

“Our Village Approach”: The story of how one
African American family educates their children

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Abstract

The purpose of this ethnographic case study is to tell the story of how one African American family educates their children. At the center of this study are two sisters. Together, they are raising four children with the help of their father, siblings, and several extended and fictive kin. The family functions collectively; they call it their “village approach”. As a cultural studies project, their story represents a counter-narrative to many stories that support deficit thinking. Education is highly valued by members of this family. The children are expected to perform at high levels academically as well as give their best effort and attitude in extracurricular activities.

Data was collected between February 2015 and October 2015 using the following methods: conversational interviews, participant observation at family events, and review of local newspaper articles featuring the academic and athletic achievements of some of the children in this family. A thematic analysis revealed three main priorities established by the family elders and passed down for several generations; 1) God first/ Christian faith, 2) commitment to family, and 3) value of education. Themes that emerged upon looking at the informal education practices included perseverance, work ethic, respect, and cooperation. The data was informed by both ecological theory and critical race theory. Epstein’s model of overlapping spheres was used to demonstrate how alignment of values between family, school, community, and peer groups significantly influence the positive development of the children. The lived experiences of three generations of adult family members draw attention to several tenets of critical race theory: permanence of racism, interest convergence, and transdisciplinary perspectives. This family’s

story challenges deficit discourse about African American families, brings attention to the value of parents as educators of their children, and problematizes conventional definitions of family.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In June 2013, one of my colleagues was asked to speak at a banquet to celebrate the 20th anniversary of a weekly after school program sponsored by one of the African American churches in the town in which we live and work. My colleague spoke encouraging words to students and challenged parents to get involved at their children's school. She implored them to not take "no" for an answer and to keep going to the schools to volunteer and participate in parent-teacher organizations, whether they felt welcomed or not. This message struck me as interesting because I had never considered the feelings of the parent, whether or not they felt welcomed into the school; it was their *right* to be involved in the school, just as they had the *right* to vote. From my perspective, parents made a choice regarding the level of involvement in their children's school.

My colleague, as an African American parent, could relate with the other African American parents in the banquet hall. She knew and acknowledged that going into their children's school was sometimes uncomfortable, but persistence was her message because it was what was best for their children. Persistence would be the only way to ensure their voice would be heard. In short, her message to the audience of 75 or more African American parents was: it doesn't matter if school personnel (i.e. teachers, administrators, counselors) want to hear what they, the parents, have to say about what is best for their children; it matters to their children's success that parents communicate and work with the teachers, administrators, and counselors and that parents are steadfastly present in the school building.

The dynamic of my colleague's presentation begs the questions: How do we build trusting, equitable partnerships between *all* parents and schools? Do schools genuinely seek

parent and community partnerships or do they want cooperation from parents and community members to help them meet their goals for student achievement and accountability? In my opinion and experience as a classroom teacher and school administrator I believe educators ask for input from parents as a show of collaboration, but not with the aim of an authentic partnership. As indicated by the statement my colleague made in her speech, parents do not always feel welcomed into the school space as valued partners in the educational process, especially African American parents, who have experienced marginalization through cycles of segregation, desegregation, and re-segregation over the past 100 years (Kozol, 2005). Her challenge to parents, however, mirrored common expectations by educators that parents carry the burden of maintaining an open line of communication with teachers as evidence they care about their child's education (Christianakis, 2011).

A negative stereotype of African American parents is that they do not care about their children's education (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Hill, 1999). In my 20 years of experience working as a teacher and administrator in both the regular and alternative school setting, I do not believe this to be true, however there is often a disconnect between African American parents and educators¹ - 90% of whom are white (Howard, 2006). I believe this disconnect helps to perpetuate the negative stereotype that education is not a priority for African American families as well as feeds the perception of African American parents that they are not welcome in the school space. Evidence for my argument is largely based on my lived experience

¹ The term "educator" is meant to include a variety of school personnel, including but not limited to administrators, teachers, counselors, and support staff (i.e. teacher assistants, administrative assistants).

as an educator.² Over the past 20 years, I have served as an educator in the role of middle and high school science teacher (12 years), alternative education administrator (6 years), and elementary school principal (2 years). I view my primary role as an educator to be an advocate for my students, especially those who identify as belonging to one or more historically marginalized groups due to race, ethnicity, economic status, religion, sexual orientation/ identity. Approximately 90% of the students currently served by the alternative education program in my school district are considered low socioeconomic status (SES) and a disproportionate number of the students are Black³ compared to the schools this program serves. After serving as the director of the alternative education program for five years, I took the position of principal at the Title I elementary school in my school district. Over the years, the majority of my experiences with parents have been positive and I continually work to develop and nurture a school culture that welcomes all of our parents and engages them in meaningful dialogue.⁴ Unfortunately, not all schools and educators demonstrate a similar philosophy; multiple parents of my students in both the elementary school and in the alternative education program have expressed sentiments that other schools have inhospitable environments in comparison to their student's current placement. The unfortunate truth is that in most schools, there is a distinct imbalance of power favoring schools over parents, especially parents of color or low SES background (Lightfoot,

² I will describe my experience as a teacher and administrator in more detail as I work through the etic perspective in my research design, data collection and analysis.

³ The terms "Black" and "African American" will be used interchangeably in this dissertation due to use of both terms in cited works presented. Black is capitalized because the term has been denoted as a proper noun to represent a specific racial group, just as Asian and Latino are terms to represent specific racial groups. The term white is not capitalized because it is not used to represent a specific racial group (Cloud, 2013).

⁴ My efforts are even more directed toward welcoming parents after hearing my colleague's speech at the anniversary celebration.

2004). Even through conscious efforts to welcome parents, my school still represents a power imbalance, favoring the educators and school system.

In both roles as teacher and as administrator, I have witnessed and experienced power struggles between parents and educators, between and among educators, between schools and districts, and between districts and states. The balance of power between these different entities is more like a broken teeter-totter than a functional, collaborative partnership. I have heard many conversations between educators throughout my career, many in which I participated in, in which the main topic included the skills, knowledge, dispositions⁵ students didn't learn at home, and thus were now the responsibility of the teacher to convey. On one side of this coin is an image of frustrated teachers who feel they can't teach everything they need to (or are required to) in order for their students to be successful. We⁶ want the parents to take responsibility and teach certain skills, knowledge, and dispositions to their children. We also want to make the decision of what should be taught at school and what should be taught at home.

On the opposite side of this coin are images of some of my marginalized students as evidenced by the face of a white, female student who sat in my office and cried- angry, frustrated, and hurt. She was living with a foster parent; I'm not sure why she was taken from her home. When I asked her to tell her side of the story of why she was sent out of class, she angrily shared an account in which her teacher made a comment in class about home training and/or the lack thereof. She interpreted the teacher's statement as an insinuation that she lacked

⁵ I use the terms dispositions and values interchangeably in this dissertation.

⁶ I use the term "we" because I am an educator. I am not making accusations of one specific educator, simply making a general statement about what many educators I have encountered in my career have openly expressed, including myself.

some skill, knowledge, and/or disposition that should have been delivered by her parents. The student was insulted and an emotional wound was reopened. A wall was instantly built between the teacher and student and learning ceased in that space.

Another face on this coin could be an African American male student who enters at least one of his classrooms every day, tense posture and curt tone. At least one of his (white, female) teachers regards his tone and refusal to work as disrespect and insubordination. His perception is that the teacher doesn't respect him (possibly because his older siblings had blazed a trail of bad behavior before he even entered this school) so he enters the room already on the defensive, waiting for the moment the teacher makes a statement he interprets as evidence to support his feelings of distrust. The teacher doesn't consider that their racial/ cultural differences and his family's history are a factor in this disconnect. The responsibility for bridging this chasm is placed on the student, when it should be placed on the educators.

Just as I understand the frustration of teachers who are overwhelmed by the amount of curriculum they are required to teach (or the amount students are supposed to learn), I can relate to the frustration and discomfort students feel. I remember my paternal grandmother scolding me at the end of a summer visit to Louisiana because I didn't pack my clothes in the suitcase correctly, neatly folded, etc. I imagine the clothing items were tossed haphazardly in the suitcase with no method of organization. The comment that hurt me was, "I can't believe your mother never taught you how to do this?" Her tone was quite indignant, as if my mother was neglecting to teach me some vital life lesson that would affect my life in a disastrous way. I was in the 4th grade when this conversation took place and it still bothers me. It was the first time I felt disfavor for my grandmother. Not only did her comments hurt, but they made me feel

marginalized, as if there was something wrong with me and my mother. Children are as protective of their parents as parents are of their children. My grandmother may not have known how her statement hurt me, just as educators may not realize how damaging their statements are to students who are “other.”⁷

The point of these stories is that relationships are difficult to build when deficit values are placed on one party's inner circle or core. Deficit thinking has been and still is a foundational reason why schools and parents struggle for true partnership, one in which both partners have equal voice and both parties respect and value the other (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). Instead, educators tend to forget that parents are the first educators of their children and expect parents to acquiesce to the agendas of the school and support their initiatives (Lightfoot, 2004). This is a complex issue because many of the initiatives come from legislative bodies that often fail to consult or partner with school personnel in making laws and setting policies for school functioning and accountability. But, let's focus on the relationship between parents and schools. Both have a vested interest in the academic and behavioral success of their students, but the means to that end are not always aligned. When this misalignment occurs, students struggle to navigate the conflicting values and messages.

When the educative work of the family is recognized, parents may be more comfortable working collaboratively with teachers (Lightfoot, 2004). The exclusion of low SES and/or minority parents from conversations related to formal education practices and philosophies is

⁷ The term “other” refers to those who fall outside the boundaries of the mainstream group. In this case the mainstream group is white, middle class. The others are generally members of one or more minority groups such as racial/ cultural minority groups, low socioeconomic status, and students with special needs (i.e. mental and/or physical exceptionalities).

indicative that their contribution to their child's development through informal education practices and philosophies are not valued or trusted.⁸ For this dissertation project, I explore the informal educative practices of one African American family whose children are considered successful by normative standards, and share the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they prioritize as most important for the success of their children; their counter-narrative may be used as an example of why educators should value input and involvement of *all* parents in providing learning activities for their children at home and in the community. I have chosen qualitative research methods in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of this issue. Due to the specific boundedness of the case and the exploratory methods I am choosing to employ, I refer to this as an ethnographic case study (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995).

This ethnographic case study focuses on one African American family. This family consists of children (siblings and cousins) ranging in age from 8- 23 years, parents of these children, and extended family members (including fictive kin). In this study, family members provide their definition(s) of family and identify who is a part of their familial membership based on their roles in their informal education practices and experiences. Two of the adult siblings live together in their father's home. Together, they are raising four children, but are also actively involved in the rearing of several nieces and nephews who live nearby. This family functions collectively; they call it their "village approach." Children in this family are expected to perform at high levels academically (i.e. earning good grades) as well as give their best effort and attitude

⁸ I use the terms "formal education" and "schooling" to indicate education and learning experiences students have within the school setting. I use the term "informal education" to indicate learning experiences students have outside the school setting. Some parenting practices are normative (done out of habit) and appear unintentional. Analyses of these practices are included in this dissertation project.

in their extracurricular activities. Several of the adult children have earned academic and athletic scholarships to college. Although one member of the extended family is a former professional athlete, the economic status of this family would be considered “working class” according to Lareau’s (2003) conceptualization of employees versus employers (p. 277-279). My interest in studying the informal education practices of this particular family is based on the fact that theirs represents a counter-story to many deficit stories despite facing some of the same challenges many African American families face including single parenting, lower middle class socio-economic status, and racial discrimination. The central question of this exploratory study is: *How does this family educate its children?* More specifically, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of their educative practices by answering the following sub-questions:

- *What values, information, and skills are taught/ reinforced through informal education practices within the family (unit of study)?*
- *Why are these practices valued by this family? (connection to priorities)*
- *What are the intended and observed outcomes of these practices?*
- *How do these parents make connections to priorities set for informal education practices and their child’s/ children’s success in the formal education setting?*

In the following sections I provide possible outcomes from presenting the voices and informal education practices of this family. I also share the conceptual foundation of this project and theoretical tools I may pull from as I analyze the data collected through qualitative methods. Finally, I outline the organization of this research project.

Purpose and Significance of this Study

In this section I explain five possible outcomes for this dissertation project. The overarching purpose for this project is to tell the story of this one family and share their practices and philosophies for raising children who are successful both at school and in the community. The potential outcomes described below include what we may learn from them as the first and most steadfast educators of their children.

The first potential outcome is to develop a deeper understanding of how this family educates their children; in particular this study aims to share the story of how an African America family educates and socializes their children and to challenge negative assumptions and stereotypes regarding parent involvement in and valuing of formal education by African American parents. The idea of this dissertation project originated from the concept of trust. Thayer-Bacon (1998, 2008) has discussed trusting teachers and students but I also wonder about how we, as educators, trust parents. Biesta (2006) argues that learning requires trust (p. 26). In my professional experience as a teacher and school administrator, I believe that parent knowledge, experience, and ideas for what is best for their children are not trusted or given space in the conversation about how, what, and when to teach their children. Additionally lack of trust in parents seems to vary based on race, economic status, community status, and educational attainment. Concurrently, some educators perceive that parents do not trust them to “do [their] jobs,” and are practically insulted that parents want input into the policies and procedures for running the school as well as methods and curricula implemented in the classroom.

Deficit theories,⁹ such as genetic deficit theory and cultural deficit theory, have biased general societal opinions of whether or not African American parents (particularly those who are economically disadvantaged) have any resources to offer their child's schooling (Valencia 2010). If the realm of education encompasses all (social) experiences, and these experiences are varied, complex, and overlapping, then a lack of trust between parents and schools creates gaps in learning for children.

The second possible outcome of this study is deeper understanding of the relationship between formal and informal education. The devaluing of parental influence and silencing of their voices in schooling is a cultural studies issue because of the significant imbalance of power that favors schools. This is a moral imperative because parents must entrust schools to prepare their children for future success. Cultural studies¹⁰ research brings attention to issues such as unequal access to social, political, and economic resources due to racism, classism, and gender bias. Rather than perpetuate deficit theories in our schools, we must use our scholarship to bring attention to the strengths parents, families, and communities contribute to child growth. Schools currently decide how and what will prepare students for future success, but do parents not get to influence what that future looks like? In particular, the strengths of underserved, marginalized groups should be emphasized, not as a generalized example for African Americans, but as an additional lens through which to view this issue. This issue brings together intersections of race, class, and gender and challenges the assumption that modes of transmission of

⁹ More information about deficit theories will be shared in Chapter 2.

¹⁰ Cultural Studies is defined in the section in this chapter titled "Conceptual Framework".

knowledge and skills utilized by middle-class white families are the best or only method for bringing up successful and happy children (Douglas & Peck, 2013; Hill, 1999; West, 2001).

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field so the scholars that inform my work come mainly from the areas of philosophy of education, sociology, and anthropology. This is a qualitative study in which the counter story of one African American family is told. The historical context for the family is included in this counter story to ensure a more holistic picture of the structure and functioning of this family; scholars have criticized studies which present an ahistorical perspective of African American family life because they neglect an important component of their organization and functioning (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Hill, 1999; Johnson & Staples 2005; Katz 2013; and Valencia 2010).

The third potential outcome is to be able to show characteristics of informal education provided by these African American parents and family members that support success in the traditional school setting. The study of the informal education these African American children receive from their parents, siblings, extended/ fictive kin, and their communities can impact this discussion by bringing attention to the cultural strengths of the Black community and of these diverse families. Breaking down stereotypes of absentee parents who rely on the schools to meet all educative needs of their children may bridge gaps that lead to deficit thinking and deepening our understanding of the values and priorities of African American families may help schools build stronger relationships/ partnerships with parents (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Epstein 1992).

A fourth potential outcome of this study may be a strengthening of the argument that African American families are resilient and the cultural pride instilled in them through

childrearing is one of the foundations to their success. Racial socialization and parental involvement have been credited as having the greatest influence on academic, behavioral, and emotional success of African American children. Several scholars have expressed a need for ethnographic research on racial socialization, ethnic identity, resilience, and family structure and function (Bennett, Jr., 2006; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Hill, 1999). Recent research in the area of racial socialization and resilience of African American youth has used quantitative surveys and self-reporting for analysis (Brown & Tylka, 2010; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002). Qualitative research is needed to provide a clearer picture of the dynamics between educative practices of parents and extended relatives and the racial socialization and resilience of African American youth. Brown (2008) recommends further exploration of the relationship between racial socialization and individuals that make up a child's social support network. I may use both ecological theory (Epstein, 1992; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Stevens, 2002) and critical race theory (Degado & Stefancic, 2000) as frameworks for my analysis. I think this work will deepen our understanding of the cultural wealth of one African American family through the lens of what, when, and how they teach their children the knowledge, dispositions, and skills required for success in the formal education setting.

Finally, a fifth potential outcome of this study could be to bring more clarity to the complexity of how modes of education are transmitted. This work should contribute to the philosophical, sociological and anthropological realms of cultural studies in education. Philosophically, this study will provide support for the importance of childrearing practices to education as both a process and a product. Examples of informal education, as well as what Broudy (1954) refers to as "milieu education" as performed by this family illuminates not only

what knowledge, dispositions, and skills are taught and/or reinforced outside of school, but provides insight into the cultural values and socialization processes prioritized by this family. Sociologically, this study provides a counter-narrative of one family's story as they teach their children to navigate a world in which theirs is not the dominant voice or perspective. Anthropologically, this study provides an example of "new" ethnography that prioritizes polyvocality and critically addresses researcher positionality (Saukko, 2003).

Conceptual Framework: Cultural Studies

The foundation of this project is cultural studies. Cultural studies in education, as a field of study, has been difficult to define because "it transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries and intimately connects academic theory to the lived experiences and practices of people" (Hyttén, 1997, p. 39). It is concerned with culture and how is it "constructed, transmitted, contested, negotiated, and received" (p. 40), and draws from the fields of history, sociology, literature, and anthropology, in a transcendent manner, to address the particular issue being studied (Giroux, 1994; Wright, 1996). Wright (1996) points out that cultural studies is interdisciplinary, but "not all interdisciplinary work is cultural studies" (p. 13). What sets it apart from other interdisciplinary work is its attention to blurring the boundaries between disciplines, linking issues of power with culture, avoiding segregation of high culture from low culture, and recognizing the dynamism of culture (Hyttén, 1997).

An overarching question of this project is to what extent does informal education matter? I define informal education as pedagogy that includes daily tasks/ routines, casual conversations, and cultural rituals that children participate in with parents, siblings, extended family members, and community members. Through perpetuation of negative stereotypes, there is often a general

lack of trust in parents, parenting methods, and parents' abilities to make appropriate educational decisions for their children, especially for parents of color, low SES status or limited educational background (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Lightfoot, 2004). Educators tend to exclude African American parents and students from decisions about what their children should learn and how they learn it in the formal education setting. By avoiding the use of pathological language and deficit discourse and, instead, "building from strengths evident in children and families" (Sims, O'Connor, & Forest, 2003), we can nurture trusting relationships among all stakeholders through open conversation, viewing them as "resources who can help us all to learn...how to become citizens of the global community" (Delpit, 2006, p.69).

Although cultural studies scholars critique a deficit discourse in regard to achievement gaps experienced by historically underserved students,¹¹ deficits continue to be the focus of general dialogue among the educators who struggle to meet the learning needs of non-white students, including explanations for low-performance on standardized testing (Howard, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Douglas and Peck (2013) recently published an historical study of how African Americans have found educational spaces outside of school, including "family, neighborhoods, sports clubs, church/spirituality, barbershops, prison, jobs/work, and international travel" (p. 67). They contend that "there is no one space that meets the needs of every individual" (p. 85) and that the attempt to make the school the primary educative space "is emblematic of cultural domination" over Black youth in particular (p. 86).

¹¹ This term refers to "students from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced sustained school failure over time" (Artiles, Kozleski, Oritiz, Osher, & Trent, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

For this project I have considered two theoretical frameworks for possible use in the analysis of data: ecological theory and critical race theory. I argue that ecological theory may be a useful framework to analyze the modes in which the children are educated and the priorities the parents establish for ensuring success for their children. I also argue that the tenets of critical race theory will lead to an understanding of the historical and social contexts in which this African American family functions and are connected with the education of their children. In the following section I provide a brief description of ecological theory and critical race theory.

Ecological Theory

The ecological perspective is a multidisciplinary approach that allows “examination of the positive and negative effects of factors at the societal, community, family, and individual levels.” (Hill 1999, p. 10). This framework is based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) *Ecology of Human Development*, which allows for the analysis of development in context with the person’s natural setting, is organized into four levels in “a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next” to demonstrate interdependent relationships with people, organizations, and common beliefs that permeate throughout each (p. 22). This model has been described to appear similarly to nesting dolls. The innermost circle/ level is called the microsystem, next is the mesosystem, then the exosystem, and, finally, the macrosystem. The microsystem is the most intimate, involving the relationship between the developing person in relation with his/her family (includes anyone in direct contact with the developing person). These relationships are described as “interdependent” because the developing person also influences those who interact with him/her (p. 66). The mesosystem is defined “as a set of

interrelations between two or more settings in which the person becomes an active participant” (p.209). Thus the model expands to include the developing person in relation with specific settings they are immediately involved in (i.e. home, school, church, neighborhood, etc.). Bronfenbrenner describes the mesosystem as a “system of microsystems” (p. 25). The exosystem “consists of one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant” (p.237). This includes the influence of settings that do not directly involve the developing person, yet are still influential in the growth and development of the person either through access to resources or support for belief systems (i.e. parents’ work place, older siblings’ school, parents’ friends, and parent interaction with community organizations and government). The macrosystem ties these three levels together to support the developing person by the inclusion of “belief systems that are consistent throughout” (p. 26). It is referred to as the “blueprint of the ecological environment not only as it is but also as it might become if the social order were altered” (p. 289). The model described here has been expanded by several scholars including Hope Leichter, Joyce Epstein, John Ogbu, and Joyce Stevens.

Hope Leichter (1979) refers to both families and schools as educational institutions in relationship with one another, along with other institutions such as “museums, religious institutions, places of work, hospitals, [and] community centers” (p. 6). In this study, I am concerned with the ecology of the dynamic relationship between families and schools as educational institutions from a cultural studies perspective of the power imbalance between families and schools. According to Christianakis (2011), the purpose of many parent-teacher partnership models is to “align home practices with the goals and work of schooling” (p. 160); the expectation of parents to change their behaviors to imitate educative practices at school and

assumptions made about the ability (or inability) and accessibility (or inaccessibility) of parents to meet these expectations promotes “asymmetrical power” between parents and teachers (p. 161). When the agenda of the school or classroom is the priority in parent-teacher partnerships, teachers are positioned “as supervisors and parents as *the helpers*” (p. 164). Parents who are unable or unavailable to meet the expectations of the partnership are assumed to be unconcerned with their child’s education.

Joyce Epstein’s (1992) work with ecological theory primarily looks at the connection between families and schools, which is within Bronfenbrenner’s mesosystem. Her model is a modification of Bronfenbrenner’s concentric structures to appear as four overlapping spheres of influence on student development. These four spheres represent schools, families, community groups, and peer groups and are represented as four “concentric circles of interaction and influence” (p. 102); these circles, or spheres, surround children as they develop. The more the spheres overlap, the greater the support a child experiences during development. Epstein contends that three forces “affect the content and extent of overlap” for the spheres that represent family and schools (p. 105): 1) Time- ages, grade levels; 2) Philosophies, policies, and practices of the family; and 3) Philosophies, policies, and practices of the school. The more closely aligned numbers 2 and 3 are, the greater the overlap. When the philosophies, policies, and practices of a family are contradictory or misaligned with those of the school their children attend, the spheres begin to disassociate from one another. Because the relations within the mesosystem are so interconnected with the intimate relations in the microsystem, this dissertation project is heavily influenced by the family-school connection.

Research has shown that student success, both academic and behavioral, increases as parent involvement increases (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Epstein, 1992). Epstein and Sanders (2000) describe six types of parent involvement within the overlapping spheres described above. These range from basic parental obligations to leadership in school governance and community collaboration. She indicates that the amount of overlap is dependent upon the level of parent involvement. If this is true, then one can surmise that there is little overlap between families and schools if the parents are only minimally involved. Parents who do not feel welcomed in the school space or valued as partners in their child's education often remain minimally involved (Lightfoot, 2004). An increase in the overlap of school and parent spheres may occur when parents are empowered by becoming involved in decision-making within the school and thus "feel more connected to the school community" (Christianakis, 2011).

John Ogbu's (1998, 2007a) cultural-ecological theory "considers the broad societal and school factors as well as dynamics within the minority communities" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). There are two overarching parts to this theory, system and community forces, which contribute to these dynamics. He first introduced us to this theory in 1981 as a non-ethnocentric method for conducting cross-cultural research on child-rearing and development in minority children in the United States. Ogbu (2007a) also delineates a classification scheme for minorities as voluntary, involuntary, and immigrant. Due to the way minorities and groups are stratified in the United States, Ogbu (2007a) calls this system "castelike" (p. 79) and contextualizes the different experiences of these groups.¹²

¹² Ogbu's castelike system is described in more detail in the Deficit Theory section of Chapter 2.

Finally, the person-process-context theory is considered a resilience model by Joyce Stevens (2002). She defines resilience as "moral steadfast perseverance, demonstrated by hardiness and courage in the face of dangerous and hazardous conditions" (p. 3). This theory was developed based primarily on the nested contexts of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development and Spencer's person-process-context model (1995). Stevens' extension of these models "allows for improvisational nature of daily life" (p. 31). The person-process-context model was used by Stevens "to clarify how Black female adolescents utilize attributes of assertion, recognition, and self-efficacy to make meaning of risk circumstances and to mediate exposure to risk elements" (p. 33). This approach allows "examination of the positive and negative effects of factors at the societal, community, family, and individual levels" (Hill, 1999, p. 10). These models may be utilized to support my use of the term "informal education" and may help lead to development of more culturally specific terminology for the education provided by African American parents and extended family members.

Although Bennett, Jr. (2006) claims there is no real theoretical framework for the phenomena of racial socialization and ethnic identity development, the ecological perspective has been used as a gold standard for studying human development in context. Racial socialization and ethnic identity development are certainly a part of every child's development regardless of race or ethnicity (Stevenson, Jr., 1994). Epstein (1992) calls for research to examine both family and school structures and practices in order to learn more about how different family structures, cultures, values, and belief systems affect parents' relationships with teachers, principals, and other school staff" (p. 119). The family I selected for this case study has raised children who are successful both in school and in their extracurricular activities. It is

likely their success is based on the overlapping support from family, friends, teachers, and community members; therefore use of ecological theory as a tool for analysis may prove informative.

An ecological perspective may also provide a “framework for considering how the complex power and influence processes in families play out...as a function of social values and norms reflected” in aspects such as race, ethnicity, class, and family structure (Perry-Jenkins, Newkirk, & Ghunney, 2013, p. 120); this is especially the case for studying resiliency in African American families. Hill (1999) recognizes the need for research on “the relationship of resilience mechanisms to the operation of various family strengths” across racial and ethnic lines (pg. 45). Sheridan, Sjuts, and Coutts’ (2013) definition of family resilience is “couched in ecological theory”, recognizing that the informal education a family provides a child is “considered a prerequisite for successful experiences in the classroom” (p. 143). I would be remiss if I did not consider ecological theory when analyzing how the Sullivan¹³ family functions as the first and most steadfast educators of their children.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines uneven power and privilege between whites and Blacks by challenging the “dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2). There are five tenets of Critical Race Theory (Yosso, 2005): 1) Intercentricity of race and racism. This maintains the permanence of racism as a normal part of United States society. 2) CRT challenges the dominant ideology of “white

¹³ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

privilege and refutes the claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (p. 73). 3) It is committed to social justice and exposes “interest convergence,” which is the benefit dominant groups enjoy as an outcome for improving the situation of Black communities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). 4) Centrality of experiential knowledge as counter-narrative (Delgado, 2000) to the dominant discourse legitimates lived experience of African Americans and other underserved groups. 5) Transdisciplinary perspective which incorporates multiple critical disciplines such as feminist theory, sociology, and history in order to combat monolithic, ahistorical analysis of issues relating to race and racism (Yosso 2005, Solorzano & Yosso 2001).

In sum, CRT “shifts the research lens away from a deficit view” so scholars can focus on the cultural wealth within African American communities, as well as communities of other marginalized groups (Yosso, 2005, p. 82). CRT examines uneven power and privilege between whites and Blacks by challenging the “dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2).

Organization of this Study

As mentioned previously, this dissertation project is an ethnographic case study. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection in this study. This project is designed to take place in three overlapping phases and allows flexibility for modification based on analysis of data throughout each phase.

Phase I

Semi-structured interviews with participant family members are conducted to determine their definition of family, their definition of student success and how success is measured, values they place on education, their family history, and what educative activities the children are involved in outside of school. The interviewees in this phase include the two sisters, Martha and Ruth (see footnote 13), in the unit of study as well as extended/fictive family members who can share information about the family's history, including past experiences with informal and formal education. For example, in addition to learning about current informal educative practices, I interview one of the patriarchal members of the extended family to learn more about how his parents instilled dispositions, skills, and knowledge as well as how he and his sisters passed these values on to the next generation (and/or diverge from tradition).

Phase II

In the second phase of the project I collect data via field notes from participant-observation of various family activities such as sports practice, family dinners, and unstructured activities at home and in the community. Informal interviews/ conversations with family members during these events are also a source of data. Flexibility in choosing which types and frequency of family activities to be a participant-observer is important because I must adapt and redirect the study in order to explore new or unexpected themes (Hatch, 2002; Goodall, Jr., 2000; Yin, 2009). This phase of the study takes place on a regular basis over the course of seven months.

Phase III

Final conversational interviews are conducted with the two sisters to probe for deeper understanding and member checking to make sure gaps in this family's story are bridged. Because this family knows me as an educator, I wait until this phase of the study to ask them about their trust in their children's teachers and their comfort level in becoming involved in their children's schools.

Data analysis occurs throughout the data collection process to identify and triangulate recurring themes. The theoretical framework emerges as recurring themes are identified. Information gathered from this case study will add to the body of knowledge about the strengths of African American families; in particular I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how one African American family educates and socializes their children to be successful in the school setting.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this particular study, the first being that the unit of study is limited to one specific family. Therefore, comparisons or grand generalizations from my findings cannot be made. This work will inform future research on familial education practices. I will, however, be able to provide a more contextual and nuanced understanding of the informal education practices that take place through child-rearing processes.

Secondly, time is a limitation of this study. This family is extremely busy due to jobs and juggling multiple extracurricular activities for their children. I have to be flexible and willing to join family activities and events with limited advanced notice. On Saturdays, they are up early and out the door for extracurricular activities. Sundays is a day of rest; the family regularly

attends church services unless they have additional athletic activities scheduled. Another limitation is that I will only participate in the family events I am invited to. This is a particular challenge due to my own busy work schedule as a school administrator.

Although I am somewhat familiar with the family I have chosen for participation in this project,¹⁴ I am a limitation to this study as the researcher. I am an outsider to this group because 1) I am not an actual member of the family and have not really experienced what is like to be a family member, and 2) I am not a member of the same racial group as this family. Another major difference is in my level of education. My education level and occupation provide several layers of authority which can create a separation between me and the family. As a participant-observer as well as an individual who has previously interacted with some members of the family on a social level, I use personal reflexivity throughout the ethnographic study to illuminate my own “positionality” (Davies, 2008; Glesne, 2011; Milner, 2007). As a scholar, who identifies as white, female, and middle-class, attempting to tell the story of an African American family, I continually question my assumptions and interpretations to try to avoid placing judgments and making analytical decisions based my world view and lived experiences.

Another important limitation is that this project data collection occurs via a single researcher- me. I am not comparing my interpretations with other researchers to develop consistency and reliability (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to minimize the impact this limitation has on results and representation, I conduct member checking with each of the participants.

¹⁴ I have interacted with several members of this family, both adult and children, on at least two occasions prior to beginning this dissertation project.

Lastly, this is my first time conducting an ethnographic case study, and my first time writing an impressionist tale (Van Maanen, 1988/2011). While I try to bring out multiple voices and perspectives in this narrative, I must recognize the privilege I have as the researcher and storyteller. I decide whose voice is heard, when, how often, and on what topic. I also know that my voice will be the loudest. While I attempt to share meanings constructed and communicated by the participants, my understandings of these meanings is what is actually communicated through the narrative and analysis. As a racial and social outsider to the unit of study, I (the researcher) am reflective of my positionality and the normative assumptions I carry as I recorded field notes and analyzed data. I addressed the ethical issue of power between researcher and participants by being up front about who I am and what my intentions are for this project. Balancing the emic and etic perspectives that emerge during this project empowers the participants (Goodall, Jr., 2000; Wolcott, 2008). It is a challenge to try to differentiate and prioritize themes that emerge during the analysis process, but member checking throughout the research process has proven to be an important step in validating my analysis.

An additional strategy for balancing the power between myself and the participants is ongoing implementation of Milner's (2007) framework for incorporating research positionality in order to avoid "misinterpretations, misinformation, and misrepresentation of the individuals and groups being studied" (p. 388). His framework "rejects practices in which researchers detach themselves from the research process" (p. 388). He implores us to acknowledge that "people of color experience a different type of normal life" than whites and that different does not mean inferior or deficient, researchers will be more likely to report authentic truths about their participants (p. 389). Through this process "deficit discourses may surface from the belief

systems and thinking of researchers, teachers, practitioners, and policy makers” (p. 390). In order to allow my own bias and cultural assumptions to surface, I follow Milner’s recommended framework by “researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, engaging in reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system” (p. 395). He argues that this framework is useful for validating work that interprets and represents people of color (p. 397).

Background and Role of Researcher

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I identify as a white, female, middle-class, educator with a diverse experience working with children and families. Most of my career has been spent working with high-school students, but I recently began working with students at a K-4 elementary school as the building level principal. For 12 years, I worked in the public education setting as a science teacher. I primarily taught high school level Biology and Chemistry, but also taught 7th and 8th General Science for two years. In 2008, I transitioned into school administration. In the role of school administrator, my involvement with students can seem to be surface level compared to those who instruct the students individually each day; however I am a very “hands-on” principal, spending a significant portion of each day in classrooms as well as greeting students in the morning and supervising them in the cafeteria at lunch. The school in which I work is a Title I school and serves a significantly high number of students and families that qualify for the federal free/reduced lunch program. Many of our families rely on assistance from the school and Family Resource Center (FRC) to help them navigate through obstacles they encounter in order to meet their basic living needs. In this setting, I prioritize the need to treat all the families and students we serve with dignity, rather than place judgement on their circumstances.

Prior to becoming an elementary school principal, I served as administrator for two separate alternative education programs for a total of six years. These experiences have colored my perspective and tightened my focus on advocating for marginalized students. Most of the students I have worked with in the alternative setting have been marginalized in some way. Students who are excluded from the regular education setting tend to be disproportionately non-white and/ or of low socioeconomic status (SES). There also tends to be a higher percentage of students with disabilities (SWD) in the alternative education setting than in the regular setting. Their exclusion is precipitated most frequently by behavioral and academic underperformance.

As mentioned previously, my role as a researcher is one of interviewer and participant-observer. On the spectrum between participant and observer, I lean more towards the observer side for most of the project (maybe 70% observer, 30% participant). I interact continually with the participants in my study while making observations, which I think enriches the experience and builds a trusting relationship between myself and extended/ fictive kin in this unit of study. I discuss my involvement with the family as both a participant and as an observer in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Participants

The family I purposefully selected for participation in the project became known to me through a close friend. My friend has known various members of this family since her childhood; her older sister married one of the patriarchs of this family several years ago and thus began a more intimate relationship with the entire family. My friend and her husband attend family events such as birthday parties, cookouts, and sports games. She, in turn, invites them to their house for special events, such as July 4 celebrations and birthday parties. I became

acquainted with several members of this family at some of these events over the past five or six years. My friend always speaks highly of them, sharing stories about how well-mannered their children are, how well they perform in school, and how talented they are in sports. When I think about the issue of schools lacking trust in parents to prepare their children for success in school and provide support for their academic success throughout their schooling, I think about this family- as a counter-story. I want to explore this case both intrinsically and instrumentally (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). I want to understand how the family itself functions as a supportive unit, as a village that raises their children collectively, and I want to understand how they educate their children informally, through everyday practices and routines.

Access

Although my first contact with this family was through my long-time friend, it is her brother-in-law, Dave, who is considered my gatekeeper (and informant, at times) for studying his family for this dissertation project because he helped me gain access to the rest of the family. Over the past ten years, I have developed a close relationship with him. Besides my husband, Dave is the first person I spoke to about my idea for this project and asked him if he thought his family would participate. He said he would be honored to have his family story told and immediately began sharing information with me about his mother who had been a school teacher. Once I was approved to collect data, I approached him again with the project idea and he helped me get connected with two of his nieces. While this family is large (Dave has two sons, six nephews, and three nieces- not to mention many great nieces and nephews), only two

nieces became the central portion of this case study.¹⁵ These two nieces live together in their father's home, raising their children together. Over the years, they have helped their siblings raise their children, just as their siblings help them. They operate "as a unit", yet pursue individual interests.

Organization of Dissertation

In this chapter I presented the problem of trust between schools and parents, particularly the lack of trust educators have in parents as educators of their children. This is the foundation for the purpose of this particular dissertation project. In Chapter 1, I also described the conceptual (cultural studies) and theoretical (ecological theory and critical race theory) frameworks that influence my work. The central research question was presented, along with a general organization for this dissertation project. In chapter 2, I present a detailed description of deficit theory and its impact on African American and other historically marginalized groups. A literature review on the strengths of African American families as well as the challenges they work to overcome is also presented in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 3, I provide a more detailed description of the methodology and methods for data collection and analysis for this dissertation project. This chapter includes specific strategies I employ to increase trustworthiness, including analysis of researcher positionality through application of Milner's (2007) framework.

In Chapter 4, I share the family's counter story as a narrative entitled "Our Village Approach". This narrative is based on information gathered via multiple data collection methods

¹⁵ See family tree (figure 3.1) in Chapter 3.

(interviews, participant observation, and archival data). A thematic analysis of data collected is presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter in which implications for future research are discussed. While researcher positionality is addressed throughout chapters 3, 4, and 5, Milner's (2007) framework, specifically the final component- "shifting from self to system" is addressed in this final chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Census Bureau (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel, & Drewery, Jr., 2011) reported a 15.4% increase in the Black population (alone or in combination with other races) between 2000 and 2010. The greatest percentages of people who identify as Black remain in the southern United States, where the Black population is growing at the fastest rate. Another group increasing in population includes people who identify as Black in combination with white, which grew by 76% between 2000 and 2010. African American families come in all shapes and sizes, but most stereotypes portray them monolithically: dysfunctional and living in high poverty, headed by a single mother. Their children are often portrayed as academic underperformers who exhibit negative behaviors in school and in the community. In reality, most African American families are middle-class due to co-providing by both mother and father (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010). Mitchell Duneier (1992) has also criticized some sociologists for inadvertently perpetuating negative stereotypes, failing “to acknowledge the historical strength of the Black working and lower working classes” (p. 130) and offering “sweeping impressions of Black men which also go beyond their own data” (p.145). Robert B. Hill (1999) defines Black families as “networks of households related by blood, marriage, or function that provide basic instrumental and expressive functions of the family to the members of those networks” (p. 40). This network includes both extended and fictive kin which diverges significantly from the white-normed nuclear family (Brown, 2008; Gerstel, 2011; Hill, 1999; Sheridan et al, 2013). Boyd-Franklin and Karger (2012) contend that “overvaluing the ‘nuclear family’ in the dominant culture” has blinded society to the rich multigenerational ties in African American families (p.

