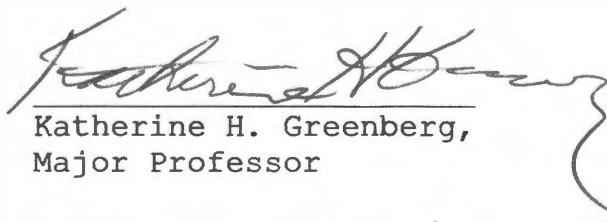
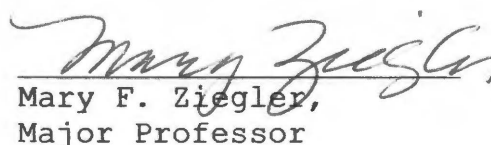


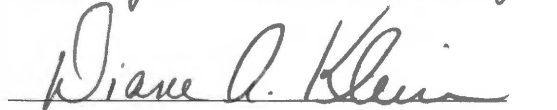
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Eva Yoshan Wiggins Young entitled "'Phenomenal Woman': A Phenomenological Exploration of the 'Voices' and Experiences of My Sistas'." I have examined the final paper copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

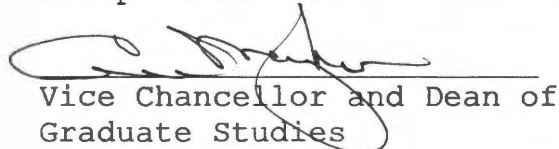

Katherine H. Greenberg,
Major Professor


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We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:


Vice Chancellor and Dean of
Graduate Studies

Thesis
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**"'Phenomenal Woman': A Phenomenological Exploration
of the 'Voices' and Experiences of my Sistas'."**

**A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Eva Yoshan Wiggins Young
December, 2005**

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the following people.

First, to my Mom, Eva H. Wiggins Mapp. You once told me that education was something no man or woman could take from me. You were right, as always. Thank you, for being the wind beneath my wings.

To my son Tai. You wrote me the poem below this year that showed me you are becoming an intelligent, proud, loving Black man. I love you and am proud to have you as my son.

**You had passionate things to say,
Despite things were going wrong,
Your words were like a song that,
Kept me going strong.
Many times I've broken all your rules,
Got mad when you've fussed and shouted,
Thinking to myself at night,
I know what you're about.
You strive to make me better than yourself.
I know there are some things in life I can't do,
But I'll try and I'll try to 'till I can't anymore
Because there's no mother better than you.**

To my daughter, Miss Eva. I have been attending school for as long as you've been in this world. You have added such joy to my life. You said to me after I passed my dissertation defense that we were celebrating two things.

First, we were celebrating me getting a Ph.D., and second we were celebrating you having a mom that had a Ph.D. You amaze me. You already understand there is a difference! You are on your way to becoming a phenomenal woman.

To both of my children. This dissertation is the most important gift I will ever give you. It represents all the dreams you will have and can accomplish. You must have a dream. You must believe.

Acknowledgements

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I wish to thank the sistas' that participated in this study. Your voices shed light on our phenomenal lives.

To my long life friends, Tammie Lee McElwee, Florine Cook, and Cassandra Brown Smith. Thank you for your support and constant reminder that I am a smart, intelligent woman. I also thank you for the continued reminder that I should not forget the nappy-headed, pop-bottled glasses, shy girl from the hood to keep me grounded. Also, a special thanks to Zorian James for showing me each day is a journey to be filled with zest, passion, and love.

I could not have finished graduate school without the people in my life that formed a village to help me raise my children. Thank you.

I wish to acknowledge Nathaniel Young. In spite of it all, I'm still a phenomenal woman. Our children taught me to be proud of the name Dr. Young.

Lastly, thank you, my advocate, my rock, the redeemer, wonderful counselor, who strengthens me.

Abstract

This research study provided a descriptive picture of educational experiences of three sets of Black sisters, including the researcher, who grew up in inner-city Knoxville. This study was not designed to be the "voice" of all Black women. It was designed to show the universal essence of the experience of Black inner-city women living in a similar socioeconomic and cultural context.

A qualitative existential-phenomenological research study design was used to derive common themes that represented the universal essence of the participants' experiences. Individual interviews were conducted for all participants and an existential-phenomenological analysis provided the common meaning underlying the stories we shared about our educational experiences.

The findings derived from the data analysis are presented in themes that provided a descriptive picture of lived-experiences of the participants. This study illuminated the formal and informal learning experiences of Black women and the profound role cultural experiences of family and community play in shaping their learning experiences through adulthood. The common ground of the

educational experiences shared by women in the study was "Learning As You Go" which served as a backdrop for the experiences (themes). The three themes are as follows: *I Seemed Like a Stupid Little Girl, Again/I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman; Staying in the Box/Stepping Out of the Box; They Taught Us the Values/and You Can't Let People Keep You Down.*

Findings suggest that the educational experiences of Black women influenced our development and our sense of voice, self-esteem, and self-defined achievement and success. These findings dispute adult development theories that suggest learning or development must precede or trail the other.

Recommendations and implications are provided to educators, specifically to adult educators, that might benefit from a deeper understanding about how to provide positive educational experiences for Black females.

Since minimal research on the relationship between adult development and educational experiences of Black women exists with regards to race, culture, gender and class, this study should also help create new integrated theoretical approaches to adult development that go beyond

traditional theories, as well as contribute to the practice of adult education.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

"If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat." Maya Angelou

Background

It is in graduate school where I began to question my life and the foundation of my existence. As a girl from inner-city Knoxville, I had a new consciousness of how concepts such as race, class, and gender affected my life. In the past five years, I have gone through a period of reconstruction which left me with feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and a loss of self. The patriarchal system in which I was raised and continued in my formal schooling, in my community, and in American society as a whole, was crushing me. As I began to grow intellectually, I questioned the concepts of my role as a wife, mother, and woman. These new ideas were beginning to take a form that seemed to be in direct conflict with the values, norms, and culture that had always been structured for me.

As a person who has always found solitude and strength in poems, I read "Phenomenal Woman", a poem written by Maya Angelou. This poem celebrates women's experiences, beauty,

strength, self-confidence, and grace. The following excerpt is particularly significant to me.

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed?
I don't shout or jump about,
or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing,
it ought to make you proud.

I say, it's in the click of my heels,
the bend of my hair, the palm of my hand,
The need of my care,

'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

When I read this poem for the first time, I did not see myself as a phenomenal woman. Maya Angelou was a phenomenal Black woman who overcame life obstacles and used her talents as a writer and motivational speaker to become an inspirational leader in the Black community and the world. No, not I. Definitely not phenomenal. When I looked in the mirror, I saw a hollow shell of a woman who had been abused psychologically and physically so much through life that a rusty razor upon my throat at times would have been a blessing. Looking back as a survivor of domestic violence these experiences helped me realize I was not alone. There is a culturally grounded attitude of acceptable violence

against women. Women have been victims of partner abuse and are often left without help from the law or even social support of family. This is yet another way in which society steals the "voices" of women. A study conducted by Thompson and Kaslow (2000) found that psychological abuse created more daily distress in women than physical abuse. The findings show that women's partners' verbal, mental, sexual, and financial forms of abuse created a sense of fear, anger, and low self-esteem. Because of fear, many women do not report the abuse to police. In fact, a study conducted by Robinson and Chandek (2000) shows how when some police were called to a domestic violence scene, if the victim was a Black woman, males were not often taken to jail. Police officers frequently made the victim feel as if she were to blame.

As I began to grow academically, I was able to recognize how psychological abuse was used as a way to silence my "voice". I had very low self-esteem and feelings of helplessness. I realized there was power in education. I could articulate how issues of race, socioeconomic status, and gender affected what I thought I deserved in life. My experiences inevitably strengthened my "voice". I was

conditioned by cultural norms to believe that I should not question the life I was given. Nor was I supposed to choose for myself the life I wanted and deserved.

I realized the more I learned in graduate school, the more I questioned my choices in life. One of the first choices I made for myself that contradicted the life that was chosen for me was to understand the right to live my life without abuse. I found my "voice". I did not have to be a victim just because I was a woman. I learned to be proud of my academic knowledge and accomplishments. In fact, I learned it was absolutely all right to love myself.

Society has tried to silence my "voice" yet I understood the importance of higher education in cultivating my "voice" and also the "voice" of Black women. Education is important because it gives us power. Just like the poem "Phenomenal Woman", when Black women realize we have power within ourselves to define who we are and what we can accomplish, we become phenomenal women.

Educational experiences played a role in my development and future aspirations. Do Black women in my life and within my community develop through educational experiences as I have? This question led me to this

qualitative research study. I explored the lives of three sets of Black sisters, including myself, by listening to our voices about how the educational experiences throughout our lives helped shape our growth and development as women.

All of the participants interviewed in this study felt a strong connection with each other as sistas'. Some are my biological sisters, my mother, aunts, and family friends. We have experienced many accomplishments, obstacles, joys, and fears with each other over a lifetime. Although we walked similar paths growing up and experienced many things together, we have taken very different paths as adults. As a researcher, and as a Sista, I wanted to explore how our educational experiences shaped our paths.

I used the term Black to describe participants' cultural identity in this study due to my own personal experiences, instead of the politically correct term African American. There has always been a debate on what appropriate terms should be used when referring to minorities. The term "African American" is used to identify Americans from African decent within cultural and historical origins, without any reference to color. The term 'Black' is used to promote racial pride (Asante, 1989;

Berry & Blassingame, 1982). Bennett (1967) stated, "The quest for the right name is the most sophisticated level of finding and projecting one's identity (p. 54)." I believe there is no right or wrong term and an individual should define for himself or herself based on their own personal beliefs.

As a member of the Armed Forces stationed in Naples, Italy, I met many African women who only saw me as an American. Not African. African women who come to America and become citizens of the United States are African American. Although the term is intended to denote a cultural identity, the only identity culturally I have ever lived is as a Black American woman.

As this study unfolds I use the pronouns 'we' and 'our' meaning all the participants I interviewed, as well as my own interview conducted by one of my major professors, as a way of interlocking our experiences. Collins(1990) states that she uses these pronouns as well to denote her own personal interests when writing about Black women. She states "I often use the pronoun 'our' instead of 'their' when referring to African-American women, a choice that embeds me in the group I am studying

instead of distancing me from it (p. 202)." The intent of this study is to contribute to the literature, through research, the "voices" of Black women and their experiences in education. Educational experiences of Black women may perhaps influence the choices made during the course of our lives.

Organization of the Dissertation

This qualitative study is divided into four chapters. Chapter I contains the introduction to the study, including the background and statement of the problem. The layout of this study is quite different, however, than other studies because the statement of the problem comes before the purpose of the study. The statement of the problem is shared first with the reader in order to provide a broader view of the significant gap in the research of Black females. A review of literature connects the problem to adult development, learning theories, adult education, as well as issues of race, class, and gender. The purpose of the study follows, which should provide the reader with an explanation of phenomenology as a philosophy, and my own personal hint of feminism which explains my personal views

and biases as a researcher. The research question and limitations of the study are also presented. Chapter II contains detailed methodology with profiles of the participants ("sistas"), interview question, data collection and detailed analysis. Chapter III contains the findings. Chapter IV is the conclusion with recommendations for the Adult Education community and my personal reflections about education.

In the next section, I will discuss several adult development theories as a first step in understanding the development of Black females.

Statement of the Problem

"... at the moment of my birth two factors' determined my destiny, my having been born black and my having been born female." bell hooks

Although there is much literature on adult development, little focuses on Black women's development or the relationship between their development and their educational experiences. This underrepresentation of Black women in the literature is a gap that may have important implications for practice. The literature on adult

development, adult learning, and adult education further illuminate the problem.

Adult Development

Adult development in its simplest definition is change and growth over the lifespan (Bee & Bjorkland, 2000; Rutter & Rutter, 1992; Jung, 1931). But, critical to understanding the development of the Black female is an understanding the important role that culture plays in the process of our development (Littleton, 2002; Goodman, 1990; Lorde, 1984). Many traditional adult development theories focused specifically on biological, psychological/cognitive and sociocultural development, but did not account for differences in culture, race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Littleton, 2002; Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Tennant & Pogson, 1995; Crawley & Freeman, 1993; Harris, 1992; Goodman, 1990;).

Although researchers such as Courtenay (1994) suggest the importance of psychological models of adult development are exaggerated, others (Clark & Caffarella, 1999; Taylor, 1996; Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Mezirow, et. al. 1990,) believe the psychological perspective is a crucial aspect

to adult learning. Most psychological models focus on the individuals' introspection through reflection and less on interaction with the environment, life events, and transitions.

Erik Erikson (1963) combines the focus of the individual with the environment and creates a framework for understanding human development from infancy through late adulthood in the eight psychosocial stages listed below.

1. Trust vs. Mistrust (0 - 12 months) Trusting others based on initial contact with primary caregiver.
2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (2 - 3 years) Gaining a sense of self control and adequacy without the loss of self esteem.
3. Initiative vs. Guilt (4 - 6 years) Successfully initiating and seeking one's own curiosity and interest. Or, feeling guilt and anxiety over attempting to separate from one's primary caregiver.
4. Industry vs. Inferiority (6 - 12 years) Discovering one's talents, gifts, and abilities. If not, developing a lack of positive self-esteem.
5. Identity vs. Role Confusion (13 - 20 years) Understanding what value one has and why.
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation (20 - 30 years) Making commitments and meaningful relationships with others.

7. Generativity vs. Stagnation (30 - 50 years)
Sharing knowledge with the next generation.
8. Integrity vs. Despair (50+) Looking back on
accomplishments in life.

Erikson (1963) believes developmental changes occur throughout the life span. Each stage consists of a crisis which must be faced. If completed successfully, the individual continues to develop and moves to the next stage. He theorizes that all individuals pass through each stage, but not all face the crisis in a positive way; however, even a negative outcome in a stage is considered development.

Erikson (1963) believes identity plays a critical role in one's overall development in adulthood. He referred to identity as a solid sense of self. Much of adult development is the result of an individual's ability to successfully handle and complete certain developmental tasks so they could meet the challenges of later stages with greater confidence.

In a similar stage model, Daniel Levinson (1978) proposed that all adult men go through a series of stages as they develop. His model was based on biographical interviews of 40 American men that focused on their

experiences after adolescence. Levinson's model has five main stages.

1. Pre-adulthood Stage (0 - 22 years) The end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. Gains independence and leaves home.
2. Early Adulthood Stage (17 - 45 years) Selects roles, establishes goals, and builds life structures.
3. Middle Adult Stage (40 - 65 years) Reflects on career and plans for future success. Starts to build a family and settles down.
4. Late Adulthood Stage (60 - 85) Feels constrained by authority figures. Wants independence, authority and responsibility. Reflects and reevaluates life based on past experiences.
5. Late Late Adult Stage (80 +) Reflects on life structures with opportunity for growth and change.

Levinson's (1978) model was based on life structures, which are patterns that are shaped by the social and physical environment, usually involving family, work, religious beliefs, and economic status. Each life cycle has a sequence of periods of development, with an attempt to build or modify life structures.

Although Levinson's original research was on males, he later researched women (1994) in an attempt to include the "gender" aspect in his research. His findings were that

women go through the same cycles as males, but women tended to be tied closer to family life. These theories focus on men and women in general rather than any particular subgroups and typify the types of stage theories that attempt to explain how adults develop.

There is much literature on adult development but minimal literature specifically designed to understand Black women's development, particularly on how development and educational experiences are linked to help shape our overall lives (Caffarella & Merriam, 1999; Taylor, 1994; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Collins, 1990; Belenky, et.al, 1986; Kegan, 1982). The theories and models of adult development form an important basis for the practice of adult education. But Black females' development may be different from that of other women (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; 1994; hooks, 1994) and understanding these differences may show how development of Black females is linked to educational experiences, family, and community (Harris, 1992; Jeffries, 1985).

Using the concepts of Levinson (1978), Jeffries (1985) researched the psychosocial development of 40 Black females

between the ages of 20 to 40. Jeffries found four phases that were culture-specific for Black female development.

Phase I. Tries to resolve the identity crises of youth and acquires a primary concept of self-worth.

Phase II. Tries to resolve unrealistic (Eurocentric) values and adapts to the realities of Black lifestyles. Assesses education/career options and interpersonal relationships. Forms initial life scripts reflecting individual and group identities.

Phase III. Questions and reorganizes decision making skills for competence and effectiveness. Engage in periods of challenge and change.

Phase IV. Compromise and reconciles the life issues of mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

Although age was not significantly related to the development of Black females, Jeffries (1985) found that the women who failed to deal with conflicting and negative messages during adolescence and young adult years, often continued to deal with the same negative messages during adulthood.

In an attempt to develop a psychosocial theory for elderly Black women, Simmons' (1990) researched eight women between the ages of 65 and 74 using biographical interviews that examined their lives. The study of these Black women suggested developmental themes including strong religious

beliefs, belonging to and/or creating a family, a view of being a survivor, and having values. Simmons found that coping with adversity was a common developmental theme. Other themes were obtaining advanced degrees, careers, and relationships with significant others (p. 144). Although more research is focusing on the development of Black women, I have found little that discusses specifically how educational experiences over a lifetime influence the development of Black females.

Sociocultural theories of development provide a more inclusive alternative to the psychological models because they focus on the social and cultural aspects of development, such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Cross, 1995). One sociocultural theory on development is that of Vygotsky (1978). The major theme of Vygotsky's theory is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky (1978) states:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child

(intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (p.57)

Factors such as genetics, physiological, biological and culture may be barriers to experiences. The culture of an individual is a result of family and community beliefs, values, and the way they see the world. Vygotsky (1978) believes different cultures emphasize different kinds of skills and social interaction due to the needs of the culture and its values. He believes cultural differences play an important role in who and what individuals become as adults.

A more holistic view on how adults develop is described by integrated approaches to adult development. Perun and Bielby's (1980) theory of adult development describes life span as made up of temporal progressions. These temporal progressions are seen as a series of wheels spinning on an axis. The wheels signify sequences of experiences or internal changes that are based on the speed and timing at which their imaginary wheels are in synchrony

or asynchrony. During major periods in development, a person may experience more stress associated with physical changes, family and work roles that may cause the "wheel" to be asynchronous. Additionally, a person with less stress in these areas who is experiencing life as "normal" may have his/her "wheel" turning in synchrony. Perun and Bielby (1980) believe sometimes asynchrony is necessary for change to happen in a person's life. This integrative perspective of development is more inclusive, captures more aspects of adulthood, and better relates to the real-lived experiences of Black women.

Jarvis (1987) believes, as do I, that social conditions of ethnic groups may be significantly different. The stresses placed upon Black females are complex in nature due to cultural factors such as responsibilities of raising a family alone, limited economic and educational obtainment, and society's expectation for accomplishment or achievement. My life experiences as a single Black woman raising a family can sometimes be extremely different, with different stressors than my friends at the university who are White and come from more mainstream middle class backgrounds. Sociocultural factors affect adult development

(Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Merriam, et.al 2001; Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000; Gilligan, 1987;).

More adult development theories focus on cultural and temporal factors that help provide insight into Black women's development. Although Black women may experience an identity crisis in ways defined by Erikson (1963) and Levinson (1994) psychosocial developmental tasks are not experienced necessarily in the same way for Black women. Even sociocultural theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) that include social and cultural aspects of development or integrative approaches such as Perium & Beilby (1980) do not account for specific cultural factors and additional stressors of being a Black woman in this society.

Some adult development research specifically on Black women has focused on three developmental and socialization areas, psychosocial concepts, bicultural factors, and the Afrocentric paradigm(Littleton, 2002; Crawley & Freeman, 1993; Bowman, 1989; Jeffries, 1985), but few have yet addressed how educational experiences might be linked to the overall development of Black women. However, now, theories integrating biological, psychological, sociocultural, and other integrative factors are providing

a framework to link development and learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Perum & Beilby, 1980). How these factors influence each other are emerging to offer further the understanding of adult development (Quashie, 2004; Imel, 2001; 1998).

Adult learning theories are important to understanding the link between development and learning for Black women. In the next section I will discuss adult learning theories which I believe are important to this understanding.

Adult Learning

"I entered the classroom with the conviction that was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer...education as the practice of freedom...education that connects the will to know with the will to become." bell hooks

It is not that Black females do not want, desire, or find education necessary, but the dominant hands of our society depict images every day through mass media, from commercials to music, which negatively illustrate Black females' lack of beauty, lack of intelligence, and lack of potential (hooks, 2000; Steele, 1997; Fordham, 1993; Ogbu, 1986; 1978). Individuals who help Black females learn should be concerned with how to help us learn effectively

and how to motivate us to want to learn. In order to do this, it is important to understand adult learning theories, as well as how racism, sexism, and social inequalities influence the learning process.

Transformative Learning Theory

I believe Mezirow (1975) has incorporated the idea of culture, past experiences, and cognitive development into a theory that helps explain some ideas of adult learning. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1997; 1990) explains how a person's expectations, along with cultural assumptions and presuppositions, directly influence the meaning we derive from our experiences. Influenced by Freire (1993), Mezirow (1998; 1997, 1990) viewed learning as a process of becoming aware of one's assumptions and revising these assumptions based on critical self-reflection. This theory describes a profound learning process that leads to development or a broader, more expansive, and complex viewpoint that guides new action. Mezirow's (1990) theory specifies two domains of learning. The areas of learning are: 1) instrumental learning, which focuses on learning through task-oriented problem solving and determination of cause and effect relationships, and 2)

communicative learning, which is learning involved in understanding the meaning of what others "communicate concerning values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment and democracy (Taylor, 1992,p.5). Merriam and Brockett (1997) suggest that transformative learning theory has helped the advancement of adult learning. They write, "the theory has refocused the interest of adult education on an aspect that may be truly unique among adult learners: the way in which experience can lead to fundamental changes in the learner's perspective (p.143)."

Originally referred to as perspective transformation, (Mezirow, 1997) the transformative learning theory explains the process of how adults revise their meaning structures of an experience by their frames of references (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Mezirow describes meaning schemes as "made up of specific knowledge, beliefs, value, judgments, and feelings which constitute interpretations of experience" (Taylor 1992, p.6). They are concrete signs of our habits and expectations that influence our behavior. Meaning perspective is a general frame of reference, worldview, or personal example that involves "a collection of meaning

schemes made up of higher-order schemata, theories, propositions, beliefs, prototypes, goal orientations and evaluations (p.7).

Mezirow (1975) identifies ten phases of transformation based on a national study of women returning to college who participated in an academic reentry program (Mezirow, 1975). The results of the study led to the following phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame.
3. A critical assessment of assumption.
4. Recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation is shared and that others have negotiated a similar change.
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.
6. Planning of a course of action.
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8. Provisionally trying out new roles.
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

From this study, Mezirow began to focus on the centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse in the process of meaning structure transformation (Taylor, 1992, p.8).

Experience itself is based upon socially constructed activities. It is experience itself that we are to make meaning of and interpret so that we may guide our future actions. When experiences are meaningful, we reflect on and evaluate the socio-cultural experience with our previous experience (Leicester & Pearce, 1997, p.4).

The second theme, critical reflection, according to Mezirow (1998), is the distinguishing characteristic of adult learning (p.185). Mezirow argues that critical self-reflection is best conducted through discourse with others and with the support of others. According to Jarvis (1983), Mezirow's idea that learning occurs as a result of reflecting upon experience is relevant to understanding the learning process (p.104).

The third theme of Transformative Learning Theory is rational discourse which rests on the following assumptions:

1. It is rational only as long as it meets the conditions necessary to create understanding with another.
2. It is driven by objectivity.
3. All actions and statements are open to question and discussion.
4. Understanding is developed through the weighing of evidence and measuring the insight and strength of supporting arguments.
5. The primary goal is to promote mutual understanding among others.

Rational discourse becomes the means in which critical reflection is put into action, experiences are reflected upon and what assumptions and beliefs are questioned and are accepted, dismissed, and incorporated into meaning.

Mezirow's (1998, 1975) ideas contribute to the connection between development and learning of Black women. By questioning assumptions and challenging habits of mind and entering into discourse about experiences can lead Black women to change their perspective through this reflective type of learning and as a result, develop.

Andragogy

I also believe the ideas of Knowles (1989; 1970), one of the most significant adult education figures, helps link Black women's development and learning. His work on

informal adult education, self-directed learning and andragogy are important in the understanding of how education is connected with adult development. Andragogy, the art and science of teaching adults, was his attempt to build a comprehensive model of adult learning based on the characteristics of adult learners (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1970). He believes teaching adult learners requires different methods and strategies than for children and young adults. He also believes that learning continues throughout the lifespan and that social factors such as economics are major factors on why adults continued to seek education.

Although I agree with Knowles (1970) that teaching adults requires different methods and strategies, economics was not a major factor in my decision to obtain a graduate degree. In fact, I actually could not afford to seek a graduate degree. I sought higher education for a sense of personal accomplishment and to prove to my children dreams could come true with hard work. My ideas of personal accomplishment and the need for family admiration is consistent with Josselson's (1987) who believes women's

identity development comes from an attachment to family, friends and educational and career goals.

Knowles (1975) also believes that self-directed learning is a process "... in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 18).

The following are four key assumptions about adult learners defined by Knowles:

1. Self concept. Adults have a deep need to be self-directed in their learning.
2. Experience. Adults bring many experiences into the classroom and want to engage in activities they can participate in through discussions as a way of constructing knowledge.
3. Readiness to learn. Adults learn what they need to know, when they need to know it.
4. Orientation to learning. Some adults learn for the sake of dealing with real-life situations.

In *The Making of an Adult Educator*, Knowles (1989) revised and expanded his ideas about adult learning:

1. Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it.

2. Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own lives and develop a deep psychological need to be seen and treated by others with respect and as capable of self-direction.
3. Adults come into an education activity with a greater volume and unique quality of experiences different than youths.
4. Adults become ready to learn things they need to know or to cope with real-life situations effectively.
5. Adults are life, task, or problem centered in their orientation to learning, unlike children and youth.
6. While adults are responsive to some extrinsic motivations, the more potent motivations are intrinsic in nature. (pp. 83-85)

Knowles (1970) also discusses how society has used education as a means for survival. He wrote:

The greatest danger to the survival of civilization today is not atomic warfare, not environmental pollution, not the population explosion, not the depletion of natural resources, and not any of the other contemporary crisis, but the underlying cause of them all - the accelerating obsolescence of man. The evidence is mounting that man's ability to cope with his changing world is lagging farther and farther behind the changing world. The only hope now seems to

be a crash program to retool the present generation of adults with the competencies required to function adequately in a condition of perpetual change. This is the deep need - the awesome challenge (p.33).

Although Knowles (1970) was not specifically addressing the needs of Black women, his ideas are particularly important in understanding us. Additional research stemming from Knowles ideas has continued to progress in the adult education arena (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), specifically concerning the unique needs of Blacks and adult learning (Flannery, 1995; Colin, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 1991). Adult development and adult learning are core theoretical concepts in adult education that apply to understanding the connection of development and learning to the Black woman. Adult development and learning are key aspects of the larger context of adult education.

Adult Education and Social Change

Adult education has been used to assist in social action and change, and personal and economic development. Merriam and Brockett (1997) state, "The development of adult education as a field of practice has historically

been linked to two very different movements - one focusing on social change or social action and the other emphasizing personal and economic development" (p. 248). In the 1920's because of the unrest in America, adult education became a way to inform individuals on how to challenge daily injustices through collaboration, and critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987).

Paul Freire (1993), one of the most influential proponents of social change, believed that an unjust social condition were due to the illiteracy of individuals. He believed, as I do, that the purpose of adult education is to enable learners to participate actively in liberating themselves from the condition of oppression (Merriam and Brockett, 1997). Freire (1993) argues that oppressed people need to develop a critical consciousness that will enable them to condemn social structures that oppress people. Through dialog or discourse, development of critical thinking can occur, and strategies for action should develop. Raising the consciousness of individuals should prepare them for social and/or political change.

Eduard Lindeman (1993, 1926) became one of most distinguished advocates of social change within the field

of adult education (Merriam and Brockett, 1997; Brookfield, 1984). Lindeman stated, "True adult education is social education" (1947, p. 55). Lindeman also believes the aim of adult education is the improvement of individuals and society. Education does not have to be formal, but informal and collaborative. Lindeman stresses the importance of designing curriculum that promotes discussion and helps develop analytical skills which benefit individual growth and social awareness (Brookfield, 1984). He believes that textbooks should only be used as secondary sources of information and through the experiences of individuals sharing through dialogue, knowledge can be revealed (Lindeman, 1926).

Although education for social action has a strong foundation in adult education, emphasis on the field's growth as a profession has led to more academic programs in universities. Some argue that the field of adult education has become a tool to socialize and maintain the status of marginalized groups rather than address the social inequalities these groups face (Heaney, 1996; Edwards, 1995; Johnson-Bailey, et.al., 1994). Perhaps this is why

the body of research on women and people of color in adult education are minimal. Merriam and Brockett (1997), state:

Basically, the experiences and knowledge that counted most-those that found their way into histories and theories-were those of middle-class white males. Large numbers of adult educators and learners had therefore been rendered invisible to mainstream adult education by who they are. (p.240)

In an analysis by Johnson-Bailey (2002) of educational archival holdings, three major themes emerge for Blacks: education for assimilation, education for cultural survival, and education for resistance. Johnson-Bailey (2002) states the following:

The ties that African Americans have had to Adult Education and to education in general have been different from the relationship that the majority population has maintained. The education of history of African Americans in the United States has been primarily one of exclusion. (p.2)

The study is an extensive analysis of a 25-year period in adult education that further clarifies that African Americans have always had an understanding of adult

education. During much of our society's history of slavery, freedom, and then segregation, informal education was primarily the way Blacks were educated. Johnson-Bailey (2002) concludes segregation contributed to more formal institutional settings of adult education in Black communities (p.20).

The goal of adult education should be to improve all people by educating them to understand the underlying structures of the society in which they live and become empowered to act in order to improve these structures by making them fair and equitable. Due to our society's political structures, which may exclude individuals with limited education and financial means to obtain formal education in higher education institutions, many women and people of color may not reach beyond their low-socioeconomic place in society or even question why this is so (Johnson-Bailey, et.al., 1994; Tisdell, 1995; 1993). We cannot disregard the cultural, economic, race, and gender issues that affect minorities.

Issues of Race and Class

In 1973 Staples suggested that racism and sexism exacerbated the processes of growth and development of Black women. Race, a socially constructed category, was created by the dominant group for economic, social, and political superiority by promoting the racial differences among groups (Buck 2001; Cross, 1995; Banks & Banks, 1995).

Racial identity development is a conscious and unconscious process of continuous changes of negotiated feelings about ones race and culture. Negative feelings toward Whites are also negotiated as experiences in life occur (Helms, 1990; Parham, 1989).

With the construction of race began the construction of "white privilege". McIntosh (1988) believes "White" privilege is an unacknowledged right. An unconscious, but nevertheless, oppressive act White Americans share which gives them advantages simply because they are a part of the dominant culture. McIntosh (1988) further clarifies this by stating,

In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group,

never in invisible conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth. (p. 120)

As a Black girl growing up in the south, I always knew these ideas existed, but I was never able to articulate the understanding of these ideas until I entered graduate school and was exposed to theories that explained my experiences. Regardless of whether these acts are unconscious or not, this ideology is called racism.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) believe there is a need to theorize race as a topic of scholarly inquiry in education. Although scholars have examined race as a tool for understanding social inequalities, "the intellectual salience of this theorizing has not been systematically employed in the analysis of educational inequality" (p.50). Research suggests that race is a significant factor in the perception of Black females that derives from early sex role socialization (Steele, 1997; Lykes, 1983; Myers, 1980).

The centrality and intersection of race and racism recognizes the role racism plays in structuring schools. Racism is interlocked with categories of gender and class oppression of minority students. Curriculum and

standardized and intelligence testing have historically been used to subordinate students of color as well (Lawrence, 1987; Ogbu, 1978). Racism takes on many dimensions such as institutional, individual, conscious and unconscious, and has different impacts on individuals and the group being discriminated against (Davis, 1989; Lawrence, 1987).

Two models of racial stereotypes that focus on negative attitudes toward minorities are the genetic determinist and cultural deficit models. The genetic determinist model believes that it is the genetic structure of minority students that is the basis of low educational attainment (Kamin, 1974). The cultural deficit model contends minority cultural values, stemming from deficient family values, is dysfunctional and causes low educational attainment for members of minority groups. This model argues that minority groups are not assimilating to the values of the dominant group in society thus limiting the success of future generations. Although not sufficiently supported, the deficit model is believed by many educators (Valencia & Solorzano, 1998).

Race is also a critical factor in the dynamics of a classroom for people of color, as well as the lack of professors of color, or textbooks that mention the history and/or contributions of people of color (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). Even when schools promote multiculturalism, the expectations of students, or the lack of, play a crucial role in their achievement and success (Sprinthall, et.al., 1998; Oakes, 1985; Ogbu, 1978). These authors echo my educational experiences as well.

Understanding the role culture plays in the learning process is an important part of the theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability. This theory is rooted in the active-modification approach to learning, which advocates the continual mobilization of environmental resources in order to enhance an individual's potential for growth and continued modification (Feuerstein, et.al, 1988, p. 12). By understanding the importance of the Structural Cognitive Modifiability theory, the Cognitive Enrichment Advantage (CEA) was designed for educators to address the needs of schools in low-income areas and for underachieving and nontraditional students (Greenberg, 2000).

The CEA approach to mediated learning may help minority students understand the value of cultural experiences they bring to the learning experience, thereby promoting a higher level of motivation. The CEA metastrategic approach to learning focuses on the developing the knowledge needed to help students construct their own personally relevant strategies in any learning experience. The twelve cognitive processes called the CEA Building Blocks of Thinking, which are specific to the cognitive processes, help promote effective thinking. The Tools of Learning focus on affective-motivational approaches. The learner develops strategies that focus on motivating behaviors within the learning experience and how to understand their emotions (Greenberg, 2000). Keeping these factors in mind, the Building Blocks and Tools of the Cognitive Enrichment Advantage address the cognitive needs, affect, and motivational needs of learners (Greenberg, 2000,p.54) .

According to Feuerstein, Klein and Tannenbaum (1991), making meaning in the learning experience is determined by cultural roots. The meaning is shaped by attitudes, values and morals of the person transmitting the meaning of the

experience (p. 28). If the mediator and learner are not from the same culture, it is important that the mediator not impose her own cultural views on the learner, but allow the learner to see that other cultural views exist and the alternatives these views offer. The learner should then be able to make sound choices based on her own culture, personal views, and the new knowledge provided by the mediated learning experience. Greenberg (2002) states:

The idea is to find value within the learning experience that provides a sense of wonder and joy—even fear and anxiety – in learning and to explore the “whys” of learning. Exploring learners’ assumptions underlying a learning experience is a powerful way to establish the quality of meaning. (p. 38)

Sometimes there is a disconnection between what minority students are learning and how it can make a difference to other aspects of their lives. As there are negative views of minorities having little or no motivation to learn, learning experiences can have an impact on other aspects of their lives. By incorporating cultural differences, which also flows to school, home, and community, minority students begin to feel they can bring

about changes in their lives and that they are capable and responsible for their own learning. Rocco and West (1998) also suggest the use of curriculum which focuses on women's learning (Belenky, et. al., 1986), as well as Jenkins (1992) who focuses on African-American development. These authors recommend a broader base of curriculum that incorporates cultural learning differences. Hayes & Flannery (2000) also believe that a woman's way of knowing and learning can produce a different meaning of connectedness that is linked to their self-development (p.135). The role of culture, race, and ethnicity all play a part in one's personal growth and self-actualization.

Although recognition of the diversity in America has improved, there is a continued struggle to break the polarized thinking that remains within our educational, political and social systems. An ethnographic study of gender diversity on school achievement of Black females in the eleventh-grade in Washington, DC, found that these females consistently tried to defy dominating patriarchal images of themselves (Fordham, 1993). They did this by such means as questioning the authority of teachers and historical accounts in text books. Most times, these

females were labeled "too loud" and "trouble makers" and began to lose confidence in their academic success. Other Black females may perform poorly or not participate in academic activities because they do not want to risk being ostracized from the dominant group (Steele, 1997). Still some Black females try to create a new identity for themselves by suppressing their cultural heritage to find a place within dominant society even to the extent of being considered traitors to their racial group (Steele, 1997; Steinberg, 1996).

By understanding racial structures, "white" privilege, and cultural dynamics, the 'mis' education of minority students can be addressed. Racial stereotyping is frequently used and allows some educators to justify having negative attitudes and behaviors toward minority students.

As a minority student, education has played a role in my transformation (Mezirow, 1975) as a person, as well as becoming a more self-directed learner (Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Knowles, 1975). As I have grown academically, I realize education has also been a way to understand and promote social change (Lindeman, 1926) by helping me understand political and racial structures (Johnson-Bailey,

et.al., 1994) that I accepted before as "That's just the way things are." I have gained the knowledge and capacity to understand and challenge oppressive ideologies because of my own individual growth and social awareness.

The review of literature suggests that there is a gap in our understanding of the influence educational experiences have on Black women's development. In the next section I will present the purpose of this study.

Purpose of the Study

"No person is your friend who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow." Alice Walker

The purpose of this study was to explore what stood out about educational experiences of three sets of Black sisters, including myself, and derive common themes that represent the universal essence of the experiences.

Hopefully, many fields of study will benefit from this research that explores possible connections between educational experiences of Black women and their development and learning, thus illuminating an area that is often invisible or ignored. Educational experiences may influence the development and achievement of Black females and have implications on our future choices in life.

Phenomenology Philosophy

Phenomenological philosophy is so very important in understanding my philosophical views because it is where I believe my transformation of "becoming" started. When I took my first phenomenology class, the ideas were unfamiliar, far from my personal thinking and beliefs. When a person's beliefs are challenged, it can be a very scary experience. However, I grew mentally and emotionally during the class because it helped me to view the world from a different perspective.

Phenomenology is an inquiry that focuses on describing an experience and determining its essence. In this study I focus on Black women's personal perspectives on their lived experiences. Each participant had her own experiences and was willing to describe the experiences and talk about what they meant to her. Stephen Brookfield (1995) believes phenomenology can be used to help educators gain an understanding of the learner's perspective. In relation to the study of critical reflection and the need for a more phenomenological perspective, he states:

Many tasks remain for researchers of critical reflection as a dimension of adult learning. A language needs to be found to describe this process to educators which is more accessible than the psychoanalytic and critical theory terminology currently employed. More understanding of how people experience episodes of critical reflection (viscerally as well as cognitively), and how they deal with the risks of committing cultural suicide these entail, would help educators respond to fluctuating rhythms of denial and depression in learners. (p. 2)

Valle and Halling (1989) also discuss the importance of phenomenology. They state "In the phenomenological perspective, questions about the existence and character of the objects that are experienced are put in abeyance while the researchers attend, instead, to what is present or given in awareness" (p. 41). Because of this, phenomenology has become increasingly more important in studying the philosophical perspective in adult education (Merriam and Brockett, 1997). Phenomenology is rooted in the idea of respect given to the lived experience of individuals through examination, meaning, and understanding (Thomas &

Pollio, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; van Manen, 1997; Stanage, 1989). From the works of the German philosophers Husserl (1970), and Merleau-Ponty (1962), phenomenology became a way of exploring the essence of lived experiences. While Heidegger (1962) believes consciousness is not separate from the world but based on historically lived experiences, Husserl (1970) focuses on individual meaning and understanding of lived experience. Merleau-Ponty (1962), believes that all knowledge is a construct of our perceptions of daily and historical experiences of our realities. Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes phenomenology as a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their "facticity", phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy (pp. vii-viii).

I agree with Allen (1995), regardless of whether or not these philosophers differ within some components of phenomenology, the overall purpose of phenomenology is to

explore the human experience through interpretation and meaning of the described phenomenon.

Ihde (1986) describes phenomenology as a radical philosophy that "departs from familiar ways of doing things and accepted ways of thinking. It overturns many presuppositions ordinarily taken for granted and seeks to establish a new perspective from which to view things (p. 17)." I believe in order to research Black women, one has to set aside society's image of us in order to describe our experiences within the context of how 'WE' view our experiences.

The phenomenological approach explores the events of human existence in an unbiased way so we might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience. Phenomenology seeks to explain the basic nature, structure, or form of both human experience and human behavior as revealed through descriptive techniques. This allows a person to describe experiences through reflection, which is necessary for learning. The phenomenological approach takes experiences in everyday life and probes the underlying meaning of these particular experiences for the individual and groups of individuals

(Valle & Halling, 1989; Collins, 1986). The purpose is to find essential meanings that are common to the human experience.

Add A Touch of Feminism

In addition to phenomenology, I must also acknowledge feminism as important to my understanding of the world. Some researchers believe that phenomenology offers a way to illuminate women's experience and voice (Levesque-Lopman, 1988), which is also important to feminist thought. According to hooks (1981), feminism is "a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates western culture on various levels - sex, race, and class- and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires (p.194)". hook's statement is one of the main reasons I now choose to consider myself a "Black feminist".

Black feminists recognize the impact of social contexts that surround black females and how these factors may lead to devaluing experiences. Black feminists promote the reality that we are rational, intelligent, beautiful

individuals who should have the opportunity to define who we are as well as our role in society. The Black feminist perspective asserts that images of Black women originated during the slave era and have been used to justify the oppression of Black females (Collins, 1991; hook, 1981). Essentially race, class and gender oppression could not have continued, in the past or present without the ideals underlying their existence (Collins, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Feminist work is based upon the active involvement of the researcher in the production of social knowledge and as an active participant in the research itself. The close relationship between participant(s) and researcher in the experience itself is a key theme to feminist research. Allowing females' "voices" to be heard and providing a sense of empowerment is in my view, one of the most important aspects of feminist research. Yet problems exist with the concept of "voice" and "empowerment" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Millen, 1997). Millen (1997) suggests there is difficulty in defining what empowerment means to each individual. It is therefore problematic whether one female feels empowered or disempowered. However, Janack (2000)

believes empowerment comes from transformation through experiences shared with other women. She states,

Women and other members of society who are subordinate often experience feelings that they are not supposed to experience, and they also will have experiences that they cannot name. Through the process of sharing and validating these experiences, women can forge a community based on these feelings and our shared interpretation of them. (p.2)

Phenomenology and feminism are important to me as a researcher because I believe both provide an opportunity to embrace differences by focusing on women's experiences. Fisher (2001) states, "an interaction between feminism and hermeneutics takes place not despite, but because of their seemingly distinct projects, creating the opportunity for such projects, conventionally seen as "other" to each other, to inform the question of otherness so central to both" (p.1). From my own experiences, I believe allowing women to share experiences helps fosters personal growth.

Research Question

What are the shared meanings of educational experiences for Black women in a southern inner-city neighborhood?

Limitations of the Study

This study was a phenomenal exploration that described the lived educational experiences of a small, selective sample of three sets of Black sisters in a southern inner-city neighborhood. Although phenomenological research does not allow for generalizations due to the characteristics of this type of research (Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1996), it illuminates the universal essence of the educational experiences of Black women within their lived reality.

CHAPTER II

Methodology

"And ain't I a woman?" (Sojourner Truth)

Research Design

This study provides a descriptive picture of participants and their educational experiences. There is a search for meaning within the lived experience that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experiences (van Manen, 1997). Conducting a qualitative study with a phenomenological design allowed me to describe a rich picture of meaning of the lived experiences of participants. Qualitative research focuses on understanding the social phenomenon through a holistic perspective (Cresswell, 1998; Van Manen, 1997). Qualitative research allows for collaboration between researcher and participant to ensure research findings accurately reflect their perceptions of the phenomenon.

Phenomenology as a Methodology

An existential-phenomenological methodology was used in this study based on procedures developed by psychology professor Howard Pollio and used by members of the

University of Tennessee Applied Phenomenological Colloquy. The procedures in this study are adapted from the book *Listening to Patients: A Phenomenological Approach to Nursing Research and Practice* by Thomas and Pollio (2002). This book is invaluable to a researcher in any field who wants to conduct a phenomenological study as it offers an in-depth understanding existential-phenomenology.

Polkinghorne (1983) believes the term "methodology" versus "method" should be used when describing the process of collecting data using phenomenology because methodology allows for a creative approach to understanding while using reflection, and openness to the experience or phenomenon being studied. The use of phenomenology as a methodology explores the basic nature, structure, or form of both human experience and human behavior as revealed through descriptive techniques (Pollio and Thompson, 1997; Ihde, 1986). Phenomenology provides a means of reflection, of both the researcher and participant, by allowing thoughts and experiences to be important in the exploration of meaning (van Manen, 1997).

Phenomenology used as a methodology allows the researcher to explore and examine the lived experiences of

individuals or groups, by in-depth interviewing and allows the essence of the phenomenon to emerge (Taylor, 1992; Collins, 1986).

Ensuring the Rigor of the Analysis

The University of Tennessee Applied Phenomenological Studies Colloquy, under the direction of Dr. Howard Polio and Dr. Sandra Thomas, (2002), which meets every Tuesday and serves as a forum for colloquy researchers to share aspects of their studies with an interdisciplinary group of faculty and students. The Tuesday Interpretive group members assisted me in establishing rigor within the study during three sessions.

The primary effort to ensure a high level of reliability, validity, and an appropriate focus of generalizability in this study included the continuous involvement of an Educational Psychology research team in most procedures throughout the study.

Reliability

Reliability in a phenomenological study ensures that "themes in any new study will be commensurate with those found in the original one (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p.39). In

a phenomenological study the thematic reliability is found when it is possible "to extend, not repeat, the themes and relations obtained in the original study (p.40)".

Validity

Validity in a phenomenological research study lies in the confidence the researcher has about the meaning presented in the findings. Thomas and Pollio (2002) state, "What this means is that validity is not determined by the degree of correspondence between a description and some external reality criterion but by whether convincing evidence has been brought forth in favor of the description offered (p.41)". The findings in this study were plausible and illuminated the experience, which are the results of validity (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 41)

Generalizability

Generalizability in an existential-phenomenological study involves a search for recurrent patterns and themes across participants (p.42). Polkinghorne (1989), as cited in Thomas and Pollio (2002), states "the purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the structure of an experience, not to describe the characteristics of a group who have had the experience" (p.41).

Ensuring generalizability also comes from obtaining feedback from participants. Participants in this study were asked to consider the general findings and to evaluate whether the thematic structure reflected their own individual experiences.

The next section outlines the research procedures conducted in this study. This consists of formalizing the interview question, bracketing interview, introduction of participants, interviews and transcription, and the interpretive process.

Research Procedures

In the following sections I will describe the research procedures modified from steps presented in Thomas and Pollio (2002), for an existential-phenomenological study.

The Opening Interview Question

The initial formation of an opening interview question in an existential-phenomenological study is to allow for a broad range of descriptive responses from the participants (p. 32). I sought confirmation of the most appropriate question by the assistance from members of the Tuesday Interpretive Group. After members of the group signed

confidentiality agreements, several questions were proposed until we agreed on the interview question used in this study. The opening interview question was "Look back over your life and tell me about educational experiences that stood out for you?" Subsequent questions were not specified in advance as they evolve from the context within each interview as a means of seeking clarification and expansion of the interviewee's description of the phenomenon.

The Bracketing Interview

I attempted to situate myself in this study not only as one of the participants, but as a competent researcher simultaneously. Because I am a part of the study and in order to provide an accurate account of the participants' lived experiences, a bracketing interview was conducted (Thomas & Pollio, 2001; Ihde, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1983). Thomas and Pollio (2002) state, "Bracketing is not a one-time event; it is a dynamic, ongoing process in which the researcher repeatedly cycles through reflection, bracketing, and intuition" (p. 33). The purpose is to self-reflect and become aware of one's biases and personal

assumptions of the 'phenomenon' (Thomas & Pollio, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1989; Ihde, 1986).

I used a combination of bracketing and reflective journaling of my personal feelings and assumptions to avoid leading participants during interviews, misinterpreting the data, as well as jumping to conclusions. My initial bracketing interview allowed me to become aware of any preconceived ideas I had about the sistas' experiences.

One of my major professors at the University of Tennessee conducted my bracketing interview for the study. The same professor also interviewed me using the interview question I posed to the participants of this study.

Journaling was used as a means of reflection after every interview to continuously be conscious of my own biases so my own personal thoughts would not hinder the true emergence of the phenomenon I wished to explore. Journaling was also a way to emotionally debrief after each interview session which sometimes was very draining.

Participants

Two principal criteria for selecting participants for a phenomenological study are (1) an individual having

experienced the phenomenon and (2) an individual who is willing to talk about that experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 30). In the next section I provide an in-depth view of the participants and their interviews.

I selected an appropriate sample of nine Black women, including myself as a part of this research study. A total of ten participants is an appropriate size for phenomenological research (p.31).

Three groups of sisters, ranging between 24 to 60 years of age were interviewed. I chose to use groups of sisters originally because I wanted to see if the group of sisters, all growing up in inner-city Knoxville, had the same educational experiences and what impact those experiences had on their choices as adults. The interviewee(s) were addressed as "participants", as we were equal and integral parts of this study. Table 1 is a summary of demographic information regarding participants in the study.

Participant Interviews

The availability and accessibility of the participants was taken into account when determining a site to conduct

Table 1: Participant Demographic Summary

Group One

Pseudonyms	Age	Marital Status	# of Children	Level of education
Lilith	36	Divorced	2	M.S. degree
Sha	34	Separated	2	H.S.Dropout
Suzanna	26	Single	3	H.S.Graduate

Group Two

Pseudonyms	Age	Marital Status	# of Children	Level of education
Andrina	60	Separated	2	One year college
Regina	54	Divorced	4	Two years College
Stella	53	Married	3	B.S. Degree

Group Three

Pseudonyms	Age	Marital Status	# of Children	Level of education
Brook	39	Married	1	B.S. Degree
Angel	37	Divorced	3	Two years college
Kim	34	Married	3	Vocational Cosmetologist
Danielle	24	Single	2	Two years College
Lilith	36	Divorced	2	M.S. degree
Sha	34	Separated	2	H.S.Dropout
Suzanna	26	Single	3	H.S.Graduate

the interviews. I met each participant in her home after normal work hours, or on the weekend. I tried to schedule each interview one to two days apart in order to perform the transcribing of each interview before the next interview. A slightly different procedure was used with group three since the sisters chose to meet at one house where I conducted their individual interviews. These individual interviews were conducted in the living room, while the other sisters waited for their turn in the kitchen.

Any questions participants had about the process of the interviews or study were answered. I explained my ethical position with regard to any confidential information. After all participants read and signed consent forms, pseudonyms were individually chosen by participants. The participants were told that the pseudonyms would be used when transcribing and analyzing interviews, assuring their anonymity in the study. However since we were family and friends, I explained that anonymity among us as participants could not be guaranteed.

I used an audio recorder, pencil, and paper for note taking during the individual interviews. The audio tape was used so I could analyze the data using the participants' exact words.

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, or to test hypotheses, and not to 'evaluate' as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (p.3)

Individual interviews were conducted with all participants to allow our experiences to emerge. Experiences are a way of defining a person's identity and the way we perceive our worlds (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). I had already established rapport with these women, as they are my sisters, my mother, my aunts and my family friends. Although we are family, I was amazed at how much I learned about them during the interviews. I believed they provided honest answers, and knew me as an individual who has had experiences, similar and different, as a Black woman.

The length of time to conduct the interviews with each participant was approximately one hour.

Interview Transcription

Interviews were transcribed into written form within 48 hours of each individual interview, except for group three which took approximately one week. I quickly transcribed the interviews to ensure inclusion of significant breaks, pauses, and emotions the participants shared during the interview.

The Interpretive Process

My Educational Psychology Research Team, under the direction of Dr. Katherine Greenberg and Dr. Mary Ziegler, helped me analyze, interpret, and describe the data to ensure the meaning of the participant's experiences, as well as to maintain the rigor of the study (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 35). This process was done in two phases.

After confidentiality agreements were signed by all members of the team, a transcript was read verbatim and specific parts, called "meaning units", were discussed that stood out as significant. During this process each transcript was read aloud by two members of the team, with

any member allowed to pause the reading to discuss and summarize the meaning of what was read (p. 36). The pauses occurred frequently in the reading to share meaning units. This process was completed for all ten transcripts. After all interviews were analyzed, the second part of the interpretive process began.

The Research Team then looked for descriptive patterns and relationships to characterize the entire set of interviews and identified comprehensive nomothetic descriptions of the participants' experiences. Themes and quotes were found that described the phenomenon that each of the participants stated during our interview. The themes and supporting quotes from across participant interviews were not placed in any hierarchy. Rather, the structure revealed the relationship among themes and the ground theme that was the underlying context in which other themes stood out (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

The final step in the analysis process was to obtain feedback from participants (Thomas & Pollio, 2002: Lincoln and Guba, 1987). This was to ensure whether the thematic structures or findings reflected participants' own

individual experiences (p.38). I shared the themes with eight of the ten participants who were available to ensure the themes accurately described the participants' experiences. All eight participants agreed with the themes and overall findings of the data.

The number of participants who supported each theme was important because it indicated the accuracy across participants of the themes that emerged. A list of the number of participants that described the theme in one or both ends of the continuum representing each theme will be provided in Chapter III.

All themes presented as findings were described in some manner by most participants. In the few cases where participants did not mention the theme, I analyzed their transcripts to ensure that they did not express ideas in opposition to the theme.

As a part of maintaining rigor in this study, my Educational Psychology Research Team met again with the Tuesday Interpretive Group, to share the findings of this study (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). This was done to seek suggestions for modifications that the research team would consider, as well as confirmation and consensus of the

findings. The Interpretive Group provided confirmation of the research team's findings.

The Educational Psychology Research Team was diligent in reaching consensus by seeking support from participant quotes for each theme recommended by a team member, as well as the structure of the phenomenon.

In chapter III, I will provide the findings in this study examining relevant literature, while using quotes to represent the shared essence of our experiences.

CHAPTER III

Discussion and Findings

"I dance in and out of fear and courage; I dance in and out of subservience and subversiveness; I dance in and out of talking back and silence; and I dance in and out of being ignorant and being aware" D. Smith

The purpose of this study was to explore what stood out about educational experiences of three sets of Black sisters, including myself, and derive common themes that represent the universal essence of the experiences. The themes "dance" as they spiral up and down to depict the essence of education and learning throughout life.

In the following sections, I present the findings from the study as well as a discussion of the literature that situates the findings within the context of the study and further illuminates the participants' experiences. The themes provide a descriptive picture of the lived experiences of the participants. The names of the themes are drawn from the participants' own words and each theme begins with the quote where the theme name occurred. While the quote is from a single individual, the theme name represents the essence of the experience. I describe each theme by using actual quotes from the interview so that our

"voices" can be heard. Within each theme, I show how the participants' experiences connect to the literature. The three themes are as follows:

*I Seemed Like a Stupid Little Girl, Again/
I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman*

and

Stepping Out of the Box/Staying in the Box

and

*They Taught Us the Values/
You Can't Let People Keep You Down*

Theme One: I Seemed Like A Stupid Little Girl Again/

I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman

And then I came um, after a bunch of mistakes I finally ended up over here at (name of school) and I hated it. It wasn't you know, I thought that I was this smart, intelligent woman and I seemed like a stupid little girl again. (Lilith)

I Seemed Like a Stupid Little Girl Again, and, I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman, is a theme that described positive and negative feelings of women in this study as experienced during the course of educational and personal experiences. Kim discussed how her low self-esteem during her childhood made her feel *Like a Stupid Little Girl*. Kim

was afraid to let people know she didn't understand many school assignments.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. So I've always felt I couldn't tell anybody. Lets say that you didn't understand. They would look at me like "You don't get it?" And that made me have very low self- esteem about myself. (Kim)

In contrast to Kim's experience, prior to the 1970's, researchers reported White children to be higher in general self-esteem than Black children. Since the mid 1970s Black children were reported as having higher self-esteem than Whites (Simmons, et.al., 1978; Epps, 1975; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975).

Suzanna shared her feelings of self-esteem during high school as a result of not knowing how to prepare for assignments.

I mostly crammed right before a test or sometimes I cheated or, just hoped to remember what I needed to for whatever assignment was due. Um, just paying attention in class, I guess just growing up too quick and not thinking that stuff was important, and now needing it later now that I'm grown. (Suzanna)

Existing barriers to reach achievement for Blacks and the general conditions of a Black person's life are constant reminders of challenges that must be faced throughout life. This led to some individuals believing

Blacks must have low self-esteem. Over a dozen major studies during the past decades have found higher self-esteem among Blacks than among Whites (Harris & Stokes, 1978; Hunt & Hunt, 1977).

In this study, educational experiences of participants from elementary through high school varied from positive self-esteem when they felt like a *Smart, Intelligent Woman*, and negative self-esteem when they felt like a *Stupid Little Girl, Again*. Self-esteem refers to global feelings of self-worth held by the individual (Bednar et. al., 1989), while group self-esteem focuses on one's feelings about being a member of a racial or ethnic group (Brewer, 1991). Self-esteem is a positive or negative attitude toward the self. Personal self-esteem involves a comprehensive assessment of one's self, including feelings of intrinsic worth, competence, and self-approval (Phelps, et.al., 2001; Richman, et. al. 1985). Sha looked back on her life as a teenager and felt her educational experiences were changed because she had the responsibility of taking care of her sister while her mother was at work.

Um, I guess that, to really clarify why I didn't is because I feel my childhood was taken away from me. I really didn't get to hang, you

know, go places with my friends, stuff like that. If it was dealing with school, I got to. But just to have my time, it wasn't there because in so many senses I guess I was playing mommy when I should've been playing dolls or kickball, or something. Maybe if that was different, it would be a little different for me now. (Sha)

The impact this experience had on Sha's self-esteem as well as future goals are explained when she stated:

You're not really setting goals for yourself. Um, self is last because, I mean true enough, you might see something you want or want to do and you probably can't because you have to do other things rather than what you want. So you put yourself on hold until the time is right, which we all know the time will never be right until you know, they're older, off to college, and then I feel you have time to actually sit down and think about yourself. I think. I hope. (Sha)

Since Black females historically have had to work and be economically supportive of their families (Collins, 1990), it has often forced them to place the needs of the family first, placing their own needs last. Brewer (1991) suggests that American psychology tends to lump individual and group self-esteem together. Problems arise when individual and group self-esteem are not looked at separately. For instance, if a person has positive self-esteem within her family structure, it does not mean she has positive individual self-esteem. The participant Lilith

felt like a *Smart Intelligent Woman* within her family structure as long as she was behaving according to her family norms. Yet, her individual self-esteem was negative. When Lilith made decisions that went against family norms trying to be a *Smart Intelligent Woman*, she *Felt Like a Stupid Little Girl, Again*, because her family did not approve of the choices she made. Both Lilith's individual and group self-esteem were negative during these times. Lilith's experience suggests individual and group self-esteem must be looked at differently in order to understand the dynamics that affect both.

One barrier to reaching achievement for Black females is life altering events that may come sooner than later, such as childbirth. Suzanna, becoming a mother in middle school, shared her life as a mother once in high school.

Now in high school I was working, going to school, and keeping up a household with kids already. I already had my first apartment and then I remember it being over with. I missed all the good stuff, I missed my senior pictures, my ordering a class ring, and uh, I went to the prom in a weeks notice by myself, but I had fun and I graduated. (Suzanna)

Suzanna worked hard to graduate high school with two children, and her experiences are not uncommon for some Black teenagers in the community in which they live, as well as in the United States. Although birth rates for Black teenagers between the ages of 15 - 19 have fallen to 21%, there are still 91.4 per 1,000 births compared to 50.1 births per 1,000 for White teenagers (http://www.familyfirstaid.org/contact_us.htm.p.3).

As a teenager of fifteen in the 1960's, Regina had her first child. Although Suzanna was able to attend middle and high school while pregnant in the 1990's, in 1967 pregnant girls were not allowed to attend school while pregnant and were ostracized by their family and community. Regina shared her feelings during pregnancy and the loss of family support.

They would tell me that I was an embarrassment not only to the family, but to the community. Me, I stood my ground. I was not gonna give up my child, I didn't care what they did to me.
(Regina)

While Regina described being pregnant in the 1960's as "taboo", she explained how 15 other girls were pregnant in her community, with 13 of the girls being forced to have abortions. Even now Black females ages 18-19 are at least

twice as likely to become pregnant as their White peers (Rosenthal, et. al., 1996). Early parenting often leads to economic hardships for teenager and family, as well as difficulty in reaching educational goals. Five of the women in this study were mothers before the age of 19, which seemed to affect their future life decisions.

High school graduation in our society is a symbol of adulthood. It is a time when many teenagers leave the family, obtain full time employment, and/or continue education. This is when a participant felt like *A Smart, Intelligent Woman*. A positive self-image is necessary for the young adult to cope with stress during this transitional period as in Erikson's (1963) Identity versus Role Confusion stage. However, several women in this study felt periods of doubt concerning their capabilities and had low self-esteem after leaving high school which made them feel like *Stupid Little Girls, again*. Lilith, shared her negative feelings and low self-esteem when she went to college.

I didn't know anything, I didn't know how to write a paper, I didn't know how to, you know do all the things that I excelled in high school and in all my other years of school, and I hated it. I hated it. (Lilith)

Lilith, from a low socioeconomic family, went from a small, Black high school in Knoxville, to a large, predominately White university in her city. Although Lilith described herself in high school as a *Smart, Intelligent Woman*, her feelings of competence changed when she entered college. As with Lilith, social class effects also have been found for young adults as with Lilith in this study. Lilith went from having positive self-esteem in high school, to feeling like *A Stupid Little Girl, Again*, and negative self-esteem as a freshman in college. The academic and general self-esteem of low socioeconomic status young adults was found to be lower than the self evaluation of middle socioeconomic young adults (Fu, et.al., 1983; Hare, 1977; Kennedy, 1975). Andrina shared her similar experience when she attended college for the first time.

When I went to college I was following a science curriculum, something I did not enjoy. I did not try hard. (Andrina)

While Lilith and Andrina described their difficulties in college differently, both felt like a *Stupid Little Girl, Again*, as the theme illustrates. Self-esteem has been the balancing component of self-

concept and refers to ones' feelings of self-worth (Coopersmith, 1967). Self-concept formation has long been considered the most significant developmental milestone of adolescence. Once Andrina changed colleges and began making decisions for her future instead of trying to please others, she found college enjoyable. Andrina shared her positive feelings about the second time she attended college in her own city.

When I came home, I went to (name of college) for a year and I really enjoyed it. That made me see that I could do much better than I had the year before. (Andrina)

By making choices for herself instead of pleasing other people, Andrina felt like *A Smart, Intelligent Woman*, which made her more successful in college. The theme *I Seemed Like a Stupid Little Girl Again/I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman*, described how women in the study battled feelings of high and low self-esteem during their adolescence and into adulthood. These feelings were compounded by the fear of failure, as well as making decisions based on others' happiness.

The next theme explained not only the women's level of self-esteem, but how life experiences within educational structures seemed to motivate completion of future goals.

Theme Two: Staying in the Box/Stepping Out of the Box

Well, it's like you have a fear and you're so used to being in an area with your safety net around you and if you do step out of the box you might fail or you might mess up and so it's easier to *stay in the box than to step out of the box* and I have always had a safety net around me and afraid to step out of the box. (Angel)

Staying in the Box, described the need to place others first, limiting life possibilities. However, when making decisions for oneself rather than for others, some women felt higher self-esteem which was a way of *Stepping Out of the Box*. While *Stepping Out of the Box* described how women made choices about what was important for them, *Staying in the Box* was about taking care of, and pleasing others. Taking care of family members was about providing for physiological needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. Pleasing others involved making family and significant others, and community, happy by doing what was acceptable as described by family. Making choices was not based on their wants, even if it was what they desired. A constant

battle and negotiation regarding the expectations of others was inevitable. Women felt like *Stupid Little Girls, Again* while they *Stayed in the Box*, as Kim described herself when she discussed her need to please other people and the impact it had on her self-esteem.

I just felt like I've always wanted to be the type of person to want to please people. It was very exhausting. I had a great mind to think on my own but I always wanted to make other people happy. (Kim)

Kim not only described her need to please others instead of herself, which kept her *staying In the Box*, but she felt like a Stupid Little Girl, Again as she tried to make other people happy. Kim's statement shows the continuation of how the themes in this study may be felt simultaneously by the participants.

Sha also explained her desire to get her General Education Diploma, but the responsibilities she faced as a single parent often got in the way.

Well I would like to get my GED. But I mean it's easier said than done. I mean I missed it by a few points and its been almost ten years and I still haven't gone back and took it. Because I really don't have time to try it. To do the school, to do the work thing, you know. Make sure that there is someone there to make sure my kids eat, do their homework, you know. So its been put on hold, its been put back. (Sha)

Kim and Sha often found *Staying In the Box* easier to manage because of the need for family support, and to provide for their families. Policies for adult basic education (ABE) programs that could help women like Sha, over the years have changed to try and help individuals seek and obtain employment. However, policymakers did not understand the problems many of these learners had were more than just limited literacy skills. They often lack social skills for working in the private sector, transportation, and income to maintain child care to continue the program. Sha discussed further her inability to establish goals for herself when she stated:

I really didn't think about having goals. One goal I did make was military and I didn't succeed in it so really now I still don't really have too many goals because I still got to do mommy first (sniffing). I mean I think of them (pause), I don't know. **(Sha)**

Many of the ABE instructors and volunteers lack the knowledge and understanding of what these learners experience daily (Sparks, 1998; Tisdell, 1995; Quigley, 1990). Amstutz (2002) believes these programs must be restructured into a multitude of programs that make sense to the learners. She explains that ABE programs are

ultimately designed to place the blame on the illiterate individual and justify their poverty. Zielger, Ebert and Cope (2004) believe more research needs to be conducted on economically disadvantaged individuals in order to create more informed policy making. ABE programs must address not only academic skills, but issues of poverty, discrimination, and inequality.

hooks (1989) discusses her own lack of self-esteem during her formative years. She explains that her book *Talking Back* was about pain, "the pain of hunger, the pain of overwork, the pain of degradation and dehumanization, the pain of loneliness, the pain of loss, the pain of isolation, the pain of exile-spiritual and physical" (p. 4). The loss of self-esteem in the development of adolescent females, regardless of race, is seen as a natural process of growing up female. The behaviors that were expected as a young child are now unacceptable and females start to change their behavior and self-image in order to conform to these new expectations. Pleasing others was important to women in this study. In order to protect, as well as please family, the women *Stayed in the Box*, placing self last.

Well, like I said I just didn't take education seriously. So I went to college for two years but I need to go back just to get that degree and do something I really want. Like I always wanted to teach. Now it's like I go to a job, but I don't have a career. It's almost like I'm stuck because I make a certain amount of money and I'm scared to step out of the box. But sometimes you have to step out of the box to do what you really, really, always wanted to do. (Angel)

Feelings of incompetence and fear of failure were common feelings in this theme just as Angel suggested when she said, "I'm scared to step out of the box." The idea of "self" among Black females is very complex and involves the idea of having a "voice" within the family structure. Black women are reared to value other people's happiness and need the approval of others to provide them with a sense of sense of self-worth. Women are taught to take care of and support other people. Kim stated she wanted to please people but that it was an exhausting task.

I just felt like I've always wanted to be the type of person to want to please people. It was very exhausting. I had a great mind to think on my own but I always wanted to make other people happy. Um, like I always felt like a puppet to my oldest sister. Like I was her puppet. Like if I didn't do what she asked me to do it would hurt her. (Kim)

It is important to note that nine out of ten women in this study did not discuss the men in their lives, other

than their sons. The one participant who did discuss her husband shared one negative comment about him. Possibly, the men in the lives of these women were not perceived as part of their educational experiences. Yet, these women discussed their sons and daughters as reasons why they made educational decisions which might require them to *Stay In the Box*. Research indicates Black women, "saw themselves as a part of the collective whole of the Black community; they could not and do not separate themselves from their children nor their men" (Collins & Sussewell 1986,p.3).

Suzzana shared similar feelings about fear of failure and how decisions she made for herself would impact what her children would think of her.

Change is hard for me because I get in this rut that I'm use to and I rather it stay the same cause I'm scared to try different things because I'm not sure if I'll succeed in doing them or maybe what my kids might think about whatever it is I choose to change, and pretty much just keeping everything simple.(Suzanna)

Because change was viewed as hard, and the need to please her children, Suzanna *Stayed In the Box*, rather than attempt to *Step Out of the Box* and try something different. She also did not want her children to view her as a *Stupid Little Girl, Again*, as she might view herself if she tried

to make choices to change her life and didn't succeed. Suzanna believed if she *Stayed In the Box*, she could stay *A Smart, Intelligent Woman*.

In "Fear of Failure," Rothblum (1990) states:

Women generally report more fear of failure, and behave in ways that express more fear of failure, than do men. What is fearful about failure seems to be the expected interpersonal consequences (such as fear of rejection) rather than the specific academic performance... Much of the research reviewed suggest that, in many ways, individuals who score high on fear of failure are cooperative rather than competitive, and socially rather than personally oriented (pp. 530-531).

Black women in this study seemed to face a constant battle of fear of failure. Danielle, explained her fear of failure when she stated:

It's the fear of the unknown, I have a lot of things I would like to do but I'm a floater.
(Danielle)

Danielle and Kim saw change as hard and feared the unknown. They did not view change and fear as a natural process of developing. Perhaps, Danielle and Kim, as single

parents did not believe they could afford the luxury of making changes with children to provide financial and emotional support for. As a single parent myself and as a student, I too have had these fears. Cummins (1986) believes fear of failure and academic difficulties of minority students are caused by the way in which schools reinforce, both overtly and covertly, the discrimination of minority students by society as a whole. Regardless of fault, many minority students such as I, are left with a sense of insecurity about their ability to learn and a feeling of confusion with regard to their own cultural identities (Cummins, 1986; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1996). Greenberg (2000) also agrees that when a family loses touch with their own cultural values, intrinsic motivation may also be lost. When a family loses its intrinsic motivation to learn, it affects the family's ability to promote good learning experiences for their children. Kim did not want to pass on her fear of failure to her children.

I'm not saying that I'm dumb, but like, I didn't want anyone to feel like, you know those looks like, you know. I don't know it's a very hurtful experience and I don't want to pass that on to my children today so I always make sure I encourage them and if they don't know anything to just to

ask me and if I can't help them ask their dad or we can get you the help. (Kim)

Every woman in this study was taught to take care of and support other people. This was supposed to give them a sense of self-worth (Josselson, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Wilson, 1978). *Staying In the Box* allowed them to feel like *Smart, Intelligent Women*, while taking care of and supporting their families. Women in this study also believed they had to accept responsibility for whatever choices they made, whether the outcome was positive or negative. Stella admitted this when she stated:

We have to uh, as they say, live with the choices that we make but sometimes the choices we make turn out to be better than we expected, sometimes they are worst, but you can always make them better. It might just take a while to get to that point. (Stella)

Stella's belief that we could make our choices better with time is my belief as well. It is better to make a decision than not make one at all. The fear of making a bad decision and allowing fear of failure to take over is not worth the dream of accomplishment that could have been fulfilled.

For many Black females, in order to survive in this society, they conform to the expectations of family and

community, and adopt submissive behavior. Robinson and Ward (1991) called this process cultural disassociation. When a Black adolescent female experiences this process, it creates a loss of self-esteem and negative sense of identity (Harris, 2004; Murry & Long, 1993). Boyd (1993) states she could not see herself as "a confident and powerful Black woman" (p.4), as a result of the limited amount of positive Black females in books she read during adolescence.

It is possible for a person to consider themselves superior to most, but feel inadequate in terms of standards set for themselves (Stevens, 2002). The participants in this study went through periods of low self-esteem while feeling like a *Stupid Little Girl*, but *Stepping Out of the Box* gave them a sense of high self-esteem and made them feel like *A Smart, Intelligent Woman*. High self-esteem expressed the feeling one is good enough. The theme, *Stepping Out of the Box*, described the participant's ability to recognize themselves positively, and the ability to make choices for themselves first. Feelings of positive self-esteem, confidence, self determination and self-definition (Collins, 1986, hooks, 1994;1989) are a part of

the experience of "*Stepping Out of the Box*". One suggestion of positive self-esteem however, is the person thinks they are very good, which is different than thinking they are good enough. Danielle and Kim both described their feelings of positive self-esteem.

But I had to step out there. I mean I had to conquer that first. (Danielle)

Accepting who you are. Um, try to figure out ways to improve yourself. Not for others but for yourself. I think that's what I'm working on now. (Kim)

Danielle and Kim described these positive feelings when making decisions about what they wanted to accomplish and accepting themselves, despite their fears. Women in this study often went through periods of transformation during personal and educational experiences (Dirkx, 1998; Dalox, 1999; Mezirow, 1997) which sometimes allowed them to define themselves (King, 1988; Lorde, 1984) and what they could accomplish. Competency (Boyd, 1993) and experience a sense of empowerment (Vanzant, 1992; Gutierrez, 1990; Rappaport, 1985) that gave them a sense of power and ownership for their lives.

Individuals with high self-esteem typically function effectively in a variety of situations and perceive

themselves as fulfilled and happy. This is how women in the study felt as *Smart, Intelligent Women*, as well as when they made decisions to *Step Out of the Box*. After many years battling low self-esteem, Kim proudly shared her feelings about how she viewed herself now.

You don't have to fake it to make it. Just love yourself. Accepting who you are. Um, try to figure out ways to improve yourself. Not for others but for yourself. I think that's what I'm working on now. (Kim)

Just as Kim shared positive feelings above, so did all of the participants in the study. Although the experiences shared were not the same for all the participants, each woman in the study seemed genuinely proud of the experience they had which brought about their positive self-esteem.

Continuing any form of education past high school was viewed as *Stepping Out of the Box*. While all ten of the participants had participated in some type of educational training past high school, eight of ten participants attended higher education institutions at some point in their lives, with three completing bachelor's degrees. Participants in this study viewed education as a means to foster positive feelings about themselves. They did not discuss education as a means of financial security, but as

a means to personal development. Education was a way to reach their highest potential (Maslow, 1970). These feelings were shared by the participants when they stated:

When I got to college I felt liked I belonged. I just liked in college were, they're might have been clicks and stuff but, nobody knew who I was and I was there because I wanted to be and I liked that the other students were there because they wanted to be. (Brook)

So going to grad school I really did come in needing it for more than just I want to get this Master's degree so I can take care of my family, it was more that I need to prove something to myself again. I needed to prove that I was capable of accomplishing anything at that point. (Lilith)

Now I'm in college and taking up legal secretary. My future plan is to work as a secretary for a construction team and I want to learn how to read a blueprint. I'm in construction now and I love it. (Regina)

Participants in this study recognized how some individuals in society challenged them with racial ideology and tried to oppress them with stereotypical ideas and demeaning rhetoric. The women's experiences led them to believe *You Can't Let People Keep You Down*. They also recognized individuals who provided positive emotional support were sources of strength. Their strength drew upon

the connectedness of being together. By doing this, *They Taught Us the Values.*

Theme Three: You Can't Let People Keep You Down/

They Taught Us The Values

One time I went to the guidance office, and I went with another student. We were talking to the guidance counselor about college opportunities for instance. The guidance counselor, who was not of my color, uh, said to me "Well you really don't need to go to college because uh, you'll never make it I college anyway. You probably just need to go out somewhere and get you a job in the grocery store or something like that". Uh, that stuck out in my mind. I really hated the fact that she had said that to me. And to the other student she talked to them about going to college and so forth and so on. So I made up in my mind that day that you know, that person could not tell me I could not succeed because my parents had always to me that I could. Even though I would imagine that that person said it because I had not tried as hard as I should have. But that has always been something that stayed with me through my college years. I've always wanted to go back and tell that person, "Yes, I did succeed. Yes, I did graduate from college". Um, I often wonder what happened to that lady but she taught me something. That you can't let people keep you down and when their intentions are good otherwise, it taught me that I was not going to allow her to think that of me. So, I didn't.
(Stella)

I had a teacher in high school named Ms. (name). She was such a sweetheart. I wanted to do so good with my life. She *taught us the values* of a Black woman growing up in (city), what your goals could

be, and how you needed to start early to work on them. (Andrina)

Challenges such as Stella described were often faced in high school and in college by the women in this study. As Andrina shared, the participants had positive individuals in their lives to show them how to look beyond the negative expectations of others. Research suggests Black children often had higher educational and occupational aspirations than children of similar economic status, but educators characterized their goals as too high and unrealistic so they lowered these aspirations to prevent Black children from becoming frustrated adults (Hill, 1993). Many of the women were in a period of transformation during these years. This manifested itself further by the time womanhood occurred in ways to include lack of intellectual self-confidence and lower aspirations. Brook shared her feelings and challenges during school because she was Black.

Um, when they feel like you're not good enough, or that because of the color of your skin you're not gonna do well, and they don't want to give you a chance. (Brook)

However, women in this study found positive and effective strategies taught by loved ones when faced with

these obstacles. In many homes, Black mothers are single parents and must engage in paid employment outside of the home. During their absence, children are cared for by secondary caregivers, which may or may not be biological family members. Research suggests Black women utilize social support networks such as family, friends, and church to deal with basic social and emotional problems (Torres, 1996; Myers, 1980). This network of caregivers is a phenomenon called the *kinship principle*. The women in this study agreed that support networks such as family, community, and schools provided them with a network to develop into proud, intelligent women. The value of positive self-esteem was taught both when a woman was *Staying In the Box* in order to provide for, and take care of family. The women in this study may have felt *Like A Stupid Little Girl, Again* during what was perceived as someone wanting keep them down, or circumstances which made them question the ability to succeed. But, the ability to turn a negative situation into positive feelings of self-esteem was because *They Taught Us the Values of* inner strength and reaffirmed beliefs of self-worth and the will to survive (Sudarkasa, 1996; Noble, 1978).

Low-income, underrepresented minority, and first-generation students continue to perform at the lowest academic levels (George, 2002). White students do not face the same challenges as Black students when trying to be accepted or successful in class (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002; Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Ford & Harris, 1993). Ogbu (1978) argues minority groups such as Blacks historically in the United States, have performed very poorly at school due to discrimination by, and privilege of the dominant group. The idea of privilege as defined by Rocco & West (1998) means "any unearned asset or benefit received by virtue of being born with a particular characteristic or when the dominant class is able to promote stereotypes of the minority classes, thus perpetuating the ideas of inferiority of some groups. Black women have even fewer privileges than other minorities due to negative images which originated during the slave era which are used to justify their oppression (Collins, 1991). These negative images are used in educational settings to create learning environments that devalue Black women (Hayes & Smith, 1994; Tisdell, 1993; Collins, 1991; Collard

& Stalker, 1991). Danielle discussed what she felt individuals believed about her inner-city high school.

No matter how much money they pour into other schools, I just don't see that those students were any smarter than we were. ... It made us want to actually do better. It made us mad but we wanted to do better. (Danielle)

Danielle was taught *You Can't Let People Keep You Down* by understanding how stereotypical beliefs of minority students led to the lack of resources provided to her school in comparison to a White school she had attended the year before. Danielle did not accept these stereotypical ideas about her school or her peers. Jeanne Noble (1978) states, " The overriding summation of the African woman's past is simply the fact that she has always demonstrated strength and self reliance—necessary qualities for survival" (p. 28).

The importance of family as an emotional aspect of maturation is ignored in traditional adult development research such as that of Levinson (1978). The women in this study believed in the importance of kinship networks to the development of their self-esteem. Studies now are beginning to address the relationship between attachment to others and self-esteem in Black females (Lewis, 1999; Evans, 1998).

While White females were more attached to fathers, Black females indicate a significantly higher attachment to mothers (Evans, 1998). Danielle spoke of the continued respect for her mother.

She knows what angle to come at me in order to get me to do something. So first she reasons with me and tells me why it's a good idea. I always respect my mom and what she has to say. So she's always been able to find a way, even if she has to take something away from me (laugh), but she finds a way. (Danielle)

The feelings of love and respect from Danielle regarding her mother were evident by the smile she displayed as she spoke of her. Lewis (1999) states, "kinship relations tend to be stronger among Blacks than White families (p. 5)." Kinship ties are among the many ways Black females develop self-esteem. Hill (1972) identifies five assets of Black families. These are: strong achievement orientation, strong work orientation, flexible family roles, strong kinship bonds, and strong religious orientation. Black families have had to build on these strengths in order to survive racial oppression. Two participants, who are sisters, proudly spoke of their mother's encouragement:

Speaking of education, now my mother, we'll call her Mrs. Brown. She always encouraged me to get

my Masters and then my Ph.D., and perhaps if I had listened to her I would have both those things by now. (Stella)

My mother, she is not my idol. But, if I were to pattern my life after someone it would be my mother. She would always push us to be our best and to do our best no matter what we decided. She was always proud of us. (Regina)

Lewis (1999) also discusses how loving grandmothers who assist in the care of their grandchildren are perceived to be a positive influence on the self-esteem development of their grandchildren. Values of right and wrong, family expectation, social responsibility, and the need for life-long learning were among their positive teachings. Andrina smiled when she talked about encouraging her granddaughter to get an education.

I have a granddaughter now who I love with all my heart and I want her to understand that being a Black woman, she needs to get an early start on an education. To know what her goals are, and to enjoy life. And to make something of her life for herself and her daughter or sons one day. (Andrina)

For many of the women in this study, a relationship with others was an important part of their identity development (Coker, 2003; Josselson, 1987; Gilligan, 1982). Having an understanding of social responsibility served as inspiration and encouragement to others. A connection with

community helped increase a sense of identity and personal accomplishment. A respect toward parents, teachers, and others in the Black community was important. Being a role model (Shade, 1983) for children and grandchildren, were also important accomplishments for the women in this study in their roles as mothers.

Black women who obtain education through formal and informal means are challenged with daily economic and personal struggles (hook, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 1999; Tisdell, 1993). Education was valued and found important by the women in this study. Yet, Gilkes (1983) contends that Black women are left to struggle in isolation without adequate support due to continued stigmas attached to Black women's wanting to educate themselves as being "matriarchs" and dominating individuals. Although the participants believed education past high school was important, it is also notable that only three out of the ten women had college degrees, with one participant having a graduate degree.

In a study of undergraduate and graduate Black women reentry students between the ages of 34 and 54, conducted by Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996), three coping

strategies were found: silence, negotiation, and resistance. Silence was a strategy employed when the women were uncomfortable in certain situations. Negotiation was used while deciding if and how to interact with classmates and faculty to avoid potential disagreements. Resistance was used when confronting an action or rule that was perceived unfair. As a Black woman, I have used these strategies while attending undergraduate and graduate school. Washington and Associates (1990), as cited by Littleton (2002) also researched doctoral students at the dissertation stages and found that they often described themselves as depressed, discouraged, and isolated from their communities.

This was true for Lilith. Although *Staying In the Box*, was a familiar and safe way to provide for herself and her children as a single parent, Lilith quit her job and went to graduate school, believing education would help her family have more opportunities in life. *Stepping Out of the Box* was a not only a way to improve herself, the lives of her children, but also a way to be a positive role model within her community. However, she learned these ideas came with a price. Lilith realized some of her kinship network

who *Taught Her the Values*, were not supportive of her decision. A realization of the fact *You Can't Let People Keep You Down* also included some individuals in her kinship network that did not understand her need to pursue higher education. *Lilith* constantly negotiated *Staying In the Box*, to have family support and acceptance, and *Stepping Out of the Box*, in order to succeed in academia. Not only did she feel misplaced within the university, she had lost the emotional support needed from some of her family to accomplish this dream. *Lilith* talked with tears in her eyes when she shared her feelings about the day she graduated with her master's degree.

And for my Bachelor's degree my family, most of my family drove down to (City) to see me graduate. And that was a nice day. That was a day where my husband made me feel like the ugliest woman in the world, but I had my family there. And that meant something to me that day. But the day I had my Master's, or before then, I had called my family, and my aunts and uncles, to tell them, you know, this is when my, my commencement was, and I'm not saying that my family, all of my family, but for the most part said "We've seen you graduate once". (laugh) And I wanted them to understand the significance of that accomplishment. But most of them didn't. And my mom was there. Her husband was there. My son was there. But it was something about not having the rest of my family not there, or them not understanding that accomplishment. (*Lilith*)

Lilith realized in order to *Step Out of the Box*, she had to learn to love her family who did not understand her dreams for higher education, from a distance. She could not force them to *Step Out of the Box* with her, nor could she *Stay In the Box* any longer to please them. Lilith was taught, as were all participants in this study, to please and take care of others.

However, *Staying in the Box* was more fearful than *Stepping Out of the Box* for Lilith, than the rest of the participants. Lilith believed her purpose in life existed somewhere outside the box. The decision to complete her dreams, or not, would rest on her ability to be strong enough to accomplish this without the unconditional acceptance of her family. Lilith would accomplish this as she discovered *They Taught Us the Values* could come from different support networks other than family.

They Taught Us The Values became individuals who helped foster her abilities to succeed in graduate school and who supported Lilith's dreams. Lilith talked of the support of professors, the hard decision to leave the security of *Staying in the Box*, and the constant battle of negative and positive self-esteem because of this decision:

The professors. Um, the professors and classes seem to push me to another level. But now that the classes are gone, um I have my professors pushing me to that next level, and then stopping and saying "Ok, we told you can do it now it's up to you to, you know, (laugh) now here you go, we've told you, Ok, (laugh) there's nothing else we can do" and me going home saying They're just lying you know, they're lying, I really can't do this. They're just saying that to be nice. And then me finally, you know saying (name) do this or don't. Stop torturing yourself. Do this or not. Um, that really stands out for me. And that truly, nobody can do this for me but me. If I, if people keep telling me I can do it, and I've told myself I can do it, and now I have to do it. And it really isn't about proving anything to anybody else anymore except for me. And if everybody else is happy for me that's great, and if nobody's happy for me, (laugh) that's great too. (Lilith)

Although Lilith did not accept the same polarized thinking of her family, she found value in being proud of her accomplishments despite her family's lack of support. Polarized thinking defined by Arnett (1986) is "the inability to believe or seriously consider one's own view as wrong and the other's opinion as truth" (p. 15). Polarized thinking does not occur just within the dominant group, but in our inner-city community as well. The misguided thoughts of many inner city Black women are in accepting the lies taught to us. Black women are taught our accomplishments should be limited to the expectations of

others. Polarized thinking does not mean an individual has low self-esteem, but it limits the possibility of understanding and loving oneself as a separate entity from others. The negative stereotypical views of Black women in mass media, educational systems, and even within our own communities are a continued backlash of the deculturalization process and the cycle of polarized thinking. Smith (1996) believes it is important for women understand their multiple realities. For Lilith, *Stepping Out of the Box* as she sought higher education served as an avenue for the improvement of not only her, but of her family and community, and ultimately her race (Sale, 1997; Milsteins, 1997).

The quotes of participants used throughout this chapter described their educational and lived experiences and associated these experiences with relevant research and theoretical literature. These themes described periods of transitions, life altering events, educational and everyday personal experiences throughout life. Each experience built upon the other. A woman in this study makes decisions not only on her needs, wants and desires of the present, but she is reevaluating her future needs, wants, and desires in

order to plan for events not yet seen. It is the way we chose to handle the events we are living at present, trying to predict our futures, while incorporating the past, which should remind us that Life is in fact "an unveiling" of oneself. This describes the backdrop of the themes in this study which is *Learning As You Go*.

Learning As You Go. The Ground of the Experience

We've experienced so many different things, you learn as you go cause you don't have any instructions. (Sha)

The common ground of the experiences shared by women in the study was "*Learning As You Go*". Our experiences were not related in the sequence of how they are discussed in this study. In fact, the findings indicated the themes described experiences that can be felt simultaneously or one at a time. Table 2 displays a list of the number of participants that described the theme from one or both ends of the continuum represented by the two phrases that label each theme. These themes might happen during the course of a lifetime, with no progression or length of logical determination. When a participant in this study experienced a negative event or person and felt *Like a*

Table 2: Number of Participants That Described the Themes In Individual Parts, Or as A Continuum

I Seemed Like A Stupid Little Girl, Again 8	I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman 8	Continuum 10
Staying In the Box 10	Stepping Out of the Box 9	Continuum 7
They Taught Us the Values 9	You Can't Let People Keep You Down 9	Continuum 7

Stupid Little Girl, Again, when she experienced events or individuals like those again, the feelings were not the same. The participants learned and developed from the previous experience. There was a negotiation, a see-saw effect between *Stepping Out of the Box* and *Staying In the Box*, which sometimes required making a decision to be loyal to the family and community, or to be loyal to oneself and make a decision to see higher education as a selfless act and not a selfish one. *Learning As You Go* involved not only individual needs, wants, or desires, but occurred within the context of what they perceived as most important to the

lives of their families, and not necessarily for themselves.

The structure or essence of an experience in a phenomenological study can be shown by describing the relationship between and among themes within a contextual ground that represents the shared experience of all participants (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1989; Valle & Halling, 1989). Figure 1 represents the structure of the experiences for the participants in this study.

Figure 1, titled "Phenomenal Woman", is taken in part from Da Vinci's art work, *Vitruvian Man* (www.aiwaz.net). Da Vinci presents a human man as sums of a whole to show the dynamic creation of the human body. The *Phenomenal Woman* also represents the dynamic learning and developing experiences of the participants in this study that is calls being-in-the world, or intentionality (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

The situatedness of the participants with regards to their perceived world of otherness, and of themselves is illuminated by this structure. The entire figure describes a flow of conscious and unconscious connectedness within the participants' many facets of their lived experiences.

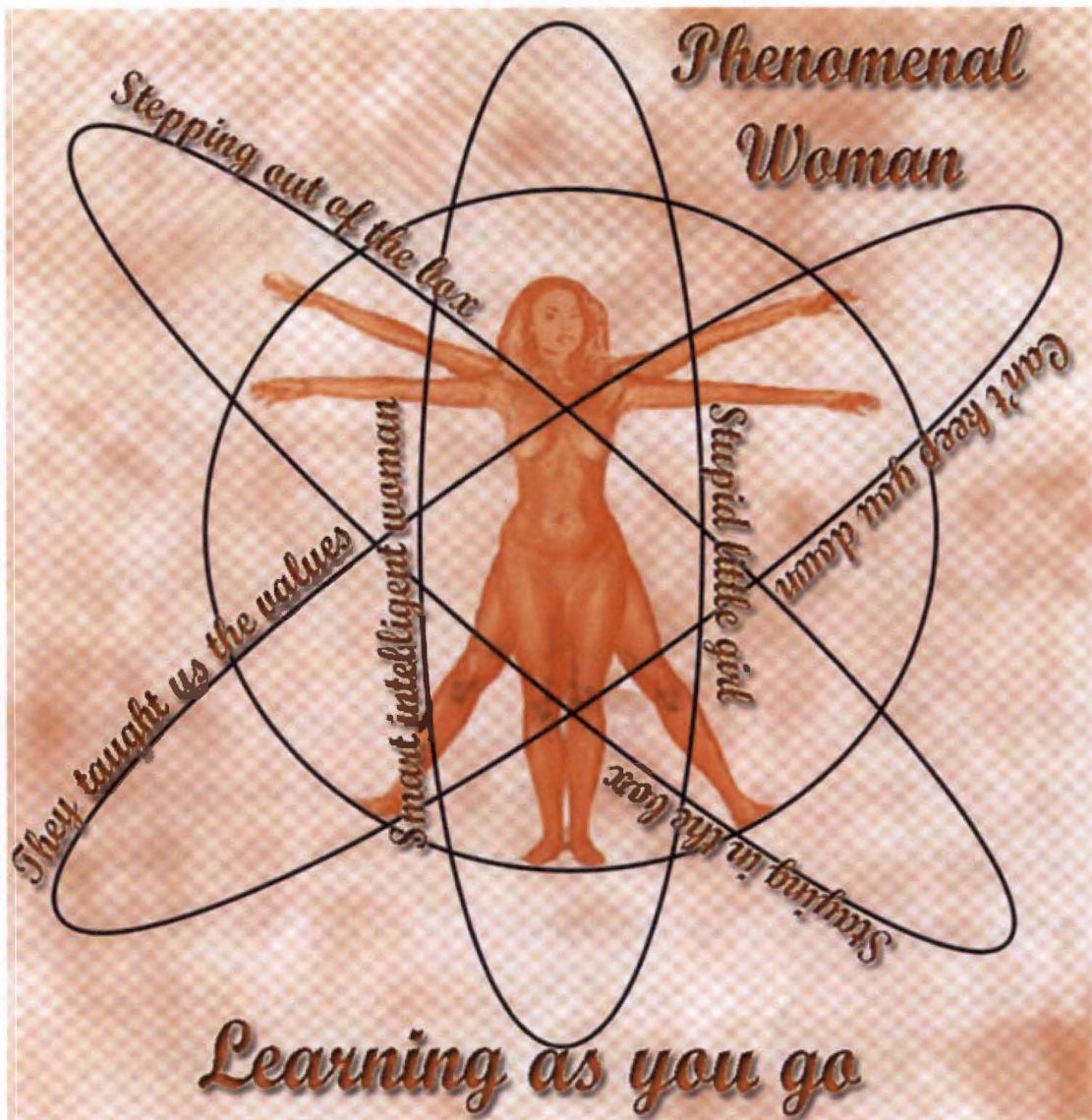


Figure 1: Phenomenal Woman Learning and Development Cycle

The Black woman in the figure has two sets of arms and legs that represent the participants' many roles in life such as that of wife, mother, and daughter. The oval shapes surrounding her represent continuous positive and negative feelings throughout the lifespan. These oval shapes are in constant motion, and represent interconnected systems, both in conscious and unconscious thought. One circle surrounds the Black woman's body as a representation of her world of others, to include, family, friends, and community. Each line of the ovals and circle intersect at some point to form the ground of the participants' experiences while in the process of learning and developing.

What is not shown purposely in the figure is the idea of self. A person must imagine the Black woman's arms having puppet strings attached to show the need to please and take care of others'. Or, imagine tattered, cut puppet strings beneath her feet as she has established her right to please and take care of herself first.

Before the research team began analyzing the data for this study, I had an accident that delayed my dissertation. I was personally struck by how the themes were microcosms of the phenomenon of being pushed and pulled back for

forth. Each movement had the potential to lead to further development.

After recovering from the accident and completing the data analysis, I realized the research themes I identified working with the research team, not only describe the experience of the women in this study, but they applied to my accident, recovery, and reconnection to my dissertation. As an example of how *Learning As You Go* is a backdrop of the themes described in this chapter, I will share a personal experience that happened to me during this year. The experience is as follows, with themes presented in bold text.

The accident occurred after I finished all the interviews. I fell and broke my hip. I was told my hip might heal naturally and to wait for possible surgery if necessary. I was devastated. I couldn't go on with the analysis of my data until I was capable of walking and returning to the university. I couldn't walk, drive, or take care of my children. People had to take care of me. **I Seemed Like a Stupid Little Girl, Again.**

After feeling sorry for myself for awhile, I began to get a renewed sense of determination. I began to take my

healing as seriously as I took my learning. I learned as much as I could from the doctors and physical therapist and worked hard to walk again. **I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman.**

I did however feel a sense of loss and confusion during this time. Although I had several family and friends to assist me, I missed being independent of others, going to the University to discuss new ideas and being challenged. I didn't realize how much I would miss working fifty hours a week. I found myself doing what I was told by people around me, trying not to question their decisions about regular daily issues. They were trying to make life easier for me, right? **I was Staying in the Box.**

But I couldn't do that for long. I needed to become independent again. I began to listen to my heart and mind. I knew what my body was capable of. I didn't listen to family or friends when they told me that I was trying too hard and too soon to walk again. I didn't listen to them when they told me to go to bed and let them take care of me. I became the worst patient ever. In two months I was walking slowly with a cane. In three months, I was walking without one. My goal was to get back my independence, take

care of my children, and to make my dissertation a priority again. **I Was Stepping Out of the Box.**

During this period of debilitation I not only learned about my strength and determination, but I learned more about the people in my lives. The people that I had assisted over the years with emotional and financial support were not there for me when I needed them. In fact, I was told that many of them thought I got what I deserved. I needed to be taught a lesson not to think I was better than other people. I was devastated at the thought that people I loved would wish this experience on me. **I Seemed Like a Stupid Little Girl, Again.** I was surprised at the individuals that were there daily. They became my kinship network. I didn't think these individuals would have the time in their schedules to help me. They found a way to help me. What I learned from the individuals who used to teach me **You Can't Let People Keep You Down**, had become the people that never wanted me to accomplish my educational dreams or see me walk again. The individuals who put up with my good days and bad, who challenged me to wellness and to walking again, **They Taught (me) Us the Values** of true friendship and humanity.

The findings from this study depict the essence of the education and learning throughout life for Black women in Knoxville, Tennessee. The description of this experience has implications for adult development and adult education research and practice. I also shared my personal experiences that have been a "dance in and out of fear and courage" (Smith, 1996). **Learning As You Go**, was about not only learning and growing through experiences, but about the power and courage that grew within me because of them. **After all, I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman.**

CHAPTER IV

Conclusions, Implications, Recommendations,

and

Personal Reflections

"The woman who truly intends to live a good life is already living phenomenally, since intent is a part of the achievement." Maya Angelou

Conclusions

This research study provided a descriptive picture of educational experiences of ten Black women who grew up in the inner-city of Knoxville. This study was not designed to be the "voice" of all Black women. It was designed to show the universal essence of the experience of Black inner-city women living in a similar socioeconomic and cultural context. Unlike most qualitative research, phenomenology is about finding a universal essence of an experience which goes beyond these women. By conducting this study, I attempted to provide a small view into our experiences which helped us develop into the women we became, and are becoming. The phenomenological analysis provided the common meaning underlying the stories about educational experiences sistas' shared. Education was much more than formal schooling from childhood through adulthood.

Educational experiences were a process of *Learning As You Go*, which was the ground in which experiences found meaning. The themes described feelings these women felt during the process of learning and developing. How individuals develop and learn can be a simultaneous process based upon the findings in this study. The themes are not single occurrences, but reoccurred throughout the women's lives in different ways and at different levels, but always recurring against the backdrop of *Learning As You Go*.

Learning and development is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by just one theory. The women in the study experienced growth and change as a continuing process that occurs through experiences in life, whether, at home, school, or within the community. The themes provided a lens on how the experiences of the women were derived from the analysis of the data.

The first theme, *I Seemed Like A Stupid Little Girl Again/I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman* was positive and negative feelings of self-esteem and self-worth faced not only during childhood, but also through adolescence, and adulthood. These feelings were positive and negative

depending on the context of which the participant experienced them.

The theme *Staying in the Box/Stepping Out of the Box* was a continuation of negotiation of one's need to feel secure, take care of, and to please family members, while also making choices for oneself that may be contradictory to the expectation of others. The women in this study described the need to place others first, limiting our own life possibilities, such as educational goals. Feelings of incompetence and fear of failure were common feelings in the idea of *Staying in the Box*, while *Stepping Out of the Box*, was a way participants described the ability to recognize ourselves positively, and make choices.

Periods of transformation during this time was a continuous process of trying to define ourselves as competent individuals, and what could be accomplished. All the women in this study felt continuing education past high school was a way of *Stepping Out of the Box*, but not as a means of financial security. Although education past high school was seen as a means of self-improvement, only three of the ten women obtained college degrees. Higher education to one participant was viewed as dangerous because of a

loss of emotional support and the safety net of family. The emotional support of family was very important to the participants in this study. All participants tried to make decisions that would not negate this support. When decisions were made that might be displeasing to the family, individual and group self-esteem were affected. Once the participants decided the individual choices made were good for themselves and their families, even if the family disagreed, then individual self-esteem was positive, although group self-esteem was negative. All the participants were on a cycle from positive and negative self-esteem feelings due to potential loss of family support.

A perception of disloyalty to family and community may result in *Stepping Out of the Box*, so the participants often made decisions to *Stay In the Box*. Although Black families have aspirations for their children to have an education, some do not know how to support them in achieving these goals (George, 2002). O'Connor (2002) also believes structural constraints of institutional, political, and social structures exacerbate this problem further. She states,

Thus, although being Black and poor significantly increases the probability of limited performance in school, this greater likelihood of poor schooling performance is not a function of lower capacity for academic success. Rather, it is a function of structured constraints (e.g., inequitable school funding, the privileging of middle-class culture in the norms and expectations of schools, differential teacher expectations, White skin privilege, and inequitable tracking and counseling practices) that systematically limit the chances that the Black poor will succeed in school. (p. 2)

Resilience is "an individually determined phenomenon as it seemingly rests on inherent traits, natural abilities, or personal character and temperaments (O'Conner, 2002 p.1)". The participants' displayed resilience in this study and are the characteristics that can be used to overcome the odds for educational success (O'Conner, 2002; George, 2002).

The theme, *You Can't Let People Keep You Down/They Taught Us the Values*, described how the women in this study recognized how some individuals challenged us with racial

ideologies so we would have low aspirations for ourselves. *They Taught Us the Values* illustrated the importance of a positive relationship with others. Kinship networks such as family, friends, and community provided a framework of help in developing into proud, intelligent women. The participants' families provided positive support when others' had low aspirations for them. But the family structure was unsupportive when educational goals were sought past the undergraduate level (George, 2002). Eight of the ten participants went to a higher educational institution for undergraduate studies, while only one participant sought graduate degrees. Although some family members did not know how to be supportive when one of the participants decided to get graduate degrees, perhaps this is also because of stereotypes of an individual losing his or her identity and becoming a traitor to their race if further education was sought past the undergraduate level (George, 2002; Steele, 1997; Ogbu, 1988).

Challenges were often faced in high school and college for all the women in this study. Instead of focusing on lower aspirations, we negotiated realities of family and

community, and focused on inner strengths and reaffirmed beliefs of self-worth and will to survive.

Implications

Educational experiences shared in this study provided important insights into the relationship between learning and overall development. Negotiating realities within a Black woman's family, community, and own sense of self is a constant struggle (Woddard, 2001; Bell-Scott, 1994; Collins, 1990). Greene (1990), suggests the degrading literature about Black women has been designed to reaffirm and perpetuate popularly held beliefs and stereotypes about Black women, and in the process has overlooked the Black woman's strengths, resources and resiliency.

The way in which women of color develop and learn is so distinctly different from other women, because of racial, economic, political, community and family structures, among which we must negotiate daily. Black women are taught to conform to limiting expectations of society, our community, and family (Boyd, 1993; Robinson and Ward, 1991; hooks, 1989; Collins & Sussewell, 1986). The stereotypes of Black women illustrate the thought that

we have a lack of beauty, intelligence, and lack of potential (hooks, 2000; Steele, 1997; Fordham, 1993; Ogbu, 1978). These stereotypes, whether conscious or not, are instilled in the minds of many individuals in this society, including Black women themselves, which influence our own sense of self-worth. Therefore, our potential for success may not be acknowledged. Education provides an avenue in which Black women can begin to understand the context in which these stereotypes were derived, but also a way to challenge and change them. This is what education provided for me.

This study sheds light on an often overlooked aspect of learning and development. Development for the participants in this study suggests that while development is dependent upon what is learned from experiences in life, those experiences do not necessarily influence development sequentially. In other words, an experience from early life may be understood differently much later in life and influence development based upon the new perceptions and understanding of the experience. It is based on the fact that developing is a process of learning as suggested by Mezirow (1975). One does not necessary come before the

other. Learning and development are intertwined, with lessons learned dependent on how we critically reflect on the experience. This reflective process builds upon what is learned, or not learned, from past experiences (Brookfield, 1995). Each experience a person has can be a part of their developmental process.

Minimal research on the relationship between adult development and educational experiences of Black women exists. Psychological models of adult development such as (Erikson, 1963) and Levison (1978), provide important aspects of development to the literature, but these theories do not specifically address differences with regard to race, cultural, gender and class.

Although Erikson (1963) believes, and this study supports the view that developmental changes occur throughout life in stages, his theory does not factor into account life altering events, for example, childbirth, coming sooner than later for Black females, which is at least twice as likely to happen as for White females (Rosenthal, et.al., 1996). Based on this factor alone Erikson's (1963) stages of Identity versus Role Confusion and Intimacy versus Isolation may shift by several years.

Although Levinson's (1978) original model, which proposed all adults go through a series of stages as they develop, was based on males, he attempts to add gender as an aspect of his theory (1994) to show how women went through the same developmental cycles. Again, although the women in this study were tied to family life as Levinson (1994) suggests, and went through similar life experiences such as: becoming independent and leaving home as in the Pre-adulthood stage, and reflected and reevaluated life based on past experiences as in the Late Adulthood stage, we did not experience them in sequence as Levinson (1994) suggests. The developmental process of women in this study were not in sequential stages, but rather a spiral, like a slinky toy of sorts, that goes back and forth as development and learning are connected.

Sociocultural theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) provide a more inclusive model because these theories focus on social and cultural aspects of development. Vygotsky (1978) believes cultural differences such as family and community beliefs and values play an important role in individual development. Vygotsky (1978) also believed learning comes before development. He stated "Consequently,

in taking one step in learning, a child makes two steps in development, that is, learning and development do not coincide (p. 84)". This study refutes this idea. Learning and development do coincide. One step in learning is also a step in developing. This process was never disconnected for the participants in this study who learned and developed not only as an experience occurred but often experiences provided a new insight into lessons learned as they critically reflected on the same experience years later, which promoted further development (Brookfield, 1995).

More integrated approaches to adult development are beginning to capture the real-lived experiences of Black women, such as Perum and Bielby's (1980) theory. This theory describes development as being made up of temporal progressions which spiral to signify synchrony, or "normal", less stressful life experiences, with asynchrony, more prevalent during stressful periods in life. While the description of this theory shares similarities with this study, it does not specifically address race, gender, or sociocultural factors that affect the adult development of Black women.

Although literature on Black women focuses on socialization, psychosocial concepts, bicultural factors, and the Afrocentric paradigm, (Littleton, 2002; Crawley & Freeman, 1993; Bowman, 1989; Jeffries, 1985), few have yet addressed how educational experiences might be linked to the overall development of Black women. This following section discusses general and specific recommendations based on conclusions reached from the findings and the implications of these conclusions for practice.

Recommendations

This study was a phenomenological exploration which described the lived educational experiences of three sets of Black sisters. The findings suggest that the educational experiences of these Black women influenced our development and our sense of voice, self-esteem, and self-defined achievement and success. Therefore, this study contributes to the practice of Adult Education.

We, as adult educators must be consciously aware of the role culture plays in the development of positive self-esteem and the positive learning experience of Black females. Traditional educational institutions are biased

toward white males (Johnson-bailey & Cervero, 1996).

Programs, curriculum, and books, misrepresent Black women, or we are omitted altogether.

Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations are targeted to adult educators.

1. Foster critical thinking skills and encourage students to question social inequalities.
2. Institute curriculum in the classroom which celebrate other ways of knowing and multiple intelligences.
3. Engage in active learning with students while creating an environment of respect and acceptance.
4. Validate students' personal and educational experiences by the use of dialog, creative writing and journaling.
5. Foster learning and development by creating opportunities for students to use their "voice" without fear of oppression.
6. Use community mentors in educational settings at all levels to validate the existence of positive role models.

Recommendations for Research

Recommendations for research serve as a springboard for future research in the fields of adult education and adult development.

1. Women, specifically women of color, should ensure that research studies on women are conducted and are important parts of their research agendas. If we, as women do not value the importance of more literature on women, who will?
2. Research using phenomenology as a methodology should address issues of race, class, and gender, to allow for the "voice" of the participants to be heard and to ensure respect is given to our lived experiences.
3. Additional studies of Black women's educational experience are needed that utilize a grounded theory approach in order to establish new theories on adult development and learning for women of color.
4. More phenomenological research to recognize and validate the "voices" of women of color and explore the essence of their educational and developmental experiences from their perspective.
5. Continued research on adult learners who are women of color in K-12, adult educational programs, and higher education institutions in order to address their specific needs and goals.

Final Thoughts

This study has illuminated the formal and informal learning experiences of Black women and the profound role that their cultural experiences of family and community play in shaping their learning experiences. This study should also create newly integrated theoretical approaches to adult development that go beyond the traditional models.

Adult Education, as a field of study, promotes self-empowerment and development (Mezirow, 1997; Belenkey, et.al., 1986) and offers a transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression (Colin & Preciphs, 1991; hooks, 1989; Matsuda, 1991; Freire, 1993). Through adult education individuals may gain the courage as the participant Lilith did, in order to understand the need to *Step Out of the Box*. This is crucial to understanding education as a means of self-improvement and empowerment, but also as a way to help ourselves, family, and community. A perpetuation of the idea of *Staying In the Box* as being safe and loyal to the family and community, whether beliefs are conscious or not, must be addressed by Black women, the community, and educators. Transformation can only occur through critical reflection, discourse, revising one's perspective and then acting on one's beliefs.

Peter Sutherland (1997) states "Adult education is predicated upon creating free space for reflection and discourse and a reduction of the power differential between educator and learner" (p.13)". Self-reflection is critical to the adult learner's ability to be self-motivated and self-directed (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Educators should

also encompass methods of narratives, family history, and autobiographies to draw on the strength of lived experiences minority students bring to the classroom (Brady, 1999; Tisdell, 1998; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; hooks, 1994; Bell, 1987; Scott-Maxwell, 1968). Examining the educational experiences of students of color can help gain better understanding of the most appropriate ways to help students achieve educational success (Frazier-Kouassi, 2000; Larson & Brady, 2000).

As an adult educator, knowing my personal values and beliefs provides a framework for me to help minority students achieve learning goals by consistently challenging the oppressive institutional system of education established by dominant elitist. The negative ideas of racism, sexism, classism, and stereotyping of minority students that are found in curriculum, films, television, and through conscious and unconscious behaviors and attitudes of individuals, can best be fought by first the honest admission of these attitudes and behaviors by educators and their willingness to change.

In the next section I offer a view of my personal journey as a Black woman, struggling to achieve the dream of a doctorate degree that began so many years ago.

Personal Reflections

**"Some succeed because they are destined to, but most succeed because they are determined to."
Dawnelle Hurd**

I regained my "voice" while pursuing my graduate degree, and even more while completing this study. Losing my voice wasn't done overnight. In fact, I did not realize I had the ability to think on my own, or make decisions for myself without the approval of others well into my thirties. Regaining my voice has been a daily battle within myself, my family, community, and the society in which I live. When I attempted to use my newfound "voice" I found in graduate school, my passionate words were sometimes not heard. Perhaps as a Black woman this "voice" sounded like the roar of a lion. Of course people fear lions. Is this how my voice sounded? Were people fearful of what I had to say? I only wanted my "voice" to be heard. I did not want to become isolated from my family or my community.

Black females are conditioned to believe their "voice" has no significance in this society. There has been isolation at school because many times I have been the only Black woman in class. Many people lack awareness or have a lack of exposure to the perspectives of Black women. My "voice" has many times gone unheard, been "too loud", or forced me to speak for an entire race of people.

In my quest for higher education, I have many times found myself explaining what I've said, clearing up how I've stated it, while informing that it is my perspective and not the perspective of an entire race. I have had to tolerate people who many times were either subconsciously or willfully ignorant of my "race" and cultural background.

The pressure of my Black face in a class of White students (don't forget the professor), at times left me questioning my place in the real world of academia, with family, and my place in the community where I grew up.

Since these sexist ideas are a continued source of oppression for the Black woman today, I sadly understand my family's belief system, yet I will not continue to validate them with loyal silence or unheard whispers. I am not to

blame for this society's (including my family's) desire to oppress me with patriarchal values and demeaning rhetoric.

The experiences of the women in this study did not focus on overtly racial acts, but it is painfully clear to me that race, class and gender oppression cannot continue unless Black females allow these ideologies to have a greater influence on us than do our images of strength and self-reliance qualities.

We, the women in this study, defined and redefined ourselves based on negative and positive experiences within educational institutions and personal experiences as well. Who we are and what we are to become will be in opposition of those who try to keep us down.

Although my experiences and expressions may be different from many of my sisters of color, I realize nevertheless, we share several commonalities. We face certain degrees of discrimination and stereotyping. Institutional racism and sexism, which are expressed through prejudiced attitudes and practices in K-12 education, adult education programs, as well as higher educational institutions. Stereotypes and discrimination

impact all facets of the Black woman's life (Dowdy, 2003; Renauer, 2001).

"Women, whether they are Black, Latino American, Asian American or White American, will not have power commensurate with their numbers unless and until they see themselves as having common interests that need to be addressed with a common voice" (Noble, 1978, p. 301). This study of the lived experiences of my sistas' and me will influence others to think outside the box that Black females have been conditioned to think in.

Johnson-Bailey (2002), asked the question, "Do African American educators make a difference? Do they still practice the old cultural adage: Each one teach one? (p. 109)." I answer this question with a resounding YES! If it is not my responsibility to make a difference by using my "voice" to challenge, question, and teach; by using the education I have struggled to receive for myself, my children, and my community, then whose responsibility is it?

This study has allowed me to grow. Not only into the Black woman I was destined to be, but the Black woman I was determined to be. My purpose in life is to use my gift,

which is my "voice", so this society will hopefully begin to understand and value the beauty, intelligence, and strength of Black women.

I am a phenomenal woman.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Confidentiality Agreement

As a member of the interdisciplinary Phenomenology Research Group in the Department of Psychology under the direction of Dr. Howard Pollio or in the Department of Educational, Psychology and Counseling, under the direction of

Dr. Katherine Greenberg at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, I agree to guarantee confidentiality to participants who participated in the study entitled "Phenomenal Woman: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Voices and Experiences of My Sistas". I will not publicly divulge information that I learned.

Signature

Date

Appendix B - Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to describe the educational experiences of three sets of African American sisters, who have grown up in inner-city Knoxville. By combining issues of race, gender, class, adult education and learning, into one study, it may show how these factors may influence adult development.

INFORMATION

If you agree to take part in this study, I will contact you to set up an interview where you will be asked to share your educational experiences. This audio taped interview will last 1 - 1½ hours. I will discuss with you a summary of the key points of the interview to see if you have any modifications or additions to what you have said in the interview. There will be no additional time requirements. You are free to choose not to participate in this study, or withdraw at any time. Your audiotape and/or transcript will be destroyed upon your request. Your name, nor any identifying information will be used in this study, although your words may be used to support the interpretation and analysis.

BENEFITS

You may benefit from your participation because you will have the opportunity to reflect on your educational experiences growing up in inner city Knoxville when responding to the interview question. Responses may help illuminate aspects of your experience that you had not considered before. Although the findings cannot be generalized, a description of your experiences may benefit other individuals who have similar demographic characteristics.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in this study will be kept confidential. Tapes and consent forms will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, room A521, Claxton Complex, and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. Your consent forms will be kept at this location for three years following completion of the research project. Data will be destroyed immediately at the completion of the research project. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

CONTACT

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 Katherine Greenberg, at the University of Tennessee Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling (865-974-8145). If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Research Compliance Services section of the Office of Research at (865)974-3466.

_____ Participants initials

PARTICIPATION

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

CONSENT

**I have read the above information and agree to participate
in this study. I have received a copy of this form.**

Participant's name (print)

Participant's signature

Date

Appendix C - Participant Interview

I: This is a continuation of a bracketing interview and will serve also as a research interview for the parts at the beginning and now where (name) is sharing her own educational experiences as they relate to the question. So (name) you have shared some of the experiences, educational experiences that stand out for you, can you share. more that stands out for you throughout your life, that stand out for you.

P: Umm, in high school I was still a nerd.(laugh) Um, I think I was popular, in that I was a nerd and some people came to me with their homework and those kinds of things. So although I was in the band and those kinds of things but um, when I look at, when I compare it to other people's experiences in high school mine doesn't, didn't seem nearly as exciting as theirs. Um (pause)

I: Say more about exciting?

P: I mean they were dating, they were going out, they were going to parties. I was coordinating some meeting or (laughing) or you know helping someone with a research project, or you know, something dull and boring, or getting home so I could watch MASH (laughing) something like that,

not nearly as exciting as as their lives seemed to be at the time. And then I came um, after a bunch of mistakes I finally ended up over here at UT and I hated it. It wasn't you know I thought that I was this smart, intelligent woman and I seemed like a stupid little girl again when I got over here to UT. I didn't know anything, I didn't know how to write a paper, I didn't know how to, you know do all the things that I excelled in in high school and in all my other years of school, and I hated it, I hated it. Um and that's when I finally went on to the military and kind of you know, I think got myself together as far as ah feeling like I was a competent person again. And you know going on and getting married, and then going through a divorce and ending right back into UT. Finally. And almost, life has a way of, maybe putting you back where you started, in that I left UT feeling really incompetent and I came back to UT still feeling that same kind of thing, wanting to change that feeling. And that's how I ended up in, in the Master's program, in Adult Ed. And it's so funny you know I was thinking the other day that maybe this was divine intervention. Because I was just flipping through some of the different web sites that UT had and I read across a man

named Dr. Brockett and I'd never heard of a field called Adult Education. Never knew anything like that existed. I decided I would call his number and he answered. (Laughing) Now I know NOW that that's a rare thing. (laughing) you know that he would be in his office because it was early (laughing) and I know now the significance of him being there that day. But he was so genuine that day. And he, you know we talked for a few minutes and he didn't push me to get off the phone, he didn't, everything you would want in a Professor, he was that day. Everything you would want in a human being, he was that day. And it made me want to go back to school. And I went right after that. I applied, and was accepted into the program. I don't think I have been the same ever since.

I: Say more about that.

P: I just needed to feel like I had control over my life.

That I, that I was a competent individual. That I was smart. Umm (pause)

I: Now you said in high school you, people came to you for research projects, uh, so why at UT and as an undergraduate did you feel so incompetent?

P: I think that umm, I think the first semester I went to East Tennessee State. And I made B's and C's the first term, but for me that was so, so horrible. I had been used to making A's and B's and you know, and although my, one of the professors told me that wasn't bad for the first term, but that was bad for me. So, that's when I ended up at UT, and I did even worse. And, and finally after a couple of years I dropped out of UT feeling really incompetent. It was all those years after that, getting married, well going to the military, getting married, having children, that I ended right back here again after going through a program at Tennessee Wesleyan College to get my Bachelors, but ending right back here at UT again, trying to prove to myself that I was competent. Umm, it was a really big world out there that I wasn't really expecting (laughing). You know maybe, if I could have stayed with a hundred students in high school, my high school was really small and um, maybe perhaps if it had been bigger, more competitive for me then I wouldn't have felt that way, I wouldn't have felt like such a failure. So going to grad school I really did come in needing it for more than just I want to get this Master's degree so I can take care of my family, it

was more that I needed to prove something to myself again. I needed to prove that I was capable of accomplishing anything at that point.

I: What stands out for you about that Master's program?

P: Um, the Professors were human (laughing) when I came uh through my Bachelor's program, even the Professors were intimidating, and it could have been that I was young, but I think there was more to it. But they were, my Professors in my Master's program were open, very kind, um, needed, they told me what I needed to do in order to succeed.

It wasn't like this game, you know. Um, and, and I, I really appreciated that. It came during a time in my life where I needed someone to be honest with me, to tell me what I needed to improve on, what I was good in, and not just everything critical. It was a combination of everything. And for me, my Professors, the Professors in my Master's program, as well as some of the people I have met really sustained me at that time, probably more than they will ever know. Um, so my educational experience filtered down into what I felt about me in the other aspects of my life, my personal life, in my, my thinking as a mother. I don't think that I would be um, the mother that I am if I

hadn't gone back to school. I think that I would've really had tunnel vision, this is how its always been, this is how its always gonna be, and I really let my children grow. Um, so my education has been far more than just getting a piece of paper, and although I always thought even with my Bachelor's degrees, and it took me so long to get it, that I always thought you know, when I get this piece of paper I'm gonna run home and have it mounted and it's gonna be a 15' x 15' piece of paper I'll have on my wall. (laughing) But my Bachelor's and my Master's diplomas are in my drawer. I haven't even done it. And I think it's because I'm still waiting for this next step. I'm still wanting to complete what I think I'm capable of before I can really put those on the wall to say this is what I've accomplished, cause I haven't accomplished what I need to yet.

I: What stands out for you in your doctoral program?

P: Again, the Professors. Um, the Professor and classes seem to push me to another level. But now that the classes are gone, um I have my Professors pushing me to that next level, and then stopping and saying "Ok, we told you can do it now it's up to you to, you know, (laugh) now here you

go, we've told you, Ok, (laugh) there's nothing else we can do" and me going home saying They're just lying you know, they're lying, I really can't do this. They're just saying that to be nice. And then me finally, you know saying (name) do this or don't. Stop torturing yourself. Do this or not. Um, that really stands out for me. And that truly, nobody can do this for me but me. If I, if people keep telling me I can do it, and I've told myself I can do it, and now I have to do it. And it really isn't about proving anything to anybody else anymore except for me. And if everybody else is happy for me that's great, and if nobody's happy for me, (laugh) that's great too. And, and it's funny I remember seeing you the day that I got my Master's degree. I remember walking by you and you waved hi to me. But I was in tears that day. And it was again one of those significant accomplishments in my life. And for my Bachelor's degree my family, most of my family drove down to Athens, Tennessee to see me graduate. And that was a nice day. That was a day where my husband made me feel like the ugliest woman in the world, but I had my family there. And that meant something to me that day. But the day I had my Master's, or before then, I had called my family, and my

aunts and uncles, to tell them, you know, this is when my, my commencement was, and I'm not saying that my family, all of my family, but for the most part said "We've seen you graduate once". (laugh) And I wanted them to understand the significance of that accomplishment. But most of them didn't. And my mom was there. Her husband was there. My son was there. But it was something about not having the rest of my family not there, or them not understanding that accomplishment. And that commencement was just a daze. So now, you know I can say truthfully, just living through that, I realize that then it was still about other people. Even my own education was still about I want you to be proud of me. See what I can do. You know. But now, it's not even about them anymore. I could care less if any of them came. I would want my mother to be there, and I know the only way she wouldn't be here is if she wasn't on this earth. And even still, I would still know she was there. But past that, I wouldn't care if I didn't see any of them. Because it just isn't about them anymore. As long as I can get my body there to be hooded (laugh) then, you know, I have found, I guess um, accomplished what I set out to do when I was just, before I was even ten. That there was

something about having that Dr. in front of my name, and I didn't even understand the significance of having that Dr., that Doctor in front of your name or that Ph.D. thing behind your name. But I new it meant something. And, and so, it really is about me. And for me that, at times it does seem like a selfish thing. But I'm not willing to give it up.

I: Say more about it being about me.

P: That my Ph.D. is about me. I know now, after being in the, getting jobs in Knoxville that I've even had to take off my resume that I was a Ph.D. student. I was told that they don't want to see that, that you're over qualified, you, you know, I don't think that, maybe, perhaps if I move out of Knoxville that degree will give me financial security perhaps, but it's not about the money. It's not about pleasing anybody anymore. It's about, it's just about doing this for me. I don't care if I make one penny past \$20,000 (laugh) it would just, you know, other than paying for my student loans, but that's another story. But I just know that at one time it was about my children, it was about my family, it was about showing that I could do something more. It was about, you know making sure that my

children were taken care of. But somewhere along the way that has changed. And my education at this point is really just about me. Just about proving something to me. Just about acknowledging that I am smart, that I am beautiful, that I am all of these things, what I always wanted to be. And I don't need confirmation or acknowledgment from anyone else.

I: Is there anything else?

P: Probably that I wish that I had more friends that could understand what that feels like. I mean I could live with no one else being there but there's something about sharing that with other people. And I do have a couple of friends, female friends that have, you know, it's funny, it's not really a competition but it kinda is, where my girlfriend in Nashville, I got my Bachelors so she said you know she had always been plugging along, but if I got it, then if you can do it, I can do it. And she did. And then you know I got my Masters, so she called me one day and said "How long did you say it took you to get your Masters?" And I said I did it in a year although without the approval of my Professors (laugh) and she said " Well if you can do it in a year, I can do it in a year". And I said well (name) you

know, you have four children, I have two, plus we were laughing and I said add your husband and you have six. (laughing) And, you know, she was like, "I can do it". And she did. And there is something about even her graduating and that's this weekend. And it was, I couldn't be there but it was as if I wanted to live for her day. It was, to just, have someone to just, to know what that feels like. And then another one of my girlfriends, it took her a long time, but she's graduating next weekend with her Bachelors degree. And it's just like little baby steps that we keep taking and I guess I think we all, or, I know I do, see other women taking those little bitty baby steps. To do something just for them.

I: Anything else?

P: No.

Vita

Eva Y. Wiggins Young was born in Knoxville, Tennessee and graduated from Austin-East High School in 1985. After completing two years of college, she went on to serve five years in the United States Navy and the United States Coast Guard.

Eva received her Bachelor's degree at Tennessee Wesleyan College in Athens, Tennessee in 1999 in Business Management and a Master of Science degree in Educational Psychology at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2000.

During her doctoral studies, Eva served as a graduate assistant at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She also taught undergraduate courses in psychology and human relations, and wrote and received a grant from Knoxville to work with Black women in the inner-city.

Eva will receive her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education, with a concentration in Educational Psychology from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville in December 2005.

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