centric programs exist in several school districts throughout the United States, including Milwaukee, Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Atlanta, San
Almost all of the programs are part of the K-12 public school system. While students from all ethnic groups are open to attend these programs, the majority of the students are African American. These programs aim to improve academic achievement in reading, writing, critical thinking, and subject-specific skills such as science and math (Gay, 2010). The programs also offer African American history, heritage, and culture, while creating a climate that fosters high self-esteem, high performance expectations, and self-reliance. All the programs used an Afrocentric framework to create a code of personal and collective conduct, values, service, and climate of community for the school (Gay, 2010).

As Gay (2010) noted in her study, consistent among the programs was the use of a pledge, motto, school song, proverb or affirmation that reinforces the community values, codes, expectations, conduct, and institutional allegiance of the program (Gay, 2010). Additionally, the programs have rituals that include community gatherings and assemblies with parents and visitors. The researcher went on to say that these programs produce improvement in all measures of achievement; the students’ performance is generally better than their peers in other schools within the districts. The students also score higher on standardized tests and GPAs, and have better attendance, lower disciplinary infractions, and stronger personal self-concepts. The students in the African American-centric programs perceived their teachers to be respectful, supportive, and caring toward them (Gay, 2010).

As one example of this above-mentioned program, Eagle Academy Foundation is an organization based in New York City with a mission to create a new pipeline of
academic and social success for inner-city young men (Banks & Lichtenberg, 2014). A group of educators, parents, and community and corporate leaders led by the One Hundred Black Men, Inc. opened the first Eagle Academy in the South Bronx, New York in 2004. The Eagle Academy Foundation, under the leadership of David Banks, was established in 2005 with public schools and partners to create Grade 6-12, all-male academies, structured in culturally relevant best practices. Five additional schools have been established in Brownsville (Brooklyn), southeastern Queens, Newark (New Jersey), Harlem (New York), and Staten Island (New York). The network of schools utilizes the components cited in Gay’s African American-centric programs. Mentors from the community are involved with the schools as well as visits from local and national leaders in various professions. There is an Eagle creed, and students are held to high academic expectations and follow a rigorous academic curriculum infused with culturally relevant content. The schools have rituals, strong parent engagement, community involvement, service projects, and stimulating and varied after-school activities, arts in education, and sports (The Eagle Academy Foundation, 2015).

Eagle Academy’s 2013-14 high school graduation rate was 78% to 50% in New York City and 52% nationally for young men of color; 100% of Eagle Academy graduates were accepted to college, in particular to some of the nation’s most prestigious universities and colleges (The Eagle Academy Foundation, 2015). Each new class of students goes through what the school calls a rites-of-passage program that culminates with a tie ceremony. After completing the initiation program, the young men have officially earned their Eagle ties, and the upper-classmen and community mentors put their Eagle ties on them. This 2-week initiation and ceremony is one of many rituals that
build self-esteem, high expectations, and a sense of belonging in the young men (The Eagle Academy Foundation, 2015). The young men begin to see themselves as leaders and expect to succeed in life (Banks & Lichtenberg, 2014).

Despite these success stories, the voices of African American students continue to be rarely heard in the discourse about their education (Howard, 2001a; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). In two separate studies, African American students were interviewed about their experiences with culturally relevant education. Howard (2001a) conducted a qualitative case study of elementary students from four inner-city elementary schools located in the northwestern United States. The purpose of the study was to uncover student perceptions of their teachers’ pedagogical practices. This was a smaller component of a larger study on effective teaching involving four elementary teachers who were identified as culturally responsive teachers of African American students. In order to collect the data, students were interviewed individually as well as in a focus group; classroom observations were also conducted. The students’ perceptions and interpretations of their teachers’ pedagogy were consistent with the tenets of culturally relevant education. The themes that emerged were: (a) caring teachers, (b) community or family-type classroom environments, and (c) education as entertainment (Howard, 2001a). The students perceived that their teachers cared about them, respected them, and held them to high academic standards. The students made references that school felt like home, indicating that the teachers created a classroom environment that valued the home and community of the students through daily rituals and classroom traditions. Last, the students had fun learning and were not bored; they shared how their teachers told them personal anecdotes, and in particular were animated in their storytelling by acting out
characters, movements, and voice variations. The teachers created an engaging and stimulating classroom environment using imagination and creativity (Howard, 2001b).

Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2011) conducted a mixed-method study (qualitative and quantitative) to determine the preferences of culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lessons for African American students. The study was conducted in a large urban high school in Colorado. The students consisted of a mixed grade (9-12) American History class. They received six lessons (one per week over 6 weeks); three lessons were culturally relevant and three were non-culturally relevant. All lessons utilized a multi-instructional approach that was experiential and included movement, collaborative group work, technology, facilitated learning, and student-led discussions. The culturally relevant lessons featured all of these activities as well as strategies anchored in culturally responsive pedagogy, including culturally relevant topics that connect home to school (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). The data collection included student feedback forms after each session, transition-termination group discussions, feedback questionnaire, and an African American focus group. The key findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the students preferred the culturally relevant curriculum (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). The students felt that culturally relevant lessons should be integrated into the existing curriculum as an integral part of the academic lives of all students. The key themes that emerged were: (a) challenging topics can be enriching and stimulating; (b) lessons should be interesting and fun; and (c) teacher interaction, energy, sense of humor, and interest in students were important for them (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Additional themes emerging from the focus group data included: (a) culturally relevant lessons are empowering;
(b) students enjoyed the engaging experientially-based activities; (c) teacher style, tone of voice, and interest in lesson are imperative to learning; and (d) it is important for teachers to understand and embrace cultural differences (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011).

These studies are important because they add to the limited literature on culturally relevant pedagogy from the perspective of African American students. School reform, best practices, and policies cannot be truly effective without including the voices of the students whom they are developed to serve (Howard, 2001a). The issue of not having the students’ viewpoints, perceptions, and stories of their schooling experiences at the center of school reform is as equally disturbing as is the lack of teacher training for these students (Howard, 2001a).

**Culturally relevant education and teacher preparation.** Education researchers have noted that high attrition rate, low academic achievement, and cultural mismatch teaching in urban schools may be the result of inadequate teacher preparation programs that do not ready teachers for diverse classrooms (Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Siwatu et al., 2011; Wenglinsky, 2002). Scholars in the field have suggested that enhanced professional development for teachers in culturally relevant pedagogies is essential for improving the education of African American students and other disenfranchised students in public schools (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006; Caruthers, 2006). According to these researchers, many teachers do not understand the culture of African American students and do not feel confident to handle urban classroom settings.

Mounting evidence has indicated that teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are related to positive student and teacher outcomes (Hayes & Juárez, 2012; Siwatu et al., 2011; Wenglinsky, 2002). For example, a teacher who does not understand African American
male children would perceive the displaying of masculine bravado, imitating rappers, and play fighting as dangerous and genuine aggression, when in fact these are often indicators of well-rehearsed play (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006). Similarly, teachers who do not understand African American children will not know how to guide them appropriately towards academic success (Banks & Lichtenberg, 2014; Barbarin & Crawford, 2006; Freidman & Watson-Thompson, 1997; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012).

To determine how teachers in schools used storytelling to promote success in schools for African American students, Diller (1999) shared a personal story about her teaching experience in an urban, predominantly African American school, in which her initial colorblindness when working with her students was a disadvantage. As a White teacher growing up in a small all-White town, she had no experience with people of color until college, and her colleague at school was her only African American friend. She had good intentions, but did not understand that by not acknowledging that her students were African American with cultural differences, she was doing them a disservice. Her friend pointed this out to her, and Diller began to read articles and books on culturally relevant education and have dialogues with her colleagues. She observed other classes and took note of what methods worked with the students. She was able to meet success with her African American students by bringing in stories and texts that reflected them, understood their language, and used African American storytelling techniques such as rhymes, rhythm, and call and response. She also reached out to the parents and made them feel comfortable to come to the classroom. She was able to help the parents integrate the schoolwork into the home and, in turn, the parents were able to bring the home culture into the classroom. Diller concluded that the demographics of U.S. schools
are steadily becoming more diverse culturally and ethnically; however, the teaching force is still predominantly White, female, and middle class. She advocated that all teachers use culture as a teaching tool, get to know their students as individuals, and seek out allies to learn about the culture of their students.

Despite Diller’s (1999) findings, the failure of many educational reform initiatives has come about because they did not change the culture of the school or classroom by deconstructing the behaviors, norms, and beliefs that did not serve urban African American students and their teachers (Caruthers, 2006). Preparing today’s students to be global citizens with healthy self-efficacy, respect, and the willingness to know about others will begin to heal many of society’s ills (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Many teachers have reported that their preservice training did not prepare them for the diversity of today’s classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Most preservice approaches concentrate on individual courses and various field experiences to satisfy legislative and professional association calls for meeting the needs of diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, these approaches do not meet the needs of diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Ladson-Billings offered an approach anchored in critical race theory and culturally relevant education modules, including work that uses autobiography, restructured field experiences, situated pedagogies, and the best practices of successful educators (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

According to Ladson-Billings (2000), autobiography utilizes the personal narrative of teachers to examine themselves within a culturally diverse society. Individuals reflect on their practicum and consciously examine their own subjectivity; through the stories of others, they see similar or different outlooks and experiences.
Restructured field experiences involve placing teachers who are slated to work in urban schools in field experiences that include the community at large as well as a school. This immersion experience helps teachers to understand the community with the strengths, challenges, and culture of the students they will ultimately teach. Field experiences should help prospective teachers to address the stereotypes and racist attitudes they may hold; rather than dread teaching in an African American community, they can understand the complexity inherent in the African American community and culture.

Ladson-Billings (2000) discussed how situated pedagogies address strategies to make school and home experiences more congruent, considering race, class, and gender as part of the curricula. The best practices of successful teachers or “experts,” as described by Ladson-Billings, includes academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical critique. To achieve academic achievement, teachers establish routines and ritual that are engaging, challenging, rigorous, and exciting, with high expectations for their students. Teachers create cultural competence in their students by fostering them to develop their ability to function effectively in the culture of their origin. This is achieved by acknowledging the legitimacy of the students’ home language and using it as a bridge to American Standard English. Support is also made through the use of curriculum content that reflects a broad range of human experiences within the students’ culture. Moreover, teachers encourage their students to participate actively in sociopolitical critiquing, where students become critical thinkers and full participants in the civics of their country. Students are challenged to understand the ways that social structure and practices help reduce inequities and how whole groups of people are systematically excluded from social benefits. Students are encouraged to see themselves as leaders and
to participate in the collective struggle for social change and justice (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

In addition, Ladson-Billings (2000) argued that the coursework for teachers is weak in its lack of attention to the perspectives and concerns of African Americans. Many of the foundation and method courses support a deficit story by only mentioning African Americans as problems and they omit the legitimacy of African American culture. She also argued that there must be change in teacher admission procedures because some excellent candidates are screened out and other candidates who have no intention or desire to serve in urban communities are hired. Her last recommendation was to recruit and retain more African American scholars as faculty in education programs. Many prospective teachers only encounter African Americans as subordinates; thus, African American faculty can serve as a resource and a balance of stories regarding the competencies and abilities of African Americans (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Storytelling and education.** Storytelling is the oldest form of narrative communication and the oldest form of education (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005). Before human beings used oral language, stories were conveyed through cave paintings, images, and sounds. Myths, folktales, fables, and legends were ways in which all cultures made sense of their world and passed down their cultural beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations (Maguire, 1985). The power of oral narrative preserved the stories until they were written down. Bible stories were carried orally by nomadic peoples until the stories were transcribed and put to paper. One of the oldest surviving tales is the epic *Gilgamesh*, relating to the deeds of a famous Sumerian king, as well as the *Tale of Two Brothers*, written on papyrus in Egypt (Maguire, 1985). Although Aesop lived in 500
B.C., his famous fables were not recorded until about 200 B.C. (Lott, 2002). After the fall of the Roman Empire, a nomadic group of people known as the gypsies were significant disseminators of stories (Maguire, 1985). The gypsy people migrated from the East through Europe following caravans of traders. They spoke their own language, Romani, but were quick to learn other languages as they traveled. Despite being nomadic, their stories stayed behind, from Afghanistan to Britain, from Finland to North Africa. The Crusades brought more stories and tales through Europe and Asia (Maguire, 1985). There is also a rich tradition of storytelling among all indigenous peoples in the world (Lott, 2002). Stories transcend geography, religion, and cultural habitats; the universality of story bridges all humanity in its power to evoke emotion and teach lessons (Gottschall, 2012).

In modern times, applied storytelling is recognized as a powerful tool to effect change and influence in every aspect of life (Peerless, 2014). The National Storytelling Network has defined storytelling as being interactive, using words, presenting a narrative, and encouraging the active imagination of the listener (National Storytelling Network, 2011). Individuals use story in myriad ways: to shape perceptions of themselves and their world; to be more effective leaders, parents, community builders, and health practitioners (National Storytelling Network, 2011). Corporations spend billions of dollars each year on advertising to communicate the right story to influence people to purchase their products or services (Denning, 2011). Governments use storytelling as a propaganda tool to influence their citizens. In a visually oriented, technologically enhanced, multitasking and competitive world, storytelling helps to remind people of their humanity and the need to embrace their own lives as opposed to being spectators in a celebrity-obsessed culture.
Presently, hip hop is the most influential cultural phenomenon of the past 35 years and its storytelling roots marry spoken word and rhyme, which was birthed from the African American oral storytelling tradition (Ford, 2015).

Despite the significant role of storytelling in our human lives, it rarely finds its way into the classroom as an official curriculum (Coskie, Trudel, & Vohs, 2010). However, in order for education to improve for all students, different pedagogical strategies need to be employed (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). Storytelling in schools is a way to address literacy development by improving oral language, reading comprehension, and writing (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).

*Storytelling in Education* (Western Washington University, 2012) extracted the following areas in which storytelling improves academic performances: connections and understandings are formed about and between the past, present, and future; horizons are broadened; and understanding and empathy towards other races and cultures are increased. Visualization skills are expanded as children form pictures in their minds, and sensory imaging is heightened as all senses are elicited: tasting, touching, smelling, hearing, and feeling. Order is brought to students’ worlds through the use of thinking skills; decision-making skills are discerned, memory is enhanced, and attention spans are stretched. Fear of public speaking is reduced, while writing skills are strengthened as students examine the structure of a story and bring characters, events, and settings to life. New vocabulary emerges and cultural literacy is conveyed; difficult scientific or mathematical concepts are introduced, explained, and explored. Students learn core academic skills, including math, science, and language arts, while factual and conceptual curriculum material is effectively and efficiently taught (Litner, 2004).
One of the ways in which people learn is through metaphors and psychological impact (Norfolk et al., 2006). Formal education relies on communicating a series of disconnected facts and asking students to memorize them (Gay, 2010; Freire, 1970; Norfolk et al., 2006). Stories open people up to multiple perspectives and help them cope with complexity (Caine & Caine, 1991). Furthermore, storytelling uses left-brain functions (such as language, a storyline, sequences of cause and effect) to speak to the right brain language of symbolic, intuitive, imaginative truths; this thus helps the brain integrate its two sides into a whole (Norfolk et al., 2006). Neuroscience is discovering that organization of information in story form is a natural brain process (Caine & Caine, 1991). The discovery is that the brain is wired to organize, retain, and access information through story. Story aids memory because it puts information into a meaningful context; it establishes the narrative track in which knowledge can reside (Norfolk et al., 2006). Science has identified emotion as having an essential connection with memory (Caine & Caine, 1991). Hormones are released to the brain and act as a memory fixative. The engaging nature of story evokes emotion and stimulates learning; the interactive and immediate nature of storytelling makes learning fun for students (Caine & Caine, 1991; Champion et al., 2003).

Storytelling also connects the lived experiences of the students with the subject matter (Deniston-Trochta, 2003; Gay, 2010). Students are able to develop identity, voice, and positive attitude towards learning through storytelling (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Peerless, 2014). Additionally, the art of storytelling lends itself to students’ varied learning styles (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006). Children’s cognitive processing protocols are learned from their cultural socialization (Gay, 2010). Children internalize
their rules for acquiring knowledge and demonstrate their skills by the time they start school at age five. As Gay noted, these cultural influences anchor how individuals process intellectual challenges for the rest of their lives, and in-group identification and affiliation, education, social class, and gender all inform one’s learning style.

Learning style indicates the preferences that individuals have for perceiving and processing information, not the ability to learn material (Gay, 2010). Most people have a combination of learning styles, and these can be procedural, communicative, substantive, environmental, organizational, perceptual, relational, and motivational (Gay, 2010). Researchers have asserted that different cultural and ethnic groups are socialized to learn differently (Bell, 2003; Delgado & Stefancic, 2006; Gay, 2010). African American children respond to rhythm, rhyme, movement, cooperation, sharing, and inferential reasoning; they focus on people rather than things and prefer kinesthetic/active instruction (Craft, 2012). The dominant culture education that embraces a “universalized” method of teaching results in a pervasive dominant culture education that is not inclusive (Craft, 2012). The elements of call and response, voice intonations, gestures, and movements in African American storytelling are congruent with the learning styles and narrative styles of many African American students (Champion et al., 2003; Diller, 1999; Gay, 2010).

Dockter (2008) documented a qualitative study of biweekly storytelling sessions with African American third graders in an urban school in Minnesota. The residency was conducted by Nothando and Vusi Zulu, master storytellers and members of the Black Storytelling Alliance. The study was organized in partnership with the storytellers and the College of Education at the University of Minnesota. The purpose of the study was to
develop an understanding of how cultural storytelling promoted particular identities and ways of being, as well as how students took up or resisted those identities. The storytellers perceived that their work was effective, but needed an academic lens to articulate the ways in which it was achieved. The storytellers explained that students could communicate their responses to the lesson or moral of the story. They were able to see how their storytelling sessions could improve reading comprehension and imagination, and were adamant about the power of story to build community and change possible futures for the students (Dockter, 2008).

The above-mentioned study included seven students who participated in the storytelling sessions and four students who participated in the study. The four students who participated in the story were given additional questions about the stories and their experience in the storytelling sessions. The storyteller started her sessions by asking the children about their weekend or something they did at home. She then told a story from a picture book. The storytelling was animated and the storyteller used movement, song, and repetition, as well as call and response. The students retold and acted out the story. The storytellers were flexible in the methods they used, and the stories they told were selected to accommodate the students’ various learning styles; consequently, all four students were able to understand the lessons in the stories and retell the stories with a solid beginning, middle, and end as well as the lesson of the stories. Dockter (2008) concluded that Nothando’s impressions of how storytelling informed student language and skill development were consistent with the research, and recommended that the discourse around cultural storytelling and how identities are negotiated, verified, and resisted was worth further exploration.
Champion, Katz, Muldrow, and Dail (1999) studied narratives of African American preschoolers to build an argument for the need to connect the home environment of students with the school environment. The themes that emerged from the study dealt with identity, social relationships, and entertainment. They explained that storytelling in the African American community takes place in the church, classroom, and social settings. They discussed that the home experience of the children has a great impact on the school experience. The experiences of the children might be different from the school, and teachers can better meet the needs of students by literacy-enriched instruction that is culturally relevant.

In lieu of the overriding literature that affirms the benefits of storytelling and particularly African American storytelling as a viable pedagogy for educating all students and supporting teachers, there is an erroneous perception that storytelling and other arts-enrichment programs take away from teachers preparing students for the mandated standardized tests (Malloy, personal communication, September 22, 2015). Advocates for Arts in Education have argued that when schools integrate the arts into the academic schedule, students fare better in all curricula areas (S. Epps, personal communication, July 22, 2015). Storytelling and culturally relevant storytelling are literacy-based art forms that can support the current standards in multiple disciplines (CCSS, 2015). For the purposes of the present study, the ELA and social studies standards for fourth, fifth, and ninth grades are highlighted in the next section.

**Common core standards and testing.** State education standards have existed since the early 1990s. By the early 2000s, every state had developed and adopted its own standards of proficiency for what students should know at each grade level and upon
graduation (Toscano, 2013). During the Clinton Administration (1996), federal policy began to pursue a standards-based reform agenda, expanding to require criteria that have school- and system-wide influence. In the past, the reforms were categorically targeted to address a specific issue such as high-poverty schools or non-English speakers (Burke & Marshall, 2010). No Child Left Behind (2002) required states to test at specific intervals using state exams. Students were required to be proficient in math, English, and science by 2014 (CCSS, 2015). States, districts, and schools had to demonstrate yearly progress toward that goal in order to receive funding (Burke & Marshall, 2010). The results of No Child Left Behind (2002) were uneven and, in some situations, states lowered their definition of proficiency on state tests to continue receiving federal funds (Burke & Marshall, 2010).

According to the Department of Education (2005), for the past 10 years, the United States has lagged behind other developed countries in standardized tests, and many colleges have reported that entering freshmen lacked the skills needed for higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014). Corporations reported that employees did not have the academic and communication skills desirable for potential employees (NCES, 2014). High-performing states with graduated students passing all required tests still needed remediation in their postsecondary work. The Common Core Standards were designed to address these issues and build consistent learning goals across the states.

The Common Core Standards were launched in 2009 by 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia to address these pressing issues (CCSS, 2015). In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education received $4.35 billion dollars of President Barack
Obama’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to allow states to compete for Race to the Top funding (Toscano, 2013). States had to undergo a competitive two-phase granting process. Phase 1 applicants had to demonstrate a commitment to the Common Core Standards, and Phase 2 applicants had to adopt the standards, evaluate them over the 2 months of summer, compare them to their current standards, discuss the matter with their constituencies, and commit to replacing their standards with Common Core (Toscano, 2013). Of the 46 states that applied, only 12 states were awarded the funds. The standards were drafted under the umbrella of two private organizations: the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSS). Both organizations received millions of dollars from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to develop the standards (Toscano, 2013). These organizations enlisted teams of selected teachers from around the country, best state standards, the highest international standards, and evidence and expertise on educational outcomes (CCSS, 2015).

There is criticism surrounding the inequitable roll-out of Common Core from state to state, the lack of parent voices in the discourse, the role of governance, and the question of who is profiting from Common Core (Burke & Marshall, 2010; Toscano, 2013; VanTassel-Baska, 2015). Critics have suggested that book publishers, private corporations, and large philanthropies are profiting from the overwhelming demand for districts and schools to purchase professional development materials, curriculum guides, fiction and nonfiction books, professional development services, and technology to meet the Common Core Standards (Burke & Marshall, 2010; Toscano, 2013). In addition, states that met the guidelines and were awarded funding through the Race to the Top
initiative had the funds to support their schools. However, states that competed and did not receive funding were already at a disadvantage by not meeting certain guidelines and were further impacted by lacking the additional resources to prepare their teachers and administrators adequately to implement Common Core (Burke & Marshall, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, 2015). These issues are worth citing because they impact teacher performance, school culture, and student learning. Any discussion of a potential learning innovation or implementation in the current educational climate must address how it will support national standards that are the controversial Common Core Standards (CCSS, 2015). The Common Core Standards do not spell out how teachers should teach the standards, what books they should use, or how they should teach their subjects (CCSS, 2015).

Consequently, schools and teachers can use storytelling to meet the Common Core Standards (CCSS, 2015). Stenson & Norfolk (2012) suggested that once teachers and storytelling teaching artists understand the Common Core Standards, they can develop exciting projects for their students. She explained that children will learn the standards best when they are embedded in a story. To this end, the key shifts specifically in the English Language Arts standards are threefold:

1. Regular practice with complex texts and academic language – A progressive development of reading comprehension to meet the demands of college, career, and life.

2. Evidence-based reading, writing, and speaking – Students should be able to speak and write about texts through evidence from their reading, narrative writing, sequence and detail, and ability to inform and persuade.
3. Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction – Students should be able to obtain information about the world around them and learn independently. Grades K-5 standards require a 50-50 balance between informational and literary reading, while Grades 6-12 require greater attention to literary nonfiction.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2015) stated that any topic can be incorporated into story form and made more memorable to the listener. They added that story is the best vehicle for passing on factual information and that historical figures and events stay in children’s minds when communicated through narrative. Story gives honor to other cultures, provides facts about plants and animals, and reveals how numbers work and government policy influences history (CCSS, 2015). In addition, the telling of folktales from around the world has the ability to increase understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures (Hamilton & Weiss, 1990).

According to the Common Core Standards for social studies (CCSS, 2015) for fourth grade, the work builds on the students’ understanding of families, schools, and communities, and highlight the political institutions of their local communities and the United States. The concepts include citizenship, civic life, values, and government. The subject areas include Native Americans, the impacts of exploration, the slave trade and slavery, the colonial period, the Revolutionary War, the new nation, industrial growth, and urbanization. The fifth-grade social studies standards build on the fourth-grade social studies program by reinforcing historical and political content in the United States, as well as geographical, economic, and social/cultural information about America, Canada, and Latin American nations today. When applicable, the program promotes the use of
contemporary examples with case studies to help students understand the content, which covers pre-Civil War times, workers’ rights in the late 1800s, migration, World War II, and cultural holidays (CCSS, 2015). While the present study focused on the CCSS and storytelling in Grades 4 and 5, knowledge of how Grade 9 (intermediate) social studies standards build on the lower grades is worth considering here for clarity for the reader.

Thus, the Grade 9 social studies content objectives aim for students to understand the economic, social, and political development occurring between World War I and World War II; examine the importance of U.S. domestic and foreign policy; analyze the present and past role of the United States in international politics; classify major developments into subject categories such as social, political, economic, geographic, technological, scientific, religious, and cultural; and understand how all people in the United States and abroad are producers and consumers of goods (CCSS, 2015).

In conjunction with these curricular goals, African American storytelling can engage students in similar lessons by infusing the curriculum with culturally relevant stories that might be ordinarily omitted by the classroom teacher or textbook (Litner, 2004). As Litner noted, all students benefit when history is not presented from a single, omnipotent perspective infused with misinformation and stereotypes. Through the use of storytelling in teaching social studies and American history, the intersection between racial identity and historic significance is redefined for the students and society ultimately wins (Litner, 2004).

The Common Core Standards in ELA focus on students being able to engage in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade topics and texts, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly. Students are expected to
progress in each grade with more complex texts, greater conceptualization, and more developed writing skills. The broad range of texts for Grades 4 through 9 includes stories from culture, drama, poetry, fiction, and literary nonfiction, such as historical, scientific, and technical texts, biographies, memoirs, speeches, essays, and digital sources (CCSS, 2015). In addition, the speaking and listening standards for Grades 4 and 5 require students to read materials and draw on that information and other known information on the topic, to follow the agreed-upon rules for discussion, pose and respond to discussion questions, review key ideas, and express their ideas. There is also an expectation for students to understand and communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Fifth graders are expected to use their experience and knowledge of language, logic, and culture to think analytically, address problems creatively, and advocate persuasively. Ninth graders are expected to work with peers collaboratively on oral presentations; relate discussions to broader themes; incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify or challenge ideas and conclusions (CCSS, 2015). Thus, storytelling is an effective strategy that has the capacity to improve academic performance and assist teachers to meet national standards creatively (CCSS, 2015; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Norfolk et al., 2006).

Trostle and Hicks (1998) conducted research to examine the effects of storytellers versus story reading on the comprehension and vocabulary development of elementary school children. The study involved 32 students ranging in age from 7 to 11 years. Half of the students were told stories and the other half had stories read to them. The students were pre- and post-tested based on comprehension and knowledge. The students who had the stories told to them scored higher than those who had been read to. The researchers
concluded that the telling of the stories engaged students with a variety of learning styles. They recommended increased storytelling implementation in the classroom as well as storytelling training in teacher preparation and in-service programs.

Groce (2004) conducted a study in Texas in which she set out to explore the experiences of eight elementary school teachers. The teachers participated in a summer in-service training in storytelling and multicultural literature. The study sought to reveal the teachers’ perceptions of storytelling before, during, and after the training. Groce compared the teachers’ perceptions of storytelling, the classroom implementation of storytelling, and their future plans to implement the training. The teachers were taught storytelling techniques and given a multicultural curriculum guide. The study revealed that the teachers were uncomfortable telling stories in front of their peers, but enjoyed listening to their peers’ presentations. According to Groce, the teachers had preconceived notions that storytelling was relegated to family events and enrichment-type activities. However, after the training, the teachers had unanimously different perceptions. The post-training observations of the teachers in their classrooms documented their use of storytelling strategies. The teachers used the curriculum guide minimally and tailored their training to their classes. They found that storytelling motivated their students to listen, engage in literacy and content-area activities, and improved their behavior. The teachers further felt that the students were more attentive to their teachers’ storytelling presentations than to the story reading. In addition, the teachers cited that the students were more motivated to engage in academic tasks. As a result, they had future plans to use storytelling as a springboard for writing and cultural studies. Groce concluded that
with adequate support, training, and time, the teachers in the study were willing to implement storytelling in their existing curriculum.

Mello (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of eight studies on the use of storytelling as a teaching methodology. The research included six studies of storytelling in classrooms as well as two studies that Mello personally conducted in storytelling workshops with 10 special education students and 60 first and second graders. The other studies were conducted by researchers with first, second, third, and fourth graders. The researcher’s data included pre- and post-interviews with participants, students’ storytelling, measures of fluency, and writing samples from students. The findings of Mello’s studies as well as the six additional studies revealed that the literacy of the participants had improved in fluency, vocabulary, writing, and recall. Additionally, the study demonstrated that the students’ self-awareness, visual imagery, and cultural knowledge had improved.

Through storytelling, students strengthen and expand their thinking, depth of knowledge, and communication skills. Students build on listening and presentation skills, and develop the skills to work collaboratively and cooperatively. These skills prepare students for life and careers, as is fundamentally the major objective of the Common Core Standards (CCSS, 2015).

**Modern-day Griots in education.** According to Abdul-Malik (personal communication, July 2, 2015), president of the National Association of Black Storytellers, a few noted African American storytellers have paved the way for African American storytelling in education: Augustus Baker, Mary Carter Smith, Mama Linda Goss, Jackie Torrence, Dr. David Anderson, Brother Blue, Tejumola Ologboni, and Dr.
Harriete Bias-Insignares. These pioneers were educators, professors, librarians, and activists. Some were involved with the Black Arts Movement, others have started schools, and still others have created organizations to preserve African American storytelling as an educational tool for schools and communities. Many of these pioneers made entry into venues, stages, and platforms where people of color were not welcomed. These trailblazers opened the door for African American storytellers and other storytellers of color to work in schools and educational institutions in the United States and abroad (Frink-Reed, personal communication, August 3, 2015).

Today, as noted in the research, many storytellers around the country are doing exemplary work in urban public schools (Alston-Blake, personal communication, August 3, 2015). These modern-day Griots include Baba Chuck Davis, Malika Lee Whitney, Michael McCarty, Akanke Nur McClean, Karen Abdul-Malik, Charlotte Austin, Mitch Capel, Julie Pascal, Temujin Ekunsea, Joy Kelly, Diane Ferlatte, Oba King, Nothando Zulu, Sharon Holley, Karima Amin, Willa Brigham, Bobby Norfolk, Dylan Pritchett, The Steward Sisters, and Lynn Ford, to name a few (L. Goss, personal communication, 2015). These storytellers strive to bring African American storytelling into schools, despite biases about storytelling as a teaching tool and the current economic conditions that have cut and decreased funding for the arts in schools (L. Goss, personal communication, 2015). Modern-day storytellers bring their stories to a wide variety of venues and feel they are empowered through the stories they tell as well as the communities they serve (Edwards, 2009; Peerless, 2014; Rivera, 2006). Their dedication to the oral tradition and their perception that their storytelling work is needed to teach, heal, and connect allow
them to pursue this ancient vocation or avocation with grace, love, and joy (Edwards, 2009; Peerless, 2014; Rivera, 2006).

To examine the power of modern-day storytellers, Edwards (2009) told the narratives of a group of storytellers in Rochester, New York, and documented their performances and interactions with their audiences. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 10 members of the Black League of Rochester Storytellers. The 2-hour interviews were conducted over the course of one month in the homes of the various storytellers. In addition to the interviews, Edwards (2009) audiotaped and videotaped a storytelling session of each of the 10 storytellers interviewed. Each storyteller told one to two stories, participated in the group’s opening and closing ritual, and served as audience members for each other. The interviews were coded for emergent themes and individual profiles. The analysis of the performances included documentation of the motions, gestures, and other visual aspects of the performance as well as the responses of the audience members. The study centered on the phenomenon and practice of contemporary African American storytelling within an urban context. The study also examined how storytelling informed the lives of the storytellers by giving them a voice that countered the dominant culture, and created social and cultural cohesion that led to community building and self-empowerment.

Peerless (2014) conducted a qualitative study using the Good Work Project (GWP), initiated by Howard Gardner in 1995. The GWP was a research enterprise that investigated individuals’ concepts of good work through a psychological approach. The goal of the project was to elicit an understanding of the complexity of good work. The GWP defined good work as having three qualities: the work is excellent in quality,
socially responsible, and conceived by the individual as rewarding and enjoyable. Peerless used the GWP’s conceptual framework to examine the good works of 12 prominent and diverse storytellers: three men and nine women representing the African American, Appalachian, Jewish, and Native American traditions. The storytellers participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews and were asked questions about their professional work, personal values, beliefs, opportunities, and responsibilities related to storytelling. The conclusions from the study were that all of the storytellers had a dedication to oral tradition; they unanimously believed that human connection is at the heart of the power of storytelling, and all communities benefit from hearing the stories of others as well as their own. The storytellers were advocates for storytelling in K-12 classrooms and felt the need to advocate for arts in education funding and professional development in storytelling for teachers.

Along these lines, Rivera (2006) conducted a study about the lived experiences of three highly respected storytellers. He used a qualitative research method developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) called portraiture. Portraiture encourages researchers to include themselves, which Rivera did by being the fourth storyteller in the study. The main purpose of the study was to record the experiences and interpret the perspectives of the professionals’ challenges, struggles, and successes of being storytellers. The research was an attempt to reveal the storytellers’ philosophy about dealing with obstacles and what success meant to them. This biographical study revealed the ways in which these four storytellers looked at their work, their world, and their places in it. The connecting theme of the study revealed the respect and dedication that each teller had for the power
of oral tradition and the inner feeling of honor, purpose, and responsibility that is derived from being a storyteller.

**Chapter Summary**

The literature reviewed gave an historical overview of the phenomenon and function of storytelling in human evolution (Gottschall, 2012; Maguire, 1985). Additionally, the literature put into perspective the role of the West African storyteller and the transmission of the African oral arts to the Americas (Asante et al., 1985; Champion et al., 2003; Dance, 2002; Goss & Barnes, 1989; Hale, 1998). Further research has substantiated the role that African American storytelling has played in the survival of African Americans and African American culture (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Champion et al., 2003; Dance, 2007; Goss & Barnes, 1989). Scholars have agreed that modern teachers and educational institutions can learn from the teaching practices of past generations of African American teachers (Asante et al., 1985; Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Kelly, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Okpewho, 1992). The practices of these teachers are congruent with the pedagogical practices of culturally relevant education (Asmeng-Boahene, 2010; Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Kelly, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1985). The research has demonstrated the effectiveness of culturally relevant storytelling for all children and specifically for promoting cultural identification, positive attitudes toward academics, and positive behavior among African American students (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Bell, 2003; Diller, 2006; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Despite the evidence referenced, the research supports the acknowledgment that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Bell, 1980; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Gay, 2010). Institutions have the potential to oppress
and marginalize while co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This is evident to the degree that public education is dominated by pedagogies that are geared toward memorization, high-stakes test-taking, stock story curricula, and punishment centers (Giroux, 2010). Furthermore, as this researcher has noted, school communities that do not support teachers who attempt to use alternative pedagogies such as storytelling in their classrooms compound student and teacher efficacy. The social, political, and economic ramifications on education suggest that critical pedagogy and critical race theory provide a lens with which explore these dynamics (Freire, 1970; Kosol, 2005; Yosso, 2006).

The literature reviewed in this chapter provided topical evidence that culturally relevant education is an effective and liberating pedagogy (Bell, 2003; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Yosso, 2006; Zinn, 1999). Underpinning the aforementioned literature is the research that demonstrates storytelling, and African American storytelling in particular, as effective teaching tools for culturally relevant education, academic achievement, and cultural identification by addressing the needs of multiple learning styles and promoting cultural tolerance and social justice (Bell, 2003; Champion et al., 2003; Dockter, 2008; Gay, 2010; Groce, 2004; Litner, 2004). The area that is lacking in the research is the scholarly documentation of the experiences of modern-day African American storytellers working in urban public schools (Edwards, 2009; Peerless, 2014; Rivera, 2006). This gap in the literature informs the significance of this present study. The next chapter explains the research design used to conduct this study and explores the rationale for using Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1997) portraiture methodology to look at the
lived experiences of six African American storytellers providing culturally relevant education in urban public schools.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The U.S. educational system continues to fail African American students (NCES, 2014). Statistics continue to show disproportionate gaps between the academic achievements of African American students and European American students (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Influenced by miseducation, African American students are deficient in their cultural knowledge, thus leading them to diminished dignity, pride, and self-esteem (Ghee et al., 1998). Stories of student deficits, poor family structures, genetic explanations about achievement, and cultural mismatch theories often persist within the culture to preserve the stock stories of the dominant group (Caruthers, 2006; Howard, 2001b). Cultural identification plays an important role in building efficacy among African American students (Siwatu et al., 2011). Students must be able to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Scholars in the field have suggested that enhanced professional development for teachers in culturally relevant pedagogies is essential in this process (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006; Caruthers, 2006; Howard, 2001a). There is mounting evidence that teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are related to positive student and teacher outcomes (Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Siwatu et al., 2011). Student and teacher efficacy is compounded by school communities that do not support teachers who attempt to use alternative pedagogies such as storytelling in their classrooms (Ghee et al., 1998). African American storytelling has historically held a transforming and sustainable presence in the lives of African Americans (Bell, 2003; Dance, 2002; Goss & Barnes, 1989). African American storytelling can also have transformative effects on the culture of urban schools and in the
lives of all students (McLean-Nur, personal communication, August 17, 2014). The failure of many educational reform initiatives has come about because those initiatives did not change the culture of the school by deconstructing the behaviors, norms, and beliefs that fail to serve urban African American students and their teachers (Caruthers, 2006).

Modern-day Griots or African American storytellers continue the tradition of educating, inspiring, and entertaining through the oral arts as teaching artists and presenters (Frink-Redd, personal communication, November 12, 2015). Storytellers provide performances, workshops, parent-engagement programs, and teacher training (Frink-Reed, personal communication, November 12, 2015). The presence of the storyteller provides ritual, acknowledges students’ culture, and integrates culturally relevant dialogue and history into the curriculum (L. Goss, personal communication, November 12, 2015). This study aimed to explore the lived experience of six professional African American storytellers who, at the time of this study, worked in public schools. The following research questions guided the inquiry for this investigation.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the lived experiences of professional African American storytellers who work as teaching artists in urban public schools?

2. How have the experiences of professional African American storytellers assisted teachers in promoting cultural awareness and self-esteem of the students they serve?

3. How can African American storytelling enhance the ELA and/or social studies curriculum within the Common Core Standards in Grades 4 and 5?
4. What can be done to promote storytelling as a tool to teach culturally relevant education in schools?

A qualitative design was selected for this study to promote what Yin (2011) described as the features of qualitative research. He stated there are five features of qualitative research: (a) studying the meaning of people’s lives under real-world conditions; (b) representing the views and perspectives of the people in the study; (c) covering the contextual conditions within which people live; (d) contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behavior; and (e) striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone.

The specific qualitative methodology that was used in this study was portraiture, which was developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997).

Portraiture is grounded in phenomenological research which, according to Creswell (2014), is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon, as described by the participants. In this method, the researcher focuses on describing what the participants have in common and have as strong philosophical underpinnings. Portraiture builds on interpretive phenomenology by combining art and science to draw a textual in-depth image of an individual or organization (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It was Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1997) intention to improve research and cross boundaries by providing opportunities to recognize the scientific rigor of artistic processes and the potential artistry of science. A more in-depth understanding of this method by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) noted that portraitists endeavor to document and translate the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying.
by documenting their voices, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in a social and cultural context and shaped through discourse between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the dialogue and shaping the evolving image. The relationship between the portraitist and the research participant is space that is rich with meaning and becomes the arena for navigating the empirical, aesthetic, and ethical dynamics of authentic and compelling narrative.

**Positionality.** Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) also noted that portraiture acknowledges the identity, character, and history of the researcher as integral components in listening, selecting, interpreting, and composing the story. The portraitist must still be concerned with his or her relationship with participants to the extent to which the portraitist self-positions as an insider or an outsider. In portraiture, the researcher is more evident and visible than in any other research form (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Kearns and Andrews (2004) further delved into the particulars of this method by saying that the insider positionality is a benefit to the researcher because it develops increased connectedness with the subject that may lead to generating greater trust and increased sharing of information during the semi-structured interviews.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), portraiture gives the researcher space for introspection and self-narrative, so it is imperative to the process that the researcher has a balance of skepticism and scrutiny. The researcher needs to employ rigorous procedures and methodological tools to rid the work of personal bias. There must be vigilance about identifying other sources that challenge the portraiture perspective. Rivera (2006) used portraiture for an in-depth study of three highly recognized storytellers because he felt it offered him the opportunity to discover the essence of the
storytellers and their philosophies about the professional barriers they encountered throughout their storytelling careers. Also a storyteller, Rivera (2006) welcomed the freedom to design a self-portrait through introspection and self-narrative. Through the portraits, he felt he was able to give the readers a glimpse into the wisdom and resilience of storytellers who made their art their life’s work. The dual nature of portraiture is that it endeavors to document and interpret while it also inspires and transforms (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

Research Context

The purpose of this study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of African American storytellers who, at the time of this study, worked in urban schools throughout the United States. Specifically, the study explored and analyzed how African American storytellers can be effective conduits of culturally relevant education in urban public schools. Additionally, this study looked at the ways in which African American storytelling supports the Common Core Standards and the work of classroom teachers. In this way, one can ascertain commonalities or differences in how African American storytellers work in urban schools across the country. To meet these criteria, the researcher chose six storytellers who work in six major urban cities: Manhattan, NY; Morristown, NJ; Washington, DC; Chicago, IL; Culver City, CA; and Rochester, NY. The study looked at six specific schools in each city (Appendix A). For the purpose of the study, each major city was documented with a code or pseudonym in order to maintain the confidentiality of each school or district.

Elementary School DC is an elementary school in northwest Washington, DC. The total school population was 224, with an ethnic breakdown of 62% Black, 15% Hispanic,
12% White, and 7% Asian. A total of 47% of the students met the reading standards; a total of 46% met the math standards; and a total of 56% and 45% of the Black students met the reading standards and math standards, respectively. The teacher-student ratio was 12 to 1.

Elementary School Manhattan is an elementary/middle school in one of the five boroughs in New York City. The total school population was 488, with 17% Black, 58% Hispanic, 11% White, and 14% other. The school met or exceeded the Standards; 65% of the students met the reading standards and 52% of the students met the math standards; 63% of the students qualified for a free lunch. The teacher-student ratio is 18:1.

Elementary School Chicago is an elementary school located in the Midwest. The population of the school was 550, with 95% Black and 5% other. Regarding standards, 59% of the students met or exceeded the state test standards in reading, and 49% met the standards in math; 68% of the students qualified for a free lunch. The teacher-student ratio was 27:1.

Elementary School Rochester is an elementary school in upstate New York. The population of the school was 473, with 64% Black, 21% Hispanic, 11% White, and 4% other. The school met the standards, with a total of 51%; however, only 30% of the Black students met the same levels of proficiency as Whites and Hispanics (22%); 96% of the students qualified for a free lunch. The teacher student ratio was 22:01.

School Culver City is an elementary/middle school (K-8) in one area of California. The population was 1545, with 23% Black, 40% Hispanic, 22% White, and 12% Asian. The school did not meet state standards, with 25% of Blacks meeting
proficiency in reading and 23% in math; 44% of the students qualified for a free lunch.
The teacher student ratio was 18:1.

Elementary School Morristown is a middle school (K-8) in a town in New Jersey.
The population was 1021, with 56.5% White, 15.6% Black, 23.4% Hispanic, and 5% Asian. The school met the state standards with 70% of students proficient in reading and 64% in math; 58.2% of Blacks were proficient in reading and 59.9% were proficient in math; and 40% of the students qualified for a free lunch. The teacher student ratio was 16:1.

Research Participants

In an effort to ascertain a comprehensive overview of African American storytelling as a culturally relevant teaching tool and to examine the best practices of African American storytellers working in urban public schools, rigid criteria for selection was employed. All of the storytellers selected for this study had at least 20 years of experience working in urban schools. Each one was a professional storyteller who had worked with an urban, elementary school class within the year of the study. Last, the researcher wanted to ensure a gender balanced pool of participants.

Creswell (2009) stated that qualitative research enables the researcher to select participants purposefully to help the researcher understand the research problem and questions. Thus, three men and three women, ages 42-85, were selected from six different urban cities. The lived experiences of African American storytellers from different American cities broadened the scope and significance of this study’s findings in the national arena. Furthermore, the rationale for identifying six research participants is consistent with the portraiture methodology, which encourages single researchers to opt
for fewer participants in order to have in-depth, semi-structured interviews and to establish rapport and trust, leading to more meaningful data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The researcher sent an informed consent form to the potential storytellers requesting their voluntary participation (Appendix B). Once the potential participants return their signed informed consent forms, the researcher sent the storytellers an initial questionnaire to assess basic demographic information about the storytellers and the school(s) in which they identified as having worked (Appendix C). The participants did not receive any compensation or reimbursement for participating in the study. The real names of the participants were not disclosed, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews for the New York City, DC, Rochester, and New Jersey storytellers were conducted in person and audio-recorded. The interviews for the Chicago and Los Angeles storytellers were conducted via Skype because their locations were not in close proximity to the researcher. The Skype interviews were also audio-recorded. Creswell (2013) cautioned researchers to use high-quality equipment that is compatible with the transcriber’s software. During the interview process, the researcher took notes to document possible emerging themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). A professional transcriber was used for all interviews in order to record all information from the participants accurately. The researcher listened to all of the recordings and read all of the transcripts. The research data is stored in a locked folder in the researcher’s home office. The participants were offered the opportunity to review the transcripts to assure accuracy and to modify, if they so desired. This procedure assured reliability and validity (Creswell, 2014). Personal information about the participants is stored separately
from the transcripts. The digital recordings are retained on a password-protected computer. This personal information will be destroyed 1 year after the completion of this study. The identities of the participants will not be published in relation to this work.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The primary source of data collection was the researcher who conducted in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, and created handwritten notes. The instruments used for the collection of data consisted of a list of questions that served as the foundation for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix D). These interview questions were created from a synthesis of the literature review and theoretical frameworks already discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 (Creswell, 2009).

In order to triangulate the data, the researcher asked a panel of six experts to review the interview questions to ensure clarity, content, and validity. The panel consisted of the Chair of an African Studies Department at a major college; a Chair of a Master’s Program in storytelling; a national expert in youth development; a retired Director of Multicultural Education for a school district; an Arts in Education executive; and a nationally renowned storyteller and scholar. All of the experts received advanced degrees from doctoral programs.

**Data Analysis**

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) compared constructing a portraiture to weaving a tapestry because it combines and interweaves elements into a complex whole. The weaving metaphor reflects the elements of structure, texture, color, design, and images of spinning a tale, telling a story, and shaping a narrative. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis outlined four dimensions to weaving this tapestry from conception to the
development of the overarching story to the structure, which refers to the sequencing and layering of emergent themes; then to the form, which reflects the movement of the narrative and the spinning of the tale; and last, to the cohesion, which refers to the unity and integrity of the piece.

After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and her handwritten notes to separate segments and/or patterns and code for identified purposes and the related themes that emerged (Creswell, 2007). As information emerged, the researcher further cross-referenced and conducted constant comparisons to find the patterns that evolved. Creswell called this process zig-zagging because of the constant back-and-forth between the data gathered through interviews, notes, and analysis to search for emerging patterns and categories. This approach to data collection is also congruent with the structure outlined by Yin (2011), who identified five stages for interview analysis. The five stages include compiling, disassembling, reassembling, and interpreting data, then concluding. The individual portraits documented the perspectives of the participants, and the interpretation and conclusions presented the overriding themes of the study.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) emphasized the challenges in the process of analyzing and conceptualizing the data collected and provided guiding questions that assisted in the development of the final portraits. The four questions are:

(a) Has contextual information been included as clarifying introduction to and edifying backdrop throughout the portrait? (b) Has the voice been sufficiently revealed and modulated so that it will inform but not distort the interpretation presented in the portrait? (c) Have relationships been respected and faith kept with
the actors on the scene throughout the shaping of the final whole? And (d) do the identified emergent themes resonate throughout the language and culture of the actors on the site and do they adequately scaffold the interpretation presented in the portrait? (p. 265)

The present researcher used these questions to ensure that the portraits were balanced aesthetically and empirically and that the themes followed a logical flow.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided the methodology for this study of African American storytellers who, at the time of this study, provided culturally relevant education in urban public schools. The participants were six African American storytellers who represented schools in six urban cities: Manhattan, NY; Rochester, NY; Morristown, NJ; Washington, DC.; Chicago, IL; and Culver City, CA. The researcher sent the storytellers consent forms. After she received the signed consent forms, she sent the storytellers a demographic questionnaire prior to scheduling the semi-structured interviews.

Portraiture, a qualitative methodology created by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), was used to create six portraits of the lived experiences of the participants, analyze the data, and find emerging themes in order to generate recommendations and conclusions on the topic. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, four of which were audio-recorded in person and two via Skype. The interview questions were based on the literature review and the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 (Creswell, 2007). The interviews were tested for triangulation of the data through a panel of six experts.
A professional transcriber transcribed the interviews. The identities of the participants were kept confidential and all documents are stored via a password-safe computer and in locked files at the researcher’s home office.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study explored African American storytelling as a vehicle to teach culturally relevant education in urban public schools. The subject was explored through the voices of six professional African American storytellers (Table 4.1) who, at the time of this study, worked as teaching artists in six cities in the United States. The storytellers participated in audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews. Four respondents were interviewed in person, and two were interviewed via Skype. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed, read, and coded. Once the coding was completed, the coded statements were reorganized into related groupings of emerging themes. This chapter is organized by the participants’ responses to the research questions that drove this inquiry.

Table 4.1

Demographics of Storytellers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Years in Profession</th>
<th>Taken Professional Storytelling Classes</th>
<th>Taken Classes in Common Core</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller C</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller J</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller L</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller N</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller R</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller W</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher sought to include an equal number of female and male storytellers, three female and three males. The storytellers varied in education, ranging from one
respondent completing high school, two respondents completing bachelor’s degrees, one respondent completing a master’s degree, and one respondent completing a doctorate degree. The ages of the respondents ranged from 43 years old to 85 years old, with one respondent aged 43, one respondent aged 50, one respondent aged 60, two respondents aged 64, and the sixth respondent aged 85. Five out of the six storytellers had taken professionals storytelling classes and Common Core classes.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the lived experiences of professional African American storytellers who work as teaching artists in urban public schools?

2. How can professional African American storytellers assist teachers in promoting cultural awareness and self-esteem in the students they serve?

3. How can African American storytelling enhance the ELA and/or social studies curriculum within the Common Core Standards in Grades 4 and 5?

4. What can be done to promote storytelling as an enhancement of cultural awareness of African American students in schools?

**Data Analysis and Findings**

**Research question 1.** What are the lived experiences of professional African American storytellers who work as teaching artists in urban public schools?

Portraiture research is designed to document and interpret the knowledge and wisdom of the subject (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Each participant in this study had a story to tell that was rich with purpose, culture, and compassion. It is in the spirit of portraiture that their tales are retold here to capture the lived experiences of modern-day *Griots.*
All six storytellers identified as African American professional storytellers (paid for their services) who worked in public schools. The three themes that emerged from the lived experiences of the storytellers revealed that each one saw storytelling as a calling. They also saw the art of storytelling as a creative expression of themselves as artists. Last, they felt that storytelling was a vehicle for them to celebrate their heritage and ancestry. Table 4.2 presents the themes that emerged from Research Question 1.

Table 4.2

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Storyteller R remembered being told family stories and how his mother would collect the stories and keep them in the family Bible. “My father told me stories about his beloved uncle who lived through slavery and established himself as a free man.” These stories instilled in him a strong sense of ethnic pride. “I joined the Air Force, and like
many African American veterans, I returned to face racism. I turned my emotions into a thirst for education and a commitment to work for social justice. I earned a doctoral degree and became an administrator in an urban school district.” In that position, Storyteller R was very concerned about finding ways to create a culture in which parents were respected for their experiences and culture. He wanted parents to be engaged with teachers and administrators in his schools for the benefit of the students. He was invited to a National Black Storytellers Festival in Oakland, CA. Storyteller R’s eyes lit up like a young child on Christmas morning when he started to reminisce about this introduction to African American storytelling as an art form. He was able to relate his personal oral histories to the personal stories he heard at the festival. He saw how these stories could be used to build community and promote self-determination. He became instrumental in starting a local affiliate of the organization and began using African American storytelling in his parent workshops and teacher trainings. He saw African American storytelling as a calling and part of his life’s purpose. He discovered that he had creativity, and storytelling was the vehicle to express it. He used storytelling in his administrative work and developed historically-based storytelling programs for public performances and in schools. He has written books, staged presentations, and developed study guides and articles to empower African Americans as well as to educate all people about the history and contributions of African Americans.

Storyteller N grew up listening to the sermons of her father in a Black church in Tennessee. Like many Black preachers in the early 1950s, her father was active in the Civil Rights Movement. His involvement put her in the middle of the school desegregation mandate. Storyteller N shared that everyone has personal stories, and they
might not seem exceptional to the individual until the story is shared with others. She stated:

The connection of our experiences helps us to give perspective to our experiences. In 1957, the Clinton 12 integrated the public high schools, and I was amongst a number of first graders to integrate the public elementary schools in Tennessee. I did not think it was such an exceptional story until I started sharing it. This event occurred around the same time that Ruby Bridges integrated the Mississippi Public Schools. Some people acted “ugly,” shouting derogatory names and spitting at us. The Hattie Cotton School was bombed the night before the first day of school as well as a civil rights lawyer’s home. Luckily no one was hurt.

Storyteller N remembered Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his family coming to her father’s church during these times. Sharing personal narratives is an integral part of African American culture:

It is vibrant in our everyday life, but we don’t recognize it. Just walk down the street in our community and you hear people telling each other stories. “Girl, you shoulda been with me! We were in church and such-and-such a person stood up and did this.” They’re telling a story but they’re not acknowledging it as a story. They’re just relating something, an experience, and we do this as African Americans all the time. I did not realize it at the time, but I was raised listening to one of the most dynamic oral traditions in African American culture, that of the Black church. When priests, ministers or preachers talk, they always relate personal stories, the call, and respond. They tell a story and relate it to a Bible story that the whole congregation can relate to. When everybody starts to answer,
and it’s a rhythm, and it’s a rhythm thing, and then it really reaches a high, a
really high pitch, and sometimes that’s when an organist comes in, and the drums
and folks start dancing, it is fundamentally African aesthetic. It was not until
years later and studying African American folklore and storytelling that I was able
to make these conscious connections.

After college, Storyteller N relocated to New York City to pursue an acting
career. As a struggling actress, she took on many undesirable jobs such as being a
waitress and temporary office worker. She wanted to do more “meaningful” work in
between her acting assignments. It was during a venting session with her sister that her
sister asked her a life-changing question: “Why don’t you become a storyteller?”
Storyteller N had never heard of a professional storyteller. Her sister told her about the
storytellers she knew in California and that there had to be storytellers in New York.
Soon afterwards, Storyteller N saw a television show featuring the legendary Jackie
Torrence and was immediately drawn. She exclaimed, “I found the creative vehicle that
gave me the purpose and substance that I was looking for.” She went to a local
storyteller’s concert and was hooked. Later that year, she began meeting storytellers and
going to storytelling swaps. One of her friends referred her to an Arts in Education
organization that commissioned her to write a storytelling piece on the Civil Rights
Movement. This piece focused on prejudice and tolerance and started her career as a
working storyteller. This opportunity led to work as a teaching artist with various Arts in
Education organizations that hired her for theater, storytelling residencies, and assembly
programs. Storyteller N saw these events as divine interventions and realized that she
always had storytelling in her life:
It’s the word of mouth. It’s, it’s a more natural way to relate experiences, to relate adventures, whether it be fiction or whether it something that actually happened. And, we as humans, that’s what we do. When we get together, when we’re talking, all of this is storytelling. We’re telling, “This is, oh, this is what happened to me and this is what happened to me.” And then we have more formalized storytelling, which is also what I appreciate, and a lot of adults and a lot of people, adults and children, appreciate hearing folk tales, hearing legends. I mean, you see their eyes. They look into like it’s a TV. But I think it’s just really important ‘cause it is an essential form of communication.

Storyteller N felt that storytelling connected her to the struggles of her ancestors and those who came before her. She believed that when we tell our personal stories, the universality of the human experience connects us. Storyteller N is a sought-after theater director and weaves personal stories, multicultural folktales, and fables into her concert and teaching work.

Storyteller J is the youngest of six children and shared how her mother juggled working and parenting, and her father worked two jobs. She cheerfully stated, “Not too many stories being told. However, my parents modeled a strong work ethic and my grandmother’s postcards from her travels sparked my love for travel and other cultures.” Storyteller J recalled sitting down at the New York State Theater and her jaw dropping wide open at the sight of ballerinas on stage performing in The Nutcracker. At that moment, like many little girls around the country, she wanted to be a ballerina. She went to a performing arts high school as a ballet major. Upon graduation, she realized that she was good, but not good enough to make it into a major company. She decided to go into
musical theater. “Creatively curious,” as she put it, Storyteller J saw an advertisement for a storytellers’ festival at the New Victory Theater in New York. Her curiosity moved her to buy a ticket. She sat down and recalled being spellbound by Carmen Didi’s 1-hour storytelling presentation entitled The Peanut Man. The piece chronicled Carmen Didi’s family journey from Cuba to Atlanta, Georgia. Storyteller J remembered hearing a strong inner voice shouting “I can do that.” She joined a couple of storytelling associations and took some storytelling workshops. In the workshops, she learned how to look for a story, research stories, and rehearse them. She did free concerts, typed and printed paper brochures on her home computer, and gave them out at her shows. After a while, people began to call her for paid engagements. She embraced the saying, “God laughs when man makes plans.” She was clear that by listening to her inner voice, she followed the right path for her. She had no regrets regarding not going to college because, in her words, “I found my calling in storytelling and have the freedom to study what I want.” She went on to become a certified clown and yoga teacher, which she felt informs her storytelling.

Storyteller J felt that storytelling is a “soul connector.” As she explained:

   Storytelling is a conversation between teller and audience. It is a passing on of knowledge, of wisdom, of shared experience. Storytelling is educational, entertaining, and can build community. In folktales in particular, there is this connection of culture. There are themes that come up in every single culture, there is a commonality. There is a name in all cultures for the soul and storytelling is a soul connector. Storytelling touches a place that cannot be touched by technology. Storytelling speaks to the cultural unconscious. It comes from something in our DNA that has to be expressed. Storytelling connects us to the commonality of our
human experiences. The position of the African storyteller was so important in the society. I almost feel that I am not worthy to be called a *Griot* or master storyteller, but I work hard to live up to the tradition. That tradition transcended the Middle Passage. African American storytelling is unique because the African component is apparent and the American experience is apparent. The folktales of our ancestors are cloaked in the experiences of this new world. The Nigerian story of the clever turtle is a great example of this. In the story, the turtle says, “Please do not throw me in the river. Please do not throw me in the river.” In reality, that is where he wants to be. The turtle survives in the water. The Brer Rabbit version replaces the water with the briar patch: “Please do not throw me in the briar patch.” Of course, the briar patch is where Brer Rabbit wants to be. Our ancestors brought the stories over on the boats, but because they were no longer seeing the turtles and seeing the rabbits, the stories transformed. African American storytelling has an ancientness that is rooted on the continent of Africa, the birthplace of humankind. African American storytelling is also unique in its usage. The stories were cloaked in metaphors and messages. There is a political agenda to the stories that were told. The slave stories masked information so that the “master” would not understand what was being said. There was a courage in telling tales that mocked the slave owners. The stories of John and Tom always had these slaves outsmarting their masters. In the story of the lion and the mouse and the Brer Rabbit stories, the smaller animals always outwitted the bigger animals. Many cultures have trickster characters, however, in the Black
storytelling tradition, the stories carry an additional position in the struggle for social justice and the survival of a people.

Storyteller J’s repertoire includes folktales, legends, epics, and fables from around the world; she works in the schools providing residencies, teacher trainings, and assembly programs. Her early childhood planted a seed for hard work and for celebrating her culture and the cultures of others. Storytelling has taken Storyteller J all over the world. She feels that her presence in many situations and places gives a different narrative of an African American woman. She explained that in her recent trip to China, many of the people she encountered had never seen an African American person before. She was elated that through storytelling, she was able to celebrate the diversity and commonality of both cultures with her audiences.

Storyteller C followed in his father’s footsteps and joined the military. He had an interest in theater, but his father did not initially support a career in theater. After serving his time in the military, he enrolled in college and rediscovered theater. He shared that he was interested in theater that taught and entertained. He embraced Oscar Brown Jr.’s term of “edu-tainment.” He shared that “[s]torytelling is a sacred gift that was awakened in me.” After attending the National Black Storytelling Festival and a few African American storytelling retreats, Storyteller C felt confident to develop storytelling and theater presentations that educated and inspired. He felt that African American storytelling is a perfect vehicle to teach history and connect all people through the lessons, struggles, and triumphs of the past. Storyteller C proclaimed a great love for his people and heritage and wanted to share that with his audiences. He had a great commitment to “edu-tainment” and felt he needed to take his work to where the youth
were not at spoken-word concerts or theater stages, but in schools. He had a multidisciplinary Arts in Education company that provides workshops and assemblies to urban public schools.

Storyteller L shared that both his parents were great storytellers and reading was important in the household. He reminisced:

My father was from Shubuta, Mississippi, and my mother was born and raised in Barbados. When my mother told me to take off the light in her bedroom at night, she would pull a chair close to the window to read by the street light. She told me that if you could read, you could do anything and I believed her. There were always three or four newspapers in our home every day.

His parents’ stories were personal stories and Storyteller L inherited their love of books, reading, and sharing personal stories. Coming of age during the Civil Rights Movement, Storyteller L recalled being in a Black History Club and reading *They Came Before the Mayflower, The Rest of the Earth*, and *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. When the Black Panthers opened an office in Chicago, he joined and was assigned to the education cadre. He explained that every new member had to take political education classes and learn the platform of the party. He said that there are many concealed stories about the Black Panthers, including the stereotype that they were anti-White and only interested in violence. He told about the early-childhood and free-breakfast programs and coalition that the Chicago party had with a White group called the Young Patriots. Because of his participation in demonstrations, he was expelled from his Catholic high school. After the assassination of the Illinois chapter chairman, Fred Hampton, J. Edgar Hoover applied more pressure on the Black Panther party. Storyteller L was approached to become an
informant for the FBI and was constantly harassed. He had to leave his job at the post office, and three of his apartments were broken into. At this point, he had a wife and baby daughter. He decided enlisting in the army would alleviate his problems with the FBI. He went to South Korea and became a martial artist. He spent 3 years and 3 days in the army, then came back to the States and went to college on the GI Bill. He explained that while doing an odd job of selling health foods at the Conference of Alternative and Jewish Education, a friend introduced him to a professional storyteller. He was mesmerized that this man got paid for telling stories. At that very moment, he coined his storytelling name and declared he would become a professional storyteller. The next week, he asked himself, “What would I do as a profession if I were independently wealthy?” He decided that, ideally, he would tell stories. He went to his local library to collect books of folktales from different countries and books about storytelling. One day, the librarian asked him if he would do a storytelling workshop for the teenagers. He accepted the workshop and as he puts it, “accepted the ‘calling’ to tell.” He felt that storytelling is important for a variety of reasons.

Storytelling is in our DNA; literally, it is in our DNA. We are hard-wired for storytelling. Storytelling is the oldest form of mass communication. Before there was writing, before there was theater, before there was poetry. When people started learning to talk, people started telling stories. So storytelling and drawing are those two art forms that define the human existence. And so storytelling, I mean when I say that storytelling is in our DNA, a friend of mine who is a science and a storyteller was involved in writing a book in which the research literally found the storytelling gene. We as human beings translate everything we see and
hear into stories. Storytelling is how we digest information and communicate. It’s so basic to our existence that storytelling is like breathing for us. I’ve seen this through my storytelling work in so many settings, in schools, in libraries, and in the prisons. You see someone who tells a good story and you watch the people who are listening to that story, and you will see when they are locked in and they go into what we call “story trance.” And there are like, they’re there, they are in, they are immersed in that story. So storytelling is crucial, absolutely crucial.

Stories are like seeds. You tell someone a story, you’re literally in their head because when you tell the story, the words come out of your mouth but the images come out of their mind. So they listen to the story and whatever you see is not what they see. They see the images that their mind projects, which makes the story theirs. I don’t care how many, if it’s 20 people in a room, if it’s a thousand people in a room, every individual is seeing their own image of your story. Whatever you say that paints a specific picture, that’s there, but they fill in everything else. If you, say you were in a room with 20 people, well, what those 20 people look like, that’s their creation. If you say you were in a city, if you say you were here, you say you were there, the background, that’s coming from their mind, their imagination. African American storytelling continues the tradition of the people who kept the history, the people who passed it on from generation to generation. I work in that tradition using stories to deal with social issues and to heal people’s hearts and minds. I personally do not have an issue with the word, “Black.”
Storyteller L became a resource for the county’s library system and started working in schools. He conducted assembly programs, residencies, parent workshops, and teacher training in the school system. He also used applied storytelling with drug rehabilitation programs and had a prison program. He toured nationally and internationally, performing concerts at cultural institutions and festivals.

Storyteller W grew up in rural New York State. She was shy and lacked confidence. She knew from an early age that she wanted to be an educator. There was a program that partnered the local community college with a major private college in the area. The partnership gave community college students the opportunity to take courses at the Ivy League college in the summer with professors from both the private and community colleges. During this experience, her professors encouraged her to apply to the Ivy League school and assured her that she had what it took to succeed academically. She remembered looking at the Ivy League college as a high school student and saying to herself that she could never go to such a school. After the summer experience and the encouragement of her professors, she applied to the Ivy League school and was accepted with a full scholarship. During that first year, she met a professional storyteller on campus. The storyteller invited her to go to a local story circle. The storytelling circle intrigued her, but she was busy with school.

After graduation, Storyteller W started working for a not-for-profit organization. Her supervisor invited her to dinner one evening and, to her surprise, his wife was the very same storyteller she had met in college. She joined the local storytelling circle and sat and listened in awe. Her mentor told her that a storytelling festival was coming up and it was time for her to start telling. Storyteller W’s eyes started to twinkle when she
recalled her first time telling a story. She shared, “It came out of me like my breath, so organic, and I discovered my creative expression!” She felt that the synchronicity of these events was a divine beckoning of storytelling to accept her divine calling.

Storyteller W saw the sharing of stories from generation to generation as a tool to human survival. She feels that storytelling is at the core of human life. As she explained, “We are always in story. Story is made in the moment. Right now, our story is my answering these questions for this study, so, you see, we are always creating story.” By now, Storyteller W had finished her master’s degree and started teaching middle school. Her school asked her to facilitate professional development workshops for her peers and conduct storytelling programs for the student body. She was still very active with the local storytelling circle. Storyteller W was the only African American member in her local storytelling circle. It was not a problem for her because, growing up in rural New York State, she was accustomed to the lack of diversity in certain circles. The storytelling circle was extremely progressive and supportive. Many of the members were well respected in the field. Everything came full circle when her mentor told her about the National Black Storytelling Conference and Festival; she said she had taught Storyteller W everything she could about storytelling and now she had to learn about the African American tradition of storytelling. Storyteller W went to her first National Black Storytelling Conference and Festival. There, it was that she began to see that everything she wanted to do as an educator could be achieved through storytelling. She was also becoming frustrated with the politics and bureaucracy of public education. She took a step of faith, resigned from her teaching position, and became a professional storyteller.
Her motivation to learn more about the tradition of African American storytelling led her to travels in West Africa and mentors with African storytellers.

Storyteller W said she strives to emulate the Mende storytelling tradition from West Africa. She explained that she prefers to use the terms that the indigenous people use. The term *Griot* is a French term that some Africans feel is derogatory and does not encompass the breadth of the position of the oral historian in West African society. She does not judge others for using the term, but prefers to use *Jali* or *Jaliya* or other names from the African languages of the ancient Mali Empire. Storyteller W conducted storytelling concerts, facilitated workshops, and offered residencies in schools across the country, including workshops with students, professional development workshops, and parent workshops.

**Research question 2.** How can professional African American storytellers assist teachers in promoting cultural awareness and self-esteem in the students they serve?

The themes that emerged from this question are documented in Table 4.3.

The respondents agreed that African American storytelling builds cultural awareness and self-esteem in adults as well as in youth. They saw themselves as conduits of an ancient art form that has the capacity to educate, heal, inspire, motivate, and transform.

Four specific themes were generated to support this overriding view. The first theme to emerge was the ability of the professional African American storytellers to bring culturally relevant materials and content into the classroom. The second theme was their ability to initiate effective collaboration with the classroom teacher. The third theme was
### Table 4.3

**Research Question 2 Themes**

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<th>Theme Number</th>
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| 1            | Bring Culturally Relevant Materials and Content Into the Classroom | I bring in historical stories of African Americans as well as local histories. The children really can identify with stories of success and resilience from their very own communities. (Storyteller R)  
I know how important it is to know your history, how it makes you feel good about yourself. I make sure that I relate this to the teachers that I work with and bring in materials that can empower the students. (Storyteller N)  
My first job when I come into a classroom is to let the students know how wonderful they are. (Storyteller W) |
| 2            | Initiate Effective Collaboration with the Classroom Teacher   | I always respected teachers; however, I have a renewed respect for teachers in this current educational climate. It is always important for me to have true collaboration with the classroom teachers. (Storyteller J)  
Some teachers do not have access to culturally relevant books, so I have a project in which we donate books to teachers and students. (Storyteller L) |
| 3            | Develop Character Education                                 | I broke the fight up, and the girl said that she knew she should act like the turtle, but sometimes she acts like the lion. (Storyteller W)  
The principles of Kwanzaa is culturally relevant and challenges the students to aspire to be better. (Storyteller R)  
The character education of the storytelling workshops sinks in and they begin to take pride in themselves and their school. (Storyteller C) |
| 4            | Serve as Additional Caring and Witnessing Adults in the Classroom | It is absolutely important for the children to see Black men in non-threatening and nurturing ways, but it is also important for teachers, parents, and administrators to see a counter-story to the media images presented. (Storyteller C)  
I aspire to always be flexible and open to use storytelling to enhance the culture of the school. (Storyteller L) |
the ability of African American storytelling to teach character education. The fourth theme was the storytellers’ self-perceptions as caring and witnessing adults in the classroom.

Storyteller N went to an all-White school where they did not teach anything about Black history. She shared how that made her feel:

I felt like I was in with the worst high school in Tennessee because it’s redneck, although I was always put in the highest group, I could feel the prejudice. But I always felt because I was integrating a school that I missed something not going to an all-Black school, because in those days, they taught Black history in the all-Black schools. They taught kids this is how you deal with society and look at these people. We lost that when the schools became more integrated and they had White teachers teaching Black kids, because they didn’t know Black history or understand the culture, and some still don’t know. The Black teachers knew how to talk to the kids, they knew how to tell them this is what—this is how you deal with society. And they also instilled in them pride ‘cause the kids saw these teachers and these principals as role models. The whole school was Black. They didn’t call their dinner, “supper,” and they would not allow students to call them by their first names. I learned Black history at home. I remember when I discovered Langston Hughes and fell in love with his writings. My parents were very educated and they tried to feel in the gaps. I remember really feeling I was missing a lot not going to an all-Black school. For a while, integration meant assimilation to me and I resented it. I know firsthand how important it is to know your history, how it makes you feel good about yourself. I make sure that I relate
this to the teachers that I work with and bring in materials that can empower the students. One of my residencies was with a large Caribbean immigrant population. I always try to get the kids to identify with their own background. I asked them why do people come to America, and one kid was trying to think what the textbook was ‘cause that’s what they were studying. And I said, “No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Why did your grandparents come? Why did your parents come?” And then they knew right away. Education, to get a better life, and all this. But when you relate stories, it helps to relate it to where these kids are coming from.

Storyteller R shared that teacher preparedness programs are lacking in teaching culturally relevant pedagogies. He stated that teachers must examine themselves and free themselves of personal biases and want to learn about the students they are going to teach. He stated:

When teachers of any ethnicity have a love and confidence in their students, then they have the beginning state to teach culturally relevant education. I take teacher development very seriously because I know that there is a gap in what they learned in university. I bring in historical stories of African Americans as well as local histories. The children really can identify with stories of success and resilience from their very own communities.

Storyteller W was passionate about the role that culturally relevant education can play in students’ lives:

As far as the students are concerned, I did not like myself as a child and did not have confidence in myself. My first job when I come in a classroom is to let the students know how wonderful they are. I smile at them and let them know that I
am honored to be in their presence. Social media and the images on television, print, and film do not make most of the children in our communities feel good about themselves. I start out at getting them to like themselves. I bring in African stories and tell them about their history. It is a process with the children, but if we are persistent, they get it. If the classroom teacher gets it, she can keep it going.

There were two boys and one girl from one of my classes and they were fighting outside the school. I broke the fight up and the girl said that she knew that she should act like the turtle, but sometimes she acts like the lion. She was referring to the Aesop’s “Tale of the Turtle and the Lion” in which the turtle was the compassionate one. At least she was beginning to process the character education component of the story.

The second significant theme to emerge was the extent to which the professional African American storyteller and the classroom teacher were able to share and collaborate. All of the respondents revealed that the most important factor to the success of a visiting artist working in the school is the mutual respect and partnership between the classroom teacher and the teaching artist. All the storytellers made it a point to have planning meetings with the teachers before the beginning of the storytelling workshop or residency. In this meeting, they can discuss the goals of the workshop, the personality of the class, curriculum integration, and the culminating activity. The overriding consensus was that the workshops were optimum when the classroom teacher actively encouraged the students to participate and make content connections as well as doing follow-up activities in between the storytelling visits.
Storyteller W shared that, as someone who taught in the public schools, she not only empathizes with the classroom teachers but understands from experience what they are dealing with. As she stated:

Most teachers are good. We need to stop blaming the victims. Every profession has people who are stellar, mediocre, and are not up to par. Society focuses too much on the small percentage that are not doing the best that they can. Some of these teachers are burned out and need more support. Teachers have to plan their bathroom breaks and in many states are grossly underpaid. I make it a point in my planning meetings with the classroom teachers that I recognize the hard work that they do. I let them know that I am there to support them and the students. I work on the self-esteem of the teachers as well as the students. The teachers are rarely praised, and I take every opportunity to empower them because that empowerment will transfer to the students.

Storyteller J was passionate when talking about the culture she was able to co-create in the classroom with the teachers and the students. As she stated:

What I do is rewarding. And I’m very grateful that I get to share my love of storytelling in the classroom. There’s always the conversations in storytelling and the community of the children, the teacher and myself creates a culture. The class has this common frame of reference. The stories become part of the cultural literacy of the classroom. “Oh, remember the crocodile?” you know, and the hen story. “Remember the cat and dog story.” When the children remember and retell the story and make the connections to their lives, you know that a culture and a community have been created.
Storyteller J also added these thoughts about teachers:

I always respected teachers; however, I have a renewed respect for teachers in this current educational climate. When I think about what teachers go through on a daily basis, it makes me want to kiss their feet ‘cause I come and go, and I got the good job, you know. I don’t have to make them take those tests. I can serve the educational process through my art, and I am humbled by being able to be of service. It is always important for me to have true collaboration with the classroom teachers. I will cite two residencies that demonstrate how I was able to partner with the classroom teachers in providing multicultural storytelling. One of my residencies was in one of the most ethnically diverse areas in our city. The students were from many places in the world. I made sure that each time I came to the class that I brought a story from one of the cultures represented in the class. It’s Honduran, it’s Guatemalan, it’s Polish, it’s Turkish, and it’s Mandarin. The students became engaged and proud when their home country was discussed. This gives us a framework to examine the stories and the lessons. We look at the similarities of the stories as well as the political science of the tales. The classroom teacher builds on the lesson and builds on our sessions with history and geography lessons. I was commissioned to participate in a professional development project with first-grade teachers. The goal of the project was for me to model storytelling and give the teachers lesson plan ideas and slowly turn the reins of storytelling over to the classroom teacher. It was a 12-session residency. The first to six sessions was me telling and modeling what could be some follow-up activities. Sessions seven and eight, the classroom teacher and I told stories
together. In sessions nine through 11, the classroom teacher told the stories and prepared the follow-up lessons and I observed, session 12 was used for feedback and additional coaching. This program was effective because teachers gained skills and tangible strategies that they felt comfortable to use after my residency ended. When we talk about the hero’s journeys, I always say teachers are the heroes of this planet.

Storyteller L recognized that some teachers do not have access to culturally relevant books for their students and had worked in projects in which he provided teacher workshops and gave books to the teachers and children. At the time of this writing, he actively conducted fundraising projects to continue this practice.

The fourth major theme to emerge from the storytellers was their presence as additional caring or witnessing adults for the students as well as for the teachers. The male storytellers reported that their presence in the schools was extremely important because both the female and male students needed to see and interact with positive Black male role models.

Storyteller R shared that it is absolutely important for the children to see Black men in a non-threatening and nurturing way, but it is also important for teachers, parents, and administrators to see a counter story to the media images presented. Storyteller C shared that in residencies where his folk arts group is in a school for the complete school year, the culture of the school changes within the second month of the school year. He said that character education sinks in and everyone begins to take pride in themselves and their school. They do not want to disappoint him and his other teaching artists.
Storyteller L saw his presence in the school as part of the community: “In the tradition of the Griot, I aspire to always be flexible and open to use storytelling to enhance the culture of the school.” He cited an episode that demonstrated his conviction:

Every year, I am hired to do a storytelling assembly for Halloween at this particular K-8 school. When I arrived there, I found out that a day or two before my program, a very popular student had died. The entire school was grieving. So before I went into my Halloween program, I told this folk tale from Liberia, “The Cow Tail Switch.” The story ends with the statement that a person can always live on in our hearts as long as we remember. It is a healing story and the situation had to be addressed. I was able to do that in the tradition of the Griot or Jeli.

**Research question 3.** How can African American storytelling enhance the English Language Arts and/or social studies curriculum with the Common Core Standards in Grades 4 and 5?

Table 4.4 identifies the themes that emerged for Research Question 3. The respondents identified workshop series they had conducted during the time frame of this study that exemplified how they were able to connect African American storytelling to Grade 4 or 5 ELA and social studies Common Core Standards. All the workshops took place in urban public schools in classrooms with predominately African American and Hispanic students. All of the workshop series were at least 5 days in length, with the longest residency 40 days. One of the workshops involved a costumed performance before the workshop series. Five of the workshops incorporated storytelling presentations throughout the series. Each workshop series began with a planning meeting with the
classroom teacher, and the storyteller continued collaboration throughout the course of the residency. All of the storytellers reported that their workshops involved students retelling stories and participating in writing activities. The students also talked about

Table 4.4

*Research Question 3 Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Number</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teacher Collaboration</td>
<td>These three teachers understand how to get the most out of a teaching artist experience and how to weave common core standards in a culturally relevant framework. When this happens, everyone wins, especially the students. (Storyteller R) So it’s a really wonderful opportunity to give teachers a sense of creativity and power to craft an exciting experience for their students using storytelling tools. (Storyteller J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Curriculum Integration</td>
<td>I embrace the term coined by Oscar Brown Jr., “Edu-tainment.” I educate and entertain, this way the children get the message. The length of this residency allowed me to supplement many aspects of the social studies curriculum. (Storyteller C) It is important for all children to know the contributions of all peoples. This can be done by infusing the curriculum with multicultural content. (Storyteller L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lessons Meet Common Core Standards</td>
<td>Storytelling is a perfect tool to enhance the English Language Arts standards, because the students are using oral and written communication skills as well as critically thinking about the stories that they hear and tell. (Storyteller N) Storytelling is the common core. My question is how is it not? Storytelling can encompass everything. (Storyteller J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Student Engagement That Is Accessible to All Learning Styles, Culturally Relevant, Participatory</td>
<td>I am convinced that storytelling is the only effective way to teach; it reaches students with different learning styles and abilities and puts us in touch with our universal humanity. (Storyteller W) Storytelling is audio, visual, and experiential. It engages the children and it is so exciting when they are totally captivated by the tale. This is what we call the “storytelling trance.” (Storyteller L)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
stories, told their own personal stories, and discussed the stories in the context of their own lives and their curriculum. A culminating event took place at the end of each workshop series that gave the students the opportunity to share what they learned. The themes that emerged from the storytellers were the importance of teacher collaboration and designing residencies that integrated into the curriculum and met the Common Core Standards. Additional themes revealed that the storytellers perceived that the students they served were engaged because the storytelling lessons were accessible to all learning styles, culturally relevant, and participatory.

Storyteller C worked in a school where there was a need for classes to have activities during the teacher-preparation period. He was able to contract with the school for an extended arts residency in which Grades 4 and 5 received story-telling workshops. He worked with one Grade 4 class (27 students) and one Grade 5 class (27 students), once a week for 32 days from November through May. The classes were predominantly African American and Hispanic children, and they were structured around holiday themes. After the initial planning meeting with the classroom teachers, Storyteller C and the teachers emailed each other and collaborated throughout the residency. In May, the students presented a culminating event. The workshop series met the ELA Common Core Standards for Grades 4 and 5 (Table 4.5). The length of the workshop series gave Storyteller C the ability to make many connections to the fourth- and fifth-grade social studies standards over the course of the series (Table 4.6).
Table 4.5

**Storytelling Residencies and Common Core Linkages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Class Demographics</th>
<th>Days of Workshops</th>
<th>Storytelling Theme</th>
<th>ELA Standards*</th>
<th>SS Standards</th>
<th>4th Grade</th>
<th>5th Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller R</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>64% Black, 21% Hispanic, 11% White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Slavery, Migration, and Human Rights</td>
<td>READING. CCSS.ELA-Literacy RL.4.2 (Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Pre-Civil War 5.5.1; Changes in culture 5.1.2; Civil Rights 5.5.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller W</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>62% Black, 15% Hispanic, 12% White, 7% Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Folk Tales, Character Education</td>
<td>READING. RL 4.3 (Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text, e.g., a character’s thoughts, words, or actions)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller J</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>50% Black, 25% Hispanic, 20% White, 5% Asian</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Folk Tales Around the World, Diversity Training, and Character Education</td>
<td>WRITING. CCSS.ELA-Literacy 4.1 (Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information)/4.3 (Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller L</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>50% Hispanic, 30% African American, 15% White, 5% Asian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Conflict Resolution and Slavery</td>
<td>SPEAKING AND LISTENING. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.ST.4.1.d (Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussion [one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led] with diverse partners on Grade 4 topics and texts)</td>
<td>Conflict Resolution 4.1.3; Slavery 4.5.8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Changes in Culture 5.1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller N</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>56.5% White, 15.6% Black, 23.4% Hispanic, 5% Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Holiday Theme and Migration</td>
<td>SPEAKING AND LISTENING. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1.d (Review the key ideas expressed and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller C</td>
<td>4th/5th</td>
<td>95% Black, 5% Other</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4th Grade Native Americans, Leaders, Black History, Cultural Holidays</td>
<td></td>
<td>Native American 4.1.1; 4.1.4; Trail of Tears 4.5.12; Resolve Conflict 4.1.3; Leaders 4.1.5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Leaders 5.5.2; Civil Rights 5.5.8; Pre-Civil War Stories 5.1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *Each of the storytelling residencies met each of the standards listed above.*
Table 4.6

*Calendar Themes for Storyteller Residencies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Standards and Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Leaders – Standard 5.5.2, Civil Rights 5.5.8, Resolve Conflict, Standard 4.1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Black History Month, African Folk Tales, Slave Narratives, Black Inventors, Leaders – Standard 5.5.2, 4.1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Women’s Heritage Month, Leaders – Standard 5.5.2, 4.1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>National Poetry and Storytelling Month, Pre-Civil War Stories – Standard 5.1.2, Trail of Tears Story – Standard 4.5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Culminating Event – The students share highlights from the workshop series.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Harvest Stories, Native American – Standards 4.1.1, 4.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Kwanzaa, Cultural Holidays – Standard 5.1.3, Resolve Conflict – Standard 4.1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Storyteller J worked with an Arts in Education organization that specializes in using storytelling to support the Common Core Standards. She took special workshops to be able to work through the organization. The workshop that she identified for this study was conducted in an urban public school with two Grade 4 classes. The class sizes were 16 students per class. The class demographics were approximately 50% White, 25% Hispanic, 20% Hispanic, and 5% Asian. The workshops met twice a week for 2 weeks over a 10-month period, totaling 40 days. The residency was designed as a professional development workshop in which the classroom teachers collaborated with the teaching artists in a hands-on storytelling project. The project utilized multicultural stories and personal stories around the social studies curriculum. The program also met the Common Core Standards for ELA and social studies. The residency started with a planning
meeting with the participating classroom teachers. This series focused on folk tales from around the world, and the main goal was to give the students an experience in hearing, retelling, and creating their own stories. The second goal of the series was to teach respect for diversity and to build character in the children through the stories.

Storyteller J saw storytelling as an organic art form to support the Common Core Standards:

Storytelling is the Common Core. It’s like when you asked that question, it’s like: “How is storytelling the Common Core?” My question is: “How is it not?” Storytelling can encompass everything. And so we’re giving them something that fulfills their mandate in an interesting, creative way that they can really individualize. I always ask the teachers if they were able to use something that I shared. In the professional development workshop, we used the library and discussed how to research stories. It was great because we could walk to the shelves, and I could recommend books that I have in my personal library, because a lot of what we’re telling them, they do to a certain extent already. I ask them how they think that they could use this story to introduce their lessons. I get their creative juices going and then we can come up with some ideas for the workshop. So it’s a really, it’s a really wonderful opportunity to give the teachers a sense of creativity and power to craft an exciting learning experience for their students using storytelling tools. The teachers can feel confident to use these tools in their classroom after my workshop is over.

Storyteller L conducted an 8-day workshop with two Grade 4 classes. The workshop was scheduled twice a week for 4 weeks. One class had 16 students, and the
second class had 20 students. The classes were diverse, comprising 50% Hispanic and African American students, and 30% White and Asian students. The series commenced with a planning meeting with both classroom teachers and ended with a culminating event held in the auditorium. The students shared a few of the personal stories they wrote and retold the two stories that were used for the workshop. Storyteller L used a personal story about his daughter to open up the conversation about bullying and strategies to deal with bullying and conflict resolution. The students wrote their own stories about the topic. The two historical stories that were used in the workshop were *Flight Time*, the story of Eugene Jacques Bullard, the first African American military pilot to fly over France in World War 1, and *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*, which tells the adventure of two enslaved African Americans, William and Ellen Crafts. Ellen was a mulatto and escaped slavery by being disguised as a White man. This workshop series addressed the ELA standards as well as: Conflict Resolution – Standard 4.1.3 and Slavery – Standard 4.5.8. Storyteller L shared that his goal for this workshop series was to let every student embrace his or her own voice. He said that these inclusion classes had students on different academic levels. He shared: “Storytelling is audio, visual, and experiential. It engages the children and it is so exciting when they are totally captivated by the tale. This is what we call the ‘storytelling trance.’” In addition, he stated that he consciously chooses material to support the classroom curriculum and give students another view of a history that is more inclusive and culturally connected to them. Storyteller L said it is important for all children to know the contributions of all peoples. This can be done by infusing the curriculum with multi-cultural content.
Storyteller N conducted a 5-day workshop series working with one Grade 4 class. The class had 18 students who were predominately Hispanic and African American. The project was funded by a corporation connected to their Christmas promotions. The workshop started with a planning meeting with the classroom teacher in which they discussed the parameters and goals of the workshop. They decided to use this workshop to introduce the culture and immigration social studies unit. The workshop was based on the story *A Christmas Carol*. Storyteller N enthusiastically shared about the workshop:

The students decided to call their presentation *Everybody’s Carol*, because we were talking about how people celebrate the holidays, and we focused on the Cratchit family in *A Christmas Carol*. We discussed how, even though the Cratchit family members were poor, they still managed to have a really nice dinner and have fun together. We asked the kids to share about how they celebrate holidays with their families. It was interesting because I had a mix of kids and they had different traditions. Some said that they opened their presents on different days and they celebrated in different ways. Many of the Hispanic students celebrate Three Kings Day and open presents on January 6th. We took one session to discuss personal immigration stories, and one of the kids was from Yemen and shared about his first experience flying on an airplane and coming to America. Over the 4-day workshop, all of the students had the opportunity to share a story with the class and all the students wrote one of their stories for a bulletin board display. The class chose six students to share their stories for the culminating event. The culminating event consisted of those six stories and a retelling of *A Christmas Carol*.
Storyteller N had taken many workshops in Common Core and shared that some of the arts organizations in which she had worked mandated her to show the Common Core connections in her lesson plans. She stated that storytelling is a perfect tool to enhance ELA Standards because the students are using oral and written communication skills as well as critically thinking about the stories they hear and tell. In this workshop, she also tied the theme in *A Christmas Carol* to Standard 5.1.3 (Table 4.5).

Storyteller R conducted a 5-day workshop with the entire fifth grade, which consisted of three classes. The workshop started with a planning meeting with the classroom teachers. In the meeting, they decided to focus the workshop on slavery, migration, and human rights documents, with their fifth-grade class residency (5.5.3). Class one had 22 students, class two had 18 students, and class three had 22 students. The classes comprised predominately African American students, followed by Hispanic students, and approximately 10% White. The workshop series began with an assembly presentation of a dramatic storytelling piece that depicted multiple freedom stories. Storyteller R used the assembly presentation as a framework for the classroom workshops. The students were asked to research their own family’s migration stories. Storyteller R felt that in this way, students can benefit from learning about the strength and resilience of those who came before them. He also reiterated how important it is to provide professional development to teachers and expanded on his collaboration with the classroom teachers in the residency:

I believe that my work in the schools is personified when the classroom teachers understand culturally relevant education and can create exciting activities as follow-up lessons to my residencies. In this particular series, the classroom
teachers followed up on the workshops by having the students explore additional stories of freedom and work on their own human rights documents. One of my mentees was one of the classroom teachers. She is a storyteller and a classroom teacher and advocated to her principal to bring my program into the school. She has taken many trainings in Common Core and culturally relevant education as well as attending storytelling conferences and retreats.

Storyteller R’s personal development is evident in how she teaches. She has a strong pedagogical toolbox and understands how to relate the curriculum to the lived experiences of her students. Furthermore, she shares her resources with her colleagues. I enjoyed this residency immensely. These three teachers understand how to get the most out of a teaching artist experience and how to weave Common Core Standards in a culturally relevant framework. When this happens, everyone wins, especially the students.

Storyteller W conducted a 5-day workshop series with two Grade 4 classes. The classes comprised over 50% African American students, with the remaining students being of Hispanic, White, and Asian ethnicities. The two classes had 12 and 14 students, respectively. During the planning meeting, the classroom teachers shared that the students could use additional assistance with reading comprehension, critical thinking, and writing. The fourth-grade ELA test was coming up later in the year, and this workshop could possibly help the students on their standardized tests. Moreover, the teachers shared that they were working with the children on being more respectful and kinder to each other. Storyteller W decided to use African folk tales in these workshops. She stated:
I chose African folktales for this workshop because in a tale, we can cover all the requests of the classroom teachers. The children learn how to decipher the beginning, middle, and the end of the story and pinpoint the message. I have the children retell the stories and rewrite them in their own words. We discussed the messages of the stories and then I have them do tandem storytelling where they create their own story with the same message. Each child has to add something to the story! Being that I was a classroom teacher, and I have taken workshops in Common Core, I know what the classroom teachers are up against and what skills the students need to master for the standardized tests. I love Aesop tales. I used the tales *Turtle and Donkey* as well as *Lion’s Skin*. I made sure to let the students and the teachers know that Aesop was an African and not Greek. He was given a Greek name as an honor when he taught in Greece. His stories are perfect for character education and the children can really relate to the characters. The workshop was designed to meet the ELA Common Core Standards that also include oral presentations (Literacy Standard L.4.2). I am convinced that storytelling is the only effective way to teach; it reaches students with different learning styles and abilities and puts us in touch with our universal humanity.

**Research question 4.** What can be done to promote storytelling as an enhancement of cultural awareness of African American students in schools?

Table 4.7 documents the emerging themes for this question. The storytellers provided their suggestions for what can be done to enhance the cultural awareness of African American students in public schools. Based on their individual experiences, a
collective consensus emerged and generated three thematic suggestions of action: funding, community outreach and advocacy, and program assessment.

Funding was a major theme addressed by the storytellers. Five of the storytellers interviewed felt fortunate to be able to support themselves through their art; however, they recognized that their personal income fluctuates from year to year because of the politics of city, state, and federal funding. The economy and the limited and decreasing funding for Arts in Education programs was also cited as a consistent issue. All of the storytellers reported that they do a few gratis programs each year for not-for-profit groups and schools because they recognize the need in the community for positive African American cultural programming. Storyteller L shared:

When the economy tanked in 2008, a lot of folks got hit hard, and a lot of people who got hit hard were folks who were supportive of the arts. Many of the philanthropists for Arts in Education in my city were victims of Bernie Madoff. A lot of people took a really big hit. Prior to that, there was a program in which elementary school, middle school, and high schools were allocated 5 to 10 thousand dollars per school to spend on the arts. When the economy tanked, it went poof. One of the Arts in Education organizations in which I work had 30 artists on the rosters, and we worked regularly in the schools doing assemblies and workshops. Today, there are only 12 of us on the roster, and we receive less contracts.

The respondents overwhelmingly felt that community outreach and advocacy are important components of promoting African American storytelling. The consensus was that the community needed to understand the importance of African American
storytelling as a community builder and teaching tool. Storyteller C shared that storytelling concerts at community centers, libraries, and cultural institutions expose the public at large to African American storytelling. Once the community sees the value of African American storytelling, they can become the biggest promoters of the art form.

Table 4.7

*Research Question 4 Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Number</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Program Assessment</td>
<td>When I work through arts organizations, they send out assessment questionnaires. These are used more for funding purposes and the organization’s purposes. (Storyteller N) The assessment tools that are sent out by the arts organizations are not geared toward assessing how my workshops inform cultural awareness of students. (Storyteller L) The anecdotes that I get from the children are my assessment. (Storyteller C) Assessment tools could be used toward advocacy of African American storytelling if used consistently. (Storyteller L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Community Outreach</td>
<td>When storytelling happens at community centers, libraries and cultural institutions can expose the public at large to African American storytelling and then they become the biggest promoters of the art form. (Storyteller C) Parents do not realize how powerful they are in the equation of what happens in their neighborhood schools. Strong parent associations can bring African American storytelling in the schools. (Storyteller R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>I see myself as an advocate in eradicating the ignorance about African American storytelling as an education tool for all grades across the curriculum. (Storyteller N) Advocacy is needed to educate decision makers about the myriad of things that African American storytelling can address in the schools. (Storyteller N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Funding is a major issue in arts in education. When the economy tanked, the dollars for arts in education went poof. (Storyteller L) I recognize how fortunate I am to be able to make a living from my art. (Storyteller J) My gift has made a way for me. I am truly blessed. (Storyteller W)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Storyteller R shared that, many times, parents do not realize how powerful they are in the equation of what happens in their neighborhood schools. He explained that strong parent associations can bring in African American storytelling as part of enrichment. Storytellers W and J both saw their work with school administrators and teachers as a way to advocate for African American storytelling in the schools. Storyteller N shared that advocacy is needed to educate decision makers in schools about the myriad of topics that African American storytelling can address. She shared that some schools had erroneous biases about storytelling. She made the case that storytelling can be used in all the grades and across the curriculum. Unfortunately, her experience was that some school administrators preferred booking her theater programs instead of her storytelling programs because they felt the theater workshops could address the Common Core Standards better than storytelling workshops. Other administrators automatically saw storytelling as an art form for the early childhood grades and not for the upper grades. Storyteller N saw herself as an advocate for eradicating ignorance about African American storytelling as an educational tool for all grades across the curriculum.

Program assessment was the last theme that emerged. The participants indicated that assessment of their programs is inconsistent. Only three of the six storytellers had assessment tools that they gave to teachers at the end of their workshops. The storytellers shared that when they worked through larger Arts in Education organizations, these organizations had the funding to develop sophisticated assessment tools. However, these assessment tools were not geared toward assessing the success of their workshops in developing cultural awareness in the students. The assessment tools were geared toward collecting data to meet the requirements for the funding sources of the arts organizations.
or school districts. All of the storytellers had positive anecdotes about the impact of their work with students and teachers. They realized that these anecdotes would be more effective in advocating for African American storytelling in the schools if they were collected and organized in valid assessment tools. Figure 4.1 depicts the storytelling web of interrelationships as revealed in the data.

![Figure 4.1. Storytelling Web of Interrelationships.](image)

The data collected from the interviews of the six storytellers in this study revealed that African American storytelling informs culturally relevant education by its ability to promote respect for diversity, self-esteem, and cultural pride. The storytellers repeatedly spoke of the importance of teacher collaboration and their commitment to adding a culture of caring to the classrooms and schools in which they worked. Last, the data revealed that African American storytelling as an art form that integrates into the
curriculum, meets academic standards, and is accessible to diverse learners. These findings are discussed in Chapter 5 because they are congruent with the literature review of this study.

**Summary of Results**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain how African American storytelling can be used to teach culturally relevant education in urban public schools. Through individual portraits of six professional African American storytellers, the findings revealed their collective view of storytelling as a divine calling, a form of creative expression, and a celebration of their heritage and ancestry. Additional themes emerged through their lived experiences as teaching artists.

The storytellers brought culturally relevant resources into the classrooms, they worked collaboratively with teachers, and they saw themselves as additional caring adults for the students. The storytellers integrated their lessons to meet the Common Core Standards and as a natural teaching tool to meet academic standards. Program assessment, community outreach, advocacy, and funding were the overriding avenues the storytellers felt would promote African American storytelling in public schools.

The findings suggest that African American storytelling engulfs a culturally relevant education by fostering respect for diversity, integration into the curriculum, self-esteem and cultural pride, a culture of caring, character education, and access to students with diversified learning styles. These findings are contextualized in Chapter 5, and implications and recommendations are offered that add to the literature on the importance of urban public schools utilizing the pedagogy of African American storytelling for their students.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This research study examined the lived experiences of six professional African American storytellers who work as teaching artists in urban public schools, providing culturally relevant education through African American storytelling. The portraiture methodology allowed the researcher to capture the emotions, perspectives, and philosophies of the storytellers. The results of the study support and add to the existing literature on the functionality of traditional African American storytelling, the ability of storytelling to provide a culturally relevant education, and the application of storytelling to support academic standards.

In addition, the research has presented African American storytelling as a viable pedagogy in addressing national concerns over urban public education. The majority of students in public schools are students of color with a widening diversity in language and ethnicities (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Scholars have agreed that curricula that are culturally relevant and aim to instill dignity, pride, motivation, culture, and high expectations can bridge the achievement gap existing among African American students in urban public schools (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ghee et al., 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The research also revealed that African American storytellers see their presence in the classroom as part of providing a caring environment for students. Furthermore, African American storytelling challenges students in critical thinking, supports character education, and fosters respect for diversity. Finally, the research
suggests that African American storytelling supports classroom teachers and promotes self-efficacy, cultural identification, and pride in the lived experiences of the students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

The researcher embarked upon this topic of inquiry from an insider’s positionality. Given her 30-year career as an Arts in Education administrator and 23 years as a professional storyteller, the researcher sought to validate the anecdotal and lived experiences of teaching artists who use the ancient art form of African American storytelling to heal a broken system of institutionalized, bureaucratic disenfranchisement, and miseducation. The researcher endeavored to use objectivity in the interview process and gave the respondents the space to tell their individual truths (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The researcher’s insider positionality allowed her to have rich dialogues with the respondents because of her own lived experiences.

Chapter 5 contextualizes the findings of this study in connection with the implications of this work for the existing literature and the field at large. Additionally, this chapter discusses the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for the utilization, implementation, and advocacy of African American storytelling as a pedagogical tool for urban public schools.

**Implications of Findings**

The findings from this research lead to implications that can be used to confirm existing research pertaining to African American storytelling, culturally relevant education, teacher support, and storytelling as an educational pedagogy. Each storyteller in this study was unique in his or her background, storytelling styles, and how “storytelling found them.” The collective voices of these storytellers were unified in their
dedication to the tradition of African American storytelling, to arts in education, and to the power of storytelling. Moreover, implications can be derived from the findings to lessen the gap in the literature on the particular value of African American storytelling as a tool for expanding culturally relevant education in urban public schools.

**African American storytelling.** The tradition of the African storyteller, the *Griot*, or the *Jali*, is one of obligation and responsibility to serve society (Boadu, 1985; Goss & Barnes, 1989; Hale, 1998). The storytellers held on to the stories of their families, and entertained, inspired, comforted, and educated them through the interactive spoken word, music, and song (Ani, 1992; Boadu, 1985, Hale 1998; Okpewho, 1992). In this way, children were taught the moral codes of the society, adults were reminded of the tenets of their society, and a rich culture was retained (Ani, 1992; Boadu, 1985; Champion et al., 2003). When enslaved Africans crossed the waters, the marriage of the old world and new world merged into African American folk tales, narratives, songs, and fables that would serve to inform, comfort, and strengthen the people through unthinkable atrocities and dehumanization for continued struggle, resilience, creativity, and self-reinvention (Champion et al., 2003; Dance, 2005; Gomez, 1999; Zinn, 1999). The ability of African Americans to tell their own stories, make their own interpretations of the world, and ask and answer epistemological and ontological questions in their own voices and terms, is a major factor in the survival of African Americans, their culture, and their future (L. Goss, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

The modern-day storytellers in this study followed “in the tradition” by answering a call to heal, comfort, entertain, and educate through storytelling. It is evident from the findings that the storytellers saw themselves as part of this ancient tradition, bringing the
personal stories of social justice, character-building lessons of the fables and folk tales, and the ritual of culture to the classrooms in which they work. The work of these storytellers incorporated elements of traditional African education, including strong interpersonal relations, communal values, rituals, culture, high expectations, and purpose (Boateng, 1983). Importantly, the findings of this study further support the literature that asserts the need for the continued and expanded use of African American storytelling as a viable vehicle for transforming the culture in urban public schools (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Carter-Black, 2007; Ghee et al., 1998; Hayes & Juarez, 2012).

Culturally relevant education. The portraiture of the six storytellers in this study revealed that the work they do in urban public schools is aligned with the frameworks that guided this study. The traditional components of cultural education consist of strong interpersonal relations, values, rituals, culture, high expectations, and purpose (Kelly, 2009). The tenets of critical race theory in education emphasize the centralization of race and other forms of subordination, recognizing the experiential knowledge of students of color, challenging the stock/dominant/majoritarian stories of the dominant culture, and committing to social justice (Hayes et al., 2012). These tenets parallel Freire’s (1970) educational philosophy that asserts that education should challenge students to embrace their lived experiences, unlearn dominant stories, as well as learn, reflect on, and evaluate their lessons. Moreover, Freire believed that the educator’s job was to give students the confidence, tools, and empowerment through which they could see themselves as change agents to address social injustices. Educator Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) coined the term culturally relevant education to define a teaching methodology committed to individual and collective empowerment, which
develops the intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning of students by using resources to teach knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes.

Here, the storytellers reported that they consciously chose to include teaching as part of their calling as storytellers and saw themselves as caring and witnessing adults in the classrooms. Each storyteller had high expectations for the students, meaning that they believed in each student’s ability to reach his or her full potential, and she used a variety of story types to build the self-esteem, character, and cultural knowledge of the students. They infused stories from American history that included the perspectives, heroes, and events of marginalized peoples, including African Americans, Hispanics, women, and other subordinate groups. They chose fables and folk tales in which the students could see themselves. Additionally, they built on the students’ lived experiences by acknowledging the transparency of their own personal stories and encouraged the students to tell their own stories from a lens of pride and strength. It is feasible that the storytellers in this study mirror a larger contingent of storytellers who understand the historical legacy of African American storytelling to present culturally relevant education to all students. The goal for a balance of story in American classrooms benefits all students as it dispels biases and moves them to examine their history, their lives, and their future through a more truthful lens of knowledge and understanding (Adichie, 2009).

Counter-storytelling is transformative for urban learning communities (Horsford, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The tenets of counter-storytelling are evident in many of the success stories in urban education (L. Goss, personal communication, March 30, 2014). Most of the time when we read the literature on the success of these sites, counter-storytelling is not in the language. The Eagle Academy Foundation (2015) established
five Eagle Academies in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Harlem, and Newark, NJ. These all-male schools are successful learning communities. For example, 87% of the Eagle scholar’s graduate high school and 85% go on to 2-4 year colleges (The Eagle Academy Foundation, 2015). Part of the success of Eagle Academy is the ritual component that involves rites of passage, peer-to-peer support, mentorship, leadership, and resilience training. The schools have high expectations for the scholars, and they also involve parents and community partners in the process. Along these lines, the Banneker School is another success story in Milwaukee, WI; although, in contrast to the Eagle Foundation, their literature credits storytelling, specifically, to the success of their school (Scherer, 1992).

**Teacher support.** The storytellers in this study work as teaching artists in urban public schools. According to the data, the successes of their workshops lie in part in: (a) the ability of the teaching artist and the classroom teacher to collaborate, (b) the willingness and capability of the classroom teacher to work with students in between storytelling sessions, and (c) classroom teachers capitalizing on the storytelling residency by integrating resources and techniques into post-lessons with their students. The findings in this study revealed that the storytellers were proactive in establishing good working relationships with the classroom teachers, providing materials, modeling storytelling techniques, supporting the teacher’s goals, and collaborating on projects. When funding existed, the storytellers conducted professional development workshops with teachers. The storytellers had great respect for classroom teachers, felt emphatic about them, and believed that by supporting teachers, they would ultimately support students. The research supports the storytellers’ positions that classroom teachers need additional
support (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006; Caruthers, 2006; Diller, 1999; Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Wenglinsky, 2002).

Moreover, the reviewed literature indicates that teacher preparation programs do not adequately develop teachers for diverse classrooms, and that enhanced professional development is essential to decrease high attrition rate, low academic achievement, and negative culture in urban public schools (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006; Caruthers, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Additional studies revealed that teachers who receive culturally relevant storytelling professional development are able to examine their own personal biases as well as bring richer, culturally congruent pedagogical tools into their classrooms (Bell, 2003; Diller, 2006; Gay, 2010; Groce, 2004).

The pedagogy of storytelling. The storytellers in this study were able to present culturally relevant lessons that integrated storytelling into the curriculum to meet the Common Core English Language Arts Standards as well as the social studies standards for the grades in which they worked. They perceived that their lessons were successful because of their collaboration with the classroom teachers and student engagement. They asserted that storytelling met the diverse learning style of students, embraced the students’ lived experiences, and brought a positive culture to the classroom. They explained that storytelling is an ancient method of teaching and could be used to teach any subject matter. There is a substantial amount of research that speaks to storytelling as a viable pedagogical tool (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005; Maguire, 1985; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Storytelling in Education, 2011). Scientific research has asserted that the human brain is wired to organize, retain, and access information through storytelling (Caine & Caine, 1991). Additional literature has stated that storytelling lends itself to varied
learning styles and can teach a variety of content matter (Caine & Caine, 1991; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Storytelling in Education, 2011). Moreover, storytelling is a way to address literacy development by improving oral language, reading comprehensive, and writing; it is a literacy-based art form that can support current standards in multiple disciplines (CCSS, 2015; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).

This research affirms that the engaging nature of story evokes emotion and stimulates learning, and the interactive and immediate nature of storytelling makes learning fun for students (Caine & Caine, 1991; Champion et al., 2003). Further implications suggest that the findings of this study continue to fill the literature gap on African American storytelling as a viable educational tool for urban schools. Much evidence supports storytelling as a viable pedagogy for teaching culturally relevant content to African American students (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Bell, 2003; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012). The studies have not produced measurable data for these findings in terms of standardized tools of academic assessment (Ghee et al., 1998), but some of the places in which storytelling is used include afterschool programs, weekend programs, and individual classrooms (Ghee et al., 1998). The positive anecdotes are evident to everyone connected to these projects; however, the resources are rarely available to obtain the data that can be used to correlate storytelling and academic improvement (Ghee et al., 1998). Table 5.1 shows the congruency of best practices reviewed in the literature and the themes emerged from this study.
Table 5.1

*Congruency of Best Practices/Interpretation of Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong interpersonal relations</td>
<td>Centralize race and other subordinates</td>
<td>Strong focus on student learning</td>
<td>Ritual—Pledge, motto, song, proverb or affirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal values</td>
<td>Recognizes the experiential knowledge of students of color</td>
<td>Developing cultural competence</td>
<td>Community values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>Challenges the stock/Dominate culture</td>
<td>Cultivating sociopolitical awareness</td>
<td>African American history, culture embedded in the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Commitment to social justice</td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>A code of individual and collective conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Promotes high self-esteem and self-reliance</td>
<td>Culturally relevant teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sees work as calling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the small sample size of six storytellers in six cities. The research presented commonalities in the responses of these storytellers, however, a broader sample size would give more credibility to the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample size for the cities would assist in understanding to what extent geography informs the research.
Portraiture was an appropriate methodology for this study. Future studies using mixed methods approaches could help develop insights that cannot be fully understood using only one or two methods (Creswell, 2009).

Another limitation of the study was that because of time restrictions, the researcher was not able to obtain teacher, administrator, student, or parent responses. This would have provided the perceptions of all school constituents about the use of storytelling as a viable tool for enhancing culturally relevant education in the classroom.

Finally, because of the previously stated reason, the researcher was unable to observe workshops. With the ability to make observations, the researcher would have been able to add a deeper dimension to the portraiture of the storytellers’ experiences in the classroom environment.

**Recommendations**

Through an extensive analysis of the data, the researcher was able to synthesize recommendations for future research as well as for the practical application of African American storytelling to urban public schools. The recommendations are made to policymakers, teachers, storytellers, and, finally, to the village. The village consists of parents, local communities, and concerned citizens—stakeholders in the education of our children. It takes a village to raise a child—as well as to advocate for a child and for our collective futures.

**Future research.** Little information exists on narrative production and its relation to the literacy of African American children. This data can be valuable for education when developing literary curriculum for children. Additionally, while there is substantial research on the benefits of storytelling in education, more research is needed on the
specific benefits of African American storytelling in education. Research on the benefits of African American storytelling and student achievement would be instrumental for future advocacy. Long-term studies of African American storytellers working in the classroom that involve observation, assessment tools, and student achievement would help to quantify the outcomes beyond anecdotal data. More studies are needed that make the connection between successful urban schools and the presence of counter-storytelling and storytelling as part of best practices. Furthermore, research on funding for the arts across the United States is valuable as funding is essential for providing services to schools. Last, as mentioned previously in the limitations of the study, the perspectives and experiences of teachers, administrators, students, and parents could further the understanding of this topic.

**Policymakers in public education.** School leaders, district administrators, and policymakers can make culturally relevant curricula materials, professional development, and increased allocation for Arts in Education funding available for schools. These actions would support teachers and schools who wish to use alternative, culturally relevant pedagogies, such as African American storytelling, in the education of their students.

**Teachers.** The research concurs with the idea that teacher preparedness in culturally relevant pedagogy is imperative for educators teaching African American students (Bell, 2003; Caruthers, 2006; Diller, 1999). Alternative pedagogies, such as storytelling, are not uniformly supported in all schools, and professional development in culturally relevant education is not always provided. However, resources are available for teachers to pursue personal and professional development. There are online resources for
multicultural books and materials. Additionally, many professional associations provide professional development institutes in which teachers can participate and receive credit. Many districts pay or reimburse teachers for participating in these workshops. Teachers who have success in urban schools create a culture in their classrooms that include communal values, high expectations, respect for students’ lived experiences, and culturally relevant lessons. Teachers can reach out to colleagues who they perceive are successful in implementing these best practices with their students and enlist them as mentors. Storytelling affiliates in the various cities are excellent resources for teachers by providing workshops and access to teaching artists and culturally relevant materials.

**Storytellers.** Storytellers should create assessment tools that can be used to quantify and support the anecdotal information derived from their workshops as well as to attain public, private, and corporate funding opportunities. This is important because African American storytellers have heartwarming anecdotes about the work they do in urban public schools; however, the data also showed that the storytellers did not have consistent assessment tools distributed to teachers and administrators after the storytellers’ residencies. It is in the interest of African American storytellers and storytellers, in general, to create usable assessment tools to ascertain if the goals of the workshops are being met. If the goal of the workshop is to increase the efficacy of the students, then an assessment tool that quantifies the data would be invaluable to the field. African American storytelling affiliates and other organized cultural and educational organizations can work together to expand the individual storytellers in their efforts to advance African American storytelling in urban public schools. Festivals, community concerts, online story-telling blogs, and collaborative conferences with school districts...
are examples of how some storytelling affiliates around the country are promoting the art form. This is a very important piece, especially as the storyteller participants collectively felt that community outreach, advocacy, and funding were important to promote African American storytelling in urban public schools.

The village. Parents have a powerful position in their ability to make innovations in their neighborhood public schools. However, many times they do not realize they have power, and they do not use it (Edwards, 2011). All citizens in the United States have a stake in the education of their children. When the entire community understands the importance of African American storytelling and culturally relevant education, they can become the biggest advocates. For example, a public school in Harlem holds monthly seminars in African American history and other relevant topics for its community. This seminar series was initiated and implemented by parents and community members. Some fraternities, sororities, and corporate event planners are using African American storytelling as part of their event programming as well as sponsoring storytelling residencies in local urban schools. This needs to happen more! Mama Linda Goss (personal communication, 2015), co-founder of the National Association of Black Storytellers, said it best: “At the seed of our survival is African American storytelling, from the cradle to the grave, it has sustained us.”

Conclusion

The negative narrative surrounding African Americans as well as the omission of their contributions and accomplishments serve as major negative effects on the spiritual, social, and academic development of African American youth (Stiler & Allen, 2006). In addition, an educational system that does not present the true histories, accomplishments,
struggles, and contributions of all its people cannot produce citizens who can compete in an ever-changing multicultural global economy (Asmeng-Boahene, 2010). In response to this problem, this study looked at African American storytelling as pedagogy to present culturally relevant education in urban public schools.

Storytelling is an ancient art form that is at the foundation of the universality of how human beings transmit knowledge, values, culture, and ethics. The stories that we tell ourselves and others inform our self-identities, our views about our world, and our actions. Most importantly, stories passed on from generation to generation have the power to transform future generations and our world at large. The Ghanaian Adinkra symbol of the bird looking backwards presents the parable that we should always take what is valuable from our past with us to ensure a glorious future. It is with the spirit of Sankofa that the stories rippled from the lips of the oral historians of West Africa and found their way to the lips of the maroons in Jamaica, the Lucumi of Cuba, and the transplanted Africans in America.

The personal stories, the songs embedded with a GPS system to freedom, the empowerment stories of folk heroes, and the trickster stories of Brer Rabbit that have strengthened, empowered, humored, and ushered African Americans from the antebellum period to the reality of the first African American president of the United States, President Barack Obama. African oral traditions and culture were evident in the wisdom of the Jim Crow teachers, and it is still accessible to educators today. The stories of African Americans and many others have been told through a majoritarian lens of the dominant group. The literature reviewed in this study is conclusive that African American storytelling presents an inclusive paradigm that positions students toward
success by the knowledge and appreciation of their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as those of others (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010).

The researcher used the portraiture methodology developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). Grounded in phenomenological research, portraiture combines art and science to draw a textual image of an individual or organization (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). To draw portraits of six professional African American storytellers who work as teaching artists in urban public schools, four research questions were posed to examine their lived experiences as professional storytellers:

1. What are the lived experiences of professional African American storytellers who work as teaching artists in urban public schools?
2. How can professional African American storytellers assist teachers in promoting cultural awareness and self-esteem in the students they serve?
3. How can African American storytelling enhance the ELA and/or social studies curriculum within the Common Core Standards in Grades 4 and 5?
4. What can be done to promote storytelling as an enhancement of cultural awareness of African American students in urban public schools?

The themes that emerged from the data revealed that African American storytelling encompasses the tenets of culturally relevant education and best practices for teaching in urban public schools. Additionally, the data demonstrated how African American storytelling is a pedagogical method that can integrate into any subject matter and support academic standards. The Common Core Standards were implemented in 2009 to create consistent national educational goals (CCSS, 2015). Thus, the storytellers worked in fourth- or fifth-grade public school classrooms and developed workshops that
supported the English Learning Arts standards as well as many of the social studies curricula areas. The storytellers embedded stories and materials that presented perspectives and narratives that were culturally congruent to the students. Further themes revealed that the storytellers worked collaboratively with classroom teachers and had high expectations for the students. They perceived that African American storytelling fosters respect for diversity, teaches good character and communal values, and promotes cultural pride and self-esteem. Additional themes emerged of the storytellers’ perceptions of their work as a divine calling. They saw African American storytelling as effective because it is accessible to students with diverse learning styles, promotes student engagement, and creates a culture of caring in the classroom.

Recommendations were informed by a synthesis of the literature and the data derived from this study in two areas: further research and practical applications. More research is needed to specifically look at African American storytelling in urban public schools. Additional research examining the extent to which African American storytelling informs teacher preparedness, students’ cultural awareness, and academic achievement is necessary to bridge the gap in the literature. Research from the perspective of classroom teachers and students is also important in adding evidence-based data to the literature. The practical recommendations are made to policymakers in education, teachers, storytellers, and the community at large.

Motivated teachers who wish to use alternative pedagogies in their classrooms need the support and funding of their administrators. School administrators and districts need the support of the community at large. In the African tradition, the village is a living organism that collectively reaps the benefits or experiences the hardships of their actions
or apathy. We are all stakeholders in the education of all of our children because the health and future of a village is determined by the extent to which it protects, nurtures, empowers, and educates its children.

The researcher acknowledges the gap in the literature on African American storytelling and urban education. In lieu of the limitations of this study’s time and scope, the researcher is optimistic that the implications presented will provide direction in the practicum and direction of further research. In the final analysis, the stories we tell and listen to will empower the next generation of Americans to lead with a commitment to human rights, social justice, and a balance of story.

The planet does not need more successful people. The planet desperately needs more peace makers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of all kinds. (Dalai Lama, 2012)
References


## Appendix A

### School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Teacher-Student Ratio</th>
<th># of Total Students</th>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Composition</th>
<th>% Low Income</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Washington, D.C.</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>62% Black, 15% Hispanic, 12% White, 7% Asian</td>
<td>65.00%</td>
<td>45% of Black males met standards in math, 56% in reading (overall: 47% and 46%, respectively)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School (K-8) New York, NY</td>
<td>18:01</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>17% Black, 58% Hispanic, 11% White</td>
<td>63.00%</td>
<td>27% of Blacks met proficiency in math, 20% in reading</td>
<td>*Receives funding for arts from DOE, private organizations, and cultural organizations; amounts not given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School (PK/K-3) Chicago, IL</td>
<td>27:1</td>
<td>(550)</td>
<td>95% Black</td>
<td>68.00%</td>
<td>59% met or exceeded state test standards (48% of Blacks meet standard in reading, 49% met standards in mathematics, 61% met standards in science)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Rochester, NY</td>
<td>22:01</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>64% Black, 21% Hispanic, 11% White</td>
<td>96.00%</td>
<td>Black students not meeting proficiency levels, Whites and Hispanics are (NY, AYP Rating)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Culver City, CA</td>
<td>18:1</td>
<td>1545</td>
<td>23% Black, 40% Hispanic, 22% White, 12% Asian</td>
<td>44.00%</td>
<td>61% Blacks meeting proficiency in reading, 23 in math, and 63% in science; school not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress overall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Morristown, NJ</td>
<td>10:1</td>
<td>1021</td>
<td>56.5% White, 15.6 % Black, 23.4% Hispanic, 5% Asian</td>
<td>27.40%</td>
<td>Meeting AYP overall (56.90% of Blacks proficient in math, 58.20% proficient in reading)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Sample Informed Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interview

Dear Storyteller,

My name is Linda H Humes. I am a fellow storyteller/educator and a doctoral candidate in the Ed.D. program at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York. I am conducting a qualitative research study entitled “African American Storytelling: A Vehicle for Providing Culturally Relevant Education in Urban Public Schools in the United States.”

Your work as a professional storyteller, educator, and teaching artist makes you an excellent potential participant for this study. The scope of this study requires storytellers versed in the Common Core curriculum from different urban cities who have conducted storytelling residencies within the past year.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please sign this consent form and email it back within two weeks. I will send an initial questionnaire under another cover. This questionnaire will provide basic demographic information for the data collection process necessary prior to the interview process.

Title of Study: African American Storytelling: A Vehicle for Providing Culturally Relevant Education in Urban Public Schools in the United States

Name of Researcher: Linda H. Humes, Ed.D. Candidate, Ralph C. Wilson Jr. School of Education at St. John Fisher College. Contact information: phone _____________ or email: ________________

Faculty Supervision: Dr. Jennifer Schulman, Ralph C. Wilson Jr. School of Education at St. John Fisher College. Contact information ________________

Purpose of Study: To examine the lived experiences of African American storytellers and their work providing culturally relevant education in urban public schools.

Study Procedures: A two-hour semi-structured interview which will be audio-recorded. Skype interviews will also be used for participants who live in Chicago and Los Angeles. Interviews will be coded transcribed. Notes will also be taken during the interviews.
Benefits: No personal benefits. It is hoped that through your participation, scholars, educators, and the storytelling community could gain benefits for understanding the role of African American storytelling in enhancing culturally relevant education in urban public schools.

Compensation: Participants will not receive any compensation.

Confidentiality: All recordings and transcriptions will be stored in a password-protected computer. All personal information and hand written notes will be kept in a separate locked file in researcher’s office.

Statement of age and consent:

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age. The research study has been explained to you.

Your questions have been fully answered.

You freely and voluntarily chose to participate in the study.

Name of participant (print)

Signature_________________________ Date________________

Name of researcher (print)

Signature_________________________ Date________________

Thank you.

Linda H. Humes
Doctoral Candidate, 2016
Ralph C. Wilson Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College
Appendix C

Sample Initial Questionnaire

Dear Storyteller,

Thank you for consenting to participate in my study. Below is a brief questionnaire. Please fill it out and email it back to me within two weeks. This information will be confidential; however, it is important for the data collection component of this study.

Thank you again for your participation.

Linda H. Humes
Doctoral Candidate, 2016
Ralph C. Wilson Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

Questionnaire:

What is your name?

What is your range of age?
☐ 20-30 ☐ 30-40 ☐ 40-50 ☐ 50-60 ☐ 60-70 ☐ 70-80 ☐ 80-90

What is your racial/ethnic background? (Check only one)
• Black/African American ☐ Asian
• White ☐ Native American/Pacific Islander
• Hispanic/Latino ☐ Other (explain): __________

What is your religion? (optional) ________________

What is your marital status?
• Single, never married ☐ Married, or Domestic Partnership
• Widowed ☐ Divorced
• Separated

In what city and state do you live? ________________

Do you have children? ☐ Yes ☐ No If yes, how many? ________________

Do you have another job besides for storytelling? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, what is it? ______________________

What is your highest level of education? (Check only one)
• Less than High School □ Technical or Vocational School
• High School Diploma or GED □ College Degree or Higher

Have you taken any professional storytelling classes? □ Yes □ No

Have you taken any professional development classes in Common Core Standards?
Integrating storytelling into curriculum? □ Yes □ No

What school will you focus on for this study? What district is it in? What City?

How many days was your residency? _______ What grade? ______________

Thank you for completing this questionnaire
Appendix D

Sample Semi-Structured Interview Questions

• Why is storytelling important?

• How and why did you become a storyteller?

• How and why did you start working with schools?

• How do you see your work as part of the West African tradition of the *Griots*?

• Culturally relevant education as defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (date) is education that empowers students to maintain cultural integrity while succeeding academically. What has been your experience about this in the schools in which you have worked? Tell me about the work that you do in urban schools.

• How can African American storytelling promote ELA and social studies Common Core Standards?

• Did you align your work with the ELA or social studies curriculum?

• When you work in public schools, what services do you provide? Performances? Workshops during school day? After-school? Professional development? Parent workshops?

• In what ways does your work inform students? School culture?

• Can you share a specific residency that you feel was successful? Why do you perceive it as successful? Can you provide a lesson plan? Documentation? Assessment tool?

• How is your work documented or assessed?

• What are your primary challenges working in urban public schools?

• Is there anything else that you would like to add?