285); Gerstel (2011) agrees and adds that the nuclear family “does not describe the reality of contemporary family life” regardless of race and/or socioeconomic status (p. 16).

Regardless of the actual makeup of a family, its purpose remains the same, “to ensure the positive development and adaptation of children” (Sheridan et al, 2013, p. 151). In literature, African American families have been described as both pathological and as resilient (Strmic-Pawl & Leffler, 2011). Several anti-deficit theories have been introduced, through scholarship, that intend to invalidate and debunk deficit theories. These theories are transformative and call teachers, practitioners, and policy makers to use a critical lens in analyzing the plight of underserved groups such as African Americans, Latinos/as, and rural Appalachian youth. In this chapter, I describe deficit theories and the impact they have had on the African American community as well as provide a review of literature on the challenges African American families face accompanied by evidence of their strength and resiliency.

Deficit Theory

Deficit theories blame the victims for their inability to be successful academically, behaviorally, and economically, and they are often used to justify discriminatory acts (Ryan, 1979). Scott Baker (1995) provides an example of how the National Teacher Examination (NTE), when first developed, was used to create legal pay scales or “merit systems” that allowed school districts to pay African American teachers less than white teachers (p. 56). This test was intentionally marketed to southern state boards of education to save them money in terms of teacher salaries because pilot testing showed that African American teachers scored significantly lower on the NTE. Because a small percentage of Black teachers scored high on the NTE, this practice became “legally defensible” and the courts supported them because they were

presumably “based on *objective* examinations of teachers” (p. 57). Fultz (1995) reports that “22.5 percent of African American elementary teachers” in the southern United States had only a high school education (p. 404). This means that 77.5 percent of these teachers were credentialed and/or college-educated. They were community leaders who often acted as a “go-between” for the Black community in their efforts to gain support from white school boards for improvements in educational opportunities and school facilities for Black students (Fultz, 1995).

Two major deficit theories have laid the foundation for deficit thinking: genetic deficit theory (hereditarianism) and cultural deficit theory. Hereditarianism applied to social stratification was first introduced by anthropologist and eugenicist Francis Galton after Charles Darwin published his *Origin of the Species* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Valencia, 2010). His concept of “social Darwinism”, in which the smartest and best adapted individuals are successful and the less intelligent individuals are less educable/employable and remain in poverty, is still commonly used as a support for deficit thinking (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). The creators of The Pioneer Fund used science as an instrument to promote racial segregation, including attempts to prove the dangers of race mixing and support for eugenic practices in which those with less desirable traits (i.e. low IQ) would be sterilized to prevent passing of defective genes onto future generations (Hattery & Smith 2007, Valencia 2010). In the last century, there have been three waves of hereditarianism that influenced social practices and political policies (Valencia, 2010).

Cultural deficit theory blames a student’s culture, ethnicity, language, or race on low academic performance. The blame is placed squarely on parents and children who presumably “create their own problems due to insular and deviant cultures, individual shortcomings, and familial dysfunction (Valencia, 2010, p. 69). Assimilation theories of the 1940s and 1950s

emphasized the dysfunction and disorganization of the African American family and made assumptions that African Americans were culturally deprived if they did not conform to the norms of middle-class white society (Ryan, 1976). Social scientists conducted both direct and indirect Black-white comparative studies and reported behavioral differences from the white mainstream as pathological and inferior (Peters, 2007).

Three scholars, whose work has promoted deficit thinking through cultural deprivation or deficit theory, are Lewis, Moynihan, and Payne (Valencia, 2010). Oscar Lewis coined the term “culture of poverty” in his 1959 book *Five Families*, an ethnographic study of five impoverished Mexican families. Although there is disagreement about whether or not Lewis intended to pathologize the impoverished families he worked with, connections have been made between Lewis’ description of the lifestyles of these families and the focus on dysfunction and pathology of “negro” family structure in Moynihan’s (1965) famous report (Katz, 2013; Valencia, 2010).¹⁶ According to multiple analyses of Moynihan’s report, he blamed female-headed households for pathology of Black families- crime, illegitimacy, matriarchy, economic dependency, and more. His work influenced changes in welfare policies and access to social services for African American families (Dodson 2007; Hill 2007; Katz 2013; Valencia 2010). Ruby Payne has become famous for traveling around the United States, presenting professional development to teachers on how to understand children in poverty.¹⁷ In her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne (2003) describes the “hidden rules” of the middle class, but

¹⁶ After reading *Five Families*, I personally do not think Lewis intended to pathologize impoverished families and individuals.

¹⁷ As an educator I have attended at least three professional development workshops over the past 12 years in which Ruby Payne’s framework has been the focus.

places responsibility on marginalized children to learn these rules rather than call on educators to teach the necessary vocabulary or change the rules to accommodate multiple cultures.

A common belief among educators is that the “culture of poverty” perpetuates itself because impoverished children do not have the ability to optimally develop mentally and physically (Artiles, Kozleski, Oritiz, Osher, & Trent, 2010). There is no denying that “hidden rules” exist. The issue with cultural deficit theory is that we tell the poor to learn the rules in order to be successful rather than critically look at these *rules* and the rationale for their role as gatekeeper to academic, economic, political, and social success. Use of the term “at-risk” also connotes a deficit kind of thinking that students will not succeed in school due to their “putative cognitive, motivational, and familial deficiencies;” unfortunately, “schools are organized and run in oppressive ways” which makes it easier for underserved students to fail (Valencia, 2010 p. 125).

A critique of deficit research is that it ignores the historical, contextual, and structural forces that impact the results of these supposedly *objective* and one-sided studies. When this research influences policy makers and practitioners, negative, albeit possibly unintended, outcomes often occur (Artiles et al, 2010). Dodson (2007) argues that social policy stemming from theoretical and ideological debates about white supremacy cloud the integrity of research activities.

Valencia (2010) provides four explanations for why students of color and/or low SES background experience school failure: communication, caste, resistance, and deficit thinking. First, communication processes contribute to school failure when there is a “mismatch between the home culture and the school culture...that leads to learning problems for culturally diverse

students” (p. 3). An example this mismatch includes “possible misunderstandings between student and teacher in verbal and nonverbal communication styles...often result in teachers labeling students as unmotivated to learn”(p. 3). Lisa Delpit (2006) explains that students need to be able to know dual codes in order to participate in mainstream school and societal activities. The dual codes she refers to are the linguistic performance of minority and second-language students in their home and community in contrast to the linguistic performance that is expected of them in the school setting. Delpit (2006) indicates that students are fully capable of learning multiple codes, but choose to use the linguistic code of their home and community rather than the code teachers try to teach them at school as they age because, through repeated correction, they become “aware of the school’s negative attitude toward their community” (p. 52).

Secondly, Valencia (2010) argues that a caste-like treatment of minorities, as theorized by Ogbu (2007a), contributes to school failure particularly for students who are considered “involuntary” minorities due to frequent discrimination. Their model separates minorities in the United States by how they are stratified through social and political practices. Three types of minorities he describes are autonomous (ex. Amish, Jews, Mormons), voluntary (ex. immigrants who moved willingly to the United States), and involuntary (ex. nonimmigrants who were conquered, colonized, or enslaved). While he affirms each type of minority has been oppressed, he explains that these minorities are stratified and argues that involuntary minorities such as African Americans and Native Americans are among the most oppressed of these minorities by both the dominant group (European Americans) as well as the other minority groups.

Voluntary minorities¹⁸ are those who immigrated to the United States in search of a better life than they were living in their home country. They have a “positive dual frame of reference” from their home country’s affirmation of their identity and their new country where they see more opportunities for success than the country from which they came (Ogbu & Simons 1998, p. 170). These minorities expect that they will achieve the American dream through hard work and persistence. The term “American dream” conjures images of a house on a quiet lane, with a white picket fence surrounding it. This symbolizes the concept of upward mobility, that the outcome of our hard work is the fulfillment of our dreams. It is the ideal that freedom, equality, and opportunity are available to everyone in the United States.¹⁹ Involuntary minorities have historically arrived in the United States against their will, or were conquered by the U.S. through wars and their land occupied/ colonized. The largest group that falls under this category are African Americans due to the slave trade in the 1700’s and 1800’s. Members of this group have a relatively negative dual frame of reference because “they see their economic and social condition, as well as their schools, as inferior to those of middle-class white Americans” (Ogbu & Simons 1998, p. 171). Members of this group often do not believe the American dream is attainable regardless of how hard they work (West, 2001).

Third, resistance to hegemonic practices that perpetuate success for certain groups (whether intentional or not) create obstacles to student success because of refusal to conform to socially reproduced expectations that support white-normative behaviors and values. In deficit thinking, we expect people to change in order to fit into the accepted norm; middle-class white

¹⁸ Immigrant minorities- such as war refugees- differ from voluntary minorities because members of this group may have been pushed out of their home country and come to the United States to find a safe place to live.

¹⁹ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/american-dream>

children perform significantly better in school than lower-class, African American, or Latino/a children because schools tend to operate under middle-class white norms (Ryan, 1976). Howard (2006) reports that 90% of public school teachers are white; this statistic alone supports claims that schools operate under middle-class white norms because we all carry our individual worldview throughout all aspects of our professional and personal lives.

Lastly, Valencia (2010) argues that deficit thinking is a major reason why some students experience school failure. Teachers maintain low expectations and fail to be culturally responsive to African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). An example of how deficit thinking has affected children in Appalachia comes from Thaller (1997). She reports that rural Appalachian children tend to have negative attitudes about education, high rates of absenteeism and school drop-out, and language problems. This often forgotten group has been “perceived by others to be culturally and intellectually inferior” (p. 249).

Six characteristics of deficit thinking, as described by Valencia (2010), are 1) blaming the victim; 2) oppression; 3) pseudoscience; 4) temporal changes; 5) educability; and 6) heterodoxy. As mentioned previously, blaming the victim directs responsibility of school failures on “culturally disadvantaged” students and/or parents because of their inability to conform to mainstream norms (p. 70). Blaming the victim allows scholars and policymakers to ignore the real issues of inequality (Ryan, 1976).

Oppressive deficit thinking helps maintain current systems of privilege and domination by the “unjust use of authority and power to keep a group of people in their place” (Valencia, 2010, p. 9). Two examples of ways oppressive deficit thinking has been applied in the past are 1) compulsory ignorance laws, which prohibited literacy education for Black slaves; and 2)

forced school segregation, which Valencia (2010) defines to as “intentional separation of students of color from their white peers” (p. 11). The basis for these measures was the beliefs that whites should not socialize with people of color and that students of color were intellectually inferior to whites.

Pseudoscience is the “use of psychometrically weak instruments and/or [collection of] data in flawed manners” in order to support specific political and social agendas such as white supremacy (Valencia, p. 12). Although deficit thinkers who utilized this strategy failed to follow guidelines of the scientific method, their findings were widely accepted (Valencia, 2010).

Hereditarianism is one example of a deficit theory founded on pseudoscience.

Temporal change, or the ideological and political climate of the times influence how society views and responds to school failure by particular students. Deficit theories have been introduced and reintroduced in waves over the past 100 years. Variants include genetic pathology, culture of poverty (“self-sustaining cultural systems of poor carry the deficits and subsequent problems”), as well as cultural and accumulated environmental deficits (“alleged inferior familial and home environmental contexts transmit the pathology”) (Valencia, 2010 p.13).

A perception of low educability of students by teachers, administrators, and policymakers breeds low expectations for academic potential for low SES, including students of color. Deficit thinking has had a resurgence since the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2001, which increased accountability to teachers and schools for the academic growth of all students, particularly those who are categorized into specific subgroups based on ethnicity, disability, or economic disadvantage (Howard, 2006). These students have been targeted for what “normative

cultural knowledge” and skills they lack when then they enroll in school and the perception that “their parents neither value nor support their child’s education” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

Heterodoxy is influenced by Bourdieu’s (1977/2011) concept for understanding class domination that reflects the “dominant, conventional scholarly and ideological climates of the time” (Valencia 2010, p. 18). Bourdieu (1977/2011) outlines three forms of capital an individual can possess: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital is just as we understand it to be financial resources. Social capital is referred to a network of connections in which capital is gained (or lost) by membership in particular groups. Cultural capital is the gaining of knowledge through power and status. Education, time, and “cultural goods” are the key to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 84). Yosso (2005) critiques Bourdieu’s theory on forms of capital because Bourdieu asserts that “some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (p. 76). Communities and individuals that possess cultural wealth are able to maintain the standard of white, middle class culture. Yosso (2005) introduces six forms of capital that measure cultural wealth: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. She contends that these forms of capital “build on one another as part of a community of cultural wealth” (p. 77).

African American Families: Challenges and Strengths

The study of the African American family dates back to the early 1900’s when W.E.B. Du Bois first gave a rich description of the African American family and the influences of their African origins. Since that time, many social scientists have developed theories to explain why social, economic, and political mobility seem to evade this group as a whole. Much of the research was biased in order to promote the status quo and protect the power and privilege of

middle-class whites (Valencia, 2010). The deficit paradigm produced by this research (including Du Bois') suggested that African Americans would be successful if/when they made behavioral changes that fit more in line with accepted white, middle class values and behaviors (Dodson, 2007, Sadarkasa, 2007a). These deficit theorists have been refuted by more culturally responsive scholars, who have proven much of the data used to support the notion that African Americans (and other minorities) were inferior to whites was overgeneralized, misused, and/or misinterpreted (Duneier, 1992, Hill 1999, Johnson & Staples, 2005, Stevens 2002, and Valencia, 2010).

Challenges to the stability and success of African American families are most often associated with discriminatory practices and policies. Although discriminatory practices have become more covert than African Americans have experienced in the past, "decrepit schools, inadequate health care, unavailable childcare, and too few jobs with a living wage" create obvious and perpetual challenges for African American families (West, 2001, p. xv). Boyd-Franklin and Karger (2012) list "racism, discrimination, classism, poverty, homelessness, violence, crime, and drugs" as threats to family survival (p. 273). When these factors intersect, stressors on families tend to magnify.

Despite a multitude of obstacles, African American families find ways to thrive. Because "family members are the child's primary source of emotional support and agents of [cultural and racial] socialization", they are the primary source for building resilience (Gosa and Alexander, 2007, pg. 293). Resiliency is a "protective mechanism that affects the individual's response to a risk or stressful situation and operates at critical turning points during various stages of one's life cycle" (Hill, 1999, p. 44). Sheridan et al (2013) define family resiliency as "the ability of the

family to respond to stress and challenge in a positive and adaptive manner, characterized by the demonstration of competence and confidence among its members, with the intentional goal of socializing children” (p. 146).

Essential characteristics of resiliency include, cohesion, adaptability, communication, affective involvement, engagement, positive parenting, and problem solving (Sheridan et al, 2013). Hill (1999) argues that "a family's strength is not determined by its ability to function in only one area but in various domains of the family" (p 42). Hill (1999) listed five factors that influence resilience: “achievement orientation, work orientation, flexible family roles kinship bonds (extended family- both related and nonrelated), and religious orientation” (p. 150). He describes “assets” African American families possess which build strength and resilience that include: “extendedness, role flexibility, biculturalism, collectivism, and spirituality...love, effective coping strategies, mutual support, sharing responsibilities...teaching children respect for themselves, teaching children how to be happy, cooperation in the family, disciplining children, and socialization of black children" (p. 43-44). Sudarkasa (2007b) agrees, stating that flexibility and adaptability of African American families are the key factors for their survival both as individuals and as a family unit. Just as challenges are interconnected so are factors that impact resilience in African American youth and families.

In this section, I share research on some of the challenges African-American families face as well as characteristics of resiliency many African American families demonstrate. It should be noted that the challenges and resiliency described below do not apply to the experience of every African American person/ family, however these have been found to be common among many African American people/ families (Strmic-Pawl & Leffler, 2011). The family I have

selected for participation in this case study have experienced some, but not all of the challenges described here. Likewise, they exhibit many of the characteristics of resiliency described here.

Specific challenges and strengths fall under one or more of the following categories: social, educational, health, economic, and political factors. Described below are some of the most salient challenges African American families face along with some of the coping strategies used to overcome them. Although an attempt is being made to organize these challenges and strengths by category, it should be noted that they are complex, interconnected, and multilayered. Several of the factors discussed below could be placed in multiple categories.

Social Factors

Single-parent/ Female-headed households.

There are some contradictory messages about whether or not single-parent households strengthen or challenge African Americans. Sudarkasa (2007b) argues that “marital stability and family stability are not one and the same” (p. 173). She contends that female-headed households “have always been a ‘legitimate’ type of family among African Americans (Sudarkasa, 2007b, p. 176). Others argue that racist policies and structures in American society are the reason why African American households have become matriarchal, when historically the African tradition respects and supports patriarchal, two-parent households (Hill, 1999; West, 2001). Polygyny was also an accepted familial structure in many African communities (Sadarkasa 2007a); it is noted that many African traditions are woven throughout the African American culture despite attempts by slave-owners to erase them.

Having a child “out-of-wedlock” was greatly stigmatized in the United States in both the Black and white communities until middle-class professional women began to choose single

parenthood (Hill, 1999). This social change, an example of interest convergence in CRT, broadened the gray area of what is socially acceptable and what is not. Still, the stereotype of young, Black, unwed mothers who continue to have babies just to get more money from the welfare system persists (Hill 2007, McAdoo 2007, West 2001). Placing judgment on female-headed households as dysfunctional and leading to drug abuse, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and criminality in youth should be avoided. Sudakasa (2007b) reminds us that differences in formation and function of female-headed households are based on age, maturity, and previous marital status. Additionally, many single mothers cohabitate with a partner, live with relatives, and/ or get support from extended family members (Hill, 1999).²⁰ Kinship support (from blood relatives and fictive kin/ “kith”) is a common strength and survival strategy for many African American families (Wellman, 1990; Gerstel, 2011).

It should also be noted that the term “female-headed household” also includes familial situations in which “a husband [or unmarried partner] is present in the household but is unable to find work or earns a lower wage than the wife” (Sudarkasa, 2007b, p. 178). Khadeeja Sadfar (2012) reported results from a survey conducted by Prudential Financial, that “53% of women were the breadwinners in their households.”²¹ This trend is not isolated to any one ethnic or cultural group. Hummer and Hamilton (2010) report that half of all non-marital births are to cohabitating parents. Although the number of births to unmarried white women has steadily increased by approximately 9% from 1994 to 2006, the percentage of births to unmarried Black

²⁰ Intersections of racism and sexism will not be discussed in this dissertation; however this issue complicates the stability of some female-headed households.

²¹ The term “breadwinner” refers to the person in the household who earns the highest income, particularly when that income is the main resource used to meet the housing, food, and clothing needs of the family.

women has remained relatively constant over that same time span (Hummer & Hamilton, 2010, p. 114). Among the African American population, females outnumber males by a significant margin due to variations in birth rate, incarceration, and early death (Sudarkasa, 2007b, McAdoo, 2007). Another reason many households are headed by females is the frequency that men must move or travel away from the family in order to find employment opportunities (Sudarkasa, 2007b). These factors reduce the number of “marriageable partners” African American women have to choose from (Hummer and Hamilton, 2010).

Biculturalism.

Biculturalism is a challenge for many non-white youth, particularly those whose culture is undervalued by dominant culture such as Native Americans, Latinos, and African Americans. African American youth often live in two worlds, the white mainstream (dominant) world and the undervalued Black world, and must learn two separate sets of rules for survival in each (Peters 2007, Ogbu 2007b). Navigating the tensions between dominant culture (white mainstream) and black communities is a concept Du Bois (1903/1994) described as “double consciousness”. This challenge for African American youth is the expectation to follow the rules of the white middle class in order to be academically and economically successful, yet, in doing so, they may endure criticism for *acting white* or rejecting their own culture (Constantine & Blackmon 2002, Ogbu 2007b). This dominant culture issue has been reported by scholars working with other marginalized groups, including Chicana/o (Urrieta, 2005) and Australian Aboriginal students and parents (Sims et al, 2003). Conflicts arise for these individuals between the desire for success and the risk of “selling out” (Urrieta, 2005, p. 174) to the “hegemonic culture” (Sims et al. 2003, p. 84). Thaller (1997) explains that children expend so much energy

trying to adjust to behavioral expectations of the school that deviate from their cultural and familial values that there is “little energy leftover to devote to learning” (p. 260).

Ethnic identity development can be complicated by biculturalism. One consequence is colorism (Burton et al, 2010) which divides and stratifies the African American community according to the lightness or darkness of a person’s skin. Those with lighter skin are more privileged and often “pass” for white. This issue brings more complexity to the development of one’s ethnic identity, especially if one is marginalized within one’s own ethnic group. Multiracial children deal with this challenge as well.

African American youth do not claim to have many role models that are minority professionals, business people, and politicians, Obgu and Simons (1998) state, because these individuals have had to “adopt white ways” and “abandon their identity” in order to be successful (p. 173). This issue persists because the dominant group defines the parameters for “what it means to be an American” and subordinate groups have to figure out how to fit in with that definition (West 2001, p.7). News media helps perpetuate negative stereotypes through unbalanced/ biased journalism and covert messages that embrace the ideal of whiteness projected through advertising and entertainment (Duneier, 1992; Hill, 1999). Multiple modes of social media both promote and refute negative stereotypes, but the sources for each side are often biased toward a specific special interest or political agenda and can be of questionable validity.

Although biculturalism has been described as a challenge for African Americans, the issue of biculturalism can also be considered a strength of African Americans when they are able to conform to white normative behavioral expectations and achieve academic success. Cultural Studies scholars, however, critique this as an oppressive act because it silences and devalues

family and community's cultural history and values. A strategy for resilience would be considered to share their "counter-narratives" as legitimate truths about their own reality (Milner, 2007).

Racial socialization of African American children is generally supported by the entire extended family through a "notion of collectivity" in being responsible for every child in the family (Sudarkasa, 2007a, p. 36). Cultural pride and Afrocentricity has been positively associated with self-esteem in African American youth (Constantine and Blackmon, 2002). Bennett, Jr. (2006) reports multiple influences on ethnic identity, but most significant were neighborhood risk and racial socialization. Ethnic identity is positively related to academic achievement and engagement by African American students (Scott-Jones, 1995). Elmore and Gaylord-Harden (2013) presented an integrated model for the influence racial socialization and supportive parenting had on internalizing and externalizing behaviors of African American children. Together, youth experienced positive outcomes.

Networks of support.

Hummer and Hamilton (2010) explain the concept of "familism" in which parents and children are part of a strong family-centric culture (p. 126). This concept is congruent with the concept of communalism in which the interests of the group are prioritized over individual needs and everyone plays a role in the success of the family or community (Scott, 2003). According to Gosa & Alexander (2007), middle-class Black families "are more likely to have family, friends, neighbors, and relations who wear different workplace collars (e.g. white, blue, and none), live more varied lifestyles, and exemplify greater diversity in value systems" (p. 298). Resilience is evident among families who have a strong connection to the community as well as among those

who seek support from relatives and/or fictive kin (Sheridan et al, 2013). Sudarkasa (2007b) reminds us that children in female-headed households tend to receive “critical support provided by adult males in roles of sons, brothers, and uncles” (p. 175).

Brown (2008) encourages parents to seek out support of community when raising children. The Black church has historically played a huge role in the Black community as one form of “complementary support” that parents receive (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, & Schoepfer, 2002, p. 69). Churches offer a “feeling of community or connectedness with a ‘church family’ and a communal network of support for single-parent families” (Boyd-Franklin & Karger 2012, p. 284). This network believes “children are a resource and a community responsibility” (Sims et al, 2003, p. 77). Family involvement in worship and other church activities has been a cornerstone of the Black family over the history of African Americans in the United States. Scott (2003) reports that spirituality is directly related to use of positive coping strategies for problem solving and self-reliance. These community factors support family cohesion. That, along with adaptability factors, impacts education because they “are positively related to adolescents’ grade point average and negatively related to their misconduct in school” (Scott-Jones 1995, p.94).

Educational Factors

Overwhelmingly, education is valued by African American families and “has been pursued as an avenue of economic advancement” (Scott-Jones, 1995, p. 83). One could argue that education of their children was the cornerstone of the Black community in the post-Civil War South, unfortunately school boards have historically failed in providing equitable instruction and learning environments for all students, particularly those belonging to non-dominant groups

(Ladson-Billings, 1994; Scott-Jones, 1995, Walker, 1996). Although *Plessy v. Ferguson* called for “separate but equal”, Black community members experienced what Anderson (1988) refers to as “double taxation” throughout segregation, paying public taxes yet receiving few, if any, municipal benefit from their contributions (p. 156). This was especially true for Black schools. An “expectation of self-help” by local school boards was required to find necessary resources to build, open, and maintain schools and provide transportation for their children (Walker, 1996, p. 21).

Overcoming these inequities strengthened the resolve and community spirit of parents, students, teachers, and administrators prior to desegregation. The value Black parents placed on education is evident by their involvement in every aspect of school operations, including attending monthly PTA meetings, transporting students on field trips, bringing food for daily lunch and special events, supporting school discipline in their homes, donating materials, time, and labor for school construction/ repair projects, and fundraising. The sacrifices parents made included use of “gas, money, and time” when lobbying for political assistance to fund necessary projects (Walker, 1996, p. 63). Black schools relied heavily on help from the entire community, including churches and philanthropic resources, to meet the financial needs to remain operational.

The spirit of the Black community was also reflected in the culture of schools. Teachers and administrators embedded themselves in the community by making frequent home visits, attending local churches, and by feeding and transporting students. One example of the “great value placed on interpersonal relationships between teachers and students”, illustrated by Walker (1996), is at Caswell County Training School (CCTS) in Yanceyville, North Carolina (p. 120).

Cecelski (1994) also depicts a “spirit of caring” between teachers and students at Hyde County Training School (HCTS) in which the “teachers and local boosters acted as surrogate parents for students, welcoming “the young people into a tight-knit and caring community” (p. 34). These teachers built relationships with their students and held them to high academic expectations, preparing them to “excel anywhere” (Cecelski, 1994, p. 64), yet instilling a sense of obligation “to go back to the community and be an effective citizen” (Walker, 1996, p. 108). A study of one African American school community in Alabama revealed that community members, involved in the school over a time span of decades, reported three main factors in the success of the school (Morris & Morris, 2002). These included “a) caring, competent, and committed teachers; b) the range of school programs and activities; and c) parental and community support and involvement” (Morris & Morris, 2002, p. 121).

Although *Plessy vs. Ferguson* was overridden by the passing and enforcement of *Brown vs. Board* (I and II), most black students still receive inequitable educational experiences due to lower funding and resources for predominantly black schools (West, 2001). This includes staffing inner city and low SES schools with less-qualified teachers (Smith & Ashiabi, 2007). At the time of desegregation, Black community members viewed the quality of vocational and liberal arts education Black students were receiving as good, if not better than that of the students at corresponding white schools. An example of this is CCTS, in Caswell County, North Carolina, who employed mostly “A level” teachers and was the only school in the county that had earned SACS accreditation (Walker, 1996, p. 8). After the Supreme Court ruled in favor of *Brown* and ordered schools across the country to desegregate, disparities in funding between white and Black schools continued as school districts sought ways to delay or avoid

desegregation all together. Black citizens were excluded from meetings in which decisions were made regarding how desegregation should take place. Freedom of choice policies, in which parents/students could choose which school they attended, were instituted across the south as a direct result of white resistance to school integration. These policies met federal desegregation standards until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, at which point school boards were required to develop system-wide desegregation plans. They were not required to involve community participation, “nor the retention of historically black schools” in this process (Cecelski, 1994, p. 77). A popular practice across the south was the closing of Black schools and busing all students to the previously all-white schools. Many Black educators lost their jobs, despite their credentials and qualifications. This method ensured that the Black students would be displaced rather than white students.

In her ethnographic study, Gloria Ladson- Billings (1994) describes “culturally relevant teaching [as] a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p.17-18). She states that often African-American students are treated as if they are white students who “just need a little extra help” (p. 9). Teacher education programs rarely adequately prepare teachers for meeting the culturally diverse needs of students (Epstein 1992, Ladson-Billings 1994, Ogbu & Simons 1998). By not recognizing the differences in our students, we are failing to meet their differing educational needs, socially, emotionally, and academically. This failure is evidenced by the disproportionately high numbers of African American and Latino students who experience exclusionary disciplinary measures (Ferguson, 2000) as well as lagging high-stakes test scores. African American students experience less success on high stakes testing and thus are segregated

within a school building via ability tracking (Hill 1999). A lower percentage of African American students participate in AP and Dual Enrollment coursework while enrolled in high school (Sudarkasa, 2007a; Gosa & Alexander, 2007). African American students also have a disproportionately higher rate of eligibility for special education services (i.e. diagnosis of learning disabilities) (Artiles et al, 2010). One of the problems is the lack of training novice and veteran teachers, alike, receive in helping them identify their own biases and assumptions of negative stereotypes, and “misunderstandings of cultural norms of social interactions” for students who are different from themselves (Swain & Noblit, 2011, p. 470). Although social foundations-type courses seem to be among the first to be released from teacher education curricula, there is hope in the commitment many teacher educators and support services (therapists, social workers, etc.) preparation programs have to build cultural competence of those entering in educational and social services professions (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Doby-Copeland, 2006).

Black citizens historically lacked a voice in the decision-making processes that involve the education of their children. Prior to desegregation, they had no say in how their tax dollars were spent by local school boards. They were also not represented on governing bodies. School officials often have lower expectations of African American parents’ ability and willingness to help their children (Epstein, 1992). The reality is that African American and low SES parents “interact with school personnel differently than white parents”; African American youth and parents have experienced difficulty in building positive relationships with teachers (Gosa & Alexander, 2007, p. 302). Through his analysis of these castelike minorities, “Ogbu has concluded that (1) no minority group does better in school because it is genetically superior than

others; (2) no minority culture is better at educating its children; and (3) no minority language is better suited for learning in school” (Ogbu & Simmons 1998, p 157).

A multidimensional study by Nichols (2004) demonstrates that minority students received twice as many disciplinary referrals and exclusionary consequences as their white counterparts; an earlier study found that discipline referrals for African American students were often more subjective in nature than those for white students (Russell, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). While Black students represent approximately 17% of the student population in the United States, they represent 34% of the students suspended out of school (Wald & Losen, 2003). Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that students behaved more defiantly if they held distrust for their teacher. These school disciplinary practices have been linked to disproportionately higher incarceration rates for black men and women (Hill 1999, Alexander 2012). Meiners (2007) reports that “Blacks, on average, are about 8 times more likely to be in a state or federal prison than whites.”; this trend has been referred to a “school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 61). The term “school-to-prison pipeline” has been described by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) as the “national trend of criminalizing rather than educating” America’s youth (Swain & Noblit, 2011, p. 466).

These challenges to educational success are caused by both “institutional practices” and “cultural representations of racial differences” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 19). Exclusionary institutional policies and practices are inherently racist as is blaming the cultural differences (attitudes, values, behaviors, family/ community practices) a student brings to school for producing “the existing pattern of punishment” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 20). Swain and Noblit (2011) report that “Black students received harsher punishments more often than other students” (p.

470). Restorative discipline practices in schools have been found to help strengthen relationships between teachers and students. Building positive relationships with students can reduce the incidents of negative behavior by students and disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices if teachers implement more culturally relevant practices in the classroom as well as ensure student learning opportunities are maximized (Ladson-Billings, 1994, Mirsky, 2011).

Racial discrimination has been associated with psychological distress experienced by African American youth (Brown & Tylka, 2011). This stress can manifest in physical ailments and thus cause higher rates of absenteeism from school. Racial socialization is a strategy utilized by parents and family members to build resilience in African American youth (Brown & Tylka, 2011). The definition of racial socialization includes parent-child interactions as well as protective strategies employed by African American parents to teach their children about a) the “realities of racism and discrimination, and to prepare them for the negative messages they may encounter” (Boyd-Franklin & Karger, 2012, p. 275); b) African American cultural heritage (Brown, 2008); and c) “healthy mistrust of non-blacks” (Constantine & Blackmon 2002, p. 324). Modes of racial socialization include teaching cultural pride and knowledge, acknowledging the current state of racial oppression, preparing African American children for racial bias they will likely encounter, and development of a cache of methods for coping with racist experiences (Brown & Tylka, 2011). Peters (2007) reminds us that the process of racial socialization differs from family to family based on the lived experiences of the parents and the decisions they make in “how they will raise their children” (p.213). Although racial socialization actually occurs among every racial and ethnic group (Stevenson, Jr., 1994), this manner of informal education is

thought to have the highest impact on success of African American students through development of positive self-identity (Brown & Tylka, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, the population of individuals who identify as black in combination with another race has grown dramatically over the past 10 years. Our categorization and labeling policies/ procedures contribute to complications with determining identities for many of our multiracial children (Burton et al, 2010). Eldeman (2007) calls on African American parents and community members to “teach our children our history so they can gain confidence, self-reliance, and courage” (pg. 325). “Ethnic Identity development is primarily the result of racial socialization process” therefore the family, in its diverse forms, is one of the most important influences in the shaping of the attitudes, and building agency in African American children (Bennett, Jr., 2006, p. 479).

An additional strength in African American students for educational factors is achievement orientation. According to Bennett, Jr. (2006), ethnic identity is positively related to academic motivation, school attachment, and fewer aggressive behaviors. Members of non-dominant groups, such as African Americans, tend to “rely more on affirming family and friends in forming an academic identity” (Gosa & Alexander, 2007, p. 296). Scott-Jones (1995) argues that parent expectations have a higher impact on student achievement than socioeconomic status. Yan (1999) reports that “families of successful African American students demonstrate equal or higher levels of parental involvement than do those of successful European American students, despite the former’s comparatively disadvantaged home environments” (p. 20).

Health and Environmental Factors

High poverty students generally have lower attendance rates than middle and upper class students (Smith & Ashiabi, 2007). This phenomenon has been attributed to lack of adequate health care and proper nutrition (Hill, 1999). Kozol (1991) reports that infant mortality rates are as high in some of the poorest areas of New York City (Central Harlem, East Harlem, and South Bronx) as they are in third-world countries such as Malaysia and Bangladesh. This is indicative of inadequate access to prenatal care. Unfortunately this trend continues for children and adults living in New York City areas; Kozol (1991) describes one particular elementary school in South Bronx in which a nurse is on duty only three days per week and the closest hospital provides unsatisfactory patient care. Additionally, it is common knowledge that the healthiest foods in the supermarket, fresh fruits, vegetables, and lean meats, are the most expensive.

The AIDS epidemic has had a greater effect on African American adults and children than any other ethnic group in the United States (Hill 1999, Hattery & Smith, 2007). According to data presented by Hattery and Smith (2007), nearly half of all new AIDS cases are diagnosed in African Americans. Due to lack of training in working with diverse cultures, which causes misunderstandings and false assumptions, African Americans frequently experience misdiagnosis when they seek medical or mental health assistance. African Americans experience a higher rate of heart disease and diabetes than other ethnic groups, yet they have inconsistent access to healthcare and health insurance (Hattery & Smith, 2007).

Boyd-Franklin and Karger's (2012) proposed "multisystem model" for training clinicians is similar to what are considered full service schools. In a multisystem or full service model (Kronick, 2002, 2005) students, parents, and community members have access to a multitude of

services such as counseling and healthcare through afterschool and evening programs in the school building. School and medical volunteers and employees of these programs are trained in cultural competence and equipped to build strong relationships with diverse populations. These models bridge social (community and family), educational, health, and political needs of families and promote resiliency.

African Americans are two times as likely to be uninsured as whites (Hattery & Smith 2007). One explanation for this is the fact that many African Americans are employed in low skilled jobs at companies that schedule employees to work part time. In doing so, they are not obligated by law to offer health plans. This situation is a challenge for many working class African American families who no longer qualify for welfare and other social services such as Medicaid. Appropriate access to both primary physicians and specialists is a challenge at all ages (Edelman 2007, Hattery & Smith 2007). The Affordable Care Act of 2010 (also known as Obamacare) will impact access to health insurance and healthcare for many individuals in all racial and ethnic groups. Three main objectives of the Affordable Care Act are 1) guaranteeing access to healthcare for all Americans, 2) improving information and creating incentives to change clinical practice, and 3) removing barriers (Kocher, Emanuel, & DeParle, 2010). An analysis by Clemans-Cope, Kenney, Buettgens, Carroll, and Blavin (2012), using a “microsimulation model”, projects that Blacks will see a reduction in “uninsurance rates” by 53.1 percent and the Black-white differential will drop “from 7.7 percentage points to 3.3 percentage points” (p. 924).

African American neighborhoods have fallen victim to environmental issues that can also pose health concerns. Municipalities historically have chosen low income neighborhoods as

locations for industrial development and disposal or storage of waste. This exposes people living in these areas to pollutants that can potentially cause serious acute and chronic illnesses (Hill 1999, Hattery & Smith 2007).

Economic Factors

The economic challenges faced by many African American families are connected with educational challenges that limit employment opportunities and earning potential. More African American females than males attend college and earn higher degrees (McAdoo, 2007), and a disproportionately low percentage of African Americans, compared to white students, matriculate to graduation at primarily white higher education institutions (PWIs) (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). Only 21% of African Americans with college-educated parents actually graduate from college, compared to 47% for white students whose parents are college-educated (Gosa & Alexander, 2007, p. 289). This creates a disparity in the ability of African American men to attain higher paying jobs as well as creates social challenges for Black women who are the bread winners or sole providers for their family.

Hill (1999) argues that "families headed by Black women are disproportionately poor not because they do not have husbands but because they [the men] do not have jobs" (p. 18). Increases in economic instability can lead to family instability (Hill, 1999, McAdoo, 2007). Sudarkasa (2007b) calls this the "systematic unemployment of males" (p. 179). As mentioned earlier, African American men have historically had to travel or move in order to find suitable employment. This challenge is particularly complex because there are a variety of factors that influence the job ceiling that many African American men experience (Sudarkasa, 2007b). These factors include shifts from high paying manufacturing jobs to low wage service economy,

back-to-back recessions, the exporting of jobs from inner-cities, increase in immigrant population as competition for low skilled jobs, and the importing of drugs and weapons (Hill 1999). The decrease in employment opportunities has led many African American men to resort to involvement in the underground economy in order to contribute economically to the family. Sudarkasa (2007b) believes that poverty, crime, and unstable family conditions are often interrelated.

A result of the challenges in attaining education, job training, and stable employment is difficulty securing acceptable housing. Hill (1999) blames a “critical shortage of affordable housing for low-income families” for social issues such as homelessness, domestic violence, child neglect, and overcrowding in substandard and unhealthy dwellings (p. 160). Gosa and Alexander (2007) also report that “African Americans [are] more than twice as likely as whites to be denied a home loan” (p. 308), which is just one example of the kind of institutional discrimination African American families experience (Hill, 1999). Many middle-class Black families often live in the same neighborhoods as poorer Black families; their children attending the same underfunded schools (McAdoo, 2007). This challenge reinforces a fatalistic, also referred to as nihilistic, attitude that social and financial mobility is impossible no matter how hard one works or how much education one attains.

The greatest challenge African American families face, according to Cornel West (2001), is nihilism. Nihilism is defined as an extreme form of skepticism; it is a belief in the destructiveness of society and of oneself and a rejection of traditional values, morals, ideas, and

beliefs.²² The threat of nihilism is that African Americans accept the deficit theories of inferiority and blame as truth (Duneier, 1992). They believe the “notion that [they] are the cause of [their] own degradation” (Sudarkasa, 2007b, p. 179). West (2001) contends that this hopeless philosophy can be nurtured through two inseparable camps, structural, “constraints on the life chances of black people” (p. 17), and behavioral, “impediments on black mobility” (p. 18). A lack of acknowledgement of the history of African American oppression, culture, and resilience within the American story contributes to both the nihilistic reasoning of the black community, but also has been used as a tool to support governmental budget “cutbacks for poor people struggling for decent housing, child care, health care, and education” (West, 2001, p. 22). The negative stereotypes of historically underserved groups become self-fulfilling prophecies (Artiles et al 2010). West (2001) places some of the blame for this on black leaders who quietly allow these stereotypes to remain the face of an entire race. Although West (2001) paints a bleak picture of nihilism, he says it can be overcome through “love and care” (p. 29). Johnson and Staples (2005) agree that these are “essential for overcoming the harsh realities of being Black in America” (p. 244).

Political Factors

Cornel West (2001) states that “private aims trump public aspirations” (p. xvi). This statement summarizes the challenges many African American families face due to racist and classist policies that benefit corporate and political interests rather than provide equitable resources and support for all communities within a town or city. Urban renewal has brought revenue to cities and economic growth for business owners. Unfortunately this municipal

²² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nihilism>

improvement has further marginalized African American families who once lived in these urban neighborhoods. Black communities have been destabilized through gentrification and “slum clearance policies” (Hill 1999 p. 30).

Restrictions on Affirmative Action legislation and implementation have affected employment and educational opportunities for many African Americans. In the late 1980’s the sentiment that gained popularity was that the need for specific initiatives to support minorities no longer existed and thus a colorblind paradigm ensued. In reality, affirmative action policies benefitted mostly white women and some middle class African Americans, but rarely benefitted low SES African Americans (Hill, 1999; Hattery & Smith, 2007).

Welfare reform and budget cuts over the past 30 years have reduced support for impoverished African Americans and promoted single-parent households. Although more than twice as many whites receive welfare benefits than African Americans, a disproportionately higher percentage of the African American population receive some form of “cash public assistance” compared to the percentage of the white population who receive the same assistance (Hattery & Smith, 2007, p. 220). Early welfare programs, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), from the Lyndon B. Johnson era of the 1960’s only provided benefits to families in which there was “only one parent present in the home” (Hattery & Smith, 2007, p. 48). In *Rachel and Her Children*, Jonathan Kozol (1988) describes the disintegration of several families due to circumstances that led them to need welfare and housing assistance. In order for a mother and her children to receive the support they needed to survive, the husband/father had to find housing elsewhere, most often in homeless shelters.

These welfare programs were reformed during the Bill Clinton era, but Hill (2007) is particularly critical of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, referring to it as “anti-family legislation” which included cuts in food stamp support for those in low-paying jobs (p. 329). Those who have suffered the greatest loss of government support are the working poor. Welfare support is removed so soon after the recipient obtains employment, there is no support to build a savings to increase the chances these families will not need to reapply for welfare assistance in the future (Hill 1999, 2007; Hattery & Smith, 2007). Additionally, welfare recipients struggle to choose between finding employment and accepting continued welfare benefits because the benefits provide non-taxed income that exceeds what a person would make working fulltime at a minimum wage job (Hattery & Smith 2007). Due to disproportionately high incarceration rates of African American men and women (as well as drug abuse), childrearing often falls under the guardianship or informal adoption of children by grandparents or other relatives. Relative caregivers, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, receive less social and financial support from the government than nonrelative caregivers (Hill 2007).

The concept of resistance is important and ties into a democratic concept of education. Resistance has largely been viewed as a political act, primarily because of the tension between dominant groups (oppressors) and dominated groups (oppressed). Resistance is required to achieve freedom (Friere, 1970/2010). Much of the lack of success students of color experience is attributed to their internal and external resistance to “acting white” or following the dominant culture’s expectations for behavior in the school setting (Ogbu, 2007b). This resistance not only affects students through exclusionary discipline tactics that result in drop-out/ push-out, but also

contribute to declining student achievement throughout the educational experience of Black children, in particular boys (Ferguson 2000; Ladson-Billings 2011).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Stevens (2002) describes resistance among inner-city Black girls as a demonstration of resilience using a theoretical framework she constructed called the “person-process-context model” adapted from Spencer’s (1995) model which includes “meaning-making processes as a point of nexus between persons and their contexts” (p. xviii). She argues that “many economically disadvantaged families cope in ways that transcend the limitations of hazardous restrictive racist impoverished environments” (p. 7). Historical examples of people and groups who showed resilience through cultural and political resistance, according to Stevens (2002), includes Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, as well as the youth who participated in the civil rights movement.

The African American community, at-large, demonstrated resilience in overcoming Jim Crow laws and other overtly discriminatory structures through the organization of boycotts, sit-ins, and marches. Although intimidation tactics (i.e. denial of credit, bank loans, and job opportunities) were used by white citizens to maintain power and punish Black citizens who had allegiances with civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, the acts of resistance shown by members of the Black community strengthened and empowered them (Baker, 2006). Individuals gained collective power during the civil rights movement through participation in citizenship school programs at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee (Horton, 1998). Key players in the civil rights movement converged at Highlander to organize and mobilize through an educational concept Horton called “learning from the people” to effect significant change in the landscape of Black communities throughout the south (Horton, 1998, p.

100). Not just a literacy program to help Blacks gain the right to vote, the citizenship schools promoted social activism and developed personal agency in its participants (Horton, 1998). Horton refers to this type of education as “out-of-schooling” or “experiential education” in which participants learned from each other while Horton played more of the role of facilitator rather than educator (Horton & Friere, 1990, p. 201-202).

Examples of resistance that effected significant change for African Americans range from small individual acts such as Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on a bus to larger organized efforts such as the boycott of school attendance by Black students in Hyde County, North Carolina (Ceceleski, 1994). Rosa Parks drew nation-wide attention to Jim Crow laws that perpetuated separate and unequal access to community and economic resources. The Hyde County boycott, which lasted an entire school year, grew beyond a boycott for educational equity to encompass participation in the greater civil rights movement throughout North Carolina. The experience of boycotting against an unjust school desegregation plan and protesting for civil rights empowered activists of all ages. In the end, members of the Black community in Hyde County had a voice and value in the greater social and political network. Most of their demands were met, including retention of Black teachers and administrators, equitable student representation on the desegregation transition committee, and two Black schools, originally slated to be closed, remained open (Ceceleski, 1994).

Gaps in Literature and Implications for Further Research

This literature review has scratched the surface of substantive research on the histories, challenges, and strengths of African American families. In this section, I share recommendations and gaps in our current scholarship to demonstrate the contribution this dissertation project may

make on growing our body of knowledge regarding family structures and informal education practices. I will discuss three major recommendations for research involving African American families: 1) the need to combat deficit discourse and promote social justice through transformation of social, political, and economic policy; 2) the need for the study of modern family structures, in particular, extended African American families; and 3) the need for more qualitative studies on African American families, utilizing ethnographic methods to provide a deeper understanding of nuanced lived experiences.

Call for Transformative Research

Both West (2001) and Constantine & Blackmon (2002) recommend inclusion of multiple research paradigms. In particular, West calls for transformative research that will influence the structures and institutions that have historically oppressed people of color as the starting point, rather than the “problems of black people” (p. 6). Cultural studies research draws on multiple disciplines and methods in order to challenge language, assumptions, and power structures by sharing multiple voices and perspectives. This project, presented as a counter-story, is transformative from a CRT perspective because the lived experiences of people of color are the central focus as a means to challenge the dominant discourse regarding the value of informal education provided by an African American family for its children. Burton et al (2010) call for “research on racial socialization that incorporates critical race and colorism perspectives” in order to facilitate the generation of “new conceptual approaches and insights about families in the multicultural society.” (p 455). While CRT is not recognized in the mainstream as a methodology, Solozano & Yosso (2002) argue that the counter-story is a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories” of racial, gender, and class privilege (p. 32).

My project supports at least two of the five central tenets of CRT: 1) a “challenge to dominant ideology”, and 2) the “centrality of experiential experience” (Solozano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

Nobles (2007) supports future research focused on the strengths of the African American parent-child relationship. He maintains that there are still gaps “in studies that honestly reflect the condition of African American family life and are not guided by various racist assumptions of African American inferiority and negativity” (p. 72). Peters (2007) agrees, stating that “research on black children and their families has generally been simplistic and often been pejorative in its approach” (p. 209). Phase II of this project aims to provide nuanced details about the structure, interactions, relationships, and strengths of one African American family (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Taylor, 1991). The purpose of telling their story is not only to provide a counter-story of how an African American family raises successful children, but also develop a deeper understanding of how one family functions collectively to overcome day to day challenges.

Study of Modern Family Structures

Family has been defined many different ways; in fact, one could argue that each individual person will provide a unique definition of family based on their own lived experiences. Hattery and Smith (2007) provide four definitions of family ranging from least inclusive (nuclear family) to most inclusive (people whom you love and reciprocally provide family-type support). Their inclusive definition of family is “a circle of people who care about each other and either provide or draw some social support from each other” (p. 12).

Unfortunately, the more inclusive family structures, such as extended families, LGBTQ families, and fictive kinships, are rarely included in research or recognized as such by institutions.

Gerstal's (2011) examination of articles published in the *American Sociological Review* and *Journal of Marriage and Family* netted 69 articles out of 570 articles that were "focused on extended kin rather than nuclear families" in a six year time span (p. 3). Her recommendation is that we challenge our biases about the structure of families and look more closely at the "realities and practices of families and the care they actually give and receive" (p. 15), specifically recognizing that "kin are a community resource" (p. 12). The family participating in this project is structured non-traditionally (involving both extended and fictive kin) and utilizes what they call "our village approach" to raising their children. This project will add to the collection of work that focuses on an inclusive family structure and challenges the boundaries of what is commonly considered a family member.

Sudarkasa (2007b) shares that little research has been completed on learning more about female-headed households in which male spouses or partners are present. They also share that there is little research on the economic roles African American females play in co-provider households. The family in this study is an example of a household with multiple providers, although technically headed by their father, the patriarch; each sister maintains employment and contributes financially (as well as physically, socially, and emotionally) to resources for the general household and the children. Additionally, Roberto, the father of Martha's youngest son, lives in the household and contributes financially, socially, and emotionally to the general household and the children.

McAdoo (2007) recommends revising existing theories based on current census data. Historically, people have been limited in their choices of demographic categories with which to identify with as provided in the census surveys. While census surveys are becoming more

inclusive by expanding one's ability to report more accurately how they identify, there still remains individuals and groups who are *othered* through under-representation. State reporting of student demographics is even more limiting than the national census survey. Several children in the Sullivan household identify as multiracial, which adds additional layers of complexity on their family structure. Even though there are influences from both white and Hispanic cultures in the household, I still consider this family to be an African American family; however my reporting of their story will not be limited to only one culture.

Need for Qualitative Studies on African American Families

My choice to implement qualitative research methods for this dissertation project is not only influenced by the kinds of questions I am trying to answer, but also by recommendations of respected scholars in the fields of Critical studies, Child and Family studies, and African American studies. Some of the more recent research on racial socialization and resiliency was conducted quantitatively via survey methods (Bennett, Jr., 2006; Elmore, 2013). The reports are limited in that the context for how the participants "self-reported" in these surveys wasn't fully disclosed. Several of these scholars called for a more in depth analysis using qualitative methods such as ethnography. A number of scholars have recommended that future research on African American families should include ethnographies (Bennett, Jr., 2006; Burton et al, 2010; Hill, 1999) because the "experiences of resilient African Americans remains understudied" (Brown & Tylka, 2011, p. 261).

Hill (1999) argues that "it has been ethnographic studies that have increased our understanding markedly of various *processes* in black families that enhance the resilience of low-income black children and youth" (p. 45). This type of research may provide better insight

into development of ethnic identity than traditional survey methods (Bennett, Jr., 2006). Ethnography may force researchers to include an historical perspective of African American families as Artiles et al (2010) call for.

Three notable ethnographies that focus on African American families and/or the academic success of African American children are Ladson-Billings' (1994) *Dreamkeepers*, Ferguson's (2000) *Bad Boys*, and Lareau's (2003) *Unequal Childhoods*. Each ethnography looks at a different aspect of the lives of African American children. Ladson-Billings' (1994) *Dreamkeepers* is the study of several teachers who were identified by African American families as having been effective in providing culturally relevant educational experiences for their children. Ferguson's (2000) *Bad Boys* documents three years of fieldwork in an elementary school with a focus on patterns of discipline and punishment, particularly of African American boys. Lareau's (2003) *Unequal Childhoods* documents the intersectionality of class and race. This multilayered study looks most closely at how children of different classes spend their extracurricular time.

Bracey's (2010) analysis of ethnographic data and subsequent interviews with two African American families is most closely connected to my research project; however her work focuses on the racial socialization of their children. I seek to explore how one family educates their children, including educative interactions of the children with family and community members, the educative experiences of the children in a variety of extracurricular activities. The focus of my work is broad as it explores the nuances of how two mothers raise their children with collective support from each other, their extended family and friends. Themes that emerge will most likely include, but won't be limited to racial socialization.

In this chapter I discussed the concept of deficit thinking and gave a review of literature on the strengths and challenges experienced by many African American families, both of which influence my research agenda. In closing, I'd like to share a personal reason for following this research agenda. I read *Rachel and her Children* (Kozol, 1988) in 1990, when I was a freshman at Emory & Henry College. To say this book changed my life is an understatement. I grew up in a small suburban town, sheltered from harsh realities of social injustice, listening to Reagan conservatism and hearing messages about welfare moms who had babies just to get more money from the government. In reading the stories of Rachel and other mothers and fathers who were trying to survive and keep their families intact humanized a deeply political issue for me. Who knew that moving from a sleepy southern town to an even sleepier town in the hills of southwest Virginia would expand my worldview in such a powerful way! As a cultural studies scholar, it is my intention to continue this tradition of challenging our assumptions and stereotypes through the sharing of peoples' stories, in particular those which are counter to the dominant discourse. These stories may help another reader glimpse an issue through a different lens. I may not tell the Sullivan's story as poignantly as Kozol can, but I certainly try. In the next chapter, I describe my research methods, design, and implementation for this project.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss qualitative research, give my rationale for the methodology I chose to use for this dissertation project, and describe the research design and process (data collection and analysis) for this project, including my role as the researcher. I also address issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, confirmability, dependability, and reflexivity.

For this dissertation project, I conducted a qualitative case study of one African American family's use of informal education practices to influence academic and behavioral success in the school setting. The overarching research question to be answered through this project is: *How does this family educate its children?*

There are five potential outcomes of this study:

1. To develop a deeper understanding of how this family educates their children; in particular this study aims to share the story of how one African American family educates and socializes their children and to challenge negative assumptions and stereotypes regarding parent involvement in and valuing of formal education by African American parents.
2. To deepen our understanding of the relationship between formal and informal education.
3. To show characteristics of informal education provided by African American parents and family members that support success in the traditional school setting.

4. To strengthen the argument that African American families are resilient and the cultural pride instilled in them through childrearing is one of the foundations to their success.
5. To bring more clarity to the complexity of how modes of education are transmitted.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research aims to bring an understanding of lived experiences of participants through their perspectives as part of the social and cultural landscape (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research, as an inductive, interdisciplinary process, is naturalistic and takes place in a real-world setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2009). Types of qualitative research include phenomenological studies, ethnographic studies, naturalistic studies, participatory inquiries, historical studies, grounded theory research, narrative analysis, critical research, case study research, and numerous combinations of these genres (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2009). The complexity of qualitative research lies in how the researcher's epistemology is applied through data collection and analytical methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For this dissertation, I have chosen to combine case study and ethnographic methods. This section describes these two methods and how they complement one another.

The phrase often used to describe case study is *bounded system* (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Merriam (2009) further describes case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). Stake (1995) describes case study as “both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning” (p. 237). Yin (2009) distinguishes case study from other qualitative methods that investigate “holistic and meaningful characteristics of

real life events” in that the focus of case study is on contemporary events rather than past events (p. 4). The unit of study (or case) may be an individual (person) or a collective (group, organization). There may also be units of analysis embedded within a larger case. For example, a particular school may be the unit of study and several classrooms within that school may represent separate embedded cases within the same study (Yin, 2009). Purposeful sample selection is a characteristic of qualitative case studies (Merriam, 2009). Methods for collecting data in a case study include observations, interviews, and document analysis. The depth of information gathered depends on the structure of the interview questions (structured, semi-structured, open-ended), the detail from observations, as well as the proximity of the researcher to the case. The more open-ended and the closer the researcher gets to the case (participation in/with the phenomenon of interest), the more likely the case study is to resembling ethnography (Hatch, 2002).

The phrase often used to describe ethnography is “thick description” (Barker 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Geertz 1977; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). In order to be able to tell a thorough story, the ethnographer must both observe and participate over an extended period of time (Hammersley, 2006). Van Maanen (1988/2011) describes ethnography as an interpretive craft, rather “a social practice concerned with the study and representation of culture” (p. 150). Hammersley (2006) defines ethnography as “a form of social and educational research that emphasizes the importance of studying *at first hand* what people do and say in particular contexts” (emphasis his, p. 4). Methods used to gather information for the story include participant observation, open-ended interviews, and analysis of documents or artifacts. The objective is to provide a better understanding of people’s perspectives (Hatch, 2002; Merriam,

2009; Van Maanen 1988/2011). As with any research method, however, there is a “tension between what we might call participant and analytic perspectives” (Hammersley, 2006, p.4). Ethnography is “discovery-oriented research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 7), therefore the ethnographer is to avoid “preconceived ideas or theories beyond the general assumptions” (Jacob 1998, p. 19).

Ethnography traditionally involves “lengthy contact” with participants (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4), and researchers position themselves completely separate from the group they are studying. The “new ethnography”, as Goodall, Jr. (2000) describes, situates the ethnographer within the context of the culture being studied. The new ethnography “requires that [researcher] observations and evaluations of others be firmly rooted in a credible, self-reflexive voice” (Goodall Jr., 2000, p. 23). According to Saukko (2003), the “goal of the new ethnography is to develop modes of study and writing that enable the scholar to be truer to the lived experiences of other people” (p. 72). Three strategies specific to the new ethnography as a methodology are collaboration between researcher and participants, self-reflexivity by the researcher, and polyvocality (Saukko, 2003). The final products of new ethnographies are “creative narratives” (p. 9) that meet the “reading expectations of its intended audience” (p. 73). Ethnography, new ethnography in particular, is an accepted methodology by cultural studies scholars (Saukko, 2003; Van Maanen 1988/2011).

So how do we describe an ethnography embedded in a case study? Many research experts describe these two as separate methodologies with separate purposes. Stake (1995) and Merriam (2009) both distinguish case study as the *what* that is to be studied (unit of study) and ethnography as a *how* to study it (emphasis mine). Hatch (2002) argues that “it is not perfectly clear that qualitative case study research is distinct from ethnography or participant observation

studies” (p. 30). The longitudinal nature of ethnographic studies have often been a distinguishing factor, however contemporary ethnographic studies have become briefer (i.e. months rather than years). An example of such a contemporary ethnographic study is Jeong-Hee Kim’s (2010) ethnographic case study of student resistance at Borderlands Alternative High School in which data was collected over a five month period of time.

When we use both case study and ethnography in a qualitative manner, though, the two practices can often merge because the data collecting techniques both include participant observation, interviews, and artifact/ document analysis. Ethnographic studies are always concerned with representation and interpretation of culture (Van Maanen, 1988/2011). An ethnography embedded within a case study would then involve a specific bounded case in which the focus of study is culture, “socially established structures of meaning” (Geertz, 1977, p. 12). Observations made for both case study and ethnography are more reliable when they occur in the natural setting (Hatch 2002). Research paradigms for both case study and ethnography tend to be constructivist/ interpretivist in nature because the intent is to bring deeper understanding to a cultural (for ethnography) phenomenon (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2009).²³ The researcher’s role is to interpret and communicate the perspectives of the participants in balance with their own (Goodall, Jr., 2000; Lather, 2009). The researcher presents their interpretations and the reader then constructs knowledge based on the connections s/he makes between the new information and prior experience or knowledge.

For post-structural and post-modern scholars, ethnography can take a more transformative role where “current systems of power and privilege” are challenged in an effort to

²³ Medical Case Studies are excluded from this generalization.

effect change (Glesne, 2011, p. 15). Solozano and Yosso (2002) refer to use of ethnography for transformative purposes, such as counter storytelling as a CRT methodology in which the lived experiences of people of color are the central focus as a means to challenge the dominant discourse of specific events and situations. They see the counter-story as a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32).

Value of Specific Methodology

This dissertation project is a bounded case study, involving one particular family. The phenomenon of interest is their informal educative practices- in particular the teaching and learning of specific values and skills the adult family members prioritize as most important for the success of their children. Because this case study involves a single family and requires a deeper understanding of their practices and beliefs, I have chosen to employ ethnographic methods of participant observation and conversational interviews. Qualitative ethnographic methods are also appropriate for this project because the intent is to develop a deeper understanding of how this family educates its children. This project reflects a constructivist ontology and epistemology in which multiple realities are expected and knowledge is co-constructed by both researcher and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2009).

In order to more fully understand the knowledge, skills, and values taught by older members of the family, I spent time with this family when they were engaged in ordinary activities. I call my time spent with the family in these activities *participant-observation* because I was both actively involved in these activities as a participant while simultaneously trying to maintain an “objective detachment” in order to record and analyze data with fidelity

(Tedlock, 2000, p. 465). As previously mentioned, several previous studies have relied on self-reporting of how African American families socialize their children. By collecting data through participant observation techniques and conversational interviews with parents and other significant adult family members in the natural setting, I am able to provide a rich description of this family as educators of their children. Choosing this method for researching this topic is complex in that it situates me, the researcher, within and throughout the context of the rich description (Vann Maanen, 1988/2011). I will discuss how my involvement with this family both limits and strengthens this study later in this chapter, as well in my analysis. Throughout the research process both emic and etic perspectives will be balanced and recognized (Goodall, Jr., 2000; Merriam, 2009). The product of this project includes both a narrative (counter-narrative) of the story of what family members have described as “our village approach” to educating their children and a thematic analysis of triangulated data.

Research Design

The original research design consists of three distinct phases, as discussed in Chapter 1, in which members of the case are interviewed and I participate in a number of family activities. In phase 1, semi-structured interviews with the two parents, Martha and Ruth (who are the central units of the case study), are conducted. Significant adult family members, identified by Martha and Ruth, are also interviewed. The purpose of these initial interviews is to determine their definition of family, student success and how success is measured, their values on education, and what educative activities the children are involved in outside of school. During this phase, I also interview an extended family member who provides family history and the family’s tradition of values and priorities placed on education.

In phase 2, data is collected through field notes from participant-observation of at least six family activities such as sports practice, family dinners, and unstructured activities at home and in the community. My field notes involve observations on naturally occurring interactions and conversations among family members as well as recounting and reflecting on conversations I have with adult family members at these events.

In phase 3, I conduct follow-up interviews with Ruth and Martha to probe for deeper understanding and filling in gaps in their family's story through member checking. This is also when I ask additional questions that arise from my experiences spending time with their family.

Participants (Unit of Study)

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the family that participated in this case study is familiar to the researcher via social affiliation with one of the extended members, an uncle. The central members of this case are two sisters who live in one household and collectively raise their children. They live with the patriarch of the family, their father, who is also very involved in raising the children. Additional members of the unit of study were identified by the sisters as highly influential in providing informal education experiences for their children on an ongoing and routine basis. Members of this group whom I include in this study spend a significant amount of time with the children on a regular basis (i.e. at least one time per week and/or at least two to four hours per week). The members who meet the first criteria must also spend the majority of that time interacting with one or more of the children. While it is recommended that extreme cases or cases that markedly vary from the norm be chosen for study (Van Maanen, 1988/2011; Yin, 2009), I hesitate to label the family selected for this study as normative or deviant. Labeling this family as either normative or deviant would risk irresponsible

stereotyping of the unit of study, as well as others who are of the same race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Family History

It is important to place these participants into the context of their family history because the values, skills, and knowledge taught informally to the children in this family are strongly influenced by the traditions this family has passed down for several generations. Because this family is large, a family tree is provided (Figure 3.1) to help the reader understand relationships between family members. Family members who were active participants in this study are shown in **bold** type. Most information about the family history was provided by Dave (see footnote 13) during the first interview. Gilbert, Sr., Martha, and Ruth also provided anecdotal information about their family, especially in regard to interpersonal relationships between members of the family and instances of family elders educating them when they were growing up.

Placing a high importance on education is a tradition that goes back generations in this family. Just two generations removed from slavery, Martha and Ruth impart the same value of education as a tool for upward mobility as their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents did for their children. Their mother, Virginia, was a baker and caterer at the finest hotel in town for over 30 years. She began working there when the hotel opened in 1982 and remained a full time employee until 2003 when she passed away following a brief battle with cancer. Their father, Gilbert, Sr., calls himself “retired” but he still works nearly 40 hours per week as a cook in the kitchen at the same hotel his wife worked in for so many years. Before retiring in 2011, Gilbert, Sr. worked full time for 26 years at a company that made water heaters and part time as a cook at the local hotel. He reminisced that Todd, the food and beverage director of the hotel, asked him

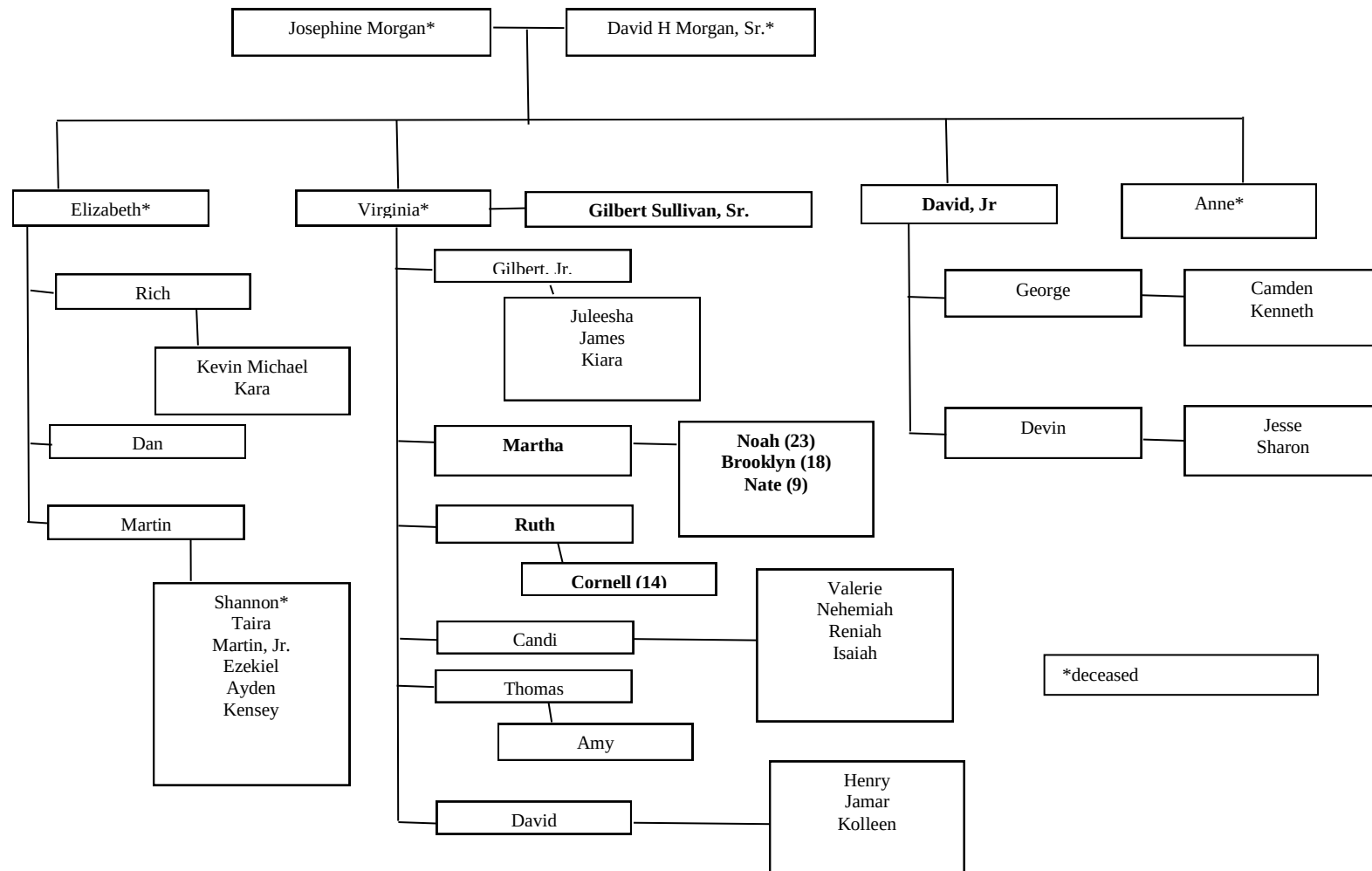


Figure 3.1. Sullivan Family Tree

to come cook at the hotel for a few weeks until he could get some cooks hired. Gilbert has now been at this hotel for 30 years and has a close relationship with Todd. He considers Todd family because he was such a support throughout Virginia's fight with cancer. The hotel is a special place for Gilbert also because he says "the workers helped raise the kids." He attributes the "village approach" his children apply to raising their children directly to their experience being raised by the hotel staff.

Although Gilbert, Sr. is the patriarch of the family, Figure 3.1 shows a depiction of Virginia's family tree, beginning with her parents, Josephine and David Morgan, Sr. The reason for this is because the Morgan side of the family has been identified by members of the family, including Gilbert, Sr. as having the greatest influence on the traditions and priorities set by this family to ensure the academic success of their children.

When asked about his family background, Gilbert, Sr. told me his parents had him later in life; his father was 44 years old and his mother was 38 years old when he was born. He had two siblings, a brother and sister, who were nearly 20 years his senior. Gilbert, Sr. knew little about his father. His name was R.T. Sullivan and he was from Louisiana. Gilbert's aunt, Erma, told him that his father was an engineer and came to the region in the early 1940s to contribute to the war effort. During that time, he met and courted Gilbert, Sr.'s mother. After World War II ended, Gilbert believes his father returned to his wife and children in Louisiana. My efforts to find more information on R.T. Sullivan met with poor results. The local artifacts, such as telephone directories, could not place an R.T. Sullivan in the area at that time following World War II; there were few public records available to me regarding whether or not R.T. Sullivan

lived in the area during World War II. When Gilbert, Sr. married Virginia Morgan, her family became his family. Her parents became his parents, and her siblings became his siblings. They were, and still are, a close knit family. Gilbert, Sr. is now one of two patriarchs of this family; the other is my friend Dave, who is Gilbert's brother-in-law, Virginia's only brother. Virginia was the middle child. Her sister, Elizabeth, was the oldest, and David, Jr. (Dave) was the youngest. Her parents were Josephine and David Morgan, Sr. Virginia and Gilbert, Sr. lived with her parents until their second child, Martha, was born.

When Josephine married David, Sr., she moved from another county (about 40 miles away) to Sunrise to join his family. They lived in the family homestead and raised three children: Elizabeth, Virginia, and David, Jr. (Dave). They had a third daughter, Anne, who died shortly after birth. Josephine and David Morgan, Sr.'s parents were former slaves. Josephine's mother, who is thought to have taken the name Lenoir after her former owners, died when Josephine was young. Her father worked for the railroad, thus Josephine was raised by older siblings. David, Sr.'s father, Charles Howard Morgan, a "red-headed freckle face", came to America on a slave ship, migrating inland from the coast via the slave trade. Once freed, Charles became a minister and built the Mt. Olive AME Zion Church in Sunrise. Josephine and David, Sr. carried the torch as elders until their deaths. The Sullivans and Morgans still call this church home.

Josephine was an educator, holding "more degrees than most people she taught with". Prior to desegregation, Josephine was principal of Booker T. Washington Elementary School and also taught grades 5-8. Dave describes this school as a small, two-room school with two teachers

(his mother and Ms. Poore) where students received a lot of one-on-one instruction. Dave spoke highly of the level of education he received at Booker T Washington, recalling that his preparation in the Black school put him towards the top of his class when the schools integrated just prior to his 5th grade year. He recalled winning awards such as spelling bees and poetry contests and being a classroom helper to his white teacher, Ms. Hammer. Unfortunately, desegregation of schools meant that Josephine would not teach Dave directly. In 1965, she went to work at Wagoner Elementary as the librarian and, later, as the remedial reading teacher. In her retirement, Josephine babysat Virginia and Gilbert's six children while they worked. Always the educator, Ruth and Martha reminisced that "Mammaw" used to make them work on their cursive and their public speaking skills.

Ruth and Martha have another sister, Candi, and three brothers, Gilbert, Jr., Thomas, and David. Their birth order, from oldest to youngest is Gilbert, Jr. Martha, Ruth, Candi, Thomas, and David. As mentioned previously, education has always been strongly valued for generations by this family. Virginia and Gilbert, Sr. graduated from high school and all of their children have high school diplomas and some post-secondary schooling and/or training. David actually took the GED a year prior to high school graduation, became trained as a certified nurse assistant (CNA), and entered the workforce. He currently works at one of the leading teaching hospitals in the state.

Martha is the only sibling to earn a Bachelor's degree. It took her eleven years to finish her degree as a part time student. Over the time span from start to finish she gave birth to two children and worked several jobs to support them as a single parent. Virginia was committed to

providing support for Martha so she could finish her degree. She drove Martha to campus, babysat her children, and helped pay for gas. Martha spoke proudly of how her mother played with her oldest child, Noah, on the front lawn of the flagship building on campus. Virginia kept her commitment throughout her battle with cancer because she wanted to see her daughter finish her education. Martha graduated in December 2002; Virginia passed away in January 2003. Since graduation, she has worked as a social worker at a government agency. Her two oldest children, Noah and Brooklyn, are both high school graduates. Noah attended a four-year university on a football scholarship and earned his Bachelor degree in December 2015; Brooklyn entered community college with a full scholarship after graduating high school in June 2015. Martha's youngest child, Nate, is eight years old and she co-parents him with her life partner, Roberto, who is Nate's father.

Ruth completed nearly two years of community college and has been a patient services coordinator for the past eight years and is raising her 14-year old son, Cornell, as a single parent. She also expressed how supportive their mother was regarding continuing education. Virginia also provided transportation for Ruth to attend college; driving her 30 minutes each way to the nearest community college. Gilbert, Sr. was just as supportive, however, his work schedule did not allow him to take as active a role in providing tangible support to his children regarding their education. His educational influence, expressed by his granddaughter, Brooklyn (Martha's daughter), has been in providing encouragement and emotional support. She stated, "My grandfather always says, "Get your education. Someone can come and take everything you have in life, but they can't take your education".

Brooklyn now passes on this philosophy to her younger brother, Nate, cousin, Cornell, as well as other young family members. She regularly helps Nate with his homework and says she has also helped Cornell with his when he was younger. The older children are expected to carry the torch and help the younger children through word and deed. Martha stated, “the younger ones want to do everything the older ones do”, and many new traditions have come from following the lead of an older family member. Cornell, now a 9th grade student, is the third child in the family, behind his two older cousins Noah and Nehemiah, to earn money in the summer working as an umpire for the local Little League organization. Noah expressed that the goal for how the children are raised in the family is “to be better than the older generation [and] make our family better and better”.

Ruth teared up when speaking of her mother; although it had been 12 years since her passing, she continues to grieve. They all do; she is still a powerful influence in their lives 12 years after her death. With Virginia’s passing, Martha has stepped into her shoes as a leader, encourager, and problem-solver for the family. This doesn’t mean she solves everyone’s problems alone. The family works together. According to Gilbert, Sr., they do almost everything together as a family, “as a unit”. They still live individual lives, but when a crisis of any sort occurs, “we bring it to the table or go to dinner and discuss it to determine what we need to do to help one of the members of the family”.

Setting

Data was collected in the “natural setting” (Merriam, 2009) such as community locations where the family spends much of their time; examples include the ballpark and local restaurants.

While the central members of this case study live in Sunrise, all locations in which data was collected are in Mellon, the town where the children attend school. This family is highly involved and respected in this town.

I was a participant-observer during the second phase of this project and thus took field notes at the events where the family invited me to participate. I met with participants in locations where they were most comfortable meeting with me. Several interviews took place in public restaurants. Observations and participation in family activities took place at the Little League park, middle school baseball field, local restaurants, soccer complex, and middle school. Some data was also collected at Martha's place of employment. I was never invited to their home in Sunrise and therefore did not observe education practices in the most informal setting.

Sunrise is a small incorporated town with a population of less than 900 residents over 3.2 square miles. According to the 2000 census, the demographic make-up of Sunrise was 96.7% white, 1.1 % African American, 0.1% Native American, 0.4% Asian, 0.8% Hispanic or Latino, and 1.6% from two or more races. This means approximately 10 people in Sunrise identified as African American in 2000. At least 7 of these individuals belong to the Sullivan family.

Neighboring Mellon tried to annex Sunrise in the late 1960's due to population growth and desire for expansion of available land for housing development. To avoid annexation, Sunrise residents chose to incorporate. The population of Mellon is nearly 8500 residents over nearly 15 square miles. According to the 2000 census data, the demographic makeup of Mellon was 81.2 % white, 16% African American, 1.89% Hispanic or Latino, 0.2% Native American,

0.35 Asian/ Pacific Islander, and 0.8% from other races. Mellon was incorporated in 1919 and named after the company that originally moved into the area and developed it for its workers.

Data Collection Procedures

The actual implemented project looks quite different from the proposed design. This diversion occurred mostly because this family is so busy with many activities (including work, school, and extracurricular activities) that necessitated data collection to occur whenever there was an opportunity. The activities and availability of family members was not structured in a way that allowed for data to be collected in succinct phases, therefore phases I and II became intertwined. As the researcher, I had to address my own anxieties about loosening the rigid structure of the research design to allow data to emerge through more authentic interaction with the family. The actual collection of data became much more ethnographic because I conformed to the schedule and activities of this family in order to conduct interviews and join them as a participant-observer rather than require them to interview in the originally organized research design. The emergence of themes in field notes taken at family events first aided in conversations that occurred in the form of semi-structured interviews with adult family members and siblings. Although I tried to stick to the pre-written interview protocols, I found it necessary (and common sense) to shift the direction of some of the questions based on observations made during participant observation activities.

After getting confirmation that the family was willing to participate in the study, Martha and I then played phone tag for several months before actually sitting down together to discuss my specific plan for this project and gain consent to begin collecting data via interviews and

participant observation. That meeting didn't occur until April 2015. I met her and Ruth at Panera Bread in Brainerd to share with them about the specific parameters of the project and what I needed from them as the main participants in the case study. They both signed the informed consent form, but asked that we break the first interview up into smaller segments due to their busy schedules. That day we spent nearly two hours talking about the project. I shared with them the information Dave had given me about his side (their mother's side) of the family. Ruth helped correct my spelling of names on the family tree created from Dave's information. Both sisters shared additional information about themselves and their siblings. Later that night Martha sent me a text with a picture of her youngest son, Nate's, Little League baseball schedule included. I then began attending his ball games as described in the original proposal for phase 2. All data was collected in a nine-month time span, between February 2015 and October 2015 (see table 3.1). Although my fieldwork lasted only a few months (Hammerlsey, 2006), I have tried to ensure that this story is told within a wider historical context.

Just as the first two phases of this project blended together as the project unfolded, phase 3 emerged as a step in validating and confirming the findings from the initial interviews and observations. At times, phase 3 overlapped with phase 2 because the timing and setting were appropriate to ask clarifying questions as part of the participant observation. Reflections from informal conversations that took place while I was a participant observer helped clarify trends and connections I was beginning to make from analyzing field and interview notes.

Table 3.1. Summary of Data Collection

Date	Activity	Data Collection Method	Participants
02/07/2015	Conversation with Dave	Informal Interview	Dave Morgan
04/15/2015	Conversation with Martha and Ruth	Informal Interview	Martha Sullivan Ruth Sullivan
04/21/2015	Nate's baseball game	Participant Observation	Multiple family members
05/04/2015	Cornell's championship baseball game/ dinner	Participant Observation	Multiple family members
05/05/2015	Nate's baseball game	Participant Observation	Multiple family members
05/16/2015	Nate's baseball game	Participant Observation	Multiple family members
05/17/2015	Nate's birthday party	Participant Observation	Multiple family members
06/25/2015	Cornell's baseball travel team practice	Participant Observation	Ruth Sullivan Gilbert Sullivan, Sr.
08/05/2015	Conversation with Ruth	Interview	Ruth Sullivan Julia Reniah
08/22/2015	Nate's soccer game(s)	Participant Observation	Martha Sullivan Gilbert Sullivan, Sr. John Thompson
08/26/2015	Family dinner	Participant Observation	Martha Sullivan Gilbert Sullivan, Sr. Brooklyn Sullivan Nate Sullivan
08/26/2015	Conversation with Gilbert, Sr.	Interview	Gilbert Sullivan, Sr.
08/26/2015	Conversation with Martha	Interview	Martha Sullivan
09/03/2015	Conversation with Sandy Nichols	Interview	Sandy Nichols
09/19/2015	Nate's soccer game(s)	Participant Observation	Martha Sullivan Ruth Sullivan Brooklyn Sullivan John Thompson
09/27/2015	Email from Brooklyn	Interview	Brooklyn Sullivan
09/28/2015	Email from Andrew	Interview	Andrew
10/30/2015	Conversation with Noah	Interview	Noah Sullivan

Interviews

I conducted eight interviews for this project: 2 parents, 1 grandparent, 1 uncle, 2 adult children, and 2 fictive kin. My first interview was with Dave, who shared stories from his childhood about desegregation and his schooling. Dave also helped me lay out a family tree based on his parents and siblings. I also used the Extended/Fictive Kin interview protocol²⁴ to ask him more in-depth questions about current family education practices. Subsequent interviews that took place with Martha and Ruth using the Parent interview protocol,²⁵ Gilbert, Sr. and Sandy using the Extended/ Fictive Kin interview protocol, and with Noah and Brooklyn using the Adult Children interview protocol.²⁶ I also used questions from the Parent interview protocol when I interviewed Gilbert, Sr. because he lives with Martha and Ruth, and plays an integral role in educating his grandchildren. Questions in each of the interview protocols were “intentionally open-ended to allow [participants] to use their own language and concepts in responding to them” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 136).

Due to their busy work schedule and children’s sports activities, I squeezed in interviews as I could. My interview with Ruth took place while she had dinner with a close friend and niece at a restaurant. My interviews with Martha and Gilbert, Sr. took place the same evening as another participant observation event- family dinner at Martha’s office. Interviews with Noah and Sandy also took place in public locations. Because interviews took place in places with multiple distractors such as back ground noise and side conversations, I typed interview responses on my

²⁴ See Appendix D-2.

²⁵ See Appendix D-1.

²⁶ See Appendix D-3.

laptop rather than try to audio-record them. Several times throughout the interviews I paused to read back answers to make sure I captured their thoughts and ideas accurately. Brooklyn, a busy first-year college student, chose to answer her interview questions electronically. Andrew also chose to answer interview questions from the Extended/ Fictive Kin interview protocol via email due to his busy work and extracurricular schedules.

Participant Observation

Davies (2008) defines participant observation as “long-term personal involvement with those being studied” in order to facilitate “more open and meaningful discussions” (p. 81). The goal, of course, is to more fully understand their culture and practices, to see the “world as others do” (Van Maanen, 1988/2011, p. 152). Davies (2008) describes the researcher’s role in participant observation as a spectrum or “scale”- ranging from “complete observer” to observer-as-participant” to “participant-as-observer” to “complete participant” (p. 82). The researcher’s role depends on how well the participants accept them into the group as well as location of fieldwork (Davies, 2008). I also believe one’s role as a participant observer depends on the location and nature of the event being studied. For the participant-observation portion of this project I attended nine family events: three of Nate’s little league baseball games, two of Nate’s soccer games, Cornell’s middle school district championship baseball game (along with a team celebration dinner at Zaxby’s), Nate’s birthday party, Cornell’s baseball travel team practice, and a family dinner at Martha’s office.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, my role was much more of a complete observer, especially at Nate’s baseball games. As I got to know the family more, I did become more of an

observer-as-participant because I was interacting with the family members in the bleachers and cheering on Nate's team. My role shifted towards more participation as I became better accepted by the family members as Davies (2008) describes. Once I became more accepted by family members, I was invited to more intimate events, which lent themselves to much higher participation and less observation. An example of this is when I attended Nate's birthday party. This was a large family event- one in which complete observation (and taking fieldnotes) during the event would have made me stand out and/or been rude to the family. By becoming more of an "observer-as-participant" or "participant-as-observer", I was able to discuss my observations and interpretations with family members. Their validation of meanings and my interpretations of their meanings helped guide future fieldwork and data analysis (Davies, 2008). In essence, my fieldwork discussions with family members were collaborative conversations, co-constructing meaning from "their lives and culture" (Emerson et al, 1995, p. 36). Because the purpose of my presence at these family events was to collect data for this project, I never was a "complete participant"; my participation was always connected with making observations.

Field Notes

Field notes were written in several stages. I took field notes periodically during the athletic games and practices I attended, and then followed up with additional notes directly after these events, and again a few days afterwards as more details and insights became apparent through reflection. My initial field notes were what Goodall, Jr. (2000) calls "raw data" (p. 84) and Emerson et al (1995) call "jottings", in which I recorded "bits of talk and action...recurring incidents...expressions and terms...dialogue among those present, and [my] own conversations"

so that I could remember details to expand on when I sat down to write up full field notes afterwards (Emerson et al, 1995, p. 31). Taking notes during the dinners and birthday party seemed inappropriate for the setting and values of the family, so I waited until I left these events to *jot* my notes and reflections.

My field notebook is layered with details through revisiting my jottings of observations and remembrances; a different color ink was used each time I made a recording on a specific event in my notebook so I could distinguish between an initial observation and a reflection/remembrance. This was the “headwork”, which was not entirely free from interpretation due to incorporation of my own reflexivity into the field notebook (Goodall, Jr., 2000, p. 87). For this project, I recorded field notes on one page of the notebook and my reflections on the opposite page. I avoided use of “evaluative adjectives and adverbs” (p. 61) when jotting field notes on the even numbered pages, but allowed myself to explore ideas and themes, generate clarifying questions, and critique potential biases through “retrospective reinterpretation” (p. 106) on the even numbered pages (Emerson et al, 1995). This strategy helped me more easily connect my reflexivity with actual events and situations in which I was a participant observer, thus facilitating the balance of two stories: my experience as the researcher (etic) and the lived experiences of the participants (emic) (Goodall, Jr. 2000, Hammersley, 2006, Van Maanen, 1988/2011). Final field notes were compiled in electronic format combining original observations with additional insights, reflections, observations, and clarifying questions. For some events, final field notes were written chronologically, but sometimes I compiled final field notes according to topic, situation, and/or participant perspective (Emerson et al, 1995).

Archival Data

An additional source of data were articles from the local newspaper which reported on outcomes and player statistics from high school football games as well as local school honor roll achievers and academic award winners. An online search of articles published by the local newspaper between 2010 and 2015 revealed information about how two of the older boys in the family performed on the football field and included some quotes from the boys themselves, as well as from their coaches. Additional articles found in more recent editions of the newspaper listed names of several of the younger family members who made honor roll at the middle school.

Data Analysis Procedures

While Schreier (2012) refers to qualitative research as having “emergent flexibility,” she stresses the importance of systematically collecting and analyzing data as well as openly addressing reflexivity in order to assure one’s research is reliable and “transparent” to the reader (p. 27). In this project, data analysis began during the data collection process as a way to identify emerging themes and look for them in subsequent interviews and activities.²⁷ Field notes and reflections recorded in a journal (Emerson et al, 1995; Goodall, Jr. 2000, Stake, 1995) were reviewed immediately following participant observation activities and reviewed again a few days after these events. Additional thoughts, observations, and remembrances were recorded (using different colored ink) on the left page of the journal, opposite of the initial field

²⁷ It is important to note that I consciously avoided repeating themes to participants because I did not want to influence their answers and behaviors.

notes/ reflections. After several layers of field notes were recorded in the journal, they were typed and printed for further analysis.

Field notes, interview data, and newspaper quotes were analyzed and triangulated for two purposes. These data were compiled to create a narrative story of how the Sullivan family educates their children. This narrative, entitled “Our Village Approach”, is presented in Chapter 4. “Weaving together interpretation and excerpt”, I took an integrative approach to telling their story (Emerson et al, 1995, p. 211). I chose this style of presentation because “it promotes a smoother, more thematically focused presentation of [data]” which provides a story that invites the reader to engage in the scene (Emerson et al, 1995, p. 213).

For the second purpose, the thematic analysis described in Chapter 5, data from multiple sources underwent multiple rounds of coding. Initial coding during the data collection process took place to look for and address emerging themes. Once all data was collected, I read through the “complete corpus” of open coding for line-by-line analysis (Emerson et al, 1995, p. 171). This part of the analysis was more exploratory and inductive in nature as themes and categories emerged through the close reading (Schreier, 2012). Once initial themes and categories were identified, the data was read through in its entirety once again for more “focused coding”, in which comparisons were made between different family events as well as different answers to the same interview questions; the overlapping ideas and concepts were combined into major themes to be included in both the narrative and the analytical report (Emerson et al, 1995, p. 192). This part of the analysis was deductive in nature because I was also seeking specific excerpts that would fit under categories that address the research questions (Schreier, 2012).

For example, I specifically looked for excerpts that provided evidence of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions the Sullivan family taught their children.

Once the major themes were identified, data from all sources were sorted according to these themes (Emerson et al, 1995). The entire process was lengthy and open-ended, requiring critical reflection in which I continually questioned my own assumptions and interpretations, why each excerpt was important enough to be included, and how each one fit under its assigned category or theme (Emerson et al, 1995; Saldaña, 2013). An additional layer of the analysis cycle was in vivo coding to match participant voice with each identified theme (Saldaña, 2013). I further discuss participant voice later in this chapter. In the next section, I discuss how the issue of trustworthiness is addressed throughout this project.

Trustworthiness

According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), building trustworthiness in a naturalistic study is an open-ended endeavor. I interpret this to mean that building trustworthiness is an ongoing process throughout a research project, from the preparation/planning to organization/participation to analysis/presentation of results. In this study I implemented several specific techniques in order to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first four terms listed are meant to be respective “equivalents for the conventional terms ‘internal validity’, ‘external validity’, ‘reliability’, and ‘objectivity’ and are more appropriate measures of trustworthiness in “naturalistic” studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). I discuss reflexivity in the next section, titled “Ethical Considerations”.

Credibility

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), there are five techniques that establish credibility when conducting a naturalistic research project: fieldwork activities that promote high credibility (prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation of data sources and methods), peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checks (both during and after data collection). To ensure the credibility of this study, I deliberately employed persistent observation, triangulation of sources and methods, peer debriefing, and member checks. Due to the nature of this study as a dissertation project, prolonged engagement was not a practical technique. Negative case analysis was not appropriate because this project is exploratory in nature and thus did not have hypotheses which may or may not need revising. Referential adequacy was also inappropriate for this study because no portions of the data are intended to be archived.

Through persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking, I worked to establish and maintain trust with members of this case; I took measures to ensure the “context [of my observations and their words are] thoroughly appreciated and understood” (Guba and Lincoln, 1985, p. 302); I made attempts to minimize distortions, both intended and unintended, through member checks, and engaged with participants to develop trust and rapport. Through topics of conversation, I searched for common ground. For example, the Sullivans and I know some of the same people. When I asked them if they knew Mr. Bart, a teacher/ administrator at one of the local schools, they immediately told me how much they loved him and what a great teacher he was. I shared that Mr. Bart and I had known each other over 20 years ago when we

worked together at church camp. When I showed a connection with other people they knew, trusted, and respected, the Sullivans became more trusting of me. Triangulation from multiple sources of data and collection methods was achieved through analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and through participant-observation methods.

I met regularly with my advisor to debrief. Because this project is not connected with my advisor's specific research agenda, I felt it was acceptable for her to work with me in this manner.²⁸ Additional sources for peer debriefing were academic colleagues and individuals unfamiliar with cultural studies. I found it insightful to hear their responses to my work and address questions they had of me about the project, especially their questions regarding my interactions with the Sullivan family and the themes I recognized as emerging during the data collection process.

Finally, member checks took place throughout the data collection process as well as after analyses of data were completed. During interviews, I frequently paused to read back answers I recorded to the person I was interviewing. This helped build their confidence that I intended to represent their perspective and words accurately and without judgement. This type of member checking also engaged the person being interviewed in giving more detail and expanding upon their answers. I conducted member checks through informal conversations while participating in family events. For example, I often shared my thoughts on emerging themes with key members of the study. Once the data was completely analyzed and written up, I shared my findings with

²⁸ Guba and Lincoln (1985) advise against having a member of one's dissertation committee act as the debriefer. Rather they suggest that a peer be selected for this role.

the participants. It was particularly important for them to read the narrative “Our Village Approach” and give me feedback regarding accuracy and representation.

Representation of participant perspectives/ voices is a topic discussed more in depth later in this chapter. Every effort has been made through self-reflection, data analysis, and member checking to accurately identify and describe the perspectives of those participating in this project (Elo et al, 2014). When analyzing the data and sharing my findings through narrative and thematic analysis, I recognize that one story is being told, but multiple truths must be represented in order to be as fair as possible in balancing perspectives and voices (Hammersley, 2006). Regardless of my reflexivity, however, my telling of the Sullivan’s story is not neutral (Hammersley, 2006; Van Maanen, 1988/2011).

Transferability

Transferability is also known as the generalizability of the research (Merriam, 2009; Tracy, 2010). Rather than think of generalizability in qualitative research as how well the research can be replicated, Merriam (2009) and Tracy (2010) recommend we view transferability (or generalizability) as how well the research can be extrapolated. For qualitative research to be transferable, the reader must make a personal connection with the findings. Two strategies which promote transferability in qualitative research are thick descriptions and purposeful sampling (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Tracy (2010) adds that “gathering direct testimony...and writing accessibly and invitationally” will enhance transferability (p. 845). For this dissertation project sampling was purposeful in order to address the research questions; direct testimony was included within the rich descriptive, accessible text of the narrative.

Although the research design was emergent and flexible based on the needs and schedule of the family, basic techniques and coded themes can be extrapolated in related studies (Elo et al, 2014). According to Davies (2008), “no ethnography is repeatable” (p. 98), but I argue that “another researcher under the same circumstances” (p. 96) would most-likely make similar observations and discover similar themes using the same participants. The participants, themselves, are consistent in their attitudes and behaviors throughout the study so I think the biggest challenge to transferability is the lens with which readers view the participants’ attitudes and behaviors.

Dependability

Dependability, also known as reliability in some studies, can be achieved by similar techniques as establishing credibility because they are symbiotic (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Through triangulation and researcher reflexivity, bias is recognized in order to maximize the reliability and dependability of the findings. One technique Guba and Lincoln (1985) recommend is an inquiry audit of both the process and product of the study. An audit of process establishes dependability and an audit of product establishes confirmability. I consider this audit to be similar in nature (although more systematic) to peer debriefing as described in the subsection on credibility. One limitation to establishing dependability is the fact that I am the only researcher for this project. It is recommended that “cross-checking information and interpretations” developed by multiple fieldworkers take place to establish agreement in findings (Davies, 2008, p. 97).

Establishing trustworthiness with the reader is just as important as establishing trustworthiness with the participants. Van Maanen (1988/2011) calls for “transparency and concreteness” in reliably telling an impressionist ethnographic tale (p. 103). My goal is to tell the Sullivan’s story with “an informal, down-to-earth, modest, accessible demeanor” (Van Maanen, 1988/2011, p. 108). Above all, I must ensure that the “data accurately represents the information that participants provided” and the interpretations reported were “not invented by the inquirer” (Elo et al, 2014, p. 5).

Confirmability

Establishing confirmability, or objectivity, is a challenge for a project that is far from neutral. Similar to dependability, Guba and Lincoln (1985) recommend triangulation and reflexivity as well as an inquiry audit as techniques for establishing confirmability. Peer debriefing with my advisor has been the most helpful in helping to determine if the “findings are grounded in the data” (p. 323), confirm “the appropriateness of inquiry decisions” (p. 324), regarding overall research design, chosen methods, and quality and quantity of data collected and review researcher biases (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Maintaining a reflexive journal has been recommended for establishing trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This is a technique for recording and analyzing the self as a human research instrument as well as “methodological decisions made and the reasons for making them” (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 327). A reflexive journal can be somewhat of a self-audit, as opposed to a peer-audit, and is an important piece of

data to be included in the final report. In the next section I discuss the process I followed in keeping a reflexive journal. I also discuss ethical issues of representation and voice.

Ethical Considerations

Representation and Voice

Goodall, Jr. (2000) claims that “all representations are partial, partisan, and problematic” (p. 55), meaning that representations don’t always capture the entire story, the voice/ point of view of the ethnographer is privileged, and the reality /realities of the representations are questionable to readers. “Crisis of representation” has been described by multiple scholars because this may be one of the biggest challenges to the validity of qualitative research, especially for ethnography (Davies, 2008, Denson & Lincoln, 2000; Goodall, Jr., 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Lather, 2009; Van Maanen, 1988/2011). Van Maanen (1988/2011) reminds us that “culture to the ethnographer is multivocal, highly ambiguous, shape-shifting, and difficult if not impossible to pin down” (p. 154).

As an ethnographer, I have an “ethical obligation to minimize misrepresentations and misunderstanding” (Stake, 1995, p. 109). I recognize my “politically mediated” power as the person telling the story, and choosing what is to be included and how the story will be told (Van Maanen, 1988/2011, p. 4-5). My obligation to both the participants and to the readers is that culture is displayed in a meaningful way to readers “without great distortion” (Van Maanen, 1988/2011, p. 13). By being sensitive to both social and historical context for participant actions, attitudes, and statements, I will more fully understand and represent their meanings

(Emerson et al, 1995; Saukko, 2003; Stake, 1995). Member checking is one of the most effective strategies for getting the “meanings straight” (Stake, 1995).

Saukko (2003) refers to how accurately the researcher “captures the lived worlds of the people being studied” as “dialogic validity” (p. 20) rather than the term representation. Three specific strategies for ensuring dialogic validity are truthfulness in reporting the perspectives of participants, self-reflexivity- an awareness of the “cultural baggage...that mediates [my] understanding” of my participants, and polyvocality- inclusion of the “voices of major stakeholders” (Saukko, 2003, p. 20). “Giving voice to the people studied” is an essential part of ethnography (Hammersley, 2006, p. 9). Polyvocality provides a more fair account of the culture being studied because it recognizes that participants may have “contrasting lived realities”, each one as important as the other (Saukko, 2003, p. 65). By sharing the voices of participants honestly and empathetically, the researcher achieves more “authentic knowing” (Lather, 2009, p. 17). Lather (2009) calls for researchers to situate the voices of participants above their own because the researcher is not as expert on the lived experiences of the participants as the participants are themselves.

Stake (1995) states, “All researchers have great privilege and obligation” (p. 49). The privilege and obligation he speaks of cannot be taken lightly; in fact, it must be considered and reconsidered throughout a project such as this. Just as there were multiple layers of data analysis, there are multiple layers of reflexive analysis for researcher bias and how it affects interactions with the participants, collection of data, and analysis of data. I have tried to be self-reflexive throughout my interactions with participants, in deciding what I choose to include as

data, how I interpret the data, and how I report my findings. Researcher bias will be analyzed throughout the entire research process using Milner's (2007) framework for researcher racial and cultural positionality.

Reflexivity/ Positionality

In addressing reflexivity and positionality throughout the research process, I followed a framework designed by Milner (2007). While other scholars influence how I approach my positionality (Saukko, 2003), Milner's framework provides a systematic method for addressing my identity, my relationship with my participants, my reflections and representations of participants, and how my findings connect with a greater social framework. There are four interrelated features of Milner's (2007) framework: researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, engaged reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system. While some critics problematize white researchers studying people of color, this systematic approach to self-reflexivity is deeply connected with critical race theory such that my research is not colorblind, in fact, it specifically addresses race as an influence on how the Sullivans educate their children. It prevents me from ignoring the influence of race and how my worldview differs from theirs based on being a cultural and racial outsider. All four features of this framework must be visited and revisited throughout the entire research project because the "dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen" emerge unexpectedly (Milner, 2007, p. 388). Continual reflection is vital to ensuring the product of this project is sound and true to the Sullivan family.

Researching self.

As part of the self-reflective process, Milner (2007) offers possible questions to ask oneself regarding personal racial and cultural heritage, convictions and beliefs about race and culture, and experiences that shape “research decisions, practices, approaches, epistemologies, and agendas” (p. 395). These questions are asked repeatedly throughout the data collection and analysis process; the answers are woven into the fabric of the narrative and thematic analysis. Not only do I answer questions about race and culture, I must reflect on all aspects of my identity, including gender, education, vocation, religious beliefs, and political beliefs and how these descriptors intersect in complex ways (Crenshaw, 1995).

Researching Self in relation to others.

Through this feature of Milner’s (2007) framework, I must constantly be “aware of [my] own feelings towards [the participants] in this study (Davies, 2008, p. 95). The questions I ask myself and answer are more centered on the participants: their cultural and racial heritage, their convictions and beliefs about race and culture, and comparisons of how “my own interests and research agendas” are balanced with the interests and priorities of the participants (Milner, 2007, p. 395). Through this feature, I address issues of power between myself, the participants, and the community. The overarching purpose for this feature is to relate more closely with the participants, more fully understanding the similarities and differences between my ways of knowing and their ways of knowing (Milner, 2007). Van Maanen (1988/2011) profoundly recognizes that what may be common to me (emic) may be foreign to my participants (etic), and vice versa.

As the researcher trying to build trust and yet maintain a healthy, objective distance, I looked for ways to find commonalities with the family members. Developing a personal relationship with the participants was unavoidable (Davies, 2008); the Sullivans adopted me as part of the family and used the nickname “Teach” to address me (Emerson et al, 1995). As my level of participant observer moved further toward the participant end of the scale, I helped with tasks/ chores at family events. For example, at Nate’s birthday party I volunteered to stay at the park and direct party-goers to the alternate location due to rain. I also helped take down the tables and chairs at the park location (in the rain) and set them back up in the alternate location. As I regularly assess their acceptance of me, I seek to understand their expectations of me as the researcher and as a fictive kin.

Engaging reflection and representation.

Finding the appropriate balance between researcher and participant perspectives, especially when there is disagreement, is a challenge addressed through this feature of Milner’s (2007) framework. Through ongoing reflection, I question my own assumptions and preconceptions about the participants and their activities so that my interpretations may be less clouded in bias (Emerson et al, 1995). Engaged reflection and representation heavily overlaps with researching self in relation to others due to tensions that may arise between differing interpretations of events, situations, attitudes, and behaviors. Milner (2007) views these tensions as sources of rich data that could prove “beneficial and useful to consumers of the research” (p. 396). My own journey through this research process has taught me a great deal about myself, as both an individual and as a scholar.

Through member checking and self-reflexivity (described in the previous section), I aim to responsibly and accurately report the story of how the Sullivans educate their children, giving voice to all key stakeholders. The term “giving voice” privileges me as the researcher, because I choose whose voices and what scenes are represented and how they are represented; the expression of topics and themes in the narrative and thematic analysis will privilege some voices over others (Emerson et al, 1995). The intent is not to silence some voices over others, but rather to maintain a clear focus on using the data to address the research questions. The “analysis never ends”, but the parameters of this project are finite, therefore some voices, situations, and/or data may be analyzed and reported in another project (Van Maanen, 1988/2011, p. 153).

Shifting from self to system.

This part of Milner’s framework extends the research and findings beyond the personal level to address more systemic issues and solutions. There is debate about whether or not ethnographers should situate the cultures they study within the wider society (Hammersley, 2006). Milner (2007) sees narratives and counter-narratives, from a CRT lens, as a method for contributing “to policy, research, and theory” (p. 396). This feature of the framework and my own conceptions of how the findings from this study may or may not situate within local or global society will be discussed in Chapter 6.

In this chapter I explained my rationale for conducting an ethnographic case study to answer my research question: *How does the Sullivan family educate their children?* I introduced the reader to the Sullivan family, providing a brief family history. I then described how data was collected and analyzed. Finally, I explained strategies employed to ensure trustworthiness of

findings, including a specific framework for researcher reflexivity. The next chapter is a narrative titled “Our Village Approach.” It is a snapshot of the life of this family; a comprehensive description would be impossible. My interpretations of information from participant interviews, field notes, and reflections were used to write this excerpt from the Sullivan’s story. The narrative contains five sections, each reflecting a different aspect of how this family works collectively to educate their children. My analysis will follow in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Our Village Approach

It takes a village to raise a child.

~ African Proverb

I met the Sullivan family (see footnote 13) several years ago through my friend, Lauren. Not only did her sister marry into this family, Lauren also went to the same schools and grew up with some of the family members. After her sister married Dave, one of the patriarchs of the family, my friend began spending time with his family on a regular basis. She and her husband attended family events such as birthday parties, cookouts, and sports games. They, in turn, invited them to their house for special events, such as July 4 celebration and birthday parties. It was at some of these events that I met several members of this family over the past six years. The stories Lauren told me about the academic and athletic success of this family led me to think they would be good candidates for this particular case study.

At some point in our friendship, Dave began calling me “Teach.” This is the name he calls me every time he sees me. This is the name he uses when he introduces me to his friends and family. This is the name his family knows me as. When I contacted his nieces, Martha and Ruth, about this project, they weren’t sure who I was when I used my real name. After I realized they didn’t know me, I reminded them that I was Dave’s friend, “Teach.” Immediately, they warmed up to me and welcomed me.

We spoke about my project and why I thought their family’s story was an important one to tell. When I spoke about the collective way in which their family raised their children, how everyone played a role, Martha responded, “You mean our village approach!” Right away, I

knew their methods for raising their children were intentional, which confirmed them as excellent candidates for this particular study.

After deliberating as a family, they let me know their interest in participating in the study as well as their appreciation to me for wanting to tell their story. Martha was also very quick to tell me that their family was in no way perfect, that they had their problems just like everyone else's family. I tried to reassure her that it was not a perfect family I was looking for, but a family that has successful children despite obstacles they may face. I explained that there are always extraordinary things that come from ordinary moments; it is my job, as the storyteller, to bring these to light (Goodall, Jr., 2000).

The Sullivan's "village approach" is not a novel concept. The quote "It takes a village to raise a child" is an African proverb that refers to the value of collective efforts in raising children.²⁹ In many African cultures, the responsibility for caring for, nurturing, and educating children is shared among the entire family, including parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings. Everyone participates because the entire family and community benefits when the children thrive (LeVine & New, 2008). The Sullivan's philosophy for raising their children is rooted in African tradition.

The pages that follow are an excerpt from their story. I have taken scenes from my field notes to convey who the Sullivans are, share their values and priorities, and help the reader better understand some of the nuances of their informal education practices. I have included five brief

²⁹ <http://www.afriprov.org/african-proverb-of-the-month/23-1998proverbs/137-november-1998-proverb.html>

narratives to round out their story. Each section/ narrative begins with a quote from a family member that summarizes the context of the story. I am the storyteller and I am an active character in these scenes, therefore the reader will hear my voice throughout this chapter, threaded among the voices of the members of the Sullivan family.

The first narrative, titled “The village is a family; The family is a village,” introduces us to those family members- both blood and fictive kin, who have been most influential in the development of the children. The second narrative, titled “Be who you are,” shares part of the Sullivan’s racial story and the value they instill in the children regarding self-respect, self-confidence and finding one’s way in a racist world. The third narrative, titled, “Do your best,” illustrates the value of work ethic as one of the values they teach their children. The fourth narrative, titled “The village comes together,” is the story of how the entire family, immediate, extended, and fictive, converged for a weekend of events to celebrate the academic accomplishments and birthdays of some of the children. The fifth and final narrative, titled, “Family tradition,” is about how the Sullivans prioritize family time despite busy work, school, and extracurricular schedules.

The Family is a Village; The Village is a Family.

“I love [Cornel] and his family as if they were my own. I continue to stand in awe of the courageousness with which [Ruth] lives her life and raises [Cornell] to be a remarkable young man. Whatever impact I may have had on him, beyond the love and support of his family, has been a blessing...he’s given me much more than I’ve ever given him.”

- Andrew

Everyone has their one concept of what the word family means, on paper and embodied. Good or bad, pro or anti, their conceptions are influenced by their own lived experiences with

family. So many variables play into how one constructs a definition, including geographic proximity, positive and/or negative relations, closeness of family elders, and number of family members. When asked what family meant to them, the Sullivans consistently used the following terms as part of their definition: bond, depend, values, trust, supports, blessing, care, love, always, functions, need, and relationships. While blood relation is not a requirement for the Sullivans to consider a person family, their ability to positively influence the younger children is. For the most part, a true friend is family, and a true friend meets the above descriptors and criteria.

Ruth's concept of who she considered family seemed to have the most parameters. She mentioned that her determination of who was family, beyond blood relations, depended on the length of time she spent with them and how that person contributes to the values and goals of the family. Two specific people she included in her list of influential family members were Andrew and Julia. Andrew is her son, Cornell's, Big Brother from the Big Brothers/ Big Sisters program. He has been a consistent influence in Cornell's life for nearly ten years. Ruth says he reinforces the values she teaches her son, especially her value in teaching him to be a good person. She says that Andrew frequently asks Cornell, "What would a gentleman do?" Although Cornell has a number of positive male role models within the family, his cousins and uncles are very involved in his life, Andrew has been a constant father figure and friend for him throughout his childhood and into adolescence. Another friendship-turned-family that "developed over the years" is Julia, Cornell's 3rd grade teacher.

She and Ruth reminisced about how their friendship began over dinner at the local Mexican restaurant the evening I interviewed Ruth. When Cornell was in 3rd grade he had several health issues that gave Ruth great worry. He had to have surgery to remove a large cyst from the side of his face. Julia was an emotional support for both Ruth and Cornell through this time. Julia shared that Cornell worried about his mother more than he worried about himself. Ruth said she and Julia have been friends ever since and that Julia was like family. Julia's friendship with Ruth has connected her deeply with the whole Sullivan family. That night, Julia brought Ruth's niece, Reniah, with her to dinner after she got out of cross-country practice. Julia shared her fajitas with Reniah; the way they moved items from one plate to another with little verbal communication, led me to believe they had a history of spending time together. Reniah spoke very little during dinner, tired from a full day of school and running 5 miles during cross-country practice.

While Julia, Ruth, and I chatted about the history of their friendship and how Julia came to live in Mellon, it occurred to me they may know a few folks I had previously worked with. Julia still worked for the city school district, and at the same school as a Stanley Bart, a man who I used to work with at church camp over 20 years ago. When I asked if she knew him, Julia and Ruth both responded enthusiastically. Ruth affirmed her respect for him; "We love Mr. Bart! Mr. Bart was Cornell's 4th grade teacher and his basketball coach in elementary school!" For African American boys, 3rd grade is a pivotal time in their educational lives. That is often the age when African American boys become tuned out and unmotivated at school. Attitude and

behavior decline. For some reason, the classroom becomes a hostile location. Ruth credits Julia and Stanley's influence in nurturing Cornell's academic, emotional, and behavioral growth.

Looking across the table at Reniah who was picking at her food, I realized that she probably knew one of my former teachers, Scott Adams. He stopped working for me a few years ago to take a job as a science teacher at Mellon Middle School and assistant coach for the high school football team. Reniah replied that Mr. Adams had been her 8th grade science teacher. It's such a small world and I was excited to share some common colleagues/ friends with Ruth, Reniah, and Julia. Discovering we shared mutual friends and acquaintances built their trust in me and made me more comfortable, as an outsider, sharing a meal among intimate friends; I felt like I was being less intrusive on their rare time to break bread together.³⁰

Martha reminded me of the old proverb, "it takes a village" several times in our conversations about family and community members who are "dear to [her] heart", primarily because of how their presence in her children's lives has been a blessing and foundation for success. She says she couldn't do it without the help of her family and friends who provide support for her children in the way of transportation to and from sports practice and games when she has to work, advice on how to behave in certain situations so they can be their best, and accountability for academic and behavioral expectations. Support from the village comes in a number of subtle and overt actions. For Martha, the entire village is her family, at least the people in the village who "hold the same values". They are her "network."

³⁰ My analysis of researcher positionality is in Chapter 6.

Folks she named as “like family” included Sandy and Bill Nichols and John Thompson. These folks have been influences in her children’s lives through their extracurricular activities. I was introduced to Sandy and Bill at Nate’s 8th birthday party. They have been a part of the family since Martha’s oldest son was in elementary school. John Thompson is a local police officer and coach for Nate’s Little League baseball team. He has a son Nate’s age. The two boys play on both a baseball team and a competitive soccer team together. Martha pointed him out to me one night at the ball field and said he “carts Nate around to and from practice on many occasions”. John’s relationship with the Sullivans goes beyond the baseball and soccer fields. He and Gilbert, Sr. co-planned a weekend trip in the fall 2015 to take the boys (Noah, Cornell, Nate, and John’s son) to a professional football game. Sandy reported that her relationship with Martha and Ruth included regular girls’ night outings and attending children’s birthday parties, in addition to attending many ballgames over the years.

The night I met John Thompson, Nate’s baseball team, the Sharks, had a late game, 7:30 p.m. Martha introduced us as we walked from one end of the Little League Park, where they were warming up, to the field they were assigned to play in. I found my spot on the second row of the metal bleachers; Martha, a dugout mom, joined the boys in the dugout and started calling the line-up and giving pep talks. I glanced around and saw the only family members present for the game were Martha’s youngest sister, Candi, and her father, Gilbert, Sr. I thought that was strange because there were always at least five or six family members at Nate’s games. Gilbert, Sr. stood over by the concession stand talking to a few other gentlemen. Candi was standing at the fence behind home plate, holding Emma, a toddler belonging to one of her son’s friends. If I

hadn't been told differently, I would think Emma was Candi's own grandchild. They were two peas in a pod; Emma clung to Candi with full trust and love.

A few minutes after the game started Brooklyn walked over to the stands with a girlfriend, nodded at me, said a quiet "hello," and sat down in front of me. I wasn't sure if she was shy or if she was distrustful of me. Regardless, she was always polite and responsive when I addressed her. She rarely initiated conversation with me, and based on the answers she gave when I interviewed her, I decided she was shy. She said, "My family never meets a stranger" when trying to distinguish for me the difference between family and friends.

About half-way through the game, it began to rain; it was more of a light drizzle than a downpour. I asked Brooklyn if they would call the game for rain. She called to Martha, "Mamma...Mamma!" Martha peeked around the side of the dugout towards the stands. "Are they going to call the game?" Martha nodded, no. "I'm going to my car!" Brooklyn and her friend quickly left the stands. Martha called after her as they walked away to remember she needed to help with handing out invitations to Nate's party. I walked to my car and grabbed an umbrella, waving to Gilbert, Sr. as I passed. "I'll be back in a few minutes", I told him. On my way back to the stands, I stopped by the concession stand. Gilbert, Sr. was now using the small overhang on the building as a shelter from the rain. We chatted for a few minutes before I excused myself to return to the stands to watch the remainder of the game.

The rain stopped during the last inning. The Sharks were victorious! Once the on-field sportsmanship ceased and both teams retreated to their respective dugouts, I left the stands and looked to see if Gilbert, Sr. was still around. We talked for a few minutes about his family

history and then walked to the other side of the dugout where the team debriefing was taking place. Coach was giving them feedback on the game. He was wrapping up and the parents were passing out snacks to the players when we arrived. As the boys finished their snacks, Ruth, Candi, and Brooklyn swooped in with a stack of invitations to Nate's birthday party. They handed some of them to Nate and he began to pass them out to each child on his team. As he gave each piece of paper away he said, "I hope you can come to my birthday party." So the family hadn't been "fair-weather fans" after all! They watched the game from their cars and then returned to help fulfill their commitment to Martha and Nate.

Family does that. The weather may not be great, but they take care of business. They "have each other's' backs" at all times, and this means extended family too. One of Martha and Ruth's cousins, Martin, has children close in age to Cornell and Nate. Their oldest son, Martin, Jr, is one of Cornell's middle school baseball teammates. They have probably also been teammates on the football team as well. Martin, Sr. is a former professional football player and successful business man. Athletic talent and intelligence run in this family, but work ethic and perseverance are ingrained in them by the family elders. Gilbert, Sr. once joked with me that Martin, Sr. says he is still scared of him, as strong as he is. The fear is more respect for Gilbert, Sr. as the patriarch and parent figure he represents since Martin's mother passed away.

I saw Martin and his wife, Renee, at Cornell's middle school baseball district championship game (obviously because Martin, Jr. was also playing). I had met them a few times before at Lauren's house; I think Renee was in the same high school graduating class as Lauren. When I arrived, the game was already in progress, Martin and Renee were talking with

a few other parents, and Gilbert, Sr. was, surprisingly, sitting in the stands. Usually he stands during the game so he can get closer to the players. For this game we were on someone else's turf, someone else's field. Perhaps it would have been inappropriate for him to stand behind home plate like he does at the Little League park; perhaps it was because it was inappropriate to do so at a middle school or high school game or a championship game. Gilbert was a man who stuck to a particular code for living. Where he placed himself, when he chose to participate, and when he chose to spectate were all part of his code. For this game Gilbert, Sr. sat on the top row of the metal bleachers, focused on the game more so that socializing with the other spectators. I walked up to the back of the bleachers and greeted him; he invited me to join him. He told me that Ruth hadn't arrived from work yet; she was on her way.

As I watched the game, one of the ladies sitting in front of us began to speak with Gilbert, Sr.. "Who are you here to cheer for?" she inquired. Gilbert, Sr. proudly replied, "My grandson; he is wearing number 2." The lady spoke highly of Cornell's skills as a catcher. Gilbert, Sr. thanked her for her compliments and replied that Cornell is a very talented athlete and "plays all nine positions, and he also does well in school...I'm proud of him for both, but more so about school." Gilbert, Sr. was mostly quiet through the game; occasionally he would respond to a play with advice like "squeeze it!" I'm not sure what that means; baseball is one of many sports I know little about. When a player got a single, he'd say, "I'll take it." I understood this to mean he wished for a bigger play but it was acceptable to have a player on a base. When Ruth arrived, she stopped by the stands to say hello, but she chose to stand and pace while she watched the game; the district championship game is a big deal.

Cornell's team dominated most of the game and ended up district champions at the end of nine innings. As we walked toward the parking lot, Ruth and Renee lead the group while they discussed where to go for the team celebration dinner; Ruth looked back at Cornell, "Look who came to your game today! Teach drove all the way out here to see you play!" Cornell, grinning with the pride in the team victory, gave me a big hug and thanked me for coming to his game.

The team chose to celebrate at Zaxby's. All the team players piled into two or three big booths and a few parents found tables nearby. Ruth and Gilbert, Sr. sat with an old friend of Ruth's; they graduated high school together. They weren't as close lately; their conversation involved catching up on what their children were doing- age, grade, activities. Cornell and four other friends/ teammates sat in the booth right behind where his mother sat. When offered ketchup, he politely answered, "no, thank you." Before beginning her meal, Ruth stopped her conversation to bow her head in momentary silence; I assumed this act to be a prayer, grace before a meal. She did the same thing just prior to beginning her meal at the Mexican restaurant the night she had dinner with Julia and Reniah.

As they ate, Gilbert, Sr. and Ruth joked about her childhood and how Gilbert, Sr. and Virginia raised their kids. Ruth joked about Gilbert, Sr.'s discipline, like it wasn't harsh most of the time. She bragged that she didn't get in trouble very often- she was the good kid! The conversation somehow made it to the topic of jail; Gilbert, Sr. said he and Virginia had a policy that they would get their kids out of jail one time; after that, they were on their own. The only child of his whom he shared had pushed that boundary was Gilbert, Jr. Periodically, Gilbert, Sr. got on to Ruth for having her phone out in the middle of dinner with he and her friend. He

recalled when phone calls and texting were not part of the etiquette of mealtime. She largely ignored his comments about putting her phone away and continued to text with someone off and on through the dinner conversation. While she turned in her tray and disposed of her trash, Gilbert, Sr., giving me a wink, took her phone off the table and hid it in his pocket. Hiding her phone seemed to be a joke, but there was a degree of seriousness in his action. Upon her return to the table and discovery that her phone was missing, she exclaimed, “Daddy, give me back my phone! Seriously!” He gave her a look- the kind of look that showed his disapproval. “I’m serious,” was his reply, but he handed her the phone. She didn’t use it again while everyone sat around the table talking.

Renee and Martin sat at a table with a few other parents; they ate quickly and got up to leave. Renee stopped by Ruth’s table and asked her if she could bring Martin, Jr. home. They had to take care of their younger children; it was getting close to bed time. Without hesitation, Ruth agreed. Theirs was a brief exchange, as if taking turns transporting each other’s children was a common occurrence. It makes sense if the two boys go to the same school and participate in the same extracurricular activities.

A week later, Renee indirectly returned the favor; this time running an errand for Martha. After one of Nate’s baseball game, Martha realized one of his teammates had left some of his equipment behind. Looking around the Little League Park, Martha realized the rest of Nate’s teammates had already gone. The Sullivans were the only folks from the Sharks team still at the ballpark; a large contingency of family members came to this particular game because they were in town for the high school graduation that had taken place the night before. Martha wasn’t sure

how she was going to get this little boy his equipment because she wouldn't be at the next practice. Renee, who was offering Nate a "good game buddy" after a hard loss, told Martha she knew where the boy's family lived and was happy to drop the equipment off on her way home that afternoon.

Reflecting on how he defined the term family, Gilbert, Sr. stated, "Family is and always will be, family. You may agree sometimes; you may disagree sometimes, but you are still family. [Family is] someone we're going to be there for no matter what." So the little favors, like picking up or dropping off one of the children for school or ball practice or youth group makes a person part of the village. Martha quoted the African proverb frequently, "It takes a village. All the villagers don't have to be family, but they share the same interests and values. Our kids are taught to respect them, and we appreciate that they get on to our kids if they need it." Their family is part of the village, and the village is their family.

Be Who You Are

"[Gilbert, Sr.] came up in a time when we were treated bad, he didn't make excuses and he worked hard and raised a family that most people in the community look up to"

- Noah Sullivan

Dave and Gilbert, Sr. grew up when schools were segregated. Dave was in 5th grade when the schools in their County integrated. Gilbert, Sr. is eleven years older than Dave so he had already graduated from the August High School, the Black high school, in Manning prior to desegregation. Dave's older sisters both graduated from Hill High School, the black high school in Mellon. Prior to my conversations with Dave I had never spoken to anyone besides my (white) parents about their experiences with Jim Crow and desegregation. In fact, the process of

desegregation seemed to be such distant past, I was surprised when Dave shared some of his experiences growing up under Jim Crow laws.

The Downtown Theatre, in Brainerd, is a historic landmark. Recently renovated, the new owners have opened it up for special performances, film showings, and private events. During the week we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr., the Downtown Theatre hosted a viewing of the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My friend, Lauren, had been involved in the planning of community events for this week-long celebration of the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. She invited her family and friends to join her for the film viewing, this included Dave and her sister, Cindy. Everyone arrived early to get a good seat; the large party ended up on the front row. Lauren mentioned maybe they were too close to the front, taking a poll to see if the group wanted to move back a few rows. Dave spoke up and said the seats were “just fine;” it was the first time he had been to that theatre and not been forced to sit in the balcony for the color of his skin. When he spoke those words, the group fell silent. He went on to share that stores in town had separate entrances and “colored water fountains.” His tone wasn’t angry because of the injustice he endured; he wasn’t bitter about “the ways things were back then.” He was the only person in their group to have experienced Jim Crow; Cindy, who is white, is five years younger than him and entered school after the schools integrated.

Dave, now 60 years old, recalled an incident when he was five or six years old. He and his mother were taking the bus from Mellon to Manning to visit his aunt. As they boarded the bus and moved down the aisle, an older white lady invited him to sit with her. He innocently

took a seat next to the kind woman. Dave said, “Mamma was nice to the old lady, but she yanked me up out of that seat and we moved to the back of the bus.”

When asked how race influenced the skills, knowledge, and values they want to teach their children, Dave replied that they were “proud of [their] heritage.” He said, “Being Black is not a crutch...if you go in with that attitude you’re already defeated. We are all expected to be the best we can be. We teach each child “be who you are.” Gilbert, Sr. echoed this message to his children and grandchildren. Every child is encouraged to try different extracurricular activities. Once they begin an activity, they commit to stay with it for the entire season or program course. Nate, unique to the other kids in the family, loves soccer. It is a love and activity he shares with his father, Roberto. Gilbert, Sr. said he reminds them, “Don’t try to be someone else. Be who you are. Find what you love, what you are passionate about, and do that.”

While everyone in the family shares similar values and priorities for God, family, and education, everyone in the family is a unique individual; their individuality, interests and personality, is respected and honored among the family. Martha is the eldest daughter and takes on a leadership role in the family. She is outgoing and highly involved with the children’s schools and sports teams. Her posture demonstrates her confidence, her smile, kindness. Ruth shares the same kindness and confidence, but in a more reserved way. While the entire family still grieves the loss of their mother, Ruth’s grief is close to the surface. Both sisters have strong work ethic and loyalty to their employers; they both model their mother’s commitment to caring for their children, including nieces, nephews, and cousins, and providing every support needed.

This support includes having “hard conversations about protecting themselves;” instructions about avoiding “places where people haven’t changed their worldview.” They roll play scenarios such as “how to react if the police pull you over.” Noah, at aged 18, experienced some police harassment in his own yard. He was approached by police after parking his car in the driveway; the police said they needed to question him because he looked suspicious, like a person of interest they were looking for, perhaps because of his dreadlocks, speculated Martha. When his aunt, Ruth, came out of the house onto the porch to see what was going on, the police firmly instructed her to go back inside. This was a scary experience for Noah and Ruth, who was paralyzed from helping him navigate the situation safely.

Martha recalled attending the county high school and being called the n-word on a regular basis. She and her older brother, Gilbert, Jr., both graduated from the county high school after enduring overt racial discrimination. “After that, Mamma and Daddy started paying tuition” for the younger kids to go the Mellon schools. Martha learned from her experiences with racism and said, “It made me stronger.” The key takeaway she tries to pass on to her children is “our reaction is important.” She says, “We use it as a learning experience and have more awareness.” Noah still chooses to wear dreadlocks for his hair style. It represents part of who he is as an individual. His actions are also who he is.

Noah and Brooklyn both reiterated the importance of being proud of who they are and avoiding behavior that supports negative Black stereotypes. Brooklyn shared that her feelings had been hurt before because of statements made on social media that girls with lighter colored skin were better; that Black boys should date white girls. Her message to the younger children in

the family is that they, especially the girls, are beautiful “no matter what color of skin they have.” Noah recognized there is a double standard, when “certain people are allowed to act one way,” and “like it or not, there are some things we are not supposed to do and there is a consequence.” Noah understands his role in passing down wisdom gained from his lived experiences to the younger children; I “want them to do better” than me. He says, we “want to be better than the older generation, to make our family better and better.”

Do Your Best

Always do the best, be the best you can be.”

- Dave

“Nothing in life comes easy.”

- Martha

“I’ve been paid to go to school because of the work I put in.”

- Noah

At an old ballfield in Manning, Cornell practiced with a travel baseball team he had been invited to join. The only family member there that evening, besides Ruth, was Gilbert, Sr.. She came straight to the ballfield when she got off work, so Gilbert, Sr. drove Cornell 30 minutes into Manning for practice. Ruth’s commute from work to the ballfield was nearly 30 minutes as well. Ruth said they practice at least two days per week and then play in tournaments every weekend. The tournaments are all over the place. This past weekend, the tournament was in Manning, but this coming weekend the tournament was going to be in Middlesboro, three hours away.

I met them at the ballfield that night with the intention of interviewing Ruth, but could tell she was tired. It was one of those June days when the temperature hovered around 85

degrees even as the sun prepared to set. She wore jeans and a t-shirt, with tennis shoes, a warm outfit for the weather. Ruth spoke in a quiet, serious tone. Looking at her dad, she explained to both of us that she didn't have the money to spend on a hotel room so she was going to drive Cornell up and back to Middlesboro on both Saturday and Sunday for the upcoming baseball tournament. I thought, "No wonder this woman is so tired and seems a little grumpy tonight." She is constantly in her car driving from one sporting event to another. This was a hardship for her. I knew from other friends and former students that experience playing on travel teams was the ticket to college scholarships. Playing on the high school team was important as well, but one has to be visible and actively practicing and playing in order to be competitive for limited spots on college teams. Ruth knows that this is an opportunity for gained exposure and to refine his skills so her sacrifices are her way of providing the support he needs to be successful. She told me, "I don't want him to have the same struggles I had."

Several team members weren't taking practice very seriously that evening, goofing off a bit. Ruth told Cornell to "get serious" several times during the practice. A few times, he looked at her and motioned like he hadn't heard her or didn't know why she was getting on to him. A few times he rolled his eyes at her or shrugged; I think he was a little embarrassed that she was calling him out. I suppose that is typical behavior for a 14 year old boy. None of the other parents were as involved in what was happening during practice as his mother was.

While we sat and watched the boys practice for two hours; we talked about Cornell's athletic talents and his academic progress. He would be starting high school in the fall. He had already made the football team and tryouts for the high school baseball team were coming up in

a month. Ruth reminded him of that during practice, a warning to take practice time seriously. Ruth told me he already had his courses picked out for freshman year; several of them were honors level courses balanced with a few electives. Given my background in secondary education I felt comfortable sharing my support of the strategies they made in creating his schedule. He wasn't the first Sullivan child to go through high school at Mellon so they knew what to expect and how to navigate the system. Ruth was firm in stating that academics come first and the expectation was that he would make A/B honor roll in order to maintain his privilege of participating in extracurricular activities such as team sports.

Cornell needed to focus and realize that "we play like we practice," as Gilbert, Sr. stated. He also needed to practice and play like he knew and appreciated the sacrifices being made so he could even be on this team. I couldn't help but be reminded of the sacrifices Virginia made, driving Martha and Ruth to college, babysitting their children so they could study and go to their jobs. The sacrifices Ruth was making for Cornell paralleled her mother's. During practice Gilbert, Sr. did not make any corrections or comments to Cornell or the other players, but I'm confident he followed up with Cornell later, perhaps on the car ride up for the next practice. His role that night was supportive grandfather, but many times he takes on a parenting role in guiding his grandchildren to meet the family's expectations.

Gilbert, Sr. shared with me that Cornell had just recently joined this team; he had gotten the opportunity to play on this team because another player was dismissed for being too arrogant about his own talent and not focused enough on being a team player. He said, "That can hurt a team." He pointed out another player named Cody, who was also on Cornell's middle school

team; he is also distantly related to Cornell. Cody and Cornell were the only African American players on this team. Their middle school team won the district championship earlier in the spring. Usually players have to go through a tryout process in order to be offered a spot on a travel baseball team. His connection with Cody and their team's successful record helped provide Cornell the opportunity to join this team. His well-rounded talent and reputation for high work ethic sealed the deal. Gilbert, Sr. called him a "utility player" because "he plays all nine positions." At this practice, I watched Cornell in the role of catcher and left fielder. His role at the middle school district championship game was strictly catcher.

Cornell was able to practice with the travel team and play in tournaments on a limited basis due to the high cost associated with being on this type of team. Although travel teams belong to a larger organization and have corporate sponsorship, there are still significant financial obligations in order to participate. In addition to basic uniforms and equipment, there are food, travel, and hotel costs. I couldn't help but think of the privilege of the other players and the greater opportunities they have because their parents have the means to pay for so much travel and gear, as well as take the time needed off of work to drive their sons to so many locations. At the end of practice, the coach rounded everyone up and discussed logistics of the upcoming tournament in Middlesboro as well as the big trip at the end of the summer to Gulf Shores, Alabama. Participation on a travel team is expensive. The trip to Gulf Shores, alone, would be \$500. Ruth emphatically stated that Cornell was not going on that trip because she was not going to allow him to participate in activities that were "beyond [her] means." Ruth didn't speak about this in comparison with the other players or the resources other parents had. It was

just the facts that her personal budget didn't allocate funds to cover all the expenses imposed by joining a travel team, especially because his invitation to join the team came unexpectedly and part-way through their season. Her rationale for allowing him the opportunity to participate on this team, even though it wasn't full participation, was so he could stay in shape and get ready for high school tryouts. She called the month of June their "dead time" because school-sponsored athletics were not actively practicing and competing. She told me that high school football practice starts back up in July.

When practice ended, Gilbert, Sr. made his goodbyes and headed home in his vehicle. I walked with Ruth and Cornell toward the parking area. They paused when we got to my car so we could finish our conversation. Cornell thanked me for coming to his practice. He always thanks me for being at his events- whether it be practice or games. As they walked away I wished him luck on the upcoming tournament in Middlesboro. Ruth nudged him and said, "Teach just said good luck at the tournament; what do you say back?" He turned and smiled sheepishly at me, "Thank you Teach!"

The Village Comes Together

"Family is important; that's why we have family reunions."

- Martha

It began to drizzle as I passed by the back side of Brookline Park on Novel Street. Turning into the park, I could see Nate and a few boys running around, kicking a soccer ball. It was 3:50 p.m. and the grown-ups were still setting up for the 4:00 p.m. party- putting out tables and chairs, a bag of charcoal was heating up in the permanent park grill, a few tables already had table clothes on them. I only recognized a few of the grown-ups: Martha, Ruth, Thomas, Gilbert,

Jr., Noah, and Nehemiah. The others must have been family friends I hadn't met yet. There was no sign of Gilbert, Sr. yet; perhaps he had to work at the hotel this morning.

The rain fell steady now and all preparation ceased for a moment. Standing in the bed of the rental pick-up truck, Martha's younger brother, Thomas, asked one of the teenage guests to call her daddy, the middle school principal, and ask if they could use the gym. He seemed to be coordinating the set up and now he was coordinating the effort to clean up and move the party to an alternate location. Thomas, along with his older brother, Gilbert, Jr., flew in from California for this family weekend of graduations, baseball games, and birthday parties. As the teen spoke on the phone, everyone else started folding chairs and returning them to the pick-up truck from which they originated, a large GMC four-wheel drive with full-sized bed. I began to fold up chairs and carry them over to where folks were stacking them next to the truck. On the back of each chair was a stencil that read "Property of Mt. Olive AME Zion Baptist Church". Mt. Olive AME Zion Baptist Church was founded by Martha's great grandfather, Charles Howard Morgan, and the family remains active in that church to this day.

Within a matter of a few minutes, the young lady confirmed that they had permission to move the party up to the gym of the middle school- just down the street. Mr. Kane, the long-time middle school principal, gave them permission to use the gymnasium for Nate's birthday party. He gave permission immediately upon request. To my knowledge, no one in the family works for the school or the school district. To be given this permission must mean this family is well respected and trusted by this principal. No one batted an eye at the news, they simply continued their work loading tables, chairs, and other party equipment.

Once all party equipment was returned to the back of the truck, everyone piled into cars to head over to the middle school. Martha called for Nate to stop playing and gather his balls and any other toys he brought. A group text message went out to the entire family. Thinking aloud, she says, “I hope the other guests know to come to the middle school.” I offered to stay and direct party-goers to the gym naively thinking that there would only be a few more guests arriving and I would be able to join the party within the next 15 minutes. It was the kind of thing to do because I would be the last person inconvenienced by missing part of the party. Martha didn’t need one more thing to worry about after having to completely change venues.

Martha’s youngest brother, David, offered to stay with me and help direct guests to the new location. Up until this point, David was the only sibling I had not met. He seemed polite, but shy- unlike the outgoing Martha or Gilbert, Sr., who seemed at ease talking to anyone. I tried to make small talk with him while we waited under a tree. A few minutes into the conversation, he said, “I wish we had something we could make a sign with.” It was at that moment that I realized I had several large pieces of cardboard in the trunk of my car. Conveniently enough, I also had a Sharpie marker in my car as well. I always have markers and other school supplies lying around- it’s the teacher in me, I suppose. I gathered the sign-making items and knelt on the ground to write the message, “Nate’s Birthday at Middle School Gym”, with a big arrow pointing in the direction of the middle school. Midway through writing the message, Gilbert, Sr. pulled up in his white Honda Accord and asked why we hadn’t gone to the party yet. I continued writing and proudly told him my job was to direct guests to the new location (excited for an opportunity to be a helper). “Y’all don’t need to stand around down here and miss the party,” he

said, recommending that we leave the sign propped against the large oak tree by the parking area and head on up to the party. Not knowing exactly where the middle school was located, I followed Gilbert, Sr. in my car, leaving the cardboard sign propped up against the big oak tree as he instructed.

There were many more vehicles parked in the middle school parking lot than I expected. A baseball tournament was taking place on campus behind the gym. Thomas parked the truck near one of the gym entrances; family members and party guests were unloading the truck and taking the tables and chairs into the gymnasium through a small doorway. The gym was warm-undoubtedly so. It was a Sunday afternoon in mid-May. No one expected to use the inside of the facility that day so the air-conditioning hadn't been turned on. Regardless of the warmth, the grown-ups continued working like busy bees, Martha directed folks on where to set everything. On the side of the gym by the open doorway, the bleachers were pulled out so guests could sit and watch the children play on the court. They brought the tables and chairs in and set them up on the opposite side of the gym, in the corner. There was plenty of room on the court sidelines because the bleachers were rolled back in their stowed position on that side of the gym. I helped bring in chairs and then asked Martha what I could do to help. She directed me to a wrinkled pile of vinyl tablecloths that needed to be placed on the tables. I began moving the tablecloths to the tables and positioning them symmetrically. Nearly all of them were still damp from being rained on so we took paper towels and tried to dry them off. Brooklyn, Martha's daughter, who had just graduated from high school the night before, helped with this part of the set up also.

I tried to chat with her as we worked, but she is more reserved, like her Aunt Ruth. I congratulated her on graduation and asked her about her plans for college. Very polite and respectful in her language, she thanked me for the congratulations and added that she was enrolling at the local community college on a state scholarship. This scholarship provided her free tuition for the first two years of college and could be renewed after transferring to a state four-year college or university. As we spoke I couldn't help but note how formally she addressed me when answering my queries about her post-secondary plans: "Yes ma'am. It just seemed like the smart thing to do- get a free education at [Community] State and then transfer to the bigger university." When I asked her how she was going to celebrate graduation- if there were any graduation trips planned, she replied, "Yes, Ma'am. We are going to spend two nights at a cabin in the mountains. Uncle Thomas rented it for our graduation present and bought us all the food..." They invited their friends to come along for the mini-getaway.

Once the table clothes were in place, I wondered back over towards Martha who was gazing at the group of kids playing in the middle of the gym; Nate was one of them. She was smiling in his direction. I said, "He is having the time of his life right now!" She chuckled and shrugged, "Nate didn't even know his party was ruined by rain! But it doesn't matter; everything just worked out!" We watched them run around; still kicking the same soccer ball they were playing with at the park 30 minutes earlier. She turned to get back to setting the food out. I was about to ask her what else I could do to help when the same teenaged girl ran up and told Martha, "Daddy said you should move the food to the food court so everyone has a place to

sit and eat.” It was clear from the number of guests trickling through the door that there wouldn’t be enough seats for all the guests at the tables they brought from the church.

As they worked out the details, I stepped away and noticed Martha’s cousin sitting at one of the tables. I had overheard them, earlier, addressing him as Uncle Dan, the minister who married Cindy and Dave a few years back. Dan is Martha’s first cousin, the son of Virginia’s sister, Elizabeth. He lives in Nashville and was in town for the high school graduation. This was a big weekend; three Sullivan/Morgan children graduated from high school two days prior—Brooklyn, Nehemiah (Candi’s oldest son), and Kevin Michael (Dan’s nephew). Gilbert, Jr. and Thomas had also come into town primarily to celebrate the high school graduation of three young family members. Martha planned Nate’s birthday party to coincide with this weekend so more family members would be able to attend; Nate’s actual birthday was in April. I sat down beside Uncle Dan and introduced myself and let him know I was a friend of Dave’s and that I had seen pictures of their beautiful wedding at Cheekwood Gardens in Nashville five years prior. Like the other members of the family, he immediately warmed up when I mentioned Dave’s name. Martha also stopped by the table and introduced us formally. She called me “Teach” and excitedly suggested I tell Dan about my “project.” While I spoke with Dan about my dissertation project and why I had chosen Ruth and Martha as my central focus, the others moved all the food into the food court, about 500 feet away, on the diagonal opposite side of the gym. Just as the set up was complete, Cindy and Dave came in with their sweet dog, Sophie, a Boston terrier rescue, so I excused myself from boring Dan with details of my project and joined Cindy, Dave, and

Sophie in the bleachers. A few of the children ran up to pet Sophie and then quickly returned to play.

The gym was full of activity. As guests entered the gym and passed us to go to the food court, Cindy would tell me who they were and/ or introduce me when she greeted them. Dave joined some of the older boys, one of whom was his son, Devin, on the gym floor and shot a few baskets with them. The older boys- Nehemiah, Noah, Devin, and friends were playing half-court basketball near the gym entrance. On the opposite side of the court, Cornell, along with second cousins, Martin, Jr. and Ezekiel, and their friends were playing half-court basketball. In the middle of the gym, Nate and his friends were playing whiffle ball. Uncle Bill was pitching. Nate was playing the role of catcher, a few boys played outfield, and the other boys were taking turns at bat. They had a smaller scale “field” set up with four bases. Whenever they got a hit, the batters ran to the bases. My first thought was how generous Nate is to play catcher and let his friends hit the ball, but it was all about taking turns and Nate got his turns to hit the ball as well.

The pitcher, Uncle Bill, is a white man in his early 50’s who Candi pointed out to me at the Little League park the day before. On that Saturday morning, many family members trickled in to see Nate’s game and socialize with one another. Some of them came from out of state so this was a precious opportunity to see loved ones all in one place. Candi sat beside me on the metal bleachers, leaning in and pointing folks out to me throughout the game. It was the largest group of family members I had seen attend Nate’s game (at least 15 or more)- primarily because they were all in town for the high school graduation. Bill, Candi said, helped raise Noah. He

stood at the fence, at the edge of the field, and gave pointers to the players on Nate's team. He seemed most familiar with the older boys, including one of the coaches for the opposing team. That coach came over to him between innings and joked with him from the other side of the fence. When Noah arrived, he immediately walked over to where Bill was standing and jokingly nudged him off balance to get his attention. Once Bill turned to see his "son," they hugged and laughed together. Noah stood next to him through the next few innings, cheering on his little brother Nate and teammates. As other family members arrived, Noah walked around greeting them and cutting up. His joyful spirit reminded me of his mother, Martha.

Conversations were interrupted throughout the game whenever Nate made a play, came to bat, hit the ball, or struck out. They cheered for the other players as well- some family members were more in tuned to the game than others. Nehemiah kept cheering for a player on the team named Chico Sanchez. A few others joined in with him. I had heard Nehemiah do this at previous games, but this time it was apparent he was referring to little Nate. Nehemiah must have sensed my unease because he joked aloud, "People who don't know us must think we're racist!" Candi then leaned in and shared with me that Nate had given himself that name. He wanted to be a famous Mexican singer and gave himself the stage name Chico Sanchez! Nate is biracial, his father is Mexican, and he has been raised to embrace both the African American and Latino cultures.

As usual, Gilbert, Sr. was standing alone watching the game from near the dugout. He rarely sat during the games. He was approached periodically by men, I assumed he knew from the community, including Bill, but mostly he watched the game, cheered and encouraged the

players. Each time, he greeted the gentlemen with a hand shake. He held a brief conversation with each person who approached him. After the game ended, family members mingled near the ballfield, chatting with community members and finalizing plans for the family graduation barbeque scheduled for later that afternoon.

So now “Uncle Bill” is playing with a bunch of eight-year olds, pitching a whiffle ball in the gymnasium of the town’s only middle school. I asked Cindy about him and she confirmed that he had been an important part of Noah’s childhood and adolescence. She told me that he traveled to many of Noah’s college football games, including his first game in Nebraska. That seems like something a parent would do- fly half way across the country, to Nebraska, to see your son play his first college football game. But Noah isn’t his son. In fact, Bill has two sons of his own, close in age to Noah. Noah grew up with them, playing ball together, attending the same schools.

Around 5:30 p.m., Thomas entered the gym from the food court and informed those of us remaining in the gym that the food would be served soon and suggested we join the rest of the guests in the food court. Several of the children continued to play. Cindy and Dave said they were going to run back to the house to drop Sophie off and then return for dinner. They live in the next town over, Brainerd, however; their house is only about a 10-minute drive away from the middle school.

Walking up the ramp into the food court I was introduced to a few older folks who were members of the Sullivan’s “church family.” Some of them were second or third cousins. The round tables, with seating for eight, were filling up quickly. The food court had seating capacity

for approximately 100 people; approximately 70 guests, adults and children, filled many of the tables. Gilbert, Sr. took his place among some folks who were closer to his age, among them were extended family members and folks they call “church family,” folks who have gone to the same church as them for many years.

This party served as somewhat of a family reunion. The seating arrangements automatically segregated by generation, a plethora of conversations blended together; the noise level not unlike a cafeteria full of students, but the cadence was calm and pleasant to the ears. There were five or six tables full of adults, a few with children, and at least one with teenagers. At a table in the middle of the food court sat two Latino men. Roberto, Nate’s dad, sat down with them for a few minutes and spoke with them in Spanish. Nate ran up and snuggled with his dad for a few minutes, hugging him around his neck and sitting on his lap. A few moments later, Nate was off, running around the food court with his friends again.

Martha’s younger brother Thomas, raised his voice to get everyone’s attention. He thanked everyone for coming to Nate’s party and offered up grace. This action was a show of leadership in the family, as if he were the host for today’s event. I silently questioned whether Thomas was the rising patriarch of the family. When I asked Dave about Thomas’s future role in the family, he replied that Gilbert, Jr., the oldest, was still the one who would be the next patriarch. He told me that many folks go to Gilbert, Jr. for help; his patriarchy is much more subtle than Thomas’. This reminded me of something Martha told me a month prior when I asked her about Nate’s baseball team, the Sharks. She said that Gilbert, Jr. was the Sharks’ sponsor, but no one knew it.

After Thomas said grace, he invited everyone to come through the buffet line and get their dinner. He gave the list of options: soft tacos or hard tacos with beef, chicken, beans, or pork, nachos, salad, and all the fixings! He then took his spot along the line as one of the servers, who also included Martha, Ruth, Roberto, John Thompson, and his wife. They helped guests fill their plates with the tacos and toppings of their choice as they moved through the buffet line. In my seat at a table in the center of the room, I watched folks move through the line for about 15 minutes; I didn't want to jump in line in front of the *real* guests. Since I knew I was going to use my observations and interactions as data for my dissertation project, I didn't feel like a real guest, not like the others who only came to celebrate with Nate - I had ulterior motives.

Candi spotted me scanning the crowd and motioned for me to come over and fill my plate. The line was shrinking so I acquiesced to her request. As I moved through the line filling my plate with soft tacos and tortilla chips, the lady behind me in line mentioned the guacamole in front of me. She said, "I look forward to this party every year because I get some of Roberto's homemade guacamole!" With that review, I helped myself to a generous spoonful. The lady didn't lie- it was the best guacamole I've ever had.

Martha stopped by my table after the buffet line died down. "Teach, did you get enough to eat? We've got plenty!" I complimented her on the delicious food; she confessed that Roberto cooked it all. I had made the assumption from Gilbert, Sr.'s background as a cook that he (and the folks at the hotel) made the food for dinner this evening. Roberto was a construction worker, carpenter by trade, so I had no idea his culinary talents. Roberto works two jobs and

Sundays were his only day off. He spent the entire morning preparing the food for the party. Thomas purchased the food and Roberto prepared it. The presentation and food were restaurant-quality.

I told Martha how cute Nate was with his father earlier; how affectionate they were together. “He loves his Daddy!” she grinned, “Sunday is their day”. It is Roberto’s only day off so they spend the day together, usually practicing soccer in the front yard after church. Martha stressed the importance of honoring both cultures from which Nate comes- African American and Mexican. She pointed out that the one bottle of Mexican soda at the beverage table was purchased upon Nate’s request. She laughed and said, “He may be the only person here who drinks it!”

Martha asked me if I had met Bill and Sandy Nichols yet, pointing in their direction, two tables over. I told her I hadn’t met them yet, but had seen Bill playing with Nate earlier and also seen him at Nate’s baseball game the day before. “Oh, you’ve got to meet them! They would be important people for you to talk to for your project. They helped raise Noah.” She led me to their table and introduced me to them as “Teach” and told them I was doing a “project on the family.” Sandy and Bill offered me a seat and we chatted about the Sullivan family, their kids in particular.

At first, Sandy joked that she didn’t understand why I would want to study the Sullivans. “They are such a mess!” When I gave her and Bill credit for helping to raise Noah, she warmed up and started talking to me about how Noah was like a son to them, how Noah often called Bill, “Dad.” Their two sons grew up with Noah, one is a year older and one is a few years younger.

Noah spent many nights at their home over the years. They visited him in college and went to his football games. Bill told me how he had promised Noah that he would be at his first college football game. He chuckled as he told of the sticker shock when he realized he would have to go to Nebraska to fulfill his promise. Keeping his promise to Noah and supporting his “son” made the expense worth it. Sandy shared that Noah had asked if Bill could join him and Martha on the field on Senior Day; unfortunately, his request was denied since Bill was not his legal parent.

Cindy and Dave returned, slipping in quietly while I chatted with the Nichols. I joined them as Martha and Ruth brought out a huge cake pan and sat it down on a table in the back-center of the food court, opposite where the buffet line was positioned. Martha and several family members gathered around the cake and called for our attention. Roberto stood beside Martha; Nate was between them, standing on one of the table seats. Martha had her arm around Nate, stabilizing him. In a loud, joyful voice, she asked for our attention, welcomed us to a celebration of Nate’s birthday, and told us that Nate had something he wanted to say to us. Looking at Nate, she gave him a nod; it was his turn to address the crowd. Nate suddenly became shy; grinning and lowering his head, he quietly said, “Thank you for coming to my party.” Martha reiterated his thanks to the crowd for sharing in Nate’s celebration; “You are all a blessing to us and especially to Nate.”

Martha led the group in singing “Happy Birthday” to Nate. When the main verse ended, the family continued with an additional verse, using the lyrics, “May God Bless You,” in place of “Happy Birthday to You.” Nate closed the song with a giant hug for Martha and Roberto, and then Martha told the crowd they had a special treat for the birthday cake. She asked Nate if he

wanted to tell everyone about the cake. He shyly nodded no and hugged his daddy's neck.

Martha told us about the cake. "It is from Mexico and it is called Tres Leches, which means *three milks cake*." She went on to describe the cake. It is cake soaked in three kinds of milk, evaporated milk, condensed milk, and heavy cream, so it is moister than most people are used to. "We top it with whipped cream and strawberries, if you choose." She offered store bought mini-cupcakes to those who may be picky eaters and not like Tres Leches. The cake was a hit with the crowd! By the time I made it through the dessert line only a few pieces remained and the toppings were gone.

As folks finished their dessert, several family members and friends began to clean up the buffet line. I offered to help, but Gilbert, Sr. said they had it under control so I followed the rest of the crowd to the gym. Martha and Ruth were in the middle of the gym; all the children between the ages of 3 and 10 were lined up at the edge so they could get their turn at swinging a whiffle ball bat at a piñata. It looked like a few people were taking down the tables and chairs across the gym so I went over and carried a few chairs out to the truck. While the children played party games, led by Ruth and Martha, the other family members cleaned up dinner and took the tables and chairs back to the church. No one barked orders, it just happened and before the piñata was smashed both the food court and the original set up were cleaned up and put back together the way it was found. Those who did not help with clean up sat in the bleachers to cheer on the children as they played several party games. After all the folding chairs were delivered to the truck, I joined Cindy in the stands. By this time the games had ended, the piñata had been busted and the children were filling plastic grocery bags with the candy that spilled out.

Each child ended up with a bag of candy bigger than many receive from trick or treating on Halloween.

While the children cleaned up the candy, several family members brought out the gifts and put them in a pile in the center of the gym. Ruth and Martha facilitated Nate opening his birthday gifts. Martha handed him a gift and announced to the crowd who the gift was from. Nate opened the gift. Ruth kept a notepad and recorded the gift and name of giver so Nate could send thank you notes. After each gift was opened, Martha showed Nate where the giver was sitting in the bleachers; he then enthusiastically ran up to the givers, hugged them, and then returned to open the next gift.

As the party wound down, so too, the weekend and family gathering seemed to wind down. One more celebration was still to be made. Cornell and Reniah were graduating from 8th grade in two days. Cornell approached Dave about needing a bow tie to wear at graduation while we ate our dessert at Nate's party. Based on the fact that he had made the A/B honor roll every grading period that school year, Cornell was expecting to win several academic awards at the graduation ceremony. Several family members made their trip to Mellon a long weekend and stuck around for that final ceremony.

Family Tradition

"When you're dealing with people's lives, work doesn't stop at 4:30; we have a system for making it work"

- Martha

We arrived for family dinner at the same time, pulling into the parking lot of an older shopping center, the store fronts transformed into business offices. Martha met us at the door of

the lobby, unlocking the door for us and then locking it back once everyone was inside. The office where Martha works was surprisingly nice compared to the exterior of the building. The structural spaces had recently undergone a remodel. The lobby was tastefully decorated and the furniture looked relatively new. We followed her back past the lobby and down a hallway, into a large room. Looking around the large room, I saw evidence, warehouse-style ceilings with exposed pipes and fixtures that the space used to be a store of some sort. The room was now carpeted in a neutral tone, common to many professional offices. The space was neatly organized into a maze of office cubicles and file cabinets. Hers was the second one on the left. Gazing around the room, there must have been 15-20 cubicles. She was the only person working that evening.

Martha is a juvenile social worker for a state agency. Many of her clients cannot meet her during regular business hours due to their requirement to attend school. This means a good portion of her work takes place after 3:30 p.m. With the case load she held (at least 40 juveniles), I wondered why they had need of 20 cubicles. She maintained her caseload as well as the caseload of a coworker who had been out on extended medical leave. She set the kids up in the cubicle across from hers. She said the woman it belongs to wouldn't mind that Nate worked at her desk and enjoyed coming in to find evidence of his presence when she came in to work in the mornings. He often left her a note to let her know he had been working at her desk. Older sister, Brooklyn, pulled up a chair in his cubicle so she could help him with his homework. Martha offered me a chair, but I told her I preferred to spread out on the floor. I sat down on the floor just outside the doorway to her cubicle- iPad on, ready to take notes.

While Nate got started on his homework, Martha picked up and began to peruse his communication folder, the folder his teacher sends home each day that describes his academic and behavioral progress for the day along with specific instructions for homework and skill practice. The communication folder also often contains communications from the principal or grade level staff regarding upcoming events, including meetings and fieldtrips. His daily reading log was in his communication folder. His parent (or other grown-up) is supposed to sign off that he read for 20 minutes each evening. As she looked through the folder, Martha asked Nate questions about his day. After signing what she needed to sign, she reminded him of the assignments he was to work on that evening.

While Martha caught up with Nate, Brooklyn and I talked about college. She was in her first semester at [Community] State, a two-year college located about 30 minutes from home. She was taking a full course load and working a part time job in an office. On top of that, she was a major caregiver to Nate. When Martha worked late Brooklyn helped him with his homework and made sure he was fed dinner. In high school, Brooklyn was invited to join the National Honor Society during her junior year. Now that she was in college, she admitted that some of her classes were tough, but was confident she could pass them. Trying to earn my keep (as usual), I offered to help her with any science classes that gave her trouble.

Martha wrapped up her conversation with Nate and sent him back to *his* cubicle to complete his homework assignments. Brooklyn joined him to make sure he stayed on task. Now, Martha and I could talk! This family dinner was also my opportunity to officially interview both Martha and Gilbert, Sr. Getting their semi-undivided attention for an interview

was difficult due to their busy schedules. They never seem to have a minute alone. Martha told me I could use the conference room to interview Gilbert, Sr. so we would have privacy. Nate perked up when he heard the word interview, jumped out of his chair and walked in our direction, “Do you want to interview me?” I wasn’t expecting him to be so interested in what the grown-ups were doing. Martha laughed, “It’s not that kind of interview Nate!” Looking at me she said, “He thinks you are going to videotape Daddy.” She explained that Nate liked to make how-to videos, like “how to kick a soccer ball,” “how to moon walk,” etc. I explained to Nate that the interview that Gilbert, Sr. and I were going to do was not that exciting, just a list of questions Gilbert, Sr. was going to answer for me. Still excited by the idea of this interview, Nate asked if he could please come with us to the conference room for the interview. Martha told him he had to sit down and do his homework. Disappointed, but obedient, Nate returned to his seat. To appease him, I told him I would try to interview him another time.

While Gilbert, Sr. and I met in the conference room, the kids worked on homework and Martha made phone calls to clients and submitted reports. When we emerged from the conference room an hour later, Nate ran up to me to see how Gilbert, Sr. did on his interview. “He did a great job! You would be proud of him!” Gilbert, Sr. and I returned to the group just as the others were deciding what to order for dinner. Pizza was the winner tonight.

I settled back into my spot on the floor outside her cubicle, and Martha told me about the long history of having “family dinners” at her office, joking that Noah and Brooklyn used to curl up in blankets under her desk and fall asleep while she finished her reports some nights. This is how they do family dinner; this is one of their traditions. She told me she was a little

embarrassed to share this part of their life with me at first. When I asked her about family dinners as one option for participant observation, she said she thought I would be disappointed. Her idea of what family dinner should be, sitting around the kitchen table, eating together, and conversing about the day, was similar to my own conception of family dinner. It is what I assumed they did. I imagined their kitchen to be a bevy of activity- Martha and/or Ruth cooking; the kids helping to clear homework papers from the table and set out plates, napkins, and silverware. This was me, bringing in my own images of “family dinner.” So family dinner for them was much less conventional, but it was still family dinner. They ate together, discussed each other’s day, and planned for upcoming activities and events. The biggest difference in what we both visualize as what family dinner should be is the location. There was no TV to distract them in the office like there is in many households during dinnertime. Even though Gilbert, Sr. took a phone call in the other room while the others ate dinner, Martha had time to eat with her children and talk with them about their day.

Like many Americans, they ordered pizza that evening. Gilbert, Sr. took Brooklyn and Nate to pick it up while Martha and I talked. During our conversation, she received several phone calls from colleagues, clients, and family members. Noah called from college at one point. Martha spoke with him for a few minutes, mostly small talk and a few topics I wasn’t privy to the background on and therefore didn’t understand. After a few minutes she told him the others were off getting the pizza and she was talking to “Teach- you know, I told you she was doing a project on the family.” She joked that I was getting to observe family dinner at her office; it seemed to bring back mutually warm memories from the tone of her voice and her side

of the conversational exchange. She told him to call back later so he could talk to the others.

Noah calls her and checks in every day.

In my spot on the floor, I worked my way through the interview questions until Gilbert, Sr. and the children return with pizza. We stopped what we're doing to get a slice or two and eat with the group. Gilbert, Sr. took a call on his cell phone in the other room while the rest of us ate and conversed. Martha reviewed the math worksheet Nate completed prior to going to get pizza. Brooklyn and I spoke more about her course load at the community college. This was family dinner; there were a lot of different things going on at one time, but Martha was always honing in on what she thought was most important.

Once the pizza was eaten and the scraps were cleaned up, I settled back into my spot on the carpet to continue the interview. Gilbert, Sr. said he was going to go ahead and take Nate and Brooklyn home. It was at least 8:00 p.m. at this point and time for Nate to go to bed. Martha said she still has some work to do and we still needed to finish our interview. She looked at me as if she wanted to know how much longer it would take. I spoke up and announced that we had three more questions to answer, it wouldn't be much longer. Brooklyn helped pack up Nate's things. Martha told Nate to make sure he had everything and the cubicle was put back together the way he found it. She told him he had to go home with Gilbert, Sr. He began to cry; he hugged her neck, face buried in her shoulder. He wanted to stay with her. She comforted him and let him know that his Daddy came home from work early to see him before he went to bed. Roberto called while they were out getting the pizza. He came home early to spend time with the family, but everyone was gone when he got home. It was one of those times like every

family experiences when signals get crossed and intentions aren't fully executed. The thought of seeing his dad cheered Nate and he willingly went with Gilbert, Sr. and Brooklyn.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a glimpse into the lives of the Sullivan family. It does not represent every theme that emerged from data analysis. It isn't meant to. The purpose of this chapter is to help the reader get to know the Sullivans better. These narratives will likely conjure more questions than answers about how this family educates their children, why they make certain choices for the priorities they set, and what their story can teach schools about better serving their students. In the chapter that follows, I present a more thorough analysis of themes that emerged through data collection as well as answers to the research questions for this project, based on the data presented. This information provides more details about how the Sullivans educate their children. In the final chapter, I discuss outcomes of the study, both intended and unintended; I extrapolate my findings to make connections with similar scholarship; and I analyze my own biases and research choices.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis

Two purposes for this chapter are to discuss emergent themes, or elements of informal education practices by the Sullivan family, and to answer the research questions posed in Chapter 1. In the first section, I analyze three major themes or critical beliefs that emerged during the research process: God First, Then Family, Then Education. These are the big priorities set by the Sullivan Family as they raise their children collectively. Concepts that emerged from the informal education practices of this family include perseverance, work ethic, respect, and cooperation. I will provide evidence of each theme from multiple data sources. These sources include interview notes/ transcripts for two parents (Martha and Ruth), two extended family members (Gilbert, Sr. and Dave), Martha's two adult children (Noah and Brooklyn), and two fictive kin (Sandy and Andrew). These themes also emerged from field notes and reflective notes taken during participant observation of family events including baseball games, baseball practice, soccer games, family dinners, and a birthday party. Lastly, I analyzed newspaper articles that featured members of the family to find supporting evidence for the concepts that emerged through interviews and participant observation.

In section two of this chapter, the concepts discussed in the first section of this chapter, as well as data presented in the narrative, are used to answer the research questions posed in Chapter 1. In the previous chapter I chose to include only a few of the themes that emerged from the data collected. Chapter 5 presents a more comprehensive analysis of the data collected.

Thematic Analysis

This part of the chapter is divided into three major sections based on the critical beliefs of the family members: God First, Then Family, and Then Education. Within the Then Education section, I cluster the concepts emphasized most through informal education practices I observed during the time I spent with the family. These include: perseverance, work ethic, respect, and cooperation. For each, I provide examples from multiple sources of data. There are several instances when a single excerpt from field notes or interview answers could be categorized into more than one theme, based on overlapping context of these themes. For the most part, examples supporting each theme are not repeated.

God First

The first priority for the Sullivan family is putting God first. “Putting God first” means living a life that demonstrates the values and beliefs of the Christian faith; priorities, choices, and actions are based on following guidelines written in the Bible. Data sources used to provide evidence that supports this theme include: interview scripts/notes for Dave, Gilbert, Sr., Martha, Ruth, Brooklyn, and Noah; field notes from Nate’s birthday party, Nate’s soccer games, and dinner with Ruth. According to Dave, the legacy of putting God first is generational in the Sullivan family. The children in each generation were raised in the church as active participants of the worship services, Sunday school, and church socials throughout their childhoods and into adulthood. Being raised in the church means the church community plays a significant role in helping the parents educate their children to emulate the values taught in the church. Charles Howard Morgan, Dave’s grandfather, started the Mt. Olive AME Zion Church in Sunrise in the

late 1800's. In the beginning, the church property also housed a school for Black children. The congregation met in the school house until a sanctuary, or worship center, could be built. This is a Christian church affiliated with the Methodist denomination. Charles Howard Morgan was the first minister of this Church. He and his wife raised their children in Mt. Olive. His son, David Morgan, Sr., along with wife, Josephine, raised their children, Virginia, Elizabeth, and David, Jr. in this church, who then raised their children in this church. Now Virginia's children, Martha and Ruth, raise their children in Mt. Olive. According to Gilbert, Sr., Josephine and David, Sr. were superintendents of the church; caring for the grounds and assisting with church operations. Gilbert, Sr. and Virginia carried that torch for several years after Josephine and David Sr. died. Gilbert, Sr. is less active now that Virginia is gone; he often works at the hotel on Sunday mornings.

Martha called her great grandfather, C.H. Morgan, the cornerstone of that church. She and Ruth admit they would like to "be better about getting [the children] to church more often" (Ruth, 08/05/2015), but it is apparent from my conversations with Noah and Brooklyn that they raised their children with Christian values and biblical knowledge. When speaking with Noah, he shared that his mother, Martha, had always told him, "God didn't give us a spirit of fear, but one of power and love of sound mind" (10/30/2016). This is a verse in the Bible his mother used to share with him (2 Timothy 1:7) to remind him that he shouldn't be ashamed of his Christian beliefs or deny his faith in front of others. It is also a reminder that God has given him the strength and tools to overcome obstacles. Brooklyn also made several references to faith in God during her interview. Her references involved prayer and perseverance when times get tough,

stating “when life gets hard, just pray and keep pushing” (09/27/2015). Martha used scripture to reinforce the skills, knowledge, and values she wanted her children to learn.

Cornell, Ruth’s only child, is very involved in church youth group at a church in Mellon. It is not the same church the family belongs to. It is a bigger church; one with a larger youth group. It is a social outlet for him, a safe outlet in which the values Ruth prioritizes are reinforced. The evening I met Ruth for dinner and her interview, I saw Cornell exiting this church with a group of 10 or 15 other adolescents. They were gathering in the church yard for an activity. He smiled and waved at me as I drove by. One of Ruth’s goals for Cornell is for him to be a good man, to “love everyone the way God loves him;” she wants “people to see the God within [him]” (08/05/2015). Ruth not only spoke about the importance of instilling love of God and reliance of Christian faith, she demonstrated this by bowing her head in silent prayer prior to eating her meals. I witnessed this during two dinners I shared with her as well as at Nate’s birthday party.

Similarly, Martha keeps Nate involved in the worship and social life of the church. He currently participates in choir because he loves to sing. At his birthday party, his Uncle Thomas (Martha’s younger brother) led the entire group of 70 or more party-goers in grace³¹ before they opened up the buffet line to guests. Later in the party Martha led the group in singing “Happy Birthday to You;” the final verse was modified to “May God Bless You,” sung repeatedly to the same tune as “Happy Birthday to You.”

³¹ “Grace” is a brief prayer, silent or spoken, just prior to mealtime.

The soccer team Nate played on was with the Crown Sports League, a faith-based organization. Martha said that is one of the reasons they chose this league for Nate to play in. The practices and games take place at Goliath Field in downtown Manning. It takes them nearly 30 minutes to drive there from their home in Sunrise. The Crown Sports League started out as a small youth program in a United Methodist church in downtown Manning and had grown over the past 20 years into a large youth program that included multiple sites for youth programming, athletic leagues, and most-recently a charter school.

I attended Nate's soccer games on two separate Saturdays. The first Saturday, Martha and Gilbert, Sr. were the only family members in attendance. On the second Saturday, Martha was joined by her daughter, Brooklyn and sister, Ruth. On that day, Ruth was the most vocal in cheering Nate on and encouraging the team. She was protective of Nate, who took a few tough hits during the game. In the next section I share the importance this family places on commitment to one another.

Then Family

Based on data collected from interviews, informal conversations, and field notes, family is second in importance to faith and service to God. Gilbert, Noah, Brooklyn, Martha, and Ruth all stated that family could be depended on to "have your back and love you unconditionally" (Noah, 10/30/2015). Several instances during my field work indicated the commitment each family member has made to ensure the family gets better and better for the next generation. Family members supported the children by attending their sports games; Martha and Ruth's older brother, Gilbert, Jr., actually sponsored Nate's baseball team, although that was supposed

to be a secret. The family frequently communicates with one another via group text messaging. Using text messaging features on their smart phones, they are able to program everyone's phone numbers into one group. They are then able to send the same message to every member of the group at one time. Dave told me this is how he knows when all the ballgames are scheduled. These group texts help keep everyone in the know about upcoming events involving the children and planning other family gatherings.

Many family members converged on Mellon in May 2015 to celebrate the high school graduation of three of the children. That same weekend, many of those family members attended Nate's baseball game on Saturday and his birthday party on Sunday. Two uncles, Gilbert, Jr. and Thomas, flew in from California to see their niece, nephew, and second cousin graduate. It was said that they sponsored several of the celebrations that weekend, including purchasing the food at Nate's birthday party; they also helped with setting up these events, hosting responsibilities, and cleaning up afterwards.

Knowing that the Sullivan's choose to raise their children collectively and how involved they are in the community, I felt it was important to learn more about their conception of what family is. Their blood family and household living situation is nontraditional compared to the once-normed nuclear family. While many people still view the term family to mean a household that includes a dad, mom, and children, the majority of families in the United States are not structured this way. The family that is the central part of this case study is not structured as a traditional nuclear family. Members of the Sullivan family living in one household include Gilbert, Sr. (grandparent; father of Martha and Ruth), Martha (Noah, Brooklyn, and Nate's

mother), her life partner, Roberto (Nate's father), Ruth (Cornell's mother), and children Brooklyn, Cornell, and Nate. Noah stays in this household when he is home from college.

As part of the interview process, Martha, Ruth, Dave, Gilbert, Sr., Noah, and Brooklyn were all asked to define family. No one gave the exact same answer, however all of their answers were similar. No one described family in terms of structure, genders, or roles for individuals that make up a family. Their definition of family wasn't confined to those living in one household. Words they used in defining family include, relationships, bond, care, trust, always, blessing, values, functions, supports, depend, love, and need. All of them said that family didn't require blood relation, but bonds that develop through close friendship can become familial in nature. Below are excerpts from the definitions each family member gave during their interviews:

Ruth described family as "love, togetherness, unbreakable bond, [and] blessing." She said, like the others, "You know, in your heart, you can always depend on them; you may fuss and fight, but in the end they are always there" (08/05/2015).

Martha described family as "people that love and support one another" (08/26/2015). She discussed how many friends become family-like because of shared values and interests. They attend many of the Sullivan's family events and are positive role models for their children.

Gilbert, Sr.'s concept of family included many friends; "we bring a lot of people into the fold that we consider family." He considers someone family if they can be depended on "no matter what" (08/26/2015).

Brooklyn stated that “Family isn’t always blood. Family is anyone you can depend on to be there for you when you are at your lowest and need a shoulder to lean on. Family is someone who loves you for who you are, and accepts you” (09/27/2015).

Noah stated that family is a “group of people, maybe not even blood related, who have your back and love you unconditionally; they care for you and your wellbeing. The biggest thing is can you trust them and know without a doubt that they have your best interest at heart” (10/30/2015).

Dave’s reply to my question was, “You are the definition of family.” He meant this in the context of thanking me for “honoring my family with your story, that you thought enough of us, you are a blessing to us” (text message, 03/25/2016).

For the Sullivan’s, family stretches beyond household membership, but when asked which adults were the most influential in the development of the children, only the closest family members, primarily those living in the household, were mentioned. One reason for this may simply be because these individuals act in a parenting role on a daily basis, not just once or twice per week. The family members living in the household play central roles in the informal education of the children; other family members and fictive kin play supporting roles. When I asked them about the people most influential in their development, Noah and Brooklyn never mentioned the fictive kin that Martha and Ruth told me about- godparents, the Nichols, John Thompson, Andrew. There are also plenty of other community members who the children respect and have good relationships with; one example is “Uncle Buddy;” he is one of the

umpires at the Little League field. From his interactions with the older children, I surmise he has been within the sphere of community support to the children for many years.

The two mothers, Ruth and Martha, value the positive influences fictive members of the family have been on their children and believe their children would not have been as successful without their support (Martha, 05/05/2015). The influences of extended kin, fictive kin, and community members have reinforced the informal education Martha and Ruth have provided their children. They have all played a role in the education of the children. Ruth described how Andrew, Cornell's Big Brother, taught Cornell to act like a gentleman, gave him advice on life and setting goals, and reinforced the same values she taught him (Ruth, 08/05/2015; Andrew, 09/28/2015). Sandy and Bill reinforced the importance and expectation of work ethic, especially with Noah (Sandy, 09/03/2015).

Then Education

Just as Christian faith is a legacy in the Sullivan family, so is valuing education. Based on interviews with Dave, Gilbert, Sr., Martha, Ruth, Brooklyn, and Noah as well as quotes from newspaper articles about some of the children in the family, it is clear that the Sullivan family wants their children to have every opportunity to succeed in life and they believe the key to realization of their dreams and goals is education.

This belief has been passed down from generation to generation. Martha's grandmother, Josephine Morgan, was a highly educated teacher and school administrator. Ruth and Martha reminisced that she would have them practice writing in cursive as well as public speaking when she baby sat them years ago (04/21/2015). It's funny how these things become a tradition; in a

later interview (08/26/2015), Martha mentioned that she used to make Noah practice public speaking. Josephine became an educator when schools were segregated and she experienced the transition of integration of schools as both a parent and an educator (Dave, 02/07/2015).

Education has also been highly valued by Roberto, Nate's father; Roberto's father was a school principal in Mexico. Although his career in construction has not required a high level of education, the value of education was a big part of his upbringing (Martha, 08/26/2015).

Gilbert, Sr. explained the importance of education as an "avenue to succeed in life." He believes "education will open doors and present opportunity if you apply yourself" (08/26/2015). This is the message he passed down to his children and helps to reinforce with his grandchildren. The message has been received by Brooklyn who shared in her interview, "My grandfather always says, 'Get your education. Someone can come and take everything you have in life, but they can't take your education'" (09/27/2015).

Family members have demonstrated the value they place on education by their actions. Gilbert, Sr. and his late wife, Virginia, did their best to remove obstacles their children encountered in completing their education. Virginia drove both Martha and Ruth to their respective college campuses or paid for their gas; she babysat Martha's two oldest children so she could attend her classes (Ruth & Martha, 04/21/2015). Another example of family member actions demonstrating the value of education is that so many extended family members went to the time and expense to travel from across the state (and at least two from across the country) to celebrate the high school graduation of three of the children.

The younger members of the family also participate in demonstrating the value of education. They lead by example because “someone is always watching” (Noah, 10/30/2015), whether that be the youngest members of the family or members of the community. One of the family members graduating with Brooklyn, her first cousin, Nehemiah, was offered a scholarship to play collegiate football at a division II school, the same school Noah attended and played football for. When interviewed by the local newspaper about the advice he received from Noah about choosing a college, Nehemiah was quoted as saying:

“His biggest concern for me wasn’t me going to [the same college] (for football),” [Nehemiah] said. “His biggest concern was me going to a place I would excel in- not just on the field, but in the classroom. He just wanted me to get an education. That was his main concern.” (Brainerd -Mellon Daily Times, 02/05/15)

Martha and Ruth both explained that the children must earn grades no lower than a B on their report cards to keep the privilege of participating in extracurricular activities. Newspaper articles from the local paper listed Cornell’s name as earning A/B honor roll status every quarter during the 2014-2015 school year (11/04/2014, 01/13/2015, & 04/21/2015). At Cornell’s middle school district championship baseball game, I overheard Gilbert, Sr. tell another parent how proud he was of Cornell’s academic success. Older family members play a role in helping the younger children maintain good grades. Brooklyn shared that she helped Cornell with his math homework regularly. She also helped her younger brother, Nate, with his homework and made sure he completed his required nightly reading assignment.

Martha’s knowledge of early literacy and their routines for reading at home was made apparent when I overheard a conversation between her and John Thompson at one of Nate’s

soccer games. Martha keeps in constant communication with his teacher and takes the time to better understand what she (and other family members) can do at home to support his success in the classroom. Martha asked John about his son's reading level and the kinds of reading assignments he brought home. Martha shared that Nate had Accelerated Reader (AR) goals to meet each week. She said, "He loves chapter books; he is currently reading a book that Brooklyn read last year called *Wonder*." She went on to explain that Nate reads every night; John concurred that his son was required to do the same. "Nate still asks me to read to him before bed." John looked surprised; they no longer have that routine in their household. Martha responded, "They say reading to your children helps them become better readers; I think it's sweet- someday soon they won't want us to read to them!" Prioritizing reading every night and reinforcing it by reading with Nate is a key factor in why he is reading above grade level.³² *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio, is written on a 5th grade level. Nate is in the 3rd grade.

So what do the Sullivans teach their children to help them be successful? The following concepts were found to be threaded throughout my observations of informal education practices of the Sullivan family and in the answers they provided during interviews: perseverance, work ethic, respect, and cooperation.

Perseverance.

One of the examples of perseverance comes from field notes, observations and conversations that occurred during Nate's soccer games; similar messages were also transmitted

³² Research shows the more time a child spends reading and being read to (print and oral language exposure), the more likely they are to be proficient readers (Allington, 2014; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Nagy & Herman, 1987)

from family members at the baseball games I attended. “Stay with it!” yelled Gilbert, Sr. as one of the players on Nate’s team moved the soccer ball towards the goal (08/22/2015). I heard this phrase multiple times that day at the soccer complex, directed at Nate and his teammates. Soccer is a fast-paced game and I was impressed at how well these seven and eight-year olds were able to focus on the ball. The sentence, “stay with it” means more than just seeing a play through to the end, but committing oneself to see any activity and project through to the end, be it a soccer season, a soccer game, a soccer play. This message of perseverance translates into all aspects of their lives. As mentioned in a previous section, Brooklyn says she tries to teach her younger brother and cousins, “when life gets hard, just pray and keep pushing” (09/27/2015).

Another phrase I heard several times during the games that day was, “Don’t give up on it!” (08/22/2015). Although Gilbert, Sr. is not an expert at soccer, most of his other children and grandchildren have focused on football, basketball, and baseball, he said he was getting the hang of it. His instructions to the players were positive and encouraging, as were those of Martha and the other parents.³³ One of the expectations of participation in the Crown Sports Leagues was good sportsmanship from parents, staff, and players.

Not only are the children encouraged to persevere through a game, they must persevere through an entire season as part of their commitment to the team and to themselves. Martha’s rule for her children is that when they begin something, they stick with it until the activity ends, whether that be a day, a week, or a season. When we were having dinner at Martha’s office, Gilbert, Sr. reiterated this sentiment. He then looked at Nate and asked, “Do you know what

³³ I heard only one negative (sort of) comment made by Gilbert, Sr. This is shared in the section on respect.

commitment means?” Nate nodded. Gilbert, Sr. replied, “Explain what commitment means, in your own words.” Nate thought for a moment and said, “You have to finish the season” (08/26/2015).

During his interview (08/26/2015), Gilbert, Sr. shared a story from when Noah first started playing football. One day after practice he told Gilbert, Sr. that he didn’t want to play anymore. Gilbert, Sr. said he brought Noah to his mother to discuss the situation. Her response was, “you made a commitment so you will finish this year. You don’t have to play next year, but you will finish this year.” Gilbert, Sr. proudly recalled that Noah “ended up running 25 touchdowns that season” (08/26/2015). Noah persevered through that first season of football, refining his talent and sharpening his skills. He later went on to help his high school team win three state football titles and earned a scholarship to play football at the collegiate level.

Noah’s inspiration to persevere regardless of obstacles and disappointments is his mother, Martha. He shared that there have been times during college when he wanted to quit because of a diminished role on the team or difficulty with a class, but “knew the people in my family wouldn’t approve” (10/30/2015). Noah shared that he works hard and doesn’t quit because he recalls the struggles his mother overcame to get her college education. He learned “by example.” Martha earned her Bachelor’s degree, but it took her nearly 11 years. “We struggled,” he said. “I watched her work two or three jobs and finish her degree...times are rough for me, but I’m not raising two kids... I stuck it out; it’s exciting to see the light at the end of the tunnel” (10/30/2015). He earned his Bachelor’s degree in four and a half years. While Noah referred to his mother’s tenacity for completing her education as his motivation to finish

school, Martha credits her parents, for providing the necessary support to help her accomplish her goals.

Work ethic.

If one is to persevere, s/he must have a strong work ethic. Martha told me, “nothing in life comes easy; that’s the values I was taught” (08/26/2015). She watched her parents and grandmother work hard. Gilbert, Sr. worked two jobs for many years; he retired four years ago and now only works one job. Roberto also works two construction jobs; his only day off each week is Sunday. Ruth and Martha model this value for their children as well. They both work long hours at their jobs. Martha is a salaried employee, paid for a 40 hour work week. She works well over her 40 hours as a social worker because her case load is heavy- she is taking on extra clients to cover for a coworker who is out on medical leave. She never complained to me about her situation. She always reflected an attitude that she intended to do a good job; she honored her clients by dedicating the time needed to help them. Unfortunately that means working evening hours sometimes to accommodate work and school schedules of these clients. She does what it takes to accomplish her tasks.

Ruth was firm on Cornell the night I spent with them at the baseball field in Manning. He was practicing with a travel baseball team and the boys on the team weren’t focused that night. Ruth repeatedly told Cornell to “get serious” (06/25/2015). She reminded him that baseball tryouts for the high school team were only a month away. She wanted to remind him that nothing is guaranteed and the only true route to success is hard work. Gilbert, Sr. showed his support for Ruth’s instructions to Cornell by saying, “We play like we practice”

(06/25/2015). Even though she couldn't afford for him to participate in all of the tournaments this team was scheduled to play, Ruth still expected Cornell to give his best effort and make the most of the opportunity.

"Good hustle!" was a message sent to Nate and teammates on both the soccer field and the baseball field. During one baseball game Martha, the vigilant dug-out mom, reminded the players to hustle out onto the field as they transitioned from the team at bat to their defensive positions (5/16/2015). As the baby of the family, one might expect Nate to be coddled to a certain extent; however on the ball field, he was expected to be tough. Win or lose, I saw Nate treated the same way by his family members, positive encouragement without inflated compliments. He earned his compliments for the effort he put in, not simply for showing up.

During one game, when a play didn't go Nate's way, Brooklyn leaned over to her aunt and said, "If he cries, I'm leaving!" (04/21/2015). After a loss one Saturday, the day so many of his family members came to the ballpark to socialize and watch him play, I saw only one relative approach him after the game to give him a hug and say "good game" (05/16/2015). At one of his soccer games (09/19/2015), Nate got hit pretty hard by a much larger player on the opposing team. The coach pulled him out the game because he was nursing his shoulder. Ruth asked Martha if he was hurt; they watched his behavior for a minute, but didn't approach the bench to check on him. Martha indicated that it was the coach's call as to whether or not she attended to her son on the bench. A few minutes later he returned to the game. The purpose of treating him this way is to provide needed support without giving him the expectation that he can be rewarded without earning it through hard work.

One of the biggest lessons the Sullivan children learn is the expectation that they must give their best effort. In her interview (09/03/2015), Sandy specifically mentioned work ethic as an example of common values she and Bill taught their children. The other value, she told me, the two families share is respect. As a parent she wanted her sons spending time and choosing friends with other children who were expected to learn respect. In the next section, I discuss ways in which the family demonstrated how they teach respect.

Respect.

Data sources where the subtheme respect was found include interview transcripts/ notes and field notes. Four aspects of respect being taught include using manners, respecting oneself, encouraging others, and demonstrating humility.

Manners.

During his interview (10//30/2015), Noah immediately responded “manners” when I asked him what were the most important skills, knowledge, or values he learned from the people who were most influential in his development. The term, manners, refers to the socially accepted behaviors that are deemed appropriate- demonstrating politeness, kindness, and respect. What constitutes good manners varies from country to country, region to region, culture to culture, and family to family. The Sullivan family values manners that are traditionally accepted as appropriate in southern United States culture. Noah shared the importance of using polite manners when speaking to others, especially adults, referencing the requirement to always say “yes, ma’am”, “no ma’am”, “yes sir”, and “no sir.” Being the oldest child in the household, he has been responsible for reinforcing these skills with the younger children. “Sometimes Nate

will say ‘yeah’, and [I] have to say ‘what do you say?’” (10/30/2015). He also shared that he helped teach his younger male cousins “how to respect women” and his younger sister “how other men should treat her” (10/30/2015). Treating others with good manners is part of developing positive relationships. Treating others with respect and being treated respectfully by others begins with using good manners when interacting. I speak more about this in the next section.

Martha’s “It takes a village to raise a child” philosophy was apparent when she told me that being respectful was one of the most important expectations she had of her children, especially when it comes to respecting people’s differences. She told me that when I speak to her children I should “hear yes ma’am and no ma’am...if you’re not hearing those things then talk to me” (08/26/2015). The family members are all expected to behave in a way that honors the family. Martha expects the “village” to help her enforce those expectations and to inform her when one of her children behaves in a way that misrepresents the family.

Once again, prioritizing this skill in the informal education of their children is a generational tradition. Gilbert, Sr. told me, “One of the proudest things I can say is Virginia and I raised our children to have manners and they are to refer to anyone as yes sir, no ma’am...our parents instilled this in us and now our children have taught their children manners; if they don’t then they have to come through me” (08/26/2015). As the patriarch of the family, he has a significant amount of influence on his nieces and nephews, as well as his own six children. He modeled good manners whenever I was in his presence. At one of Nate’s soccer games, I arrived without a chair to sit in. Even though I told him I was happy to stand, Gilbert insisted I sit in his

chair. He then went to his car and got another chair and set it up behind Martha and me. He gave up his front row view of the game so that I could watch the game and talk to Martha. At the same game, Gilbert, Sr. gave his encouragement and “arm chair coaching” from the sidelines; during one play he said in a calm yet firm voice, “Kick the ball hard, please. (PAUSE)...Thank you,” to one of the players on Nate’s team (08/22/2015).

It was evident the children had learned manners and speaking respectfully to others had become a positive habit. Every time I spoke to the children they said “yes ma’am” and “no ma’am” as part of the answers to my questions, when applicable. Every time I came to a practice or ballgame, the children thanked me for being there to see them play.

Self- respect.

Self-respect is an important value to the family because it teaches the children not to settle for second best- from themselves or from others. Both Gilbert, Sr. and Dave stated that it was important for the children to “be who you are” (Gilbert, Sr., 08/22/2015; Dave, 02/07/2015), to be comfortable with their individuality, and to know they are supported in whatever makes them happy. For Nate, soccer and music are his big loves. He has given himself the name Chico Sanchez as his alter ego, a Mexican country music singer. The family honors the things he is passionate about, just as they do for all the children. Some run track, some play football, some like to cook. There is not an expectation to live up to another family member’s accomplishments. Each child in the family is different and special. Gilbert, Sr. tells them, “Don’t try to be someone else” (08/22/2015). The family wants each child to make their own mark on the world.

When I asked her what her overarching goal for Cornell was, Ruth said, “Whatever his heart desires, I want him to have it” (08/05/2015). Cornell’s Big Brother, Andrew, says he teaches him “to set goals and reach for the stars...not to settle, but reach beyond what he may think he’s capable of” (09/28/2015). Andrew went on to say that Cornell is beginning to see the results of hard work and reaching beyond what he thinks he is capable of and that his positive choices are bringing him more and more opportunities for his future life as an adult.

Self-respect also means making choices that will help promote one’s success. For Brooklyn, this means teaching Nate and her younger male cousins “that there are a lot of stereotypes out there that are against them, so they need to lead a life where they won’t fall into them” (09/27/2015). She wants them to avoid behaviors that promote negative stereotypes of Black males such as “Black men don’t have real jobs, they sell drugs for money” (09/27/2015). This also means making choices that positively impact their lives, like making their education a priority. She also wants the younger girls in the family to become strong women, to understand their self-worth and beauty as Black women, and to not allow themselves to be treated disrespectfully by men. She referenced a time when she read some things on social media, posted by Black men, encouraging other Black men to choose to date white girls instead of Black girls. She stated that the purpose of some of the posts were to “make fun of dark skin girls;” these posts were very hurtful to her and she doesn’t want the younger girls to be made to feel the same way (09/27/2015).

Encourage others.

Good sportsmanship is a valuable lesson learned through participation in team sports. For the Sullivans, team sports have been a huge part of their lives, and for good reason. Martha said she liked “keeping [the kids] active in sports because it promotes a teammate attitude” (08/26/2015). On a team, players must work together, encourage each other, and help them out when needed. I saw examples of encouragement from both the Sullivan children and the adult family members when attending these games.

During one of Nate’s baseball games, a boy on his team struck out. As he walked back towards the dugout, Nate consoled him, “It’s okay Ezra.” (05/16/2015). Earlier in the game I heard Martha remind the players, “Cheer for your teammates!” (05/16/2015). The team culture was positive overall, as was the culture of the crowd of parents and fans/ spectators in the bleachers watching the game. I consistently heard positive encouragement coming from the dugout and the bleachers at every one of Nate’s Little League baseball games I attended.

Examples include:

“Good job!”
 “Great play!”
 “Good cut!”
 “You got it!”
 “Keep your eye on the ball!”

Similarly, I heard positive encouragement from the parents and fans/ spectators at Nate’s soccer games I attended. Examples include:

“Good job!”
 “Good pass!”
 “Way to stay with it!”
 “Go, Go, Go!”

“Go after it!”
 “Spread out!”
 “Take the shot!”
 “It’s all you, buddy!”
 “Good try, buddy!”
 “You’ll get it next time.”

Nate’s soccer team lost one of the two games they played on a Saturday morning. Martha and another mom were conversing as the clock wound down for the end of the game. Martha suggested to the other mother, “We should give family high fives!” (08/22/2015). The other parent replied, “Let’s do it!” They ran out onto the soccer field high fiving all of the players on the field, from both teams. As they high fived, they joyfully proclaimed, “Good game!” and “It’s alright! We’ll get ‘em next time!” (8/22/2015).

As mentioned previously, Gilbert, Sr. gave regular and consistent encouragement to his grandchildren and other players on the field; however, there was one occasion in which Gilbert, Sr. became impatient with one of the players on Nate’s soccer team. The boy began kicking the ball towards the opponent’s goal. He shouted to the boy that he was going the wrong way; his frustration was apparent by his tone. Martha quickly scolded him and said, “Daddy- hush! He’s eight [years old]!”

Humility.

One area of respect that involves both respect for oneself and respect for others is humility. Humility is an important value in the Sullivan family. Humility is also connected with work ethic and perseverance because having humility prevents a person from feeling entitled to awards, acclaim, and/or position. Humility drives a person to seek continual improvement and persistently work hard to achieve goals. Several adults told me they remind the children that

“nothing in life comes easy” (Martha, 08/26/2015). There are obstacles to overcome and humility reminds us that we always have room for improvement. Dave said they teach the children that there is “always somebody, somewhere who is better [more talented, intelligent, skilled] than you are” (02/07/2015). Rather than use that as an excuse for defeat, they use it as a motivation to keep trying and get better.

During her interview, Martha told me that she teaches her children, “it’s okay to be wrong, be humble; if I’m wrong, I will apologize to show them it’s okay to be remorseful.” (08/26/2015). She went on to tell me “we don’t make excuses for [our mistakes]; we sometimes make mistakes, but we make up for it.” (08/26/2015). Humility in this sense is a way of earning respect from others. Martha wants her children to accept that we are all imperfect humans. Taking responsibility for our shortcomings, rather than placing blame on others, is a value the children learn early on in their childhoods.

Noah spoke about how Martha taught him to be humble in a different way. He said his mother would tell him, “you smelling yourself”, meaning you think you’re a big man (10/30/2015). In my family, the phrase for that was “you’re getting too big for your britches.” This statement made by Martha was a reminder to Noah not to let his ego get too big. Humility is a quality I saw in all the children, in particular because of behaviors I did not see at the ball games I attended. As mentioned previously, good sportsmanship was an expectation by both the family and the sports leagues Nate and Cornell played on. I never saw them boast about their successes, nor did I see them delight when the opposing team made a mistake. When complimented about academic successes or awards, the children responded with humility.

Cooperation.

The spirit of cooperation instilled in the Sullivan family is also reinforced through involvement with sports. Martha said it is important for them to be “active in sports [because] it helps promote the teammate attitude” (08/26/2015). They have to “be willing to help people, not just themselves” (08/26/2015). Noah was quoted in the local newspaper in October 2014 as saying:

“Whatever it takes to help the team to be successful...if that means me carrying the ball, if that means me blocking, I’m for either one.” (Brainerd-Mellon Daily Times, 10/11/14)

The context of this quote was regarding his role on the [college] football team that was scheduled to play against a larger division I football team located just 30 minutes from where he grew up. It was a homecoming of sorts for him.

Cooperation means helping one’s family, teammates, and colleagues in whatever ways needed to achieve a goal. One strategy that promotes cooperation on a team is good communication. While watching the fast pace of Nate’s soccer game, the ball and players moving in one direction and then quickly switching due to a turn over or passing of the ball, Martha stated, “I like the way they communicate...working together” (08/22/2015). The players on Nate’s soccer team have to focus on the ball and communicate with one another as they work collaboratively to move the ball towards the opponent’s goal.

Versatility is another strategy for achieving a goal through cooperation. In order for a team to be successful, each player must be placed in the position they are best suited for based on their strengths. Just as Noah shared that he was willing to play whatever position that was

needed to help the team be successful, Cornell is following in his footsteps as a “utility player” for baseball. Gilbert, Sr. explained that a utility player can play all nine positions, and play them well (05/04/2015). This is important for Cornell’s overall achievement because he will be able to help his baseball team win games regardless of where he is needed on the field.

With the goal of team success as the primary focus, individual desires must take a backseat. Gilbert, Sr. shared that Cornell’s opportunity to play on a travel baseball team came because another player was released from the team for being arrogant, focusing on himself, rather than the team. The goal of the Sullivan family is for the family to become better with each generation (Noah, 10/30/2015). This means putting individual agendas aside, working cooperatively, and providing the support needed to help each member. The family communicates with one another regularly through group text messaging and daily phone calls; they also “do almost everything together...as a unit...still live individually, but when there is a crisis of any sort we bring it to the table or go to dinner to determine what we need to do to help one of the members of the family.” (Gilbert, Sr., 08/26/2015). This applies for small things like helping each other by picking up the children from school and taking them to their ballgames or practices; it also applies for the larger crises when a family member is struggling with a financial or employment issue. It applies for the children when they have a problem with school. The communication and cooperation involves the teachers and coaches as well.

Research Questions

In this section, I answer the research questions I posed in Chapter 1 using evidence from data collected. The main research question was *How do the Sullivan's educate their children?* The additional four questions elaborate on this overarching question.

How do the Sullivan's Educate their Children?

Like many parents, Ruth and Martha educate their children in a variety of ways; they “talk to them, lead by example, and show them” (08/05/2015). They provide “examples of people [they] look up to” and keep a circle of supportive people in their lives “who are positive influences” (Ruth, 08/05/2015). Noah sees the reason for his success and the success of the other children in the family as the “uniformity of how everybody raises their kids;” he says that “helps the family stay strong...cousins disciplining your kids; it takes a village” (10/30/2015). In order for the family to operate as a village, they must have strong communication. One form of communication that helps keep the family knowledgeable about what is going on, extracurricularly, is group text messaging that circulates to all members of the family. The messages keep everyone informed of event information for the children. They also use this medium to plan family gatherings such as dinners and parties. They also use this group text message to alert other family members when one the children needs support, whether that be discipline, encouragement, or time.

I also noticed a quiet, almost nonverbal form of communication occur between the adults in the family, especially between Ruth, Martha, and Gilbert, Sr. Part of the reason that they only needed to use only a few words, facial expressions, and hand gestures to communicate may be

due to the routines of their activities. They have had children involved in team sports from the time 23-year old Noah was in Kindergarten. Their roles and expectations for each other before, during, and after these activities helped the family operate like a well-oiled machine. Time is limited for this busy family so they function collaboratively.

Martha mentioned that she and Noah role-played situations such as being pulled over by a police officer as a protective measure (08/26/2015). This role playing type activity is one way Martha and Ruth “show” their children the skills, information, and values they want their children to learn. Dave said that the children often role-play Bible scenes at family reunions as a way to reinforce the values they are learning from studying the Bible (02/07/2015).

What values, information, and skills are taught/ reinforced through informal education practices within the family?

A summary of the skills, information, and values taught or reinforced through informal education practices is listed in Table 5.1. Most of the values listed in the table including, work ethic, respect for others, don’t give up, caring, and humility were observed in action at the family events at which I was a participant observer as well as discussed by multiple family members during their interviews. At these same events I saw manners and cooperation, as well as development of fine and gross motor skills reinforced. Brooklynn shared that she thought it was important to help her younger siblings and cousins learn practical skills such as cooking and money management (09/27/2015). Evidence that school curriculum is reinforced at home emerged from both interview and observation data. Gilbert, Sr. and Dave both shared that passing knowledge about the Sullivan (and Morgan) family history was important to the identity

development of the younger generation. Both Martha and Ruth discussed the importance of ensuring the children learned about their cultural heritage on both sides of their family. For example, Martha supports Nate in learning about and valuing both African American and Mexican cultural traditions (05/17/2015, 08/26/2015). Likewise, Ruth shared that she wants Cornell to feel connected to both the African American side of his family and the white side of his family (08/05/2015). By no means is this a comprehensive list of the skills, knowledge, and values taught through informal education practices of the Sullivan family, but these were most valued by the family as evidenced by their recurrence throughout the data sets.

Table 5.1 Skills, Knowledge, and Dispositions

Skills	Information	Values
Cooking Manners Money management Public Speaking Cooperation Fine motor skills Gross motor skills	School curriculum Family history (Multi-)Cultural heritage	Put God first Respect yourself and others Don't give up Work ethic Don't judge other people/ those who are different from you Self-confidence Caring Humility

Why are these practices valued by the family?

These practices are valued by the family because they believe these will ensure their children are successful in life and function as moral citizens in their community. They teach the children through several different modes of instruction: lecture, demonstration, and application.

The family also utilizes community resources and expands the familial circle for their children to include close friends who share the same interests, beliefs, and values. Not only is it important for the children to achieve to their highest potential, it is also necessary to the collective success of the family that the Sullivan family be respected in the community. There is a responsibility that each family member has to act in a way that will honor the family.

What are the intended and observed outcomes of these practices?

Ruth's overarching goals for Cornell is that he do well in school, graduate high school, and go on to college. She doesn't "want him to have the same struggles I had" (08/05/2015). Likewise, Brooklyn wants Nate and her younger cousins to have a good life. "I don't want them to have to struggle...I don't want them living paycheck to paycheck." (09/27/2015). Brooklyn made a point that she doesn't want her brothers and male cousins to behave in a manner that supports negative stereotypes about Black men. She stressed that getting their education was most important, but if they didn't want to go to school they would have to get a "certified job." She adamantly stated that she would not allow any of her relatives work in the underground economy (i.e. sell drugs). Several family members, Dave, Gilbert, Sr., and Ruth in particular, said they wanted to see the younger family members place God first in their lives and allow others to see their Christian beliefs reflected in their words and actions.

Both Martha and Ruth want their children to finish high school and earn a college degree. It would be dangerous to assume that Noah's success is an indication of the success the other children will experience in the future, however, Brooklyn and Cornell are already showing signs that they will follow in his footsteps. Brooklyn is enrolled in community college and has a full

scholarship from the state based on her academic performance in high school and community service hours served. Cornell consistently makes the A/B honor roll and has made both the high school football and baseball teams as a 9th grade student. Cornell's Big Brother has reinforced the importance of education to him throughout the years, helping him visualize what he wants to be and how he is going to achieve his goals. He stated that Cornell now sees his potential and told Andrew, "when I continue down this path, I won't have to go looking for them...they'll come looking for me", referring to colleges and scholarship committees (Andrew, 09/28/2015).

How do the parents make connections to priorities set for informal education practices and their children's success in the formal education setting?

A distinct connection can be made between the values and skills the Sullivan family teaches their children and the mission, vision, and beliefs posted by their children's schools. One example of how Martha actively participates in the academic growth of Nate is her dedication to making sure he reads every night. Her understanding of early literacy shows she truly cares about his academic success and follows the recommendations of the teachers and schools to ensure Nate's reading proficiency continues to improve. Table 5.2 shows excerpts from the mission, vision, and beliefs posted on the school websites, along with evidence of reinforcement from the Sullivan family. When the values, skills, and information students are learning at home are aligned with what is being taught at school students are more successful (Epstein, 1992).

Table 5.2. Connections between informal education practices and success in the formal education setting

Excerpts from school mission, vision, and beliefs	Theme	Alignment with skills, values, and knowledge prioritized by Martha and Ruth
“Graduating Competitive Students”	Work Ethic	Gilbert, Sr.: “education will open doors and present you with opportunity if you apply yourself.” From interview (08/26/2015) Noah: “I’ve been paid to go to school because of the work I put in.” From interview (10/30/2015)
“We will be collaborative and innovative”	Cooperation	Martha: “keep open communication at school...if you don’t do your school work, you don’t play sports.” From interview (08/26/2015)
We will trust each other”	Respect	Noah: Regarding family: “biggest thing is you can trust them and know without a doubt that they have your best interest at heart.” From interview (10/30/2015)
We will be tireless in our efforts”	Perseverance	Brooklyn: “When life gets hard, just pray and keep pushing.” From interview (09/27/2015)
“We will continually improve”	Do your best	Noah: “we “want to be better than the older generation and make our family better and better.” From interview (10/30/2015) Nehemiah: Regarding high school football team: “We just have to get better...We definitely haven’t reached our maximum potential.” Quote in local newspaper (10/23/2014)
“We will positively impact our school system, county, and our state.”	Respect	Noah: “That’s always a reminder that you’re not just playing for yourself or even just your team. You play for your town. You never want to do anything to embarrass your team, your school, or your town.” Quote in local newspaper (08/03/2011)

Table 5.2 (continued). Connections between informal education practices and success in the formal education setting

Excerpts from school mission, vision, and beliefs	Theme	Alignment with skills, values, and knowledge prioritized by Martha and Ruth
“promote mutual supporting and caring relationships”	Cooperation	Martha: “Be willing to help people, not just get for themselves” From interview (08/26/2015) Ruth: “Always be willing to help others who need it.” From interview (08/05/2015)
“enhance commitment and involvement”	Perseverance	Gilbert, Sr.: “If we make a commitment, we have to stay with it for the whole period of time” From Interview (08/26/2015)
“challenge one another”	Work ethic, Cooperation	Dave: “There is always someone, somewhere who is better than you are.” From interview (02/07/2015)
“shared responsibility”	Cooperation	Brooklyn: “I help out any way I can.” From interview (09/27/2015)
“A value system...that promotes trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, compassion, citizenship, and accountability”	Respect, Work Ethic, Humility, Cooperation	Dave: “Always do the right thing and good things will happen to you.” From interview (02/07/2015) Martha: “I love [Mellon] Schools; I’m involved and I like that the kids are involved in a small community and not subjected to [racism].” From interview (08/26/2015)
“positive communication”	Cooperation	Dave: “The family sends out a calendar of events so I know when to go to the games” From interview (02/07/2105)
“motivating and encouraging students to do their very best”	Respect, Cooperation	Dave: “Always do the best, be the best you can be” From interview (2/07/2015)

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided evidence of themes that emerged through the data collection process. The themes that resonated through informal education practices included prioritizing faith in God, commitment to family, and value of education. I also provided supporting evidence for concepts that emerged on how the Sullivan's educated their children including perseverance, work ethic, respect, and cooperation. I also answered the research questions posed in Chapter 1. In the next chapter, I share the outcomes of this research project, provide a critique of the project process and product, including positionality of the researcher, as well as implications for future research.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This scholarship brings attention to the strengths this one African American family reinforces with their children. It also brings attention to the value of educational spaces outside of school such as church, the ball field, and home (Douglas & Peck, 2013). As will be discussed later in this chapter, the Sullivan family exhibits qualities that researchers say support resilience and academic success. Among these qualities are cohesion, communication, engagement, positive parenting, problem solving, achievement orientation, work orientation, flexible family roles and kinship bonds, and religious orientation (Hill, 1999; Sheridan et al, 2013, Valencia, 2010). This cultural studies project originated from the concept that there may be a disconnect between parents and educators due to power imbalances favoring educators and exclusion of voices in educational conversations especially for African American parents and other historically marginalized groups. What I discovered through this study is a family who maintains a high level of involvement in school and community, thus facilitating avenues for academic, behavioral, and extracurricular achievement for their children. The focus of this study was to bring attention to the educative work of parents by learning more about the ways in which the Sullivan family educates their children in informal settings.

While there are definitely issues with intersections of race, class, and gender within the family structure and function, my primary focus for discussion is how the Sullivan family educates their children. The “new” ethnographic research presented here provides multiple perspectives from both participants and researcher (Goodall, Jr., 2000; Saukko, 2003). As will be discussed further, some of the voices are louder than others in the presentation and

representation of family members and their practices. These voices are balanced with a historical perspective to provide context for the information presented. This work answers the call of several scholars for more ethnographic research on racial socialization, ethnic identity, resilience, and family structure and function (Bennett, Jr. 2006; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Hill, 1999).

The overarching purpose of this dissertation project was to tell the story of the Sullivan family and share their informal education practices and philosophies for raising their children all of whom are successful both at school and in the community. Sheridan et al (2013) claim that informal education is a “prerequisite for successful experiences in the classroom” (p. 143). This cultural studies project is meant to be a counter story that challenges deficit discourse on African American families. In this chapter I discuss the ways in which the informal education practices of this family serve to both strengthen the family and to ensure the children achieve their goals. I show how ecological theory and critical race theory inform this family’s story. I use facts from their story as evidence that challenges negative stereotypes of African American children and families. I provide a critique of the project, addressing participant voice and researcher positionality using Milner’s framework (2007) as a guide. Lastly, I explore the implications this work has on future research.

Theoretical Analysis

Ecological Theory

Ecological theory is a multidisciplinary approach to looking at positive and negative effects of social, community, family, and individual factors in the development of a child (Hill,

1999). For this project, Epstein's (1992) conception of overlapping spheres that represent the influences of schools, families, community, and peer groups on student development is the most appropriate for analyzing the Sullivan family structure and function, their informal education practices and how they align with the mission, vision, and beliefs of the schools. The more closely the philosophies, policies, and practices of the family are aligned with those of the school, the greater the overlap of the spheres and the better support available for the developing student. Increased parent involvement is directly related to increased student academic and behavioral success (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Epstein, 1992). Figures 6.1 and 6.2 show how Epstein's model can be applied to the development and academic success of Cornell and Nate, respectively. It is likely the success of the children in the Sullivan family is based on the overlapping support of family, community, schools, and peers.

One reason for the amount of "overlap" between the spheres is due to the broad concept of family the Sullivans recognize. Their familial circle includes more than just those living in their household; it includes close friends and community members who share similar values and serve as a good example to their children. These extended and fictive kin, along with ever-present community members, reinforce their values through personal interactions and modeling desired behaviors. The members of this network of support include members of their "church family," coaches, and teachers. When individuals belong in more than one of the "overlapping spheres," the connection between the spheres grows stronger. Using an analogy from my chemistry background, the attraction between two or more of the overlapping spheres is similar

to two nonmetals forming a chemical bond by sharing electrons between two atoms. The shared electrons create a strong bond that is difficult to break.

Another important reason for overlap between school and family spheres is the fact that the values, skills, and information taught through informal education practices are aligned very closely with the mission, vision, and beliefs of the schools in which the children are enrolled. Table 5.2 shows a clear connection between phrases in the school mission, vision, and belief statements and statements made by members of the Sullivan family.

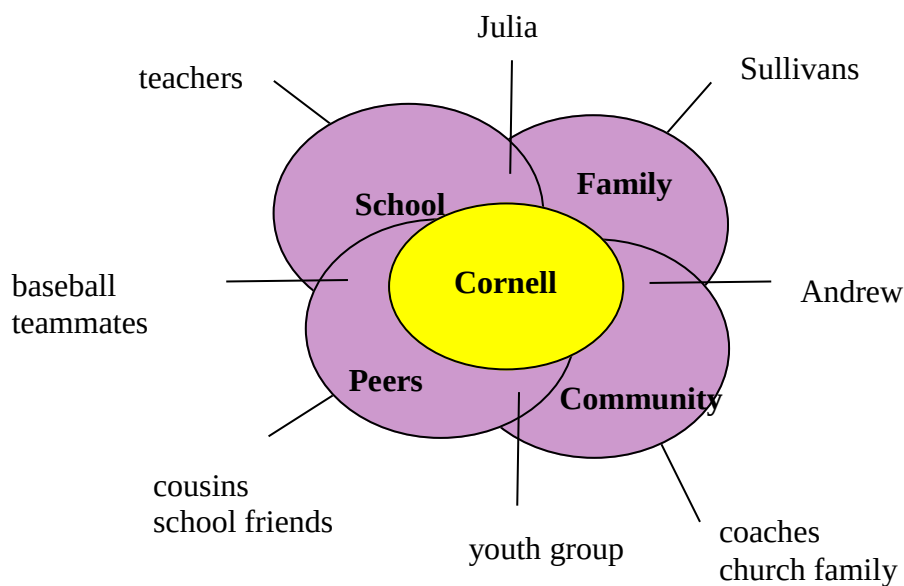


Figure 6.1. Epstein's model applied to development of Cornell

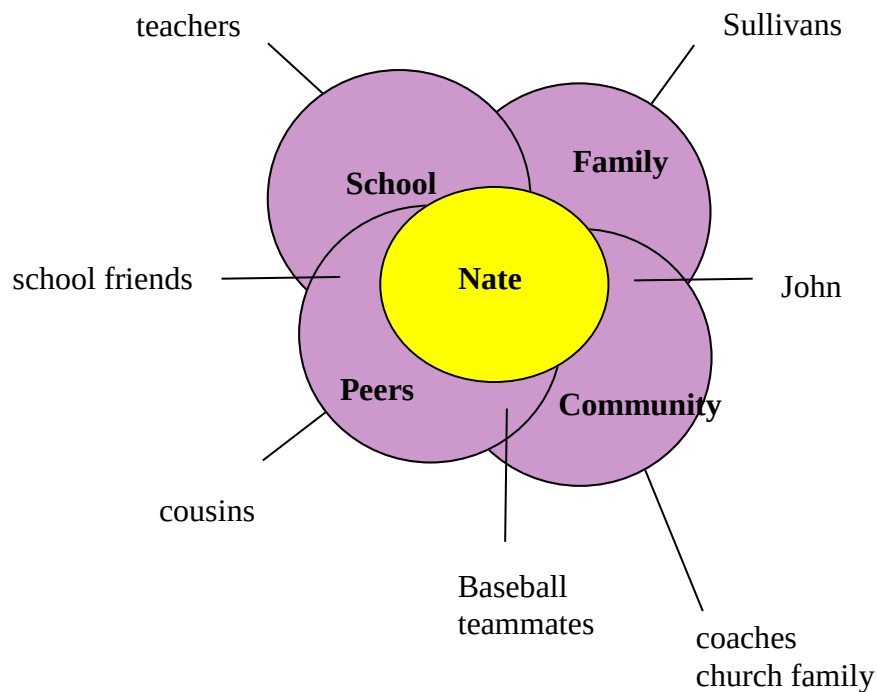


Figure 6.2. Epstein's model applied to development of Nate

For the Sullivan family, the overlapping spheres they created through relationships with members of the community, school personnel, and their children's peers involve complex interactions. For example, Sandy and Bill Nichols' two sons were positive influences in Noah's peer group/sphere and Sandy and Bill served as positive adult influences in the community sphere. Martha indicated that Bill was like a surrogate father to Noah and could also be located in the family sphere (or the overlapping spaced between the two spheres). For Cornell, Julia has

become like a family member to Ruth, but she started out as Cornell's 3rd grade teacher. She belongs in two spheres (or in the overlapping spaces between two spheres) and thus strengthens Cornell's development. Likewise, Andrew is located in the overlapping space between family and community spheres because he has been such a significant figure in Cornell's life for the past 10 years; more than a Big Brother, Andrew serves as a father-figure for Cornell. For Nate, John Thompson serves as his baseball coach and also the father of one of his teammates for both baseball and soccer. He is family (as defined by Martha) and plays the same role as some family members by transporting Nate to and from practices and going on family trips. He belongs in both the family sphere and the community sphere (or the overlapping spaces). Flexible family roles and kinship bonds are one form of resilience mechanism that strengthens families and promotes academic success (Hill, 1999).

Critical Race Theory

Data collected in this project can be analyzed through the lens of the five tenets of critical race theory 1) permanence of racism, 2) challenge to dominant ideology, 3) interest convergence, 4) counter-narrative as a means to legitimize the lived experiences of African Americans, and 5) transdisciplinary perspectives. The first tenet of CRT, the permanence of racism is evident through lived experiences of four generations of Sullivans, beginning with Charles Howard Morgan, who came to the United States on a slave ship from West Africa. The Sullivan family has experienced racism in multiple forms throughout their history, from slavery (Charles Howard Morgan) to Jim Crow laws (Dave, Gilbert, Sr.) to discrimination and harassment at school (Martha), to racial profiling by law enforcement (Noah). Methods of racist structures and acts

vary from generation to generation, but the fact remains that each person in the family has experienced discriminatory acts based on their race. Despite their experiences with racism and the obstacles they have faced over the years, the Sullivans are strong, resilient people who teach their children to rise above deficit thinking such as negative stereotypes and low expectations; they also teach them about their cultural heritage and instill positive ethnic identity as well as methods to protect themselves from racist acts.

The Sullivan's story challenges dominant ideology of white privilege. The school setting has been critiqued by CRT scholars because it has traditionally been a space that mimics greater society which favors white middle class values, behaviors, and traditions as normative. The chasm between school culture and home culture has been blamed for the failure of many African American students and generally home culture is blamed for being different (deviant). Students who come to the school setting with an understanding of the norms, the expectations, because they are similar to the culture at home are said to experience privilege over those who do not. This understanding and ability to easily navigate the school setting has been described by Peggy McIntosh (1990) as an example of white privilege. The alignment of values at school and values the Sullivans teach at home are important to the success of their children because they have fewer mazes to navigate in trying to understand what is expected at school versus what is expected at home. They do not have to code-switch between the two settings and they do not have to live by two separate sets of rules. One critique of the philosophies and practices of this family is that they are "acting white" (Ogbu, 2007b); they have a lot of white friends and fictive

kin who are influential in the lives of their children. The children are taught to have respect for people of all backgrounds and to be open to learning from them.

I challenge the assumption that certain modes of educating children can be claimed by any specific ethnic group. As stated earlier in this dissertation, informal education practices of white families are socially normative and those practices which fall outside the typical practices of a white, middle class family have been pathologized. An area of concern is that Black families and individuals who behave in similar fashion and who exhibit similar values are accused of “acting white” (Ogbu, 2007b). Expecting the Sullivans (or any Black family) to act more Black or accusing them of selling out is problematic because they should just act the way they think is best for them (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Ogbu, 2007b). The Sullivan family has prioritized the values God first, then family, and then education for multiple generations. The big ideas, perseverance, work ethic, respect, and cooperation, they have chosen to teach their children and the skills, information, and values associated with these concepts cannot be owned by any one racial or ethnic group. The Sullivans are not buying in to hegemonic structures; they have a desire to provide a strong foundation for success for their children and these are the modes that work for this family. These values are part of their family culture. This dissertation shares the cultural wealth of the Sullivan family through their familial structure and function and their methods for raising their children.

An example of interest convergence for this family is the growing acceptance of single motherhood as a legitimate parenting/ family structure due to the fact that there are a growing percentage of white women who have chosen to have children out of wedlock. This has been

experienced by Martha and Ruth who are both unmarried mothers. While Martha and Roberto have been cohabitating for nearly twelve years and have a child together, she says she does not intend to marry him (Hill, 1999). Ruth never discussed her marital status or intentions with me, and it didn't seem relevant to the focus of this study, however both Martha and Ruth have taken steps to ensure their children have multiple sources of positive male influences including uncles, cousins, and coaches.

The Sullivan's story, itself, is a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant discourse and negative stereotypes about Black families. The manner in which the Sullivans conceptualize family is counter to dominant culture in the United States, but is actually still quite common in other countries. Their conception of family strengthens each member, which, according to Sheridan et al (2013), is the purpose for family. Their definition of family includes networks of households with rich multigenerational ties (Boyd-Franklin & Karger, 2012; Hill, 1999). In the next section I will discuss specific examples of how the Sullivan's story presents a more positive lens through which to view African American families.

Transdisciplinary perspectives include other critical studies in relation to CRT. The intersections of race and gender are prevalent in the priority Brooklyn set for teaching the younger females in the family about self-worth and resistance to buying into colorism. Her goal for teaching them this is development of a positive racial identity and self-esteem as a female. Drawing on the work of feminist scholars to inform analysis of this issue is proposed for future research later in this chapter.

Challenging Deficit Discourse: Challenges and Resiliency of the Sullivan Family

The three main themes that emerged from interview and field note data, God first, then family, and then education, are factors that other successful African American families exhibit (Bennett, Jr., 2006; Hill, 1999; Scott-Jones, 1995; Sheridan, 2013; Valencia, 2010). Many aspects of the Sullivan's story refute negative stereotypes and deficit theories. Resiliency has been defined as the ability to overcome adversity (Hill, 1999, Valenica 2010, Sheridan et al 2013). Four strategies that build resilience and strength in African American families are 1) achievement orientation, 2) work orientation, 3) flexible family roles/ kinship bonds, and 4) religious orientation (Hill, 1999). The Sullivan family employs all of these strategies. In this section, I provide evidence from their counter-story that demonstrates social, educational, and political factors that promote achievement and resiliency.³⁴ The evidence presented here also problematizes negative stereotypes associated with African American families.

Social Factors

Socially the Sullivans combat deficit thinking in that they utilize their family and community network support for raising the children and they ensure people from multiple cultural backgrounds are influential in the lives of their children, thus helping them be more culturally-adapted. While female-headed households and single parenting by African American mothers have been pathologized in the past, it has become more widely accepted due to the fact that the majority of households in the United States are shifting such that the female adult members of the household are out-earning the male members of the household. A false

³⁴ The health factors and economic factors discussed in Chapter 2 were not directly related to the focus of this study and will not be included in this final discussion.

assumption that may have contributed to the pathology of female-headed and single-parent households is that children receive less parental support than they would if they were raised in a household with two active parents. This may be true, but the criticisms do not consider the additional supports that single parents seek out from extended family, church family, neighbors and other community members.

The Sullivan household is not necessarily a “female-headed household” because there are multiple family members contributing financial, emotional, educational, and social resources to support the development of the children. Although Ruth is the primary provider for Nate, there are four wage-earners in the same household: Gilbert, Sr., Martha, Roberto, and Ruth. Work orientation as a strategy for resilience (Hill 1999) is reinforced by three generations in the same house. Gilbert, Sr. worked two jobs for most of his life; Roberto also works two construction jobs to contribute to family resources. Martha and Ruth both work long hours at their jobs because of their work ethic; the day may be done, but if the to-do list isn’t completed, they stay late. Now that Brooklyn is a young adult, she works a part time job in addition to going to college full time.

I did not explore the financial contributions of each member of the household nor did I explore the contributions made by extended and/or fictive kin, but I think financial support is provided in a number of ways by Martha and Ruth’s brothers, Gilbert, Jr. and Thomas. Both men live in California and work for Apple.³⁵ Martha shared that Gilbert, Jr. was a sponsor for Nate’s Little League baseball team. Martha helps manage a bank account for Thomas; the funds

³⁵ The adult men finding employment and moving out of state is another issue that impacts the stability of African American families; it is not addressed in this dissertation.

within are spent on things needed for family members, such as college textbooks and tuition for Nehemiah to attend a semester of community college. I also know from previous conversations with my friend, Lauren, that Thomas purchased a used car for Brooklyn as a reward for being invited to join National Honor Society. He also recently purchased a new home for his father, Gilbert, Sr.

Cultural deficit theory, or the thinking that perpetuates the idea that African Americans are culturally deprived, is combatted by this story, which highlights the social and cultural wealth (Bourdieu, 2007) of the Sullivan family. A primary strength of their social capital is their network of connections in the town of Mellon. This town is a close-knit community and, while the family members who are central to this case study live in Sunrise, the Sullivan family is highly respected and involved in the life of the Mellon community. Their strong connection to the community and employment of support from this community network of extended and fictive kin is a resiliency strategy (Gerstal 2011; Hill, 1999; Sheridan et al, 2013; Wellman 1990). Their “village approach” requires that all members of their network participate in the rearing of the children; all members of the network collectively educate the children (Sudarkasa, 2007a). Male children get critical support needed from their grandfather, uncles, siblings, cousins, and fictive kin when their father is absent (Sudarkasa, 2007b).

The Sullivan’s active participation in worship and social activities at the church founded by great grandfather Charles Howard Morgan also strengthens their network of community connections. Religious orientation is another resiliency strategy observed in this family (Hill, 1999; Scott, 2003). The Sullivans draw support from people they attend church with as an

additional resource in the “village.” The Sullivans believe the foundation of their Christian faith translates into actions that contribute to the success of their children.

Although biculturalism has been considered a challenge for many African American families/ students, it is a strength for the Sullivans. Several of the children are biracial and all of them have been influenced heavily by Black, Latino, and white adults who have similar value systems. Their household esteems the traditions of multiple cultures and celebrates their shared values. The multicultural educational experiences the children receive help them navigate their world effectively. There are no dual worlds because they are already exposed to so many cultural intersections, between Black and white, Black and Mexican, and white and Mexican. Their ability to adapt to each cultural situation is considered one of their biggest strengths as a family. The Sullivan family provides cultural capital to their children through positive identity development (Yosso, 2005) and emotional support (Gosa and Alexander, 2007).

Educational Factors

Valencia (2010) gives four reasons students of color experience school failure: communication, caste, resistance to hegemonic practices, and deficit thinking. Here are the ways the Sullivan family counters these factors. Valencia (2010) specifies that a mismatch between communication at home and at school create challenges for African American students, specifically due to cultural differences and communication techniques (both verbal and nonverbal). One could say that the Sullivan children know “dual codes,” however their African American parents and extended family members appear to communicate the same way as their white fictive kin, which includes teachers and coaches (Delpit, 2006).

Caste refers to Ogbu's (1998, 2007a) classification of different kinds of minorities: voluntary, involuntary, and immigrant. He states that many involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, are more fatalistic in their belief system and reject the concept of the American dream. Although members of the Sullivan family have experienced both overt and covert racial discrimination over multiple generations, they collectively voiced the belief that hard work pays off. In fact, Noah attended college on a full scholarship due to the hard work he put in to academics and athletics when he was in high school.

For many people of color, resistance to hegemonic practices creates obstacles due to failure to conform to socially reproduced expectations. The Sullivan family has made conscious choices in how and where they educate their children, who they associate with, and who is allowed in their inner circle, or family, in order to protect them from discriminatory practices. Rather than expect their children to either resist the norm or conform to it, they created their own norm by working from within the confines of the mainstream. This form of protection reduces the need or desire to fight hegemonic practices, rather they are using the system to their advantage. For example, the Sullivan family began sending their children to Mellon City Schools as a protective mechanism after several of the children (Gilbert, Jr. and Martha) experienced overt racism, while attending the schools they are zoned for, by peers and classrooms/ teachers that were not culturally responsive in their pedagogy. Scholars could critique the concept of school choice as a luxury, an exercise of privilege that many families of color and lower socioeconomic status do not have. Whether or not a family exercises their rights for school choice or finds the needed resources to pay tuition for their children to go to a school

they perceive to be better than the school they are “zoned” for is an issue of resistance to hegemonic practices.

Martha and Ruth spoke about the teachers they have worked with over the years in Mellon City Schools and how the school staff does not allow children to be subjected to racism or bullying. They feel safer with their children in the Mellon City School System and are willing to make the financial sacrifices needed to ensure the children receive a rigorous education in a welcoming and inclusive space. Martha also expressed positive perception of communication between her and Nate’s teachers. Martha and Ruth are involved in their children’s schools; they work closely with teachers, coaches, etc. and hold in high regards the value of interpersonal relationships they have developed with teachers over the years (Morris & Morris, 2002; Walker, 1996).

The Sullivan family does not allow their children to buy in to deficit thinking or placing blame for their failures on their race. Dave stated that defeat was inevitable if one believed that being Black was a crutch. There are multiple ways in which the actions and philosophies of this family combat deficit thinking in relation to education factors. The concepts that emerged as subthemes to valuing education are key to avoiding deficit thinking: perseverance, work ethic, respect (for self and others), and cooperation.

Several pieces of evidence from the Sullivan’s story challenge the negative stereotype that African American parents do not care about their children’s education (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Hill, 1999). First, Josephine’s career as an educator is evidence that this family historically has valued education. Going back one more generation, the church Charles Howard

Morgan built in the late 1800's also served as a school for Black children. Another example of the Sullivans value of education is the fact that Martha learned about early literacy strategies to help Nate become a better reader. She kept up with his reading levels and assignments from school and reinforced these skills as part of a nightly routine. Martha's regular communication and involvement in the school have a high impact on Nate's academic success (Yan, 1999).

An expectation to maintain academic excellence is another example the family values education; Hill (1999) refers to this as achievement orientation, a strategy that promotes resiliency in African American families. Martha and Ruth say that the children are required to maintain A/B honor roll to stay in sports, as a house rule, but they also say how valuable sports are to the development of their children. While I am not sure if any of the children allowed their grades to slip to the point of losing the privilege to play sports, it is clear the older family members have high academic expectations for the children. Although Martha (and now her oldest son Noah) is the only member of this family who has earned a four-year college degree,³⁶ all members of the family have voiced how much they value education and believe it is a central factor in helping their children achieve their goals and strengthen the family (Scott-Jones, 1995). Both Martha and Ruth stated that one of their goals for their children was that they would earn a college degree.

Racial socialization has been associated with academic success of African American students due to development of positive self-identity (Bennett, Jr., 2006; Brown & Tylka, 2011). It has also been a method African American parents use to teach their children the realities of

³⁶ Gilbert, Jr. now has a degree from ITT Tech.

racism (Boyd-Franklin & Karger, 2012). The Sullivans have utilized racial socialization for both reasons. The older members of the family share stories from their family history and what it was like growing up in a segregated society. These stories are lessons to remind them how far they have come, as a family, and how important getting an education is. They encourage the children to do what they love and be confident in who they are. They support each child's individual talents and desires because their future success will have a positive impact on the future of the Sullivan family. A protective mechanism of racial socialization is preparing children for possible experiences with racism. Martha shared examples of role-playing with Noah the potential situations he may find himself in due to being a young Black male.

Political Factors

Oppressive deficit thinking has influenced discriminatory practices, such as forced school desegregation, in order to maintain the status quo for systems of power and privilege (Valencia, 2010). The older members of the Sullivan family experienced this including Dave, who proved he was not intellectually inferior to his white classmates when schools integrated. He reported that he served as the teacher's helper in the 5th grade because he was already working at an 8th grade level. Another perception stemming from oppressive deficit thinking was that Black teachers were not as qualified to educate white children and thus were often demoted or fired when schools were integrated. Dave's mother, Josephine, was among the 77% of Black teachers who were credentialed and college-educated when schools desegregated in the mid-1960's. She went from being the principal of an African American elementary school to being a school librarian and remedial reading teacher when schools integrated. Many would call this a

demotion. Dave did not speak to me about resistance or activism regarding his experiences with discrimination, racism and denial of civil rights. The family's reaction to these injustices were to work hard, keep trying, show respect to others as well as themselves, and do their part to help others. Their lived experiences with Jim Crow laws and exclusionary policies and practices by government and businesses help strengthen the family as they reinforce the values of perseverance, work ethic, respect, and cooperation.

One of the challenges that Cornell West (2001) claims is the most dangerous for African Americans is nihilism. This is the fatalistic idea that the American dream is unachievable for a specific group due to institutional and structural racism. The members of the Sullivan family don't allow their children to participate in this type of thinking about themselves. For them "being Black is not a crutch" (Dave, 02/07/ 2015), and it isn't an excuse for not succeeding. He stated that this belief is self-defeating. The Sullivans believe that they will succeed if they work hard, unlike the fatalistic worldview of "involuntary minorities" (Ogbu, 2007a) that the American dream is unattainable regardless of effort. Noah Sullivan is a testament to this philosophy because his hard work both academically and in sports paid off in the form of a full athletic scholarship to a division II university. Is their philosophy that "being Black is not a crutch" hegemonic to the blame the victim mentality of deficit theorists? One might interpret their philosophy as one that blames other African Americans for their own failures, rather than look critically at the structures that perpetuate challenges and marginalization. The Sullivans believe they can act only on what they can control. They have experienced upward mobility through hard work and have a collective mission to make the family better with each new

generation. The importance they place on work ethic and their philosophy that hard work pays off is counter to the nihilism issue Cornell West (2001) talks about.

Gentrification and urban renewal are challenges many African American families face. The Sullivans have had little experience with this challenge because they live in a rural area, in the town of Sunrise. Interestingly, an attempt was made by the city of Mellon in the 1970's to annex Sunrise to meet growing demand for land and housing. This attempt failed. The residents of Sunrise chose to incorporate rather than become part of the town of Mellon. The Sullivans have been paying tuition for their children to attend Mellon City Schools since the late 1980's. The irony of Sunrise's resistance to annexation is that the Sullivans would have been able to send all of their children to Mellon City Schools for free had their little town become a part of Mellon in the 1970's.

Research Critique and Self-Analysis

In this section I take a critical look at researcher positionality and its impact on the outcomes of the research project using the four features of Milner's (2007) framework for researcher positionality: researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system. I also discuss the structural limitations of this project.

Researcher Positionality Using Milner's (2007) Framework

Researching the self.

I learned a great deal about myself during the research process. The personality, culture, and values I hold from my upbringing both enhanced and interfered with the implementation of

my research plan. One example of this was my need to help the family with Nate's birthday party got in the way of data collection. I was a guest in their world who felt the need to earn my keep so I regularly volunteered to help them. I struggled with this because I was overly conscientious about making sure I wasn't exploiting the family in this study. My concern was that I was essentially using this family to get a Ph.D. What I neglected to consider was the benefits the family received as a byproduct of participation. I need to view my work as an ethnographer in a less exploitative way, but rather from the lens that I am partnering with them in order to tell an important story, a story that needs to be told in order to effect positive change through counter-narrative. At the end of this project, the Sullivans received a copy of their story. Their story is being shared with a greater audience and will hopefully be used to inform future scholarship and, more importantly, educator practices and philosophies about African American students and families.

My southern culture of avoiding offending others and being overly polite got in the way of data collection. I needed to be more assertive about collecting data and acknowledging my role as the researcher. This flaw in my research instrument (me) prolonged the data collection process. I should have been more persistent in contacting Martha and Ruth to arrange interviews and I should have asked them more frequently about attending family events rather than wait to be invited. Their agreement to participate in this project was an open invitation to attend family events; I was expecting them to reach out to me, when it was my responsibility as the researcher to maintain continuous communication. My concern for not wanting to impose on the family's time or my fear that I may say or do something that would offend members of the family limited

my ability to follow my research protocol more closely and complete the project in a more timely manner.

The research process varied from the original plan because I had to collect data when I had the opportunity to collect data. Because of my reluctance to be tenacious in communicating with Martha and Ruth, we would play phone tag for weeks before arranging an opportunity for an interview or family event to observe. In retrospect, I should have developed a more clear understanding with Martha and Ruth about what family events I could attend and when.

Arranging a weekly check-in with them regarding their schedule of events for the week would have been helpful. My work schedule interfered with a few opportunities to collect data. For example, there was a football game for Cornell in northwest Manning, which is only 15 minutes from where I live. Unfortunately my plans to attend the game were foiled unexpectedly when I had to cover for a member of my staff who was supposed to host a family night event at my school on the same night. The staff member became ill at the last minute and we were unable to cancel the event.

Researching self in relation to others.

Through the research process I sought ways to build and maintain trust with my participants. My personal connection with family (i.e. friendships with Lauren and Dave) helped forge a positive relationship with the Sullivan family. Gaining access to the family was easier than had I been trying to recruit a family to participate with whom I did not know or have community connections. I am a relative outsider to the family in this study. Even though I have a personal relationship with one of the extended family members, I did not enter this research

project as their friend. I have lived a very different life than this family. The obvious differences include race, education attainment, and socioeconomic status, but there also are big differences in familial relationships that I have versus the familial relationships they have. I grew up with a typical nuclear family, living a two day's drive away from both sets of grandparents and other extended kin. We saw them only once or twice each year while I was growing up; I see them quite infrequently now that I am an adult. My parents raised my brothers and me independently of input from their parents and extended family. They preferred it that way. The Sullivans all prescribe to the same philosophy for raising their children. While there are variations from one household to the next, there is an overarching collectivity and commitment to helping each other raise the children.

Familial differences didn't necessarily make me an "outsider," but did limit my ability to fully understand the relationships between different family members. My goals as a researcher were to avoid romanticizing the collective child-rearing methods utilized by this family and to question the assumptions I made based on my interpretations of observations and conversations with family members. I do not think I asked enough questions of them during data collection while playing the role a participant observer.

To counter my outsider status, I tried to capitalize on common areas of interest and experience. One commonality is practicing a Christian faith. While we do not worship in the same denomination, our overarching concept of what it means to live a Christian life is similar. The most important lesson learned from this faith is love and acceptance of others. My own Christian faith allowed me to more fully understand statements they made about their faith and

their references to the Bible. Although I tried to be objective in reporting the values related to their faith, I recognize my agreement with their values as a possible area for bias towards the family. Assumptions made based on my biases and common faith may have interfered with my objective critique of the data collected. Had the researcher been someone who knew little about the Christian faith, the family would have had to answer more questions to support their statement that they prioritize their faith in God above all other concepts and values.

Throughout our conversations and time together, I deliberately worked to build trust with family members by trying to locate and share commonalities between myself and the Sullivans. Examples include discovering mutual friends and acquaintances beyond my initial gatekeepers, Lauren and Dave. I built rapport with Gilbert, Sr. by sharing with him that he and my husband are in the same line of work. They both cook during the morning shift at a hotel. When he shared his experiences with me about working at the hotel, he knew that I better understood him because my husband's lived experiences were similar to his. This confidence in my understanding was extrapolated to confidence that I would understand his perspective on raising children, even though I do not have children of my own and have not experienced any situations with child-rearing beyond my own experiences being raised by my parents. I also built trust by reminding them of friends and acquaintances we had in common, including Stanley Bart (my college friend and Cornell's 4th grade teacher), Dave (my friend and their uncle), Lauren (mutual friend and Dave's sister-in-law), and Scott Adams (my former employee and one of their local teachers).

I found the Sullivan family to be kind, respectful and generous with their time and willingness to share their story with me. They are an affectionate group of people who always hug when they greet you and always hug when you part ways. It was a challenge to be continually mindful about my emotional connection with the Sullivan family, especially since one of the extended members is a close friend. I tried not to romanticize their methods for raising their children or ogle over the politeness (and cuteness) of their children. While I did not intentionally avoid reporting imperfections of this family, my primary focus was how they educated their children. Their methods of informal education demonstrate positive parenting rather than coercive tactics and fear. I was deliberate in recording facts about what I saw and heard when taking field notes and conducting interview conversations. My interpretations, which are unavoidably biased, came afterwards.

Reflection and representation.

Through reflection and member checking I believe I represented the Sullivan family and how they educate their children accurately. Family members were given opportunities through the data collection, analysis, and reporting process to make corrections and clarifications. They were pleased with the end products (family history in Chapter 3, Chapters 4 and 5) and agreed they were an accurate interpretation of the priorities of their informal education practices.

Balancing the emic and etic perspectives was a challenge for this project. While I made a conscious effort to provide an equitable platform for each participant's voice, my voice was privileged because I was the storyteller. I made choices about which anecdotes from my field notes were included in the narrative "Our Village Approach" and which pieces of evidence were

used to support the emergent themes shared in Chapter 5. When I changed each family member's name to a pseudonym, I realized the proportions of each person's voice shared in this dissertation. Martha's voice was significantly louder than Ruth's, even though this is the story of how they raise their children collectively. One reason may be because I attended more events for Nate than I did for Cornell. It may also be because my interview time with Martha lasted at least an hour longer than my interview with Ruth. In short, I had more data from Martha.

Another reason I may have less rich data on Ruth and Cornell is fewer family members attended the events I observed, which were both baseball-related. I am not sure how many family members attend his football games, but, now that he is in high school, he is playing on a team that has a legacy of winning seasons and state championships. I suspect his football games are heavily attended by family members. One time after one of Nate's baseball games, the family members present debated going to the middle school ball field to see the second game of a double header that Cornell's team was playing. Gilbert, Sr. sent Ruth a text to let her know and she responded that Cornell wasn't getting to play in the second game. Since he wasn't playing they all decided not to go. The only purpose the family members had for going to a middle school baseball game was to support the children in the family who were playing.

Another voice that is privileged over another is Noah over Brooklyn. Although I spent significantly more time with Brooklyn, I have more quotes from Noah. One reason for this is that I included a few quotes he made in a local newspaper as supporting evidence for some of the themes. Brooklyn is a more quiet person than Noah and getting to know her was challenging. Martha and Gilbert, Sr. also used Noah's childhood experiences as examples of their informal

education practices more frequently than they did Brooklyn's. I would like to learn more about her and her emerging role as an adult and future female leader in this family.

Gilbert, Sr.'s voice was among the loudest in this paper. He was present for nearly every event I attended. He is the patriarch of the family and a foundation for the younger family members to learn from. Martha and Ruth model their parenting techniques after how he and their mother raised them. He acts as both a grandfather and a father-figure to several of the boys in the family, including Noah, Nehemiah (who lived with him for several years), and Cornell.

Shifting from self to system.

In shifting from self to system, I want to take a closer look at the concept that began this whole project, whether or not there is a disconnect between schools/ educators and African American parents/ families. With the Sullivan's story in mind, I would like to know more about what deliberate strategies the schools in Mellon employ to reach out to parents, especially African American parents. How do the educators make parents feel welcome in the school setting? How do they engage their parents as true partners in education? Do they trust parents to involve them in the conversations about how their informal education practices contribute to success at school? What deliberate strategies do teachers and administrators employ to ensure the instruction is culturally relevant for all students? How do administrators recruit teachers who are culturally responsive in their pedagogy? How do they train their staff to be culturally responsive to students and families? Do Martha and Ruth have a voice in the decision making processes that surround their children's formal education? How so? These questions can be applied on a more systemic scale.

From an ecological perspective, educators can critique their practices for how closely they work with families to align their mission, vision, and beliefs to those of the families they serve. Rather than expect families to conform to school expectations, inclusion of parent voice in establishing the school mission, vision, and beliefs supports healthier overlap between the school and family spheres.

This can be extrapolated to higher levels of decision-making on policies and procedures through legislation from local boards of education legislation, state departments of education, and the federal department of education. Certain voices are more privileged in these settings. For example, the state department of education recently accepted applications for participation of parents on a state advisory board. The application process was a structural barrier to many parents (ELL, low SES, limited education background) who have just as much interest in the quality of their children's education as their more affluent, more educated peers.

Limitations of this Study

One of the biggest limitations of this study is that it is too broad. I think I would have been able to develop a deeper understanding of informal education practices had I narrowed my observations to include fewer people. For example, if I had chosen to study the relationship between one of the younger children and one older family member (parent, older sibling, and/or extended/ fictive kin), I would be able to report nuances of the intimate interactions between the two.

Due to the fact that this was an ethnographic study of one family, I cannot generalize findings to the greater population. I cannot say that if every African American family raised

their children this way or even if every family, regardless of race or ethnicity, reared their children this way, then their children would be academically and behaviorally successful. I can however extrapolate my findings to inform scholarship, teacher preparation and professional development in particular, of ways in which this African American family engages with their children to build a bridge between the informal education they receive outside of school and the formal education they receive in school. Their story can also be used to help educators shift their biases and challenge the assumptions they make about their students.

For this project, I was the sole data collector, therefore I was not able to use interrater reliability or compare assumptions, interpretations, and observations made by co-researchers. After taking on such a large project I see the value in collaborating with at least one additional ethnographer in making and interpreting observations, connecting them with greater themes, analyzing our findings, and assisting one another in analysis of researcher biases and positionality.

My inexperience as an ethnographer is one of the biggest limitations to this study. What would I do differently? The answer: many things! Here are a few lessons I learned from this experience. While my next ethnographic project may be very different from this one, there are several structural changes I plan to make in how I collect data. The purpose of these changes is to collect more and richer data the next time I embark on this type of research project. I realize that another reason for this is because this project was so broad that I didn't feel like I was able to dig too deeply into any one topic or any one relationship. My advice to myself as a future ethnographer is:

1. Always take notes, whether it seems appropriate or not. The purpose of my being with that family was to learn more about how they educate their children. I need to always remember my purpose is to collect data, not help with a party or cheer on a child at his baseball game. If I do not take notes during certain activities, my data lacks the details that it would have if I were taking notes or recording conversations.
2. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Asking questions of participants is the best way to get richer information about the research topic. I found the Sullivan family very open and willing to answer my questions when I needed clarity about a situation or observation. They want to be represented accurately and I want to represent them accurately. How do I do that with more fidelity? Ask, ask, ask, and write reflective notes as soon as possible after leaving the research setting. In defense of the methods I used in writing field notes for this project, I think it was helpful to write reflections very soon after leaving the setting and then add a layer of reflection a few days after leaving the setting because "headwork" opens one up to insights we might gloss over without further thought about the field experience.
3. Tape record or video tape during interviews and observations in order to get more perspective of the participant voice. For this project, I chose to type the answers to interview questions rather than record and transcribe them. At the time, it seemed like a more organic way to converse with participants. My assumption

was that they would be more used to being around people using electronic devices for text and word processing, but may be less comfortable with recording devices such as video cameras and audio recorders. Nate showed me that wasn't the case for his family when he wanted me to videotape my interview with his grandfather; he also wanted me to videotape an interview with him because he loves making videos. Another shortcoming was that I would pause typing answers on my laptop in order to ask unscripted questions and sometimes didn't get everything they said. I had to go back and read to them what I typed to make sure I captured what they wanted to convey to me.

4. Continually reflecting with a professional community of scholars. I reflected throughout this project- disrupting my sleep at times, but the debriefing and reflection process could be enhanced by participation in an online or physical group that shared ideas, experiences, challenges, and solutions to situations that arise while in the field, when analyzing data, and when synthesizing the final report.
5. Experiment with different literary methods for telling stories. For this project I did not take risks with literary methods or genre, but in the future I would like to explore telling tales using poetry, theatre/ plays, and novel-like products. I don't intend to share my ethnographic findings gratuitously using these methods, but understand that applying creative presentation can enhance understanding of the

culture for the reader. Doing so also presents an interesting challenge for the researcher.

Outcomes

In Chapter 1, I discussed five potential outcomes for this dissertation project. This section is my discussion of these outcomes as well as several unexpected outcomes. The first potential outcome was a deeper understanding of how this family educates their children. Through participant observation and conversational interviews, I better understand how this family educates their children. While longer exposure to this family and in different settings would inevitably produce more information about how the Sullivans educate their children, the informal settings I observed as well as information learned from interviewing participants produced repeating themes of spirituality, familial commitment, and educative priorities. In the field, I observed them modeling the behaviors they expected from the children as frequently as I saw direct instruction. The instructions given during ballgames and practices, such as “stay with it,” “go after it,” and “take the shot,” followed the same themes the adults shared when I interviewed them. Martha and Ruth not only modeled polite manners, they also gave gentle reminders to Nate and Cornell to use the same manner when speaking to adults.

The second potential outcome of this project was a deeper understanding of the relationship between formal and informal education. It is difficult to make generalized statements about this topic; however the evidence presented in Chapters 4 and 5 aligns very closely with the mission, vision, and belief statements made by the schools these children attend. The informal education practices of the Sullivan family are directly related to the priorities in the

formal education setting. As mentioned previously in this chapter, ecological theory informs this discussion when the spheres of school and family overlap. Significant overlap between these two spheres provides a more secure foundation of support for a developing child.

The third potential outcome was to show characteristics of informal education provided by these African American parents and their network of extended and fictive kin. Table 5.1 shows the values, information, and skills taught by family members. Although we cannot generalize this information or extrapolate it to families outside this particular study, it is an example of what one African American family deliberately teaches their children to help them reach their academic and athletic potential. The priorities of this family were to teach soft skills/ interpersonal skills, basic living skills, information that will help them succeed at the next level of education, and values for personal accountability and positive self-identity (perseverance, work ethic, cooperation, and respect).

The fourth potential outcome was to strengthen the argument that African American families are resilient and the cultural pride instilled in them through childrearing is one of the foundations to their success. The purpose of this counter-narrative was to tell the story of a resilient family who has successful children. Characteristics of resiliency displayed by the Sullivan family include achievement orientation, work orientation, racial socialization, parental involvement, family/ community support, biculturalism/ multiculturalism, cohesion, adaptability, and communication.

The fifth potential outcome was more clarity to the complexity of how modes of education are transmitted. Modes of education in any family are nuanced and with so many

people participating in child-rearing processes, it is difficult to observe all the ways in which the modes of education are transmitted. I can't say with certainty that I fully understand the manners in which modes of education are transmitted aside from restating that the older family members, including older siblings, all participate in the education of the younger children. Younger children are taught by being told by their elders what needs to be learned, lecture-style and conversationally. Younger children learn from watching the behaviors of and listening to conversations between the older family members, modeling. Younger children learn by being shown examples (non-examples) and analogies of the concepts being taught. There are many nuances to how children learn, but instructional research tells us that repetitive lessons that develop in complexity, use of multiple instructional formats, frequent checks for understanding, and intentional, explicit feedback deepens a student's understanding and increases retention of knowledge (Tileston, 2011; Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

An unexpected outcome of this project was that this story drew attention to the complexity of family structures. It became more than the story of an African American family; it became a story of a multicultural family. I had no idea before I started collecting data that Cornell was biracial and that the majority of fictive kin who were reported as being most influential in the development of the children were white. This realization relates back to my own assumptions about the family prior to getting to know the Sullivans. I assumed that African American families mainly have friends and family in their inner-most circles that are of the same race/ethnicity as them. This is not the case for the Sullivan family. Their inner circle is both ethnically and culturally diverse.

Contribution to the Current Body of Knowledge

Three major recommendations were presented through related scholarship on additional needs for research on African American families. This included a call for transformative research, the study of more modern family structures, and the need for more qualitative studies of African American families, ethnographies in particular. In this section, I address how this work addresses these recommendations.

Call for Transformative Research

This project is transformative in that it is a counter-story. It is meant to combat deficit discourse about the failures of African American families. This is a story of an African American family that employs a deliberate plan to informally educate their children so that they are successful in school and in life. It is transformative from a cultural studies perspective because it shares the lived experiences of this African American family. It challenges negative stereotypes that African American parents do not value their children's education and do not want to be involved in the school setting. It challenges the negative stereotypes that they are lazy and unemployable. This project supports the tenets of critical race theory. This study provides an honest reflection of the condition of this family's life and collective functioning. This is a complex study and many layers to the onion can still be peeled back for further analysis. Several options for further research are discussed later in this chapter.

Study of Modern Family Structures

While the recommendations from other scholars have been more research on "modern family structures," I prefer to use the term "unconventional" because I do not view the structure

of the Sullivan family to be necessarily modern (Gerstal, 2011; Hattery & Smith, 2007; McAdoo, 2007; Sudarkasa, 2007b). The structure for their household is different from the once-normed white nuclear family household. It is not necessarily inferior or superior to other family structures; it is simply different and this structure works for this family. The family structure of the Sullivans is considered “most inclusive” by Hattery & Smith (2007) because they include so many extended family and fictive kin as part of the family, the village that raises their children. Their collective practices are normed practices in many other cultures around the world and in West African in particular. This study follows Gerstal’s (2011) recommendation that we challenge our biases of family structures and look more closely at the care the family gives to the children as a reality of their structure. This project also contributes to the body of knowledge about households in which there are co-providers such as Martha and Roberto, and/or multiple providers such as Martha, Roberto, Gilbert, Sr., and Ruth. It is not clear if they pool their resources or if they each take on specific responsibilities to support the entire household.

When reviewing the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of each of the members of this household, one sees multiple ways that the household could be labeled. This is an example of how limiting the government is in forcing specific and broad labels on individuals for self-identification. Within the same household lives an adult male African American, three adult females African American, one adult male who identifies as Mexican, one minor male biracial identifying as Black in combination with white, and one minor male biracial identifying as Black in combination with Latino. To make Nate choose which culture and ethnicity he identifies most

with means he has to deny his other heritage. To label this household as an African American household is wrong because within it lives a man who identifies as Latino/ Mexican.

Additionally, the broad definition of family the Sullivans use reaches beyond household labels and biological relationships. Martha shared with me that Bill Nichols was like a father to Noah, so much so that he asked his football coach if Bill could be recognized as a parent on the field during the Senior Day festivities. Noah's request was denied because Bill was not his legal father. This policy is probably meant to limit the number of people allowed to be recognized by each senior player, but it is also indicative of limited views of who should be included under the umbrella of family and, more specifically, who can be considered a parent.

Need for Qualitative Studies on African American Families

Multiple scholars have recommended more qualitative research studies on African American families, such as ethnographic studies, to learn more about the nuanced behaviors and interactions during and as a result of racial socialization and resilience mechanisms (Hill, 1999; Bennett, Jr., 2006; Elmore, 2013; Burton et al, 2010). This study has done just that. Through ethnographic methods I have shown the priorities set by this family and the values, information, and skills taught to the children through informal education practices. These practices directly relate to their positive self-identity and academic performance in school. Through this ethnographic project I have included a historical perspective of this family to support why they prioritize God first, then family, then education (Artiles et al, 2010). The work presented here looks beyond racial socialization to all aspects of the informal education of the children. It isn't

just positive ethnic identity development, but also parent expectations, parent involvement, and community support that promote the success of the children.

Implications for Future Research

Ethnographic studies often produce more questions than answers. There are several projects that could spin off from this study and there are additional projects that could add to our understanding of informal education, challenges to deficit discourse, and transformative research. A great deal of information was gained through data collection processes, but I was not able to dig as deeply as I wanted into this family's story for this project. In future writings, I would like to select a small portion of the data to expand upon. For example, I would like to look more closely at each sister's individual stories, as well as take a closer look at the role the older siblings play in raising their younger siblings and cousins.

Intersections of race and gender are prevalent throughout this family's story. From a feminist perspective, I would like to learn more about Brooklyn's story because she is the only female child in the household. Her experiences bring a unique perspective about what she has learned from the "village." She is 10 years older than her brother, Nate, and serves as a primary caretaker for him when Martha has to work late. Now that she is an adult, what is her emerging role within the family? Her mother has become the matriarch of the family, in her grandmother's absence.³⁷ Will Brooklyn follow in her mother's footsteps? Will she venture out on her own or will she remain close geographically, nurturing and leading the next generation of Sullivans? What expectations does the family impose on her, what expectations does she impose

³⁷ Martha's role as matriarch, in the absence of her mother, follows a West African matriarchy model.

on herself, and are these expectations in conflict with one another? It would be interesting to compare the family expectations of her with their expectations of her male siblings and cousins.

From a CRT perspective, I would like to learn more about Brooklyn's experiences with colorism and racism. This intersects with the feminist study mentioned above because some of the issues Brooklyn presented in her interview relate to her experiences as an African American female being "othered" by African American men who use social media to place a hierarchy of value on dating women based on lighter shades of skin color.

A blended cultural studies and CRT project could be to study Cornell's participation on the travel baseball team more closely and critique the privilege associated with a child's ability to fully participate (Spearman, 2013). Access to this type of extracurricular activity is limited to those who can meet the financial obligations and transportation requirements. If a baseball player does not have personal means or sponsorship, they are unable to participate. This limits access for many children of color due to lower socioeconomic status, transportation limitations, and time. All three of these limitations are interconnected. A parent who works a nonskilled job for a low wage has limited financial resources. Often these nonskilled jobs require parents to work shifts that are outside the normative Monday through Friday jobs, thus limiting a parent's ability to transport their baseball player to evening practices and weekend tournaments. If their work schedules do allow parents the time to support their children in travel sports teams, do they have adequate transportation available to get their player to the practice and tournament locations? This last challenge implies geographical privilege as an additional layer to this study. Families who happen to live closer in proximity to practice locations may have more access to

participation on travel sports teams if they can carpool with other families to play in tournaments.

I would like to dig deeper into the history of the family, including Gilbert, Sr.'s side of the family. I think it would be interesting to learn more about Josephine's education and teacher training as well as her experience as an educator before, during, and after racial integration of schools in her county. I also think it would be interesting to learn more about Charles Howard Morgan and the building of Mt. Olive AME Zion Church. How does this legacy translate into the overarching theme that their God is placed in highest importance in the lives of his decedents? How has their spirituality served as a mechanism of resilience over the past four generations?

The Sullivan family was not compared with any other families in this study. It would be interesting to analyze data from a similar project using the study of a family (or multiple families) who has had more difficulty navigating the system, a family that does not have children as successful as the Sullivans. The challenge in a project like this would be to look at their cultural and social challenges and strengths, compare them with those of the Sullivan family and analyze possible reasons why achievement of goals seems out of reach and what resiliency mechanisms they employ. Comparison studies can be problematic, but can offer deeper insights into what resiliency factors they have in common and which ones are unique to the families whose children experience more academic success.

A large portion of data was collected at sporting events. These events were more public and afforded me the easiest access to this family. As mentioned previously, I was never invited

to join them for family events that took place within more intimate settings such as their home. I did not include sports as a specific theme in this study because it seemed to be more of a method for providing informal education, rather than an outcome of informal education practices. Team sports plays an integral role in the life of this family and could be the sole focus of future research.

I am interested in writing a more in-depth tale about Nate in the form of an illustrated children's nonfiction book. I would like to co-write the book with him, using QR codes linked to 1-2 minute videos he narrates as part of the text. The idea for a project of this nature came to me after reflecting on how much Nate loves to make videos and talk about the things he loves, such as soccer, country music, his friends, and his family. This book would be a multicultural autobiography, told from his perspective. I discussed this kind of collaborative creative writing project with one of my colleagues at school and we have decided to introduce this concept to our 4th grade students as an interdisciplinary, multicultural project for the next school year. In the end, each child will have explored their own story- hopefully strengthening their ethnic identity development and recognizing the strengths of the culture they bring from their families, written and illustrated their autobiography, and incorporated use of digital tools to enhance their presentation.

Conclusion

This dissertation project was an ethnographic case study of one African American family's informal education practices as a counter-narrative to deficit discourse and negative stereotypes. In Chapter 1, I described cultural studies as the conceptual framework for this study

and introduced ecological theory and critical race theory as potential frameworks for analysis. I also shared my background as the primary researcher and gave a glimpse into the African American family I selected for participation in this study.

In Chapter 2, I gave a detailed description of deficit theory and how it negatively impacts African Americans and other historically marginalized groups. I also provided a literature review of the challenges and strengths of African American families. The body of work presented in Chapter 2 laid the foundation for this research project as I answered the call for more transformative research, more research on modern family structures, and qualitative (ethnographic) research on African American families.

In Chapter 3, I described the specific methodology chosen for this dissertation project, case study using ethnographic methods. I introduced the reader to the Sullivan family and provided their historical background as a context for this ethnographic case study. In Chapter 4, I presented a counter-narrative of the Sullivan's story, specifically the story of how they educate their children and the values, skills, and information they believe to be most important for ensuring academic success. The specific priorities included in the counter-narrative in Chapter 4 include God first, be who you are (self-respect), do your best (work ethic and perseverance), and commitment to family (then family).

In Chapter 5, I presented a more detailed analysis of the themes that emerged through data collection. Sources for data included participant observation at family events, conversational interviews of selected family members, and artifacts from the local newspaper. Due to the complex nature of modern family structures, family members who participated in the study

provided their own definition of family. These definitions were analyzed to find common terms and conceptions. Three overarching themes that emerged from the data were discussed: God first, then family, then education, followed by a discussion of the concepts that repeatedly emerged from data that related to the informal education of the children, including perseverance, work ethic, respect (manners, self-respect, humility, and encourage others), and cooperation.

In Chapter 6, I provided a discussion using ecological theory and critical race theory as two different frameworks for addressing the cultural studies issues within the data. I also used the Sullivan's story to challenge deficit thinking including social factors, educational factors, and political factors that highlight their strengths and resiliency as a family. I also shared a critique of this project, researcher positionality in particular. Six outcomes of this study were described, along with implications for future research.

As I move forward in my career as a researcher, I plan to continue working within the methodology of ethnography. I believe the fabric of the issues we critique is woven by the individual stories of those impacted by the social injustices we intend to correct through transformative research. Essentially, I am a storyteller, with a purpose.

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Appendix

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letters

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE 
KNOXVILLE
Office of Research & Engagement
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

1534 White Ave.
Knoxville, TN 37956-1529
865-974-7697
Fax 865-974-7400

September 22, 2014

Sherry Fairchild-Keyes
UTK – Educational Psychology & Counseling


Re: UTK IRB-14-09551 XP

Study Title: Informal Education Practices of an African American Family: A Counter Story

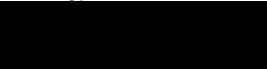
Dear Ms. Fairchild-Keyes:

The Administrative Section of the UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for **expedited** review. The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application (version 1) as submitted. Approval of this study will be valid from September 22, 2014 to September 21, 2015.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,



Chair
Institutional Review Board

Attachment

Big Orange. Big Ideas.

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE
 KNOXVILLE
 Office of Research & Engagement
 INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

1534 White Ave.
 Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
 865-574-7887
 fax 865-974-7400

September 20, 2015

Sherrie Lynn Fairchild-Keyes,
 UTK - Education

Re: UTK IRB-14-09551-XP
 Study Title: Informal Education Practices of an African American Family: A Counter Story

Dear Ms. Fairchild-Keyes:

The Administrative Section of the UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application to continue your previously approved project, referenced above. It has determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), categories (6) and (7). The IRB reviewed your renewal application and determined that it does comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes approval of your renewal application including the consent form version 1.1 dated and stamped IRB approved. Approval of this study will be valid from 09/21/2015 to 09/20/2016.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subject or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,



Chair

Appendix B: IRB*FORM B APPLICATION*

All applicants are encouraged to read the Form B guidelines. If you have any questions as you develop your Form B, contact your Departmental Review Committee (DRC) or Research Compliance Services at the Office of Research.

FORM B**IRB #** _____**Date Received in OR** _____

*THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE***Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects**

I. IDENTIFICATION OF PROJECT**1. Principal Investigator Co-Principal Investigator:***Complete name and address including telephone number and e-mail address*

Sherrie Fairchild-Keyes

Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling

1126 Volunteer Boulevard

421 Claxton Complex

Knoxville, TN 37996-3456

Phone: 865-208-9888

Email: sbradsh1@vols.utk.edu**Faculty Advisor:***Complete name and address including telephone number and e-mail address***Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon****Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling**

1126 Volunteer Boulevard

420 Claxton Complex
 Knoxville, TN 37996-3456
 Phone: 865-974-9505
 Email: bthayer@utk.edu

2. Project Classification: Dissertation, Thesis, Class Project, Research Project, or Other (Please specify)

Dissertation

3. Title of Project: Informal Education Practices of an African American Family: A Counter Story

4. Starting Date: *Specify the intended starting date or insert "Upon IRB Approval":*
 Upon IRB Approval

5. Estimated Completion Date: December 31, 2014

6. External Funding (if any): N/A

- **Grant/Contract Submission Deadline:**
- **Funding Agency:**
- **Sponsor ID Number (if known):**
- **UT Proposal Number (if known):**

II. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

For my dissertation, I plan to conduct a qualitative case study of one African American family's use of informal education practices to influence academic and behavioral success in the school setting. There are five intended outcomes of this study:

6. To develop a deeper understanding of how families educate their children; in particular this study aims to share the story of how one African American family educates and socializes their children and to challenge negative assumptions and stereotypes regarding parent involvement in and valuing of formal education by African American parents
7. To deepen our understanding of the relationship between formal and informal education
8. To show characteristics of informal education provided by African American parents and family members that support success in the traditional school setting
9. To strengthen the argument that African American families are resilient and the cultural pride instilled in them through childrearing is one of the foundations to their success
10. To bring more clarity to the complexity of how modes of education are transmitted

III. DESCRIPTION AND SOURCE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

I plan to conduct an exploratory case study that focuses on one African American family. The central members of this case are two sisters who live in one household and collectively raise their children. They live with the patriarch of the family, their father, who is also very involved in raising the children. Together, they are raising five children, but are also actively involved in the rearing of several nieces and nephews who live nearby. This family functions collectively. Additional members of the unit of study will be identified by the sisters as highly influential in providing the informal education experiences to their children on an ongoing and routine basis. I predict that many extended and fictive kin will be identified as highly influential. Members of this group whom I will include in this study will be those who spend a significant amount of time with the children on a regular basis (i.e. at least one time per week and/or at least two to four hours per week). The members who meet the first criteria must also spend the majority of that time interacting with one or more of the children. Data collection will occur within the natural setting, primarily in the home of the participants, because this will be the best means to fully address the research questions.

Children in this family are expected to perform at high levels academically (i.e. earning good grades) as well as give their best effort and attitude in their extracurricular activities. Several of the adult children have earned academic and athletic scholarships to college. Although one member of the extended family is a former professional athlete, the economic status of this family would be considered “working class” according to Lareau’s (2003) conceptualization of employees versus employers (p. 277-279). My interest in studying the informal education practices of this particular family is based on the fact that theirs represents a counter-story to many deficit stories despite facing some of the same challenges many African American families face including single parenting, lower middle class socio-economic status, and racial discrimination.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The researcher will be the primary instrument for data collection in this study. This exploratory case study will have three phases:

Phase I.

Semi-structured interviews with participant (adult) family members will be conducted to determine their definition of family, definition of student success and how success is measured, values placed on education, family history, and what potentially educative activities the children are involved in outside of school. The interviewees in this phase include the two sisters³⁸ (mentioned above) in the unit of study as well as extended family members who can share information about the family’s history, including past experiences with informal and formal education. For example, in addition to learning about current informal educative practices, I intend to interview one of the patriarchal members of the extended family to learn more about how his parents instilled dispositions, skills, and knowledge as well as how he and his sisters passed these values on to the next generation (or diverged from tradition).

³⁸ Pseudonyms will be determined by participants at the beginning of the study.

This phase of the study should take place in July and August, 2014.

Phase II.

I will collect data via field notes from participant-observation of at least six (up to 10) family activities such as sports practice, family dinners, and unstructured activities at home and in the community. I will observe and take notes on naturally occurring interactions and conversations among family members and I will participate in these activities/ events. Informal interviews/ conversations with adult family members during these events will also be a source of data. Flexibility in choosing which types and frequency of family activities to be a participant-observer is important because I may have to adapt and redirect the study in order to explore new or unexpected themes (Yin, 2009).

This phase of the study will take place on a weekly or bi-weekly basis during the months of July, August, September, and October of 2014.

Phase III.

Final interviews will be conducted with the two sisters to probe for deeper understanding and member checking to make sure gaps in this family's story are bridged. Because this family knows me as an educator, I will wait until this phase of the study to ask them about their trust in their children's teachers and their comfort level in becoming involved in their children's schools.

This phase of the study will be completed in November 2014.

Data Analysis will occur throughout the data collection process to identify and triangulate recurring themes. The theoretical framework will emerge as recurring themes are identified.

Researcher bias will be analyzed throughout the entire research process using Milner's (2007) framework for researcher racial and cultural positionality.

References

- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction* (4th ed). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Hatch, J.A. (2002). *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Merriam, S.B. (2011). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Milner, R.M. (2007). Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working Through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 388-400.

Saukko, P. (2003). *Doing Research in Cultural Studies*. London: SAGE Publications.

Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

V. SPECIFIC RISKS AND PROTECTION MEASURES

Risks to participants are minimal. All data will remain confidential. Participants will have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym that they will be referred to in the transcription as well as in the dissertation. There is always a possibility that through self-reflection during the interview process, the participant may begin discussing previous events that had been emotionally hurtful to them in the past. They may also make statements that they do not want their other family members to know. At their request, I will remove such statements from my recordings and/or notes and will not use them in my dissertation. Participants will be fully informed of their rights and that they may withdraw from the case study at any time with no consequences.

To minimize discomfort and the potential of being a distraction to the normal functioning of this family during the second phase of the project, I will only participate in family events/activities in which I am explicitly invited.

All electronic data (digital recordings and transcriptions of interviews) will be kept in a password protected file on the principal investigator's computer. The principal investigator is the only individual who has access to the computer with electronic files. At the end of the study, all electronic data files will be transferred to a portable storage device and locked in a file cabinet in the office of Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon- Claxton Bldg., Room420 at the University of Tennessee.

VI. BENEFITS

Information gathered from this case study will add to the body of knowledge about the strengths of African American families; in particular I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how one African American family educates and socializes their children to be successful in the school setting.

VII. METHODS FOR OBTAINING "INFORMED CONSENT" FROM PARTICIPANTS

The participants will be informed of the objectives and methods of this study and advised of their rights as a participant. They will also be notified that they may discontinue participation at any time. Participation will be voluntary and there will be no reward for participating. Informed consent will be obtained prior to the start of all interviews. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project in a locked file in Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon's office- Claxton Bldg., Room 420 at the University of Tennessee. Field notes will be kept in a separate file cabinet in Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon's office- Claxton Bldg., Room 420 at the University of Tennessee. They will be destroyed in three years.

VIII. QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR(S) TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

The principal investigator, Sherrie Fairchild-Keyes, is a 4th year doctoral student at the University of Tennessee. The student's faculty advisor, Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, will counsel the investigator through the research project.

The principal investigator completed CITI research ethics trainings in June 2012.

IX. FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT TO BE USED IN THE RESEARCH

Data will be collected in the "natural setting" (Merriam, 2011) such as the home of the family who is the unit of study or in community locations where the family goes such as the ballpark, community center, church, etc. The principal investigator will be a participant observer during the second phase of this project and thus will take field notes at the events/locations where the family invites me to participate.

The Principal Investigator will record interviews using a digital recorder and transcriptions of these recordings will be stored in a password-protected file on the investigator's personal computer. Paper-copy field notes will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the principal investigator's home office. Electronic copies of field notes will be stored in a password-protected file on the principal investigator's personal computer. This is a private computer and no other individuals have access or rights to use this device. At the end of the study, all electronic data files will be transferred to a portable storage device and locked in a file cabinet in the office of Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon- Claxton Bldg., Room420 at the University of Tennessee.

X. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRINCIPAL/CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S):

By compliance with the policies established by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee the principal investigator(s) subscribe to the principles stated in "The Belmont Report" and standards of professional ethics in all research, development, and related activities involving human subjects under the auspices of The University of Tennessee. The principal investigator(s) further agree that:

- 1. Approval will be obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to instituting any change in this research project.**
- 2. Development of any unexpected risks will be immediately reported to Research Compliance Services.**
- 3. An annual review and progress report (Form R) will be completed and submitted when requested by the Institutional Review Board.**
- 4. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project and for at least three years thereafter at a location approved by the Institutional Review Board.**

XI. SIGNATURES

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE ORIGINAL. The Principal Investigator should keep the original copy of the Form B and submit a copy with original signatures for review. Type the name of each individual above the appropriate signature line. Add signature lines for all Co-Principal Investigators, collaborating and student investigators, faculty advisor(s), department head of the Principal Investigator, and the Chair of the Departmental Review Committee. The following information should be typed verbatim, with added categories where needed:

Principal Investigator: Sherrie Fairchild-Keyes

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Student Advisor (if any): Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

XII. DEPARTMENT REVIEW AND APPROVAL

The application described above has been reviewed by the IRB departmental review committee and has been approved. The DRC further recommends that this application be reviewed as:

☐ Expedited Review -- Category(s): _____

OR

☐ Full IRB Review

Chair, DRC: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Department Head: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Protocol sent to Research Compliance Services for final approval on (Date) : _____

Approved:
Research Compliance Services
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue

Signature: _____ Date: _____

For additional information on Form B, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer or by phone at (865) 974-3466.

Appendix C: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study. The purpose of this research study to develop a deeper understanding of how families educate their children; in particular this study aims to share the story of how one African America family educates and socializes their children and to challenge negative assumptions and stereotypes regarding parent involvement in and valuing of formal education by African American parents.

PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

I am seeking your participation in two kinds of data collection in this dissertation project:

1. As part of this study, I am inviting you to participate in at least one interview. The interview is designed to last approximately one hour and will be audio recorded, with your permission. Interviews will take place in a location you are most comfortable and will include questions about your involvement in the educating and socializing children in your family. I may request a second interview towards the end of the study to ask questions to clarify observations made during the participant-observation phase of this project (see below)
2. As part of this study, I will be observing and taking notes on naturally occurring interactions and conversations among family members. I would like to participate in at least six family events/ activities to experience, first-hand, the complexity of roles, expectations, and priorities for educating and socializing the children in your family. This research will not require additional time or activities from participants beyond regularly scheduled activities and events.

RISKS

Risks to participants are minimal. All data will remain confidential. As a participant, you will have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to be referred to as in both the transcription as well as in the dissertation. Every attempt will be made to remove any identifying information such as names of town(s), schools, businesses, ball fields, etc. When necessary, actual names will be replaced with pseudonyms.

There is always a possibility that you may experience discomfort through self-reflection during the interview and participant-observation process, such as remembering and discussing previous events that may have been emotionally hurtful to you in the past. You may also want to keep some information you share confidential from other family members. While it may be difficult to protect your identity from your family members, you may decide that you do not want information you shared to be made public. At your request, I will remove such statements from my recordings and/or notes and will not use them in them in my dissertation.

Participation in this study is voluntary; you may withdraw from the case study at any time with no consequences. To minimize discomfort and the potential of being a distraction to the normal functioning during this project, I will only participate in family events/activities in which I am explicitly invited.

BENEFITS

Information gathered from this case study will add to the body of knowledge about the strengths of African American families; in particular I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how one African American family educates and socializes their children to be successful in the school setting.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to the researcher conducting the study and her advisor. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study. You will be asked to select a pseudonym of your choice, which will be used to refer to you throughout the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Sherrie Fairchild-Keyes, at 1122 Volunteer Blvd., Knoxville, TN 37916, and (865) 208-9888 or sbradsh1@vols.utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

Please check one of the following four options:

☐

I agree to both the interview and the family observation. Only the family observation includes observation of and possible interaction with the children. Children will not be interviewed as part of this research project.

I agree to have my child(ren) included in the observations (please list names of children):

My child(ren) are not to be included in the observations (please list names of children):

-
-
- ☐ I agree to the observation only. The family observation includes observation of and possible interaction with the children. Children will not be interviewed as part of this research project.

I agree to have my child(ren) included in the observations (please list names of children):

My child(ren) are not to be included in the observations (please list names of children):

- ☐ I agree to the interview only.
- ☐ I do NOT want to participate in any part of this research.

If you agreed to participate in an interview (above), please check one of the following options:

- ☐ I agree to have the interview audio recorded.
- ☐ I do NOT agree to have the interview audio recorded.

Please check one of the following options:

- ☐ I understand that my real name may be used in this dissertation project and any other publication of this research.
- ☐ I prefer that this interview remain confidential and that my statements be attributed to a pseudonym in the dissertation and any other publication of this research.

I am 18 years or older, and I have read and understand the information provided above. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project.

Participant's Name _____ Date _____

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

References

- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction* (4th ed). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Hatch, J.A. (2002). *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Merriam, S.B. (2011). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Milner, R.M. (2007). Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working Through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 388-400.
- Saukko, P. (2003). *Doing Research in Cultural Studies*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Appendix D: Interview Protocols

D-1: Interview Protocol: parents

General Information:

Gender

Education level

Age

Occupation

1. What is your definition of family?
 - a. How do you determine who is considered “family” and who is considered “friend”, “acquaintance”? Do you consider friends to be a part of the family?
 - b. Can you give me some examples of people in your life you consider to be family and why/how they became so?
2. Who do you consider to be closest family in regards to influences on the development of your children?
3. In what ways do they influence the development of your children?
4. What are the most important skills you want to teach your children?
 - a. Why do you consider these to be most important?
 - b. How do you go about teaching them these skills?
5. What are the most important dispositions/ values you want to teach your children?
 - a. Why do you consider these to be most important?
 - b. How do you go about teaching them these values?

- c. How do these values translate into success at school and in the future?
- 6. What are the most important pieces of knowledge you want to teach your children?
 - a. Why do you consider these to be most important?
 - b. How do you go about teaching them these things?
 - c. How does this knowledge base translate into success at school and in the future?
- 7. How does your race influence the skills, values, and knowledge you want to teach your children?
- 8. What are your overarching goals for your children and how do the skills, knowledge, and values you mentioned previously connect with these goals?

D-2: Interview Protocol: extended and fictive kin

General Information:

Gender

Education level

Age

Occupation

1. How long have you known [the unit of study]?
2. What is your relation to [the unit of study]? (i.e. uncle, cousin, friend, etc)
3. How often do you spend time with their children?
4. What activities do you generally participate in with [this unit of study]?
5. How does your race influence the skills, values, and knowledge you want to teach your children?
6. What are your overarching goals for these children and how do the skills, knowledge, and values you mentioned previously connect with these goals?
7. Can you share any stories or anecdotes about a time when you participated in teaching a skill, knowledge, and/or disposition to the children in this family?

D-3: Interview Protocol: adult siblings

General Information:

Gender

Education level

Age

Occupation

1. What types of skills, knowledge, and values are you expected to reinforce/ teach your younger siblings?
2. What is your role in the education of the younger children in your family?
 - a. Examples?
3. How does your race influence the skills, values, and knowledge you want to teach your children?
4. What are your overarching goals for these children and how do the skills, knowledge, and values you mentioned previously connect with these goals?
5. Can you share any stories or anecdotes about a time when you participated in teaching a skill, knowledge, and/or disposition to the children in this family?

Vita

Sherrie Fairchild-Keyes grew up in Clinton, Tennessee. After graduating high school, with honors, in 1989, she enrolled at Emory & Henry College in Emory, Virginia before transferring to Tennessee Technological University in 1992. She completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry from Tennessee Technological University in May 1994. For graduate school, Fairchild-Keyes was accepted into the Master's program and offered a Graduate Teacher Assistantship at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in the Department of Biochemistry and Cellular & Molecular Biology.

When she realized that the only pleasure she felt in her graduate studies was when she was teaching, she decided to change her major to Education and become a secondary science teacher. After completing required coursework and a year-long internship, Fairchild-Keyes earned a Master of Science degree in Curriculum & Instruction, specializing in Secondary Science from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August 1997.

She returned to her home school district and was hired to teach Biology and Chemistry at Anderson County High School in Clinton, Tennessee. After five years in this role, she moved to Key West, Florida where she worked for the Monroe County School District as a science teacher for nearly eight years. Fairchild-Keyes spent 2 years as a 7th and 8th grade science teacher at Horace O'Bryant Middle School. In June 2003, she took a brief sabbatical to tryout the inn-keeping business. Missing the classroom environment, and preferring to work with children rather than adults on vacation, Fairchild-Keyes returned to the classroom in October 2003 as a 9th grade U.S. History and Environmental Science teacher at Key West High School (KWHS).

While at Key West High School, she also taught Integrated Science, General Biology, Honors Biology, Intensive Reading, and A.P. Chemistry.

Fairchild-Keyes refined her leadership skills, becoming the chair for the KWHS Science Department in 2004, and enrolling in the Education Leadership and Administration program at Florida State University (via distance learning) in 2005. Collaboration with colleagues involved her in the small learning community and career academy movement. Upon completion of the Educational Leadership program at Florida State University in 2006, Fairchild-Keyes enrolled in the Aspiring Administrator program with Monroe County School District. In 2008, she was offered her first administrative position as the Associate Director for The Keys Center- A Place for Girls, an alternative education program funded through the Monroe County School District.

In 2007, Fairchild-Keyes began teaching Chemistry and Education coursework at Florida Keys Community College. These experiences were pivotal in the decision to pursue a doctoral degree. She returned to Tennessee in 2009 when she was hired to be the Principal of the Alternative Education Program (now called Secret City Academy) for Oak Ridge Schools in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. After leading this program for five years, she transitioned to elementary education. She currently serves as the Principal at Willow Brook Elementary School in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

In 2010, Fairchild-Keyes began her doctoral studies in Cultural Studies in what is now called the Learning Environments and Educational Studies program at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Taking classes part-time and working full-time as a school administrator, she completed her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education in 2016.