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# Urban Elementary Teachers' Perspectives and Practices

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Meredith Elise Murray entitled "Urban Elementary Teachers' Perspectives and Practices." I have examined the final electronic 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.

J. Amos Hatch, Major Professor

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**Urban Elementary Teachers' Perspectives and Practices**

**A Dissertation**

**Presented for the**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Degree**

**The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Meredith Elise Murray**

**December 2012**

## **Dedication**

**This dissertation is dedicated to my family:**

**my husband, Jack Staddon;**

**my son, Jeffrey Staddon;**

**my grandmother, Betty J. Shields;**

**my sister, Marlo Hodnett**

**my mother and step-father, Deborrah and Vernon Jackson**

**my father and step-mother, Morris and Betty Murray.**

**my dear friend, Louise Reed**

**my eighth grade teacher, Mr. Pullens**

**Their love was demonstrated by the way they supported me through this challenging process with never ending encouragement and the belief that I would succeed and accomplish my goal.**

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## **Abstract**

Urban teachers alone cannot solve the complex social and economic problems that plague urban communities and schools; however, their efforts to effectively educate inner-city youth can begin to break the cycle of disadvantage. Therefore, urban teachers' perspectives are essential in understanding the process of effectively instructing urban youth. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives and practices of five urban educators through a postpositive theoretical lens. Participants for this study were five urban educators kindergarten through fourth grade, all of whom were teaching at one urban school. The participating teachers were chosen by criterion sampling with the help of the principal. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and observations during the course of one school year. A case study of each of the five urban educators provided a better understanding of: (a) factors that influenced each urban educator's career choice; (b) how these urban educators describe their educational practices and beliefs about teaching; (c) the similarities and differences that can be found between urban educators' beliefs and practices; (d) how these urban educators think cultural/ethnic background influences their instructional practices. Recommendations were made to improve current urban educators teaching practices, enhance future urban education, and encourage researchers to continue doing research in the field of urban education.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The origins of this study of urban teachers' perceptions and practices extend over several years of informal observation and conversations with teachers in a variety of educational contexts. As I witnessed the diversity of teaching approaches, I began to sense that the rich variety of teaching practices originates from a complex interplay of many factors, including those related to teachers, students, and their cultural backgrounds. As a Master's level student in California, I observed a young Hispanic teacher with mostly Hispanic elementary students create a culturally conducive learning environment. Greeting some of her students in their native Spanish at the door, she signaled acceptance. As she taught her class (primarily in English), I noticed that the classroom wall displays included Spanish words and pictures of people of Hispanic origin. When I asked her about it, she explained how the Hispanic-themed displays helped convey to her students a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Years later, as a doctoral student looking for a research project, a veteran African-American teacher showed me how the same kinds of social variables (albeit in a different cultural context) influence not only the general classroom climate but the specific methods of instruction as well. Standing behind her makeshift podium, adorned with a sign marked "Teacher's Time," she lectured her mostly African-American class as they followed along in their books. During this time, no students were allowed to talk or ask questions. She expressed pride in how quiet her classroom was, stating that learning occurred where there was silence. She spoke about her own successes as an elementary student in a heavily structured classroom, contrasting it with her perception of her students' often chaotic home environments. As I reflected upon these experiences, I sensed that both teachers' pedagogical practices were

influenced by a complex interplay between the teachers' personal backgrounds and their perceptions of their students' backgrounds and needs.

Based on these and other experiences, my dissertation research project began to take shape. I chose an urban context to study the interplay between teachers' perceptions and practices, beginning with a dissertation pilot study of one urban teacher. From this study, I gained preliminary understanding of this topic, a clear sense of how and where I would like to focus my dissertation study, and a more comprehensive understanding of the research process. This dissertation reports findings from a qualitative study built on case studies of five urban educators teaching in a mid-sized city in Tennessee.

Urban educators were selected because I am interested in the additional layers that the urban context offers that may not be found in other educational settings. Urban educators are often faced with difficulties not encountered by teachers in suburban and rural schools (Darling-Hammond, 1998). For example, they are more likely to encounter some of the following obstacles: teaching students with fewer basic resources; higher student and teacher absenteeism; higher teacher turnover; greater numbers of inexperienced teachers; disproportionate numbers of minority students; more students being placed in special education, dropping out, and failing academically; and many other issues beyond their control (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Sharpton, Casbergue, & Cafide, 2002). Still, many teachers choose to become urban educators with the hope of making a difference, and they are strongly committed to working with children from challenging environments (Patterson, Collins, & Abbot, 2004). I chose this group of five urban educators because I believe teachers who have dedicated their professional lives to being effective educators can contribute a wealth of knowledge and insight, leading to a better understanding of urban education, including

effective teaching practices. I selected these five urban educators by using criterion sampling which will be described in more detail later in this dissertation.

### **Background: Student, School, and Teacher Demographics**

The term urban school has come to encompass more than merely a school located in the city. Kincheloe (2004) identified additional factors that distinguish an urban school environment from a rural or a suburban one: (1) ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic diversity; (2) significant number of families below the poverty line; (3) large, bureaucratic, and politicized schools and school districts; (4) students transferring among multiple schools during the school year; (4) teachers and administrators who are unlikely to live in the communities in which they work; and (5) student transportation challenges. I have classified the school where my study took place as urban based upon the following determining factors. First, the school is located in medium sized city rather than a rural or suburban area. Second, the school is a Title I school with a comparatively high rate of poverty as measured by the number of students who receive free or reduced lunch. Third, the school has a relatively high proportion of minority students as reported by Tennessee's Department of Education (TDOE) (2009). Fourth, the student population has a high percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged as reported by TDOE.

According to statistics from the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) (2007), nearly 29 million children in the U.S. live in families with low incomes (i.e., below twice the official poverty level). There is a strong correlation between the poverty level and parental level of education. Eighty-three percent of children whose parents have less than a high school diploma live in low-income families, and over half of parents who have only a high school diploma are classified as low income (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007). In Tennessee, 83% of children whose parents do not have a high school degree live in low-income

families, and 68% of children whose parents have a high school degree, but no college education, live in low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007).

An influential factor that puts many children at greater economic risk is that they come from single parent households that lack the benefits of dual earning power found in two parent households. NCCP (2007) reports that in rural and suburban areas, the majority of children have married parents. However, in Tennessee, 57% of children in low-income families live with a single parent. Fifty percent of these children under the age of six live in low-income families, and 56% of the children in urban areas live in low-income families. Twenty-five percent of children in Tennessee in low-income families moved last year, and 70% of children of immigrant parents live in low-income families. NCCP (2007) reported that in terms of race, 35% of White children, 68% of Black children, and 76% of Hispanic children live in low-income families. A majority of students living in poverty come from urban and rural areas.

Banks Elementary Magnet School (BEMS) is the pseudonym selected for the school in which my study took place. BEMS is located in the central portion of a mid-sized city located in Tennessee. It has been identified by the National Center for Education Statistics as a Title I school. One way the income levels of students attending a school are measured is based on the number of students who qualify for free or reduced price lunches. According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010), 81% of students at BEMS are eligible for free lunches and are classified as coming from low-income households. These statistics help us to understand challenges that are often present within the context of this and other urban schools.

Low levels of income, single parent households, parents who have low levels of academic attainment, and minority race are considered to be risk factors that increase the likelihood of academic failure for students entering school (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken,

2000). In addition, studies have shown that students who come from families with multiple risk factors are more likely to enter school with an achievement gap and continue to fall farther behind academically than those without risk factors (Alexander & Entwisle, 1998; Gutman, Sameroff, and Cole, 2003). Many students who are faced with the multiple risk factors described above are students of minority ethnic/racial groups who attend urban schools.

White student enrollment continues to decrease, while minority enrollment increases in public schools. Between 1970 and 2000, White student enrollment in public schools has decreased from 81% to 68%, while Black enrollment has increased from 13.2% to 16.43%, and Hispanic enrollment has increased from 5.05% to 12.4% (National Education Association [NEA] 2004). However, less than 14% of teachers are minorities and 40% of U.S. public schools have no minority teachers. Some White teachers understand the dissonance that can be present when they are unable to relate to or understand their students. This lack of connection can prohibit effective teaching from taking place and might cause teachers to underestimate their students' abilities. The reflections of one teacher captured by Gregory Michie (2007) conveyed how one teacher processed this source of dissonance:

As a White person and recent transplant from the South, I had just as much, if not more, to learn about the context of my teaching: the lived experiences of my students and their families, the social and economic landscape of the school's neighborhood, and the way my work with urban kids would be impacted by issues of culture, language, class, and race (p. 3).

The first step in resolving the racial and cultural dissonance between teacher and student is to create a safe space for teachers to talk openly about their feelings and their perspectives. One goal of this study is to allow teachers the opportunity to reflect on this issue and to gain a

greater understanding of their perceptions and how these perceptions might influence their teaching methods.

### **Purpose Statement**

My interest in this investigation originated from recognizing the diversity in teaching practices observed among urban teachers and talking with them about teaching and learning. In turn, as I searched literature, I focused on research relevant to successful urban educators' teaching methodologies and classroom practices. Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings (2001) and others (Foster, 1993; Murrell, 2001; Kunjufu, 2002; Irvine, 2002; Nieto, 2005) have identified several characteristics and practices of effective urban educators. Through their research, these authors have provided insight for those trying to understand the complexity of urban education. It is my intention to elaborate and explore these themes in detail, as well as uncover additional insights about urban elementary teaching that have been undiscovered or not yet fully explored.

A literature review on teachers' beliefs led me to some contradictory positions about how teachers' beliefs inform their practices. For example, Lortie (1975) suggests that teachers rely on their insight and practical knowledge when instructing students because they lack conclusive empirically proven methodologies and practices. Berliner (2002) supports Lortie in arguing that empirical evidence cannot be found to support teaching and learning practices that will work for all students and teachers because of the variability among students, teachers, families, and schools. In contrast, Carnine (2000) argues there is empirically sound research on teaching practices, but that educators often ignore it. Whatever the case may be concerning the existence of empirically sound research on teaching practices, it seems clear that teachers' practices are guided by their beliefs. Therefore understanding teachers' beliefs is crucial in interpreting how teachers define and interpret social realities and in understanding how their social realities are

intertwined with knowledge and pedagogical practices (Song, 2006). A section of my literature review adds insight into the perceptions of teachers and how their perceptions influence their teaching practices.

Concerned about the academic plight of predominantly minority urban youth, many scholars are searching for effective pedagogical practices that will improve these students' academic performance. Considering the disproportionate number of minority students being placed in special education, dropping out, and failing academically, urban education researchers must continue searching for more effective ways to address these problems. As an educator with a personal background in urban education, I am interested in exploring what experienced urban educators believe to be effective instructional methodologies and how such instructional practices are implemented in their classrooms. This interpretive study will draw from and build on existing literature focusing on urban educators' instructional methodologies. Therefore, it is important that this area of research is continuously explored and expanded until we are able to successfully address the problem of urban academic failure. My research seeks to add insights and expand current understandings of what are considered to be effective practices in teaching urban youth.

### **Choice of Case Study**

This study of urban teachers' perceptions and practices explores five individual teachers in the contexts of their classroom. I selected case study as the type of qualitative research that will be used in this study. Merriam (1988) writes, "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 21). Case study research is a strategy for doing social inquiry and can be useful in understanding a particular problem, issue, or concept. It seeks to look in an in-depth way at the case itself, as

opposed to focusing only on the variables that surround the case. In this research, five case studies are presented that explore the uniqueness and commonalities represented within the boundaries of each case. Observations and interviews will provide insight into how each educator perceives her teaching practices and how these teachers' beliefs may influence their teaching practices.

### **Research Questions**

Interaction styles with students and teaching pedagogy are closely related to teachers' beliefs. Understanding the similarities and differences among urban educators' beliefs is important for gaining insight into what contributes to the ways teachers understand their social worlds (Romanoski, 1997). Understanding their reality cannot be separated from either their general and content-specific pedagogical knowledge or their understanding and knowledge of their students. The goal of this study includes understanding underlying connections between teachers' beliefs and practices and how they are expressed in the classroom. The following research questions were generated from my pilot study and a preliminary survey of the literature. These questions were used to focus my attention during the collection of data from classroom observations and teacher interviews.

1. What are some factors that influenced each urban educator's career choice?
2. How do these urban educators describe their educational practices and beliefs about teaching?
3. What are the similarities and differences that can be found between urban educators' beliefs and practices?
4. How do urban educators think cultural/ethnic background influences their instructional practices?

### **Theoretical Perspective**

A research paradigm helps researchers conceptualize and frame research within the assumptions and world views that guide their research. Qualitative researchers need to understand the different research paradigms available and design projects within the assumptions of this paradigm choice. Hatch (2002), Creswell (1998), and Maxwell (1996) provide detailed descriptions of differing qualitative research paradigms. My ontological and epistemological assumptions have helped to determine that I am applying a postpositivist perspective as I design and carry out my research. The research questions and the methodology I used convey how I seek to understand urban teachers' practices and perceptions based on my postpositivist ontological and epistemological beliefs.

Ontologically, I believe that approximations of reality can be captured. As a postpositivist, I believe reality is in the world to be discovered, but recognize that humans perceive reality with fallible sensory and intellectual mechanisms (Cook & Campbell, 1979). According to Guba (1990), postpositivist are distinguished from positivists by recognizing that reality can never be fully apprehended.

Epistemologically, I believe that a researcher can maintain an objective position in order to capture a closely accurate portrayal of the social phenomena being studied (Hatch, 2002). I also believe that knowledge and approximations of reality are accessible through teacher interviews, which then can be supported or challenged by observations and additional interviews. In short, although fully apprehending "Truth" is impossible, getting an approximate representation of what can be agreed upon as true is possible.

I used a descriptive research approach to explore how five urban educators conceptualize teaching strategies they view as helpful in fostering effective teaching and learning. The theory

of symbolic interactionism was applied in order to understand the meaning behind urban educators' thoughts and actions. Symbolic interactionism refers to how individuals construct meaning from experiences, objects, thoughts, and ideas (Blumer, 1969) and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

This dissertation research will consist of five qualitative case studies using a symbolic interactionist descriptive approach. Hatch (2002) describes symbolic interactionism as a methodology that fits within a qualitative postpositivist paradigm based on the three principles. Spradley (1979) views symbolic interactionism as a theory that has much in common with the concept of culture. A descriptive postpositivist approach seemed most appropriate because I was seeking to understand what these five teachers identified as their culture of effective urban teaching practices.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 has introduced the problem, background, type of qualitative research selected, research questions, and theoretical perspective. Chapter 2 contains relevant research pertinent to my study. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology and data analysis procedures used in this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings. Chapter 5 includes a cross-case analysis based on the data presented in Chapter 4, followed by conclusions, recommendations, and my reflections on this study.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This dissertation is a study of urban educators' teaching perceptions and practices. This chapter is a review of literature begins with a brief history and description of the context of urban education. Then literature related to teacher beliefs, philosophies of teaching, the pedagogy of poverty, and culturally relevant pedagogy is reviewed. These topics create a context to help readers conceptualize the reality faced by the urban educators who participated in this study. This literature review concludes with a summary of this chapter's salient points.

### **History of Urban Education**

The history of urban education starts with the history of organized schooling. Schooling was not widespread in the early years of America's history because, in the agriculture-based economy of the times, attaining an education past the sixth grade was unnecessary for most people (Altenbaugh, 2003; Spring, 2008). During the early 1800s, wealthy families hired private tutors to educate their children. During this time, religious groups and charitable organizations considered it their duty to establish schools for children of the poor and working classes. The main purpose for establishing charity schools, such as the one opened in New York by the Association of Women Friends for the Relief of the Poor, was to serve as a type of social reform movement. This particular charity school provided free elementary education to over 700 children by 1823 (Spring, 2008; Webb, 2006). Charity schools' central ideology was to teach students moral lessons in order to maintain a well-run society and create what were considered to be good citizens.

Not until between the late 1800s and the mid 1900s did all states start establishing public education (Altenbaugh, 2003). During the 1820s through the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a continual influx of immigrants came to America. First the Irish came, followed by many non-

English speaking groups, such as Italians, Germans, Chinese, Russians, and the Polish. The mostly English residents already residing in America considered these immigrants inferior (Altenbaugh, 2003; Spring, 2008). As the immigrants settled in cities, the city schools became overpopulated. These urban schools, often called common schools, were used to assimilate the immigrants into American culture. However, the immigrants viewed these schools as a means to upward mobility (Webb, 2006). The common schools were designed to provide a rudimentary education, consisting of basic reading and writing skills, not to prepare students to become scholars or professionals (Webb, 2006). These schools were accused of using strict instruction and severe discipline to control overpopulated classrooms. Similar in some ways to common schools, Sunday schools were established to provide children and adults with some form of schooling (Webb, 2006).

In the South, the first Sunday school opened in 1786 in Virginia; and by the early 1800s, more than 2,000 students were attending Sunday school in Philadelphia. In 1827, over 200,000 children are estimated to have attended Sunday schools in the United States of America (Kaestle, 1983). The purpose of Sunday school was to teach basic reading and writing and moral instruction to children and to adults who worked during the week (Webb, 2006). Black adults and children attended these schools in separate classrooms from Whites. The organization of Southern public schools lagged behind other regions of the U.S. until the late 1800s when the economy shifted from agricultural to industrial. By the 1880s, several communities supported taxation to fund grade levels of education (Webb, 2006).

The history of African-American education is significantly different from that of White Americans. After the Civil War, 40% of the South's population was African American, and 409,000 African Americans lived in the North (Webb, 2006). The end of slavery did not translate

into equality for Blacks. In Florida, Mississippi, and Texas in the late 1800s, “Jim Crow” laws separating Whites and Blacks were enacted. In the South, most Whites were against educating Blacks. However, three types of groups offered limited and sporadic education to African Americans: missionary, denominational, and human agency (Webb, 2006).

An example of human agency groups that contributed to the schooling of African-Americans is Native schools. Existing since the late 1800s, native schools were often taught by functionally illiterate ex-slaves (Webb, 2006). Other former slaves opened and taught Sabbath schools, similar to Sunday Schools, to provide Blacks with elementary education. The major goal of these schools was to empower African Americans. Leadership training and a classical liberal arts curriculum were emphasized.

In the North, while the Civil War was still being fought, religion-based institutions or abolitionist organizations most often offered schooling for African Americans. According to historian Altenbaugh (2003), after the Civil War, newly freed slaves were offered more formal and systematic schooling. The Freedmen’s Bureau provided funding for teachers, materials, facilities, and transportation. The purpose of these schools was to help newly freed slaves transition from slavery to freedom. They offered only basic literacy training, instruction in the core ideologies of democracy, and rudimentary coverage of other academic subjects such as mathematics (Altenbaugh, 2003). Southerners were resistant to educating newly freed slaves and were sometimes hostile towards White teachers designated to teach Blacks in the South. The Freedmen’s Bureau’s schools supported less ambitious goals than African Americans preferred: to instill obedience of the law, respect for personal and property rights, honesty, industry, and segregated racial harmony (Altenbaugh, 2003).

In the late 1860s, Northern and Southern Whites created and supported normal and agricultural institutes for minorities (Anderson, 2001). The most famous, the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, was established in 1868 with a focus on segregated industrial education. Hampton's Normal and Agricultural Institute had three basic objectives: work training, rudimentary literacy training, and a strict routine. Manual work training was the core of the curriculum and required students to perform six to ten hours of manual labor per day (Anderson, 2001). Booker T. Washington founded and led another notable normal agricultural institution, the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (Anderson, 2001). Washington became a popular spokesman for agricultural institutions, which Southern and Northern Whites favored. He advocated for Blacks to wait patiently for the advancement of their status and to work peacefully by laboring manually for their race's advancement.

The Tuskegee Institute and Hampton Institute not only trained its students in agriculture and industrial work, it also prepared Black teachers to teach in the South (Webb, 2006). These institutes taught African Americans that they belonged in a subordinate role in a segregated society and that education was useful in preparing them for that role. By 1890, more than 600 graduates of the Hampton Institute became teachers. Tuskegee graduates were instrumental in teaching in public schools and in establishing schools in the South (Anderson, 1978). W.E.B DuBois, the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard, did not agree with Washington's ideologies. He along with others from the Niagara movement, later known as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), aggressively fought for and demanded equal rights with which other Americans were born. The NAACP believed that to educate African Americans in only one area, namely industrial skills, would stall their progress in becoming acknowledged as equal with Whites (Webb, 2006). Furthermore, DuBois believed

that limiting Blacks to industrial education would prohibit what he called the “Talented Ten” from becoming leaders of their race (Anderson, 2001). The “Talented Ten” were defined as the most intellectually gifted students within the African-American race.

In the South during the Reconstruction Period, tax-supported public schools were legislated. Blacks and Whites continued to be segregated as public schools were organized. According to Webb (2006) the conditions in Blacks’ schooling after the Reconstruction Period were poor. For example, African-American teachers were often paid less than half of White teachers’ salaries, schools were dilapidated, and materials and textbooks were old and inadequate. These conditions were largely the result of the federal government’s withdrawing support for African Americans’ civil and educational rights (Anderson, 1988).

Although segregation was a common way of life, it became law as a result of the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. According to that ruling, separate railroad cars for Blacks and Whites did not violate the U.S. Constitution (Webb, 2006). The increasing number of immigrant and poor Whites resulted in funding being diverted from Black schools to support the White schools’ ever growing needs. Also, many local school boards were directed to spend money allocated for education as they saw fit. These factors among others resulted in Blacks receiving separate and unequal education (Webb, 2006).

Starting in the 1930s, the NAACP traveled throughout the South collecting evidence that the education of Blacks and Whites was segregated and unequal. After twenty or more years of study, the NAACP felt that they had collected enough evidence to prove their case (Webb, 2006). In 1954, the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* was the beginning of the reversal of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Chief Justice Earl Warren ruled on May 17, 1954, that separate educational facilities are unequal. Although it did not set a deadline, the Supreme Court

encouraged states to swiftly integrate their education systems. The response to this historical decision varied from state to state. West Virginia, Oklahoma, Texas, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, and Arkansas began to integrate within a few weeks (Manchester, 1975). However, in the deep South, the ruling was openly opposed and resisted for years. For example, In September of 1957, Governor Orval Faubus used the Arkansas National Guard to block nine African Americans from enrolling in Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. In response, President Eisenhower sent in the regular army to ensure the nine students were permitted to enroll. In 1962, James Meredith attempted to apply to the University of Mississippi but faced great opposition and was not able to register until the United States Army got involved and three marshals accompanied him to the registrar (Webb, 2006). Thus, ten years after the *Brown* ruling, desegregation had made little progress. However, during the Civil Rights Era, Black students' test scores began to move closer to those of White students, narrowing the achievement gap. After the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, U.S. public schools became less segregated for a short time (Webb, 2006).

On July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, allowing the federal government to become more involved in decisions concerning public education. Title VI of this act prohibits institutions receiving federal funding to discriminate against students based on race, color, or national origin (Webb, 2006). Also, Title IV allows for federal funds to be withheld from any institution or agency that discriminates based on race, color, or national origin. Furthermore, Title VI permits the U.S. attorney to take legal action to desegregate schools. In 1964, the Supreme Court ruled that more had to be done to accelerate the pace of desegregating schools. They promoted such strategies as forced busing, pairing schools,

consolidating schools, altering attendance zones, reassigning teachers, and using racial quotas (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 1971).

Outside of the South, the problem of *de facto segregation* existed. Local zoning regulations, housing restrictions, attendance zoning and other official actions were designed to segregate minorities (Altenbaugh, 2003). Housing patterns resulted in large numbers of minorities and poor students attending schools in urban school districts. The Office of Civil Rights unsuccessfully pressured school districts to comply with Title IV. Eventually, federal funds were released even though school boards did nothing to comply with school desegregation.

According to Webb, 2006 from 1964 to 1974 the desegregation effort became less important and the emphasis on desegregation waned. In 1974, the Supreme Court limited the extent of desegregation efforts. The *Milliken v. Bradley* ruling prohibited moving children to schools in surrounding suburban areas. In the 1980s, the federal government's involvement in desegregating schools officially ended. During President Ronald Reagan's administration, the U.S. Department of Education reduced its efforts to desegregate schools. In 1990, two rulings indicated that the Supreme Court felt school desegregation had been adequately addressed and that school districts could be exempt from court-ordered busing if they have made good-faith efforts to integrate (Altenbaugh, 2003). White flight and urban sprawl have since increased the number of urban schools with high numbers of minority students. The concentrated poverty level in these urban areas places additional burdens and responsibilities on urban schools that suburban schools are unlikely to experience (Webb, 2006).

### **Urban Schools Today**

The past reminds us how we got to where we are today, but it is also important to reflect on the circumstances that continue to impact how urban education is conceptualized today. This

section draws from literature that enables the reader to conceptualize the contemporary urban education experience. There are discernible characteristics of teachers and students that are prevalent in urban schools. Also, the challenges that teachers and students are confronted with will be explored. The purpose of this information is to provide the reader with a conceptual background to draw from while considering the findings and the discussion included in this study.

### **Teachers**

Pascopella (2006) suggested that classroom teachers may be one of the strongest variables for determining if urban students will be academically successful. According to research conducted by Zumwalt and Craig (2005) the majority of urban school teachers are European-American, middle-class females who have limited experience with students from cultural and ethnic backgrounds different from their own. In schools where the majority of students are minorities, two thirds of the teachers are White. African-American teachers represent about 6% of the U.S. teaching population. In their chapter entitled “Teachers’ Characteristics: Research on the Demographic Profile,” Zumwalt and Craig (2005) paint a picture of who is teaching urban students. According to these researchers, for many urban teachers, their first teaching experience was in urban schools, and their experience in an urban school was confined to the first urban school in which they taught. Also, more than one in five teachers in urban schools have typically taught three years or less.

There is evidence that new teachers leave urban schools at higher rates than teachers working in suburban schools. Haberman and Richards (1990) found that in some urban districts one half or more of beginning teachers leave within two to three years, in contrast to five to six years for all new teachers. The top reasons that teachers leave are job dissatisfaction and the

desire to seek better job or career opportunities (Ingersoll, 2001). Teaching positions are often filled with unlicensed, unqualified substitutes due to the lack of qualified teachers available to fill teaching positions in urban schools (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

## **Students**

Today, urban schools are largely populated by low-income, African-American and Hispanic students. According to the Children's Defense Fund's 2010 report, the number of children living in poverty in the United States is approaching 16 million. According to the Center for Civil Rights at the University of North Carolina, 50 percent of all Black and Latino students attend schools in which 75 percent or more of the students are low-income, as measured by the number of students who receive free or reduced lunch (Children's Defense Fund, 2010)

Being born into and growing up in poverty perpetuates problems that produce more problems. Researchers have found that those children born into and growing up in poverty face a variety of difficulties. For example, they are more likely to be born with low weight, growth, lead poisoning, learning disabilities and developmental delays (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Sharpton, Casbergue & Cafide, 2002). Also, these children are more likely to experience lower self-esteem and emotional and behavior problems (Eamon, 2001). Furthermore, compared to their suburban peers, children from impoverished households are more likely to enter school behind academically. They are also more likely to be linguistically challenged because they have not been exposed to advanced vocabulary and they live in households where literacy and reading readiness are not promoted and actively supported (Strickland, 2001). Urban students' parents often have not completed high school. Finally, unlike middle- and upper-class children, many urban children are not exposed to opportunities, such as museums and summer camps, that promote social and intellectual development (Koppelman & Goodhart, 2005).

## Challenges

Teachers' feelings and thoughts about race affect classroom dynamics and students' academic achievement (Gay & Howard, 2000). Research has shown that it is not uncommon for White teachers to have negative feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about the differences that exist between them and their students of color (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004). Song and Christiansen (2001) found that many urban teachers believed that higher order thinking materials, which are part of the regular curriculum, are too advanced for urban students, who enter school with a limited vocabulary; as a result, these teachers do not use challenging materials. Often when urban teachers are confronted with the notion that they are lowering their expectations and standards for urban students, they feel that they are being attacked and blamed for a host of problems over which they have no control (Vasquez & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

No Child Left Behind and other accountability measures are often viewed as a way to blame students, teachers, staff, and the community for low-performing schools (Vasquez, & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Also, White teachers sometimes embrace "color blind" ideologies. As a result, they diminish the significance of race and act in a way that views racial differences as meaningless. This mindset encourages students and teachers to avoid seeing, hearing, or speaking about race in meaningful ways (Bolgatz, 2005; Pollock, 2004).

Black teachers are expected to be in racial solidarity with their minority students by fulfilling other roles, such as providing an emotional support system and being an advisor and advocate. As a result of this expected solidarity, Black teachers are conflicted between their professional role as teacher and their felt responsibility of caring effectively for their students (Dickar, 2008). This conflict happens when students' expectation of support and advocacy from

their African-American teacher collides with their professional responsibilities. If not defending or siding with the student, the teacher is often viewed as disloyal and as a traitor (Dickar, 2008).

Students attending urban schools also face challenges. For example, African-American students continue to lag behind their Asian and White peers (Heilig, 2011). Urban Black students' scores in reading and math have declined over the years. Furthermore, Black poor students are disproportionately placed in special education and low-ability classes, and they are more likely to be suspended and/or expelled than their peers (Irvine, 1999). High dropout rates, academic underachievement, high transiency rates, and low attendance rates are just a few of the challenges that researchers have found in urban schools (Bartz and Evans, 1991; Grossman, 1995; Domanico, 1994; Kozol, 2005; Heilig, 2011). Home environment and other social issues have far-reaching implications that influence academic success. In urban communities, higher incidences of child abuse, neglect, fragmented families, crime, inadequate health care, and homelessness are likely (Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Israel, & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2009). Parent involvement in school functions, parent-teacher conferences, and school events is often inconsistent. Also, the parent-school relationship is often strained because of teachers' and parents' frustrations. It is not uncommon for urban teachers to feel that their students' parents are uninvolved, and it is not uncommon for parents to feel intimidated by the school environment. Plus, parent-teacher communication is sometimes lacking, and misunderstandings are difficult to resolve (Millian-Perrone & Ferrell, 1993). These challenges and others influence urban teachers' beliefs and approaches to teaching.

### **Teacher Beliefs**

Research literature indicates that teacher beliefs influence classroom practices, teaching methodologies, and expectations for success (Snider & Roehl, 2007; Song, 2006). Researchers

postulate that underlying beliefs influence the relationship between urban teachers and urban students and often hinder academic success among minority students (Grant & Sleeter, 1986). Leland and Harste (2005) found that teachers of children from impoverished backgrounds must see themselves as “agents of change – people who can make a difference in the lives of children” (p. 76). Lee and Smith (1996) feel that the willingness of teachers to take responsibility for their students learning is directly linked to their perceived control over their environment and that, in turn, impacts students’ academic success.

Separating the knowledge of teachers from their beliefs can be difficult because the distinction between where teachers’ knowledge ends and their beliefs begin is unclear (Pajares, 1992). For example, Ernest (1989) concluded that although teachers may have the same knowledge of a subject matter, such as math, they may choose to teach it in different ways. Also, the pedagogical practices of teachers are influenced by whether or not they think their students can grasp the subject matter.

According to Nespore (1987), subject knowledge is an example of cognitive knowledge, whereas opinions related to the best teaching methods or to what influences learning illustrate a second kind of knowledge called beliefs. Nespore also asserted that belief knowledge resides in the episodic memory and originates from experiences or cultural sources of knowledge. Other researchers, such as Goodman (1988), agree with this conceptualization, but also believe that teachers filter new information through past events and are influenced through this filtering process. In a similar line of thinking, Lewis (1990) contends that all knowledge is based on our beliefs and that knowledge impacts our value system. Thus, the way we think about knowledge and beliefs is inextricably linked and difficult to differentiate. Therefore, cognitive knowledge and beliefs are important to consider when thinking about teachers’ beliefs and their influence on

pedagogical practices. From my review of literature about teacher beliefs and practices, six generalizations emerged that are important to consider because they are related to my research about urban educators' perceptions and practices. These six generalizations are summarized below:

(1) Researchers report that beliefs, which play a critical role in shaping teaching practices and are formed early during teaching careers, often persist regardless of contradictions the teacher encounters (Abelson, 1979; Lortie, 1975). The teachers' beliefs can be challenged by time and current information, explanation or experience, but usually persist despite these obstacles.

(2) It is generally agreed that beliefs are developed through the process of cultural transmission (Abelson, 1979; Brown & Cooney, 1982). Cultural transmission involves passing culturally relevant ways of understanding, skills, thoughts, and standards from one person to another or from culture to culture. This transmission is not biological from parent to child but is learned through social interactions and experiences.

(3) Many studies report that epistemological beliefs are central to the way knowledge is interpreted and how one's thought process is monitored (Pajares, 1992; Peterman, 1991; Schommer, 1990). An epistemological belief involves the origin of one's knowledge. Teachers make decisions about what counts as knowledge and what they believe by engaging in epistemic practices (Kang, 2007), which are activities that help people decide what and why they believe what they believe.

(4) Belief systems help individuals understand the world around them and how they understand themselves (Abelson, 1979; Lewis, 1990; Pajares, 1992). Teachers are constantly flooded with messages from their five senses about how they and the world around them should

be. During childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, they also receive messages from caregivers and from religious and political organizations that help them establish how they view the world. Beliefs that are shaped from youth on help people examine new messages that they are constantly receiving.

(5) Pajares (1992) noted that beliefs incorporated into the belief structure early in life are difficult to alter, whereas newly established beliefs are easier to change. New experiences influence our emotions, beliefs, ideologies, and behavior—the lenses through which we see the world for the rest of our life. Over time, we have fewer and fewer new experiences, and the world becomes more common. Our earlier experiences are difficult to alter because our understanding of the world and of various experiences becomes more fixed.

(6) Beliefs strongly influence behavior (Abelson, 1979; Bandura, 1986; Lewis, 1990; Pajares, 1992). It is our expectations and beliefs from previous experiences that predicate how current experiences are perceived and often dictate our reactions. For example, preconceived notions can cause teachers to stereotype certain students. These stereotypes can lead to lower expectations. However, high expectations with a positive attitude can help to foster academic success (Love & Kruger, 2005). These are the six generalizations that shape my definition of the meaning of *beliefs*.

Considering these six basic generalizations, Sigel's (1985) definition is most closely aligned with how I utilize the term *beliefs* in this research project. Sigel defines beliefs as “mental constructions of experience—often condensed and integrated into schemata or concepts that are held to be true and guide behavior” (p. 351). However, as mentioned above, research on what teachers believe is not likely to be influential unless they also behave in a way that supports what they believe. Therefore, my research project includes not only interviews but also

observations. Through these observations, I verified the beliefs teachers expressed during their interviews.

### **Teacher Practices**

As argued above, beliefs are translated into teaching practices. In this section, I utilize various lenses to focus on characteristics of teaching practices that are evident within the urban context. This section begins by looking at parenting styles and how they can improve understandings of teaching practices. Second, I explore different theories of teaching and learning that persist in the field of education today. Third, the pedagogy of poverty will be explained as well as factors that contribute to poor teaching practices that lead to the cycle of poverty. Last, the pedagogical practices of successful urban teachers will be investigated.

### **Parenting Style Theories and Teaching Practices**

To begin exploring teaching practices and how they relate to teachers' perceptions, it is helpful to draw from theories in the field of educational psychology. Parenting style theory directly relates to teachers' instructional practices, classroom social dynamics, and students' achievement (Walker, 2008). In 1967, Baumrind created a simple model of different parenting styles. She discovered that good parenting is characterized by two features: control, or enforcing demands for appropriate behavior; and nurturance, or supporting children's individuality. Similar to a humanistic perspective, nurturance is the process of anticipating and being responsive to the child's needs. She interpreted the control feature as setting high, consistent expectations for appropriate behavior and increasing those expectations based on the child's maturity. In 1978, Baumrind used these features to identify four parenting styles. The authoritative style is highest in control and nurturance. Firm but caring, authoritative parents explain why they have certain rules in place, are consistent, and have high expectations. Authoritarian parents stress conformity

and do not explain rules. They are detached and do not encourage or foster an environment where dialog can occur between parent and child. A permissive parenting style gives the child total freedom. These parents have limited expectations, and they make few demands on their children. Neglectful parents have little interaction with their children and few expectations.

In 1991, Baumrind conducted a study involving these four parenting styles. Following young children into adolescence, she found that children who consistently experienced an authoritative parenting style were more confident, secure and successful in school. Less positive outcomes were found among children in authoritarian homes. Withdrawn and defiant, these children lacked social skills. Children reared in permissive households were found to be more immature, lacking self-control, unmotivated, and impulsive. The worst outcomes were with the neglectful parenting style, which resulted in children lacking self-control and long-term goals. These children were easily frustrated and disobedient.

Subsequent research showed how three of Baumrind's parenting styles, which teachers practiced in the classroom had virtually the same outcomes on students. These three parenting styles are manifested in teaching styles, and teachers often describe their teaching practices in terms reminiscent of Baumrind's parenting styles. Authoritative teaching styles—involving positive, structured teaching practices in a nurturing environment—were associated with student engagement, confidence, and high academic achievement. In authoritarian classrooms, students often performed average academically. Many students did not feel free to make mistakes and learn from them and did not feel they were in a nurturing, supportive environment. Based on these findings, the authoritative teaching style has been identified as a successful teaching practice in urban education (Walker, 2009).

## **Theories of Teaching and Learning**

Teaching styles are the distinct approaches teachers use while trying to transmit information to or receive it from their learners. Finn (1999) and Villegas and Lucas (2002) found that teaching philosophies are based on teachers' ideals, beliefs, attitudes, aspirations, personal experiences, social identities, cultural back ground and teaching experiences. Researchers have identified behaviors indicating that teachers often have a preferred or dominate teaching style (Cothran, Kulinna & Garrahy, 2003; Ladd, 1995). However, researchers use their own way of identifying, labeling and understanding different teaching styles; thus, teaching style definitions vary among research articles. For the purpose of this study, four main teaching and learning theories from the field of educational psychology are described: behavioral, humanistic, cognitive, and constructivist.

Behavioral theory views learning as a habit-forming process. B.F. Skinner and Ivan Pavlov contributed significantly to this theory, which focuses on external factors that influence learning. Incentives such as good grades, praise, or tangible rewards are used to encourage students to supply the right answer; and rewards are usually immediate (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Mastery of the prescribed material is stressed. Direct instruction is the most common instructional method associated with this theory. However, other forms of instruction, such as rote memorization and repetition of desired responses, are also used. Many teachers prefer the direct instruction method because they can cover large amounts of material in a short time (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Researchers such as Axelrod & Kim (2005) suggest direct instruction is the best teaching style for urban classrooms because students lack the prior knowledge necessary to contribute to their learning. These researchers also feel that because so many urban students are behind academically, this is the most effective instructional method to catch them up

with their peers (Axelrod & Kim, 2005). However, other researchers feel that various instructional methods, rather than direct instruction alone, are necessary to meet all students' needs (Joyce, 1978).

The humanistic theory of learning emphasizes developing the whole person (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). If students understand their weaknesses and strengths, they can improve. According to this theory, learning's goal is to reach self-actualization, which is the highest point on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and refers to the ability to reach one's full capability of being (Maslow, 1987). Concerned with teaching their students how to learn, humanistic teachers nurture their students, help them develop a positive self-image, and use positive feedback to motivate them to learn. These teachers also create a safe environment, in which their students feel comfortable expressing their ideas and collaborating with others. In the humanistic approach, students are rewarded intrinsically because they are inwardly driven by a sense of accomplishing something for themselves through the learning process (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Differing from behaviorism (wherein the student is rewarded extrinsically), humanism is centered on creating a need within students to become self-motivated to learn.

Cognitive theory explains how information is transformed, expounded upon, stored and recalled in order to problem solve (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). In line with this theory, teachers provide activities to get students interested in problem solving. Students become more comfortable with their ability to think as the teacher allows them to experience success. Because learning depends on what has already experienced, the teacher provides materials and experiences that can help students have more prior experiences from which to draw (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). In turn, students make sense of what they experience, including new information presented. In the process, they are constructing their own knowledge based on prior

knowledge and what makes sense to them. Teachers make learning more meaningful by using guided questioning, cooperative group learning, and classroom discussions. Furthermore, as students interact with others regarding what they are learning, their learning is enhanced (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010).

Constructivist theories of learning suggest that learners create their knowledge out of the subject matter they are studying rather than receiving knowledge that is given to them by other mediums, such as teachers and/or books (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). In the process, students are continuously constructing and reconstructing their knowledge. This theory is in contrast with the notion that learning involves copying and memorizing information (Kroll, 2004). Many different definitions of constructivism are associated with different researchers (Phillips, 2000). However, constructivist theories can be conceptualized in terms of a continuum ranging from individual to group/social construction of knowledge (Cobb, 1996). Individual construction of knowledge focuses on one's own internal construction of knowledge, whereas social constructivism suggests that before students individually construct and internalize knowledge, they construct it with others in social settings. Eggen and Kauchak (2010) identify four important principles of constructivism. First, students construct knowledge that is logical to them. Second, new information is constructed based on current and prior knowledge. Third, many constructivist theorists agree that group discussions and other forms of social interaction foster learning among students. Fourth, constructivist teachers often capitalize on real-world, hands-on tasks because they believe that those tasks are how most significant learning takes place. Each teaching theory presented has advantages and disadvantages, and some are more suited for teaching certain subjects than others. Each of these theories requires different levels of student participation. Any of these theories can be observed in urban classrooms.

## **Pedagogy of Poverty**

A variety of pedagogical practices, such as direct instruction, cooperative learning, and individualized instruction can be observed in urban classrooms. However, these practices have little to do with what Haberman (2010) called the *pedagogy of poverty*, which is the norm, not the exception, in urban schools. The pedagogy of poverty focuses on keeping and maintaining power and control over students. Haberman (2010) described four points that distinguish this theory, and these are reviewed below. Along with the four points undergirding the pedagogy of poverty according to Haberman, I offer two additional points.

First, according to this pedagogy, the role of teachers is to teach and the role of students is to learn (Haberman, 2010). The teacher feels that students have nothing to contribute to their learning and that students cannot inform the teacher's methodology. Therefore, teachers treat students as if they are empty banks into which the teacher makes deposits. The idea that students come into the classroom with their own way of knowing and with prior knowledge is not considered (Freire, 2006). As a result, ideas, answers, or strategies that differ from the teachers' are often considered to be wrong.

Second, teachers are responsible and in charge of students' behavior (Haberman, 2010). Teachers feel that they have to reprogram students. For example, teachers teach their students how to walk on the blue line down the hallway, hands folded behind their backs without making a sound. Teachers reward students for sitting quietly and responding in the way they are told to respond. Teachers are also rewarded by praise and compliments for having the quietest classes. Students come to school to learn and to be taught the appropriate way to behave.

Third, urban students come from various levels of poverty or privilege, but they are all taught the same way and with the same materials. Therefore, inevitably some students will finish

at the bottom of the class, while others will finish at the top (Haberman, 2010). The school system and teachers do not prepare for students coming from impoverished homes or from academically advanced homes. These two extremes put both groups of students at a disadvantage. The students behind academically are struggling and often fail to keep up with the rest of the class. Those at the top are often held back because they are not presented with advanced concepts that could challenge them and help them grow academically.

Fourth, a cultural disconnect results when teachers from cultures different from their students are not responsive to or accepting of their students' culture, background and cultural practices (Haberman, 2010). Often the students' history, culture, and background are not represented in textbooks or in classroom discussions; and when they are, they are often distorted. Some teachers' actions and words may cause students to distance themselves from their cultural background instead of encouraging students to allow that background to contribute to the learning experience.

Fifth, basic skills are a prerequisite for more advanced learning, but students are not self-motivated to acquire those skills. Therefore, teachers often used direct instruction or rote memorization to engrain basic skills into their students (Pascopella, 2006). Direct instruction is often overused and abused as a way to make up for students who are academically behind. When teacher-dominated direct instruction overshadows other instructional methods, students miss other important learning experiences (Good, Biddle, & Brophy, 1975).

Sixth, teachers are not willing to try different methods of instruction to excite their students' interest. Some teachers use the same dated materials and methods that they used when they first started teaching. They are unwilling to take classes or learn about instructional technology available to them within their classrooms (Clark, 2000). Instead of using the smart

board their school spent money to purchase and install in their classroom, they continue to use the overhead projector as their students go to sleep. These teachers are not interested in using pedagogical practices and methods to make their students excited about learning.

As repeatedly shown by urban students who are behind academically with ever growing achievement gaps, the pedagogy of poverty does not work. However, teachers can make a difference for students living in poverty (Pascopella, 2006). Several researchers have studied exceptional urban educators and their attributes (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Foster, 1993; Pasch et al., 1993; Irvine, 2002; Nieto, 2005). The last section this literature review is a compilation of teacher attributes that have proven to be successful in urban contexts.

### **Practices of Successful Urban Educators**

A review of literature concerning attributes of successful urban educators is important when considering how to improve American urban schools. Several researchers emphasize that the teacher is one of the most important factors in reaching and properly educating students in urban schools (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Pascopella, 2006). Successful urban teachers know what they believe and have high expectations for their student. Below I have highlighted several of these factors featured in scholarly literature.

*Community Engagement.* Seeing themselves as part of the school community, successful urban educators are agents of change and support within their community. In their study entitled *Reflections of Urban Education: A Tale of Three Cities*, Pasch et al. (1993) interviewed 90 urban teachers working in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Detroit. Several of these teachers believed that their classroom success related to their understanding of community's culture. Murrell (2001) notes that teachers in an urban context need to understand the many factors that may influence their students' learning and development. They access and use their community's resources.

Ladson-Billings (1994) proposes that successful urban teachers not only have an understanding of their students' community but also identify themselves as part of that community. They often feel a sense of cultural connectedness with their students and their students' families. Teachers who are part of the community are members of the local churches, attend community meetings, and have a working relationship with their students' parents.

*Caregiver Contact.* Successful urban educators recognize the enormous impact parental or caregiver contact can have on student learning. Therefore, they value their students' parents/caregivers and strive to get them involved in the learning process, parent-teacher conferences, and school events. Successful urban educators see parents as co-partners in students' learning. These teachers make themselves available to parents/caregivers in person and by phone, regularly calling parents and giving their phone number to parents in case they have concerns, questions, or ideas (Peterson, Bennet, & Sherman, 2009). Some urban educators even invite their students' parents to their home or visit their students' homes.

*Professional Respect.* Successful urban educators are well respected by their students and their students' families (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In turn, they show respect to their students and their students' parents (Kunjufu, 2002). Successful urban educators are professional not only in how they carry themselves but also in their response to situations and people. For example, they remain calm when others overreact in difficult situations (Kunjufu, 2002).

*Relational and Interpersonal Expertise.* Successful urban educators have strong relational and interpersonal skills, enabling them to communicate effectively with people. They remember their students' and parents' names and show by the way they listen that they are genuinely interested in hearing what others have to say. Furthermore, they are considerate of others' feelings and opinions. Their excellent interpersonal skills enable them to perceive and respond to

complex situations that may arise (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). As a result of their past experiences, they are open-minded about experiences and opinions.

*Cultural Relevance.* A byproduct of being members of the community in which they teach is teachers' ability to understand how their students learn and to present meaningful and culturally relevant lessons. Effective curriculum for urban schools should include content pertinent to urban learners' needs. One author suggests that curriculum and teaching should include knowledge and skills related to home language, culturally congruent dialects, family structure, neighborhoods, community resources, and cultural differences (Sharpton et al., 2002). Nieto (2002) characterizes this type of teaching as "teaching outside of the lines and building on what excites and energizes students" (p. 212). This characterization suggests that culturally aware teachers view their students' experiences as important and incorporate their students' experiences, culture, and thoughts into the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Successful urban educators often modify their instruction to make it more congruent with their students' culture and are constantly drawing from their students' prior knowledge. According to Murrell (2001), successful urban educators recognize, understand, and respond to the many factors affecting their students' learning. These factors often include hunger, anger, fearfulness, poor health, and transiency.

*Positivity.* Successful urban educators genuinely believe that all of their students are capable of excelling academically. They have positive attitude toward and high hopes for their students. In her article entitled "Successful Pedagogy in Urban Schools: Perspectives of Four African-American Teachers," Stanford (1997) notes that the four teachers she interviewed set high academic standards for their students. Also interested in their students' social and emotional

growth, successful urban teachers help their students set personal goals and hold them accountable for reaching those goals (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

*Dedication.* Believing that all students can succeed, successful urban educators are willing to invest in their students through developing caring, nurturing relationships. These educators have a history of investing in their students' lives. Feeling a kinship and personal attachment to their students is not uncommon for these teachers (Irvine, 1999). Collins (1991) expressed this unique bond between teacher and student as "other mothering" (p. 48). Many times, such relationships extend outside the classroom. As a result, teachers may assume some of their students' physical and emotional needs and feel as if they are an additional parent. Nieto (2005) and Nodding (1992) described caring as a type of love involving respect, high expectations, and great admiration that teachers have for their students.

*Caring.* An "ethic of caring" (Collins, 1991, p. 125) is expressed by successful urban educators through their concern for their students' present and future situations. Successful urban educators' caring behavior includes being warm and affectionate with their students. Daily, they demonstrate a genuine respect and concern for their students' well-being. They also expect their students to care for one another. Cooperative and collaborative learning and teaching strategies are often used to promote engaged student learning. Students are encouraged to help one another through peer teaching. Within the community of learners, each student understands that he or she is an important part of the learning community and is expected to be present and give back to the community (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Stanford, 1997). The classroom atmosphere is fair, friendly, and equitable.

*Problem Solving Orientation.* Effective teachers affirm their students and teach them to be their own problem solvers by encouraging them to be flexible in their thinking. They show

their students that more than one answer to a problem often exists; therefore, rather than praising them for arriving at “the only right answer,” they encourage students to be more dedicated to learning and exploring. Ladson-Billings (1994) summarizes this approach: “Culturally relevant teaching views knowledge as something that is continuously re-created, recycled, and shared” (p. 81). Furthermore, successful educators problem solve and make intelligent decisions when faced with complex and ill-defined situations. In turn, they not only teach their students how to problem solve but also model problem solving (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010).

*Understanding.* Successful urban educators work hard towards knowing and understanding each student on a personal level. Ladson-Billings (1994) writes that effective urban educators recognize differences among their students and respect their individuality. They know which students understand abstract ideas and which need concrete examples. They can also identify different types of learners: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic (Gardner & Hatch, 1989). Gordon (1999) suggests that because urban educators know their students as individuals, they are able to customize their teaching practices to foster success in all their students. They value cultural and behavioral-code differences within their classroom, while not buying into myths and stereotypes (Gay, 2001).

*Sociocultural Awareness.* Sociocultural awareness is the awareness, recognition, and affirmation of one’s own and others’ cultural identity (Gay, 1995). Successful urban educators are socioculturally aware, and view students’ experiences as valuable and meaningful. They prepare lessons with the intention of integrating aspects of their students’ life, experiences, and culture into the subject matter.

*Holistic Instruction.* Lisa Delpit (1995) emphasizes the importance of teaching students the codes necessary to participate in mainstream American culture. These codes include the skills students must master to excel academically and professionally. For example, Delpit notes that students who are taught how to use Standard English when appropriate are more likely to succeed academically than their peers who are not taught these skills. Also, successful urban educators work towards ensuring their students have proficient writing skills because they know those skills help to ensure future success. Middle-class discourse, such as grammar and mechanics, hygiene, and how to conduct one's self with decorum are all examples of what successful urban educators strive to teach their students that goes beyond book knowledge. Successful urban educators' instruction goes beyond academics. In addition to cognitive development, they are concerned about their students' social, emotional, and moral growth (Howards, 2001).

*High Expectations.* Successful urban educators think positively about their students and they have high self-esteem for themselves. Proud to be urban educators and seeing themselves as competent professionals, they dress professionally and always carry themselves in a dignified manner (Ladson-Billings, 1994). They believe that all students can learn, so they have high expectations for their students. Knowing that their students are capable of academic success, they are always looking for ways to help cultivate their students' positive attributes (Zeichner, 2003). Successful urban educators consider the environment from which their students come, but do not feel sorry for them, nor do they lower their expectations. Instead, they set standards high for their students and help them meet goals (Sparks, 2004).

*Facilitation Skills.* Acting as facilitators in the learning process, successful urban educators encourage their students to become actively involved in learning. Knowing that active

involvement is superior to being an inactive bystander, these educators want their students to experience what they are learning (Haberman, 2000). They empower their students by drawing from those students' prior knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

*Sharing Authority.* Successful urban educators do not assert authority over their students by implementing strict rules and punishments; instead, they discuss with their students how best to create an environment of shared authority where learning can occur (Abbate-Vaughn, Frechon, & Wright, 2010). Shared authority helps students to be accountable for their learning and behavior, giving them the opportunity to make choices for themselves.

*Enthusiasm.* Successful urban educators' classrooms are full of enthusiasm and excitement about learning. The teachers may use their dramatic side to captivate their students, and they are receptive and interested in their students' ideas and opinions (Kunjufu, 2002). To be actively involved with their students, they are constantly walking around their classroom and supporting the learning that is occurring.

*Knowledge of Subject Matter.* Successful urban educators are knowledgeable about their subject matter (Ladson-Billings, 1994). According to Darling Hammond and Baratz-Snowdon (2005), what teachers know strongly correlates with how they teach. Expert knowledge of subject matter engenders confidence so that the teachers are not shaken when students ask questions or if they have to present the subject matter in different ways. Adequate knowledge of the content allows the teacher to focus more attention on students' needs, cultural/community factors and the classroom's atmosphere. Successful urban educators are well prepared for each lesson because they take the time to thoughtfully plan and are constantly thinking of new ways to present lessons (Kunjufu, 2002).

*Reflection.* Ladson-Billings (2002) found that to improve their teaching, successful urban educators use reflective practice, the process of critically examining their teaching (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Successful urban educators know their goal is to increase students' learning; therefore, after teaching a lesson, they mentally process what happened during the lesson. They ask themselves if they need to go back and re-teach the same lesson in a different way and consider how they can improve the lesson in the future (Clarke, 2000).

*Focus on Academic Achievement.* When students walk into a successful urban educator's classroom, they know they are there to learn. Successful urban educators are not easily distracted; instead, they use unexpected situations to draw students back into the learning process. They know that every minute is precious. Maximizing instructional, engaged, and academic learning time is vital to achieve the highest level of academic success (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1989). Successful urban educators do not waste time with pointless tasks or time filler worksheets/activities. Academic learning takes precedence in successful urban educators' classrooms Ladson-Billings (1994)

*Technological Skill.* Computer literacy beyond word processing is essential to urban students' academic success. Mecklenburger (1990) suggests that students and teachers can share a rich world of information through text, sights and sounds by way of technology. Technology used in certain ways is more likely to cause students to become excited about and interested in what they are learning. Some research has indicated that using technology can produce as much learning as hands-on learning experiences (Triona & Klahr, 2003).

*Use of Oral Language.* Oral language has been shown to play an important role in the teaching and learning process of successful urban teachers and students (Howard, 2001). Successful urban educators foster a learning environment where communication is actively used

through group discussions and person-to-person interactions. Many African-American students learn best by verbalizing and discussing information. Therefore, successful urban educators structure their lessons in ways that take advantage of students' verbal skills.

*Diverse Teaching Repertoire.* Successful urban educators know how to use pedagogical content knowledge, understanding how to represent subject matter in a way that students can understand as well as what makes topics difficult or easy for students to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2005). They are resourceful and creative in planning and executing their lessons. They use a variety of instructional styles and teaching methods that interest their students and meet their students' academic needs, ability levels, and learning styles. They also know what motivates their students to learn (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010).

### **Chapter Summary**

Urban education's history is important to consider when discussing successful urban educators because it provides the context in which this study is framed. Awareness of African Americans' long history of fighting for educational opportunities comparable to their suburban peers helps in understanding urban education today.

According to scholarly literature, certain characteristics of teachers and students are common within urban schools. Also, the challenges within urban schools are very complex and may explain urban teachers' perceptions and beliefs, which directly influence their classroom practices. Furthermore, correlations exist between successful parenting styles and successful teaching practices. Four teaching styles that are likely to be observed in urban teachers' classrooms were identified and explained through the lens of educational psychology. Optimal teacher practices within the urban context have been identified by a host of scholars. While studies have evaluated teacher practices through surveys and interviews, fewer have included a

direct observation component, and fewer yet have involved multiple-subject urban elementary school classrooms. My study will add to existing research regarding teacher beliefs and practices by provide additional insight into these phenomena as they are played out in urban elementary classrooms.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the perspectives and experiences of urban elementary educators as related to their pedagogical practices. This chapter presents a rationale for the choice of methodology, an explanation of my research approach, a description of participant selection, an overview of the context of study, as well as descriptions of data collection and data analysis procedures.

#### **Rationale**

A qualitative approach was used in this study to guide the collection and interpretation of data. Creswell (1998) describes qualitative research as a process involving an interpretive naturalistic approach. That is, the researcher examines certain phenomena in their natural settings and attempts to make sense of those phenomena by trying to understand the meanings people attribute to them. Much of qualitative research seeks to explore a social problem and how people make sense of it (Creswell, 1998).

A qualitative research approach seemed most appropriate when considering my goals and the characteristics of qualitative research. My purpose was to capture urban teachers' perspectives on teaching as it happens in natural classroom settings that are not intentionally controlled or manipulated for research purposes. As detailed in Chapter 1, my epistemological and ontological assumptions led me to conceptualize my research within the postpositivist research paradigm. This paradigm includes the symbolic interactionist tradition, which is focused on the meaning a researcher can find in everyday local situations and seeks to understand these situations from the participants' viewpoint (Blumer, 1969; Pushkala, 2005).

As I immersed myself in the daily life and classroom experiences of each of the five urban teachers who participated, I sought to better understand from their viewpoint the

following: influences that lead them to become urban educators, their motivation for teaching at an urban school, as well as their teaching experiences, teaching methods, and interactions with students. My role as a researcher was to observe what some would consider mundane aspects of each teacher's teaching methods and to ask during interviews for the teachers' own interpretations of what I had observed. For example, although more than one teacher verbally identified the same teaching method, this method had different meanings for each participant. As a researcher, I was interested in accurately capturing the "multiplicity of meaning in any social situation" that these phenomena held for the teachers in my study (Pushkala, 2005, p. 23).

Most of this study's methodological framework is based on the theory of symbolic interactionism. Hatch (2002) recognizes that many qualitative studies view research through a symbolic interactionist perspective, but few studies use the symbolic interaction method. Three principles of social interactionism are central to all postpositivist work (Blumer, 1969; Hatch 2002). Identified by Blumer, these three principles, which provide ways to interpret human behavior, are discussed below:

The first principle—that humans react to situations based on the meaning they associate with those situations—highlights how meaning is derived from surroundings. This principle is transferable to teaching. The urban elementary school's geographic location, the teachers' individuality, and the students' social and family environment are symbols with various meanings. Teachers teach and interact with their students based on the meaning they associate with these symbols.

The second principle is that meaning arises from social interactions. Culture can thus be characterized by a group's common beliefs and value systems. These shared beliefs and values are learned, deconstructed, and reconstructed as people continuously interact with

the world and with other people. Urban educators have their own culture that influences what they ascribe meaning to during their daily instruction.

The third principle is that people use an interpretive process to derive meaning from the things they encounter. Culture acts as only a guide in understanding experiences. In other words, people will not automatically respond in a certain way because of their beliefs, but their beliefs provide grounded principles for how they might respond. Therefore, the numerous interactions urban teachers have with their students may provide a roadmap for how they might teach a certain subject or what they might consider most important in teaching.

Symbolic interactionism, a branch of interpretative research, evolved from phenomenological research and American pragmatism (Pushkala, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Through the works of George Herbert Mead (1934) and Charles Horton Cooley (1918), symbolic interactionism focused on human beings' sense making and the role of self in making meaning. Spradley (1979) views symbolic interaction as a theory that has much in common with the concept of culture. Herbert Blumer, a sociologist, gave symbolic interactionism its name. Building on the work of Mead and Cooley and crafting the three fundamental principles mentioned above, Blumer made this theory more accessible to researchers. Because this research tradition emphasizes the perspectives and experiences of the participants, it is well suited to this research.

In qualitative work, the researcher influences the phenomena being studied. As noted by Hatch (2002), "Researchers are a part of world they study; the knower and the known are taken to be inseparable" (p. 10). As a teacher myself, I was cognizant that my own pedagogical preferences and ideologies concerning teaching might influence the collection and interpretation

of data. To be reflexive, I was vigilant in recording my thoughts, feelings, and biases in a journal during the research process. I also used bracketing to separate my thoughts and responses from the data during the data-collection process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Bracketing was helpful so that my preferences and ideologies would not influence my data. Furthermore, I concentrated on remaining neutral because capturing the authenticity of each teacher's voice was essential in this research project.

### **Methodological Approach**

Using a symbolic interactionism framework, this research consisted of five qualitative case studies. Applying the ethnographic research cycle (Spradley, 1980), I collected data by interviewing and observing five teacher participants. The postpositivist paradigm required uncovering questions and their answers related to the social phenomena being studied (Spradley, 1980). As questions were answered, new questions were discovered. This cycle began by interviewing the participants about their beliefs and practices. The second step in this cyclical process was to observe participants to collect a different kind of data related to the phenomena being studied. As I continued this recursive research process and completed two more observations, the scope and focus of what was observed began to narrow. The third step required me to carefully analyze the initial field notes and interview transcripts. The fourth step, to discover new questions within the data, was performed only after thorough analysis was completed. The fifth step was to repeat the first step and continue the process until I felt the research goal had been reached.

Based on Spradley's (1980) recursive research sequence, my field work began with interviewing each of the five teachers about their backgrounds, how they became urban educators, what teaching methods they used, and what principles governed their classroom

practices. After the initial interview, I observed each of the five teachers for three full school days, collecting data on their teaching methods and classroom procedures. The first interview and observation were broad in scope. After the first observation, I compared the data from the interview and observation of each teacher to uncover new questions, allowing the data to guide my study's direction. For example, after the first interview I began to see the importance of understanding why and how each teacher became an urban educator which is why the first research question was added and interview questions were created. Next, I interviewed each participant again with questions resulting from the first interview and observation. Over the course of the study, each of the five teachers was interviewed three times and observed three times (for three full school days). Although open-ended questions were prepared for each interview, the teachers were given freedom to guide the interviews to areas they felt were relevant to the research project.

This study involved a multiple-case design, meaning that it contained more than one case study (Yin, 2003). Multiple cases not only add more variability across cases but also make each case's interpretation more compelling (Merriam, 1998). Looking at similarities and differences among multiple cases provides a better understanding of a single case by recognizing how it is grounded (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, five case studies allowed me to explore the uniqueness of each teacher's ideologies and practices as well explore the commonalities that existed across cases (Stakes, 1995). The five cases are presented individually in Chapter 4, and in the final chapter, results from a cross case analysis are described and discussed.

## Participants

### School Selection

I selected Banks Elementary Magnate School (BEMS) by utilizing purposeful sampling as described by Merriam (1998). Purposeful sampling occurs when researchers select a sample from which they can learn the most based on predetermined characteristics. The characteristics applied for the selection of a school for this study were:

- Urban school
- Teachers representative of different ethnic backgrounds
- Teachers representative of a variety of age ranges
- Administrator and teacher willingness to work with the researcher.

In the beginning stages of this research project, I discussed with a mentor my interest in urban educators. She described her positive experiences with BEMS, where her preservice teachers interned. She offered to introduce me to the primary gatekeeper, the principal of the school. During a brief, informal meeting, the principal told me about the school, and I shared my research interest. As I learned more about the school, I realized how much its rich history and context could add to my research project.

After collecting information on BEMS by meeting with former principals of the school, looking at the school website, and reading archived newspaper articles, I recognized that it met the criteria I desired for my research site. First, BEMS meets criteria as an urban school (including free and reduced lunch and identification as a Title I school) as discussed previously in this dissertation. Second, teachers I met at BEMS included both Caucasians and African-Americans. Third, teachers I met ranged in age from their 20's to their 60's. Fourth, on our first

meeting, the BEMS principal was excited and interested in my proposed research. I sensed that BEMS would be a promising and supportive environment for my research.

I sent a letter to the school system requesting permission to conduct my study at BEMS. The school system responded, granting permission. After applying for and receiving Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Tennessee, I met with the BEMS principal in spring of 2009 and further discussed my research project. In the summer of 2009, I met with the principal again to ask permission to conduct a pilot study of my research project with one teacher. After completing the pilot study, I decided to complete my dissertation project at BEMS. In turn, I sought and received the school district's permission to broaden my study to include five teachers.

### **Participant Selection and Informed Consent**

Criterion sampling was used to select the participants for this study (Creswell, 1998). Criterion sampling involves selecting participants that meet some predetermined criteria of importance (Patton, 2001). Clear criteria are determined by the researcher to ensure that all participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied. This type of sampling was used to ensure that attributes central to my study were included (Merriam, 1998). At my request, the school's principal recommended potential participants based on five main criteria:

- Identified by the principal as a successful urban educator
- Teacher in kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade (with one teacher from each grade for a total of 5 teachers).
- Taught at BEMS for at least one year
- Total teaching experience of at least 3 years
- Willingness to work closely with the researcher.

The above criteria were important in participant selection. First, I wanted to focus my research on successful urban educators, and felt that the principal was in a good position to help me identify successful urban educators because she knew the teachers at BEMS well. It is not clear what criteria, beyond what I requested, the principal used to select teachers for this study. I did not use criteria from existing literature that captured characteristics of successful urban educators because I sought to gain the perspective of an average urban school represented in the U.S.A. Many successful urban teachers that are described in literature are not the reality of the majority of teachers teaching in urban schools in the United States of American. Principals are the ones who select and hire whom they deem to be successful urban educators, and this study sought to capture this perspective. Second, selecting a teacher from each grades (K – 4<sup>th</sup>) provided depth to this study and offered differing perspectives that may not have been possible if teachers from only one grade were selected. Third, I wanted to make sure that all five participants had experience teaching at an urban school, so the criterion of teaching at BEMS for at least one year ensured that all of my teacher participants had experienced being an urban educator. Fourth, I did not want this study of urban education to be overshadowed by the perceptions of novice teachers who are just entering the field of teaching. Making sure that the participants had at least three years of teaching experience allowed the participants to focus more on being an urban educator than on being a new teacher. Fifth, before starting this study, I spoke with several of the principal-recommended BEMS teachers to confirm availability for this study. I selected teachers from the principal's prepared list who were interested in participating in the research and willing to contribute their time and insights to the process.

Based on the criteria above, the principal provided me with a list of ten teachers: two kindergarten teachers, two first grade teachers, one third grade teacher, three fourth grade

teachers, and two fifth grade teachers. The first name listed from each grade was arbitrarily selected, and each of these five teachers was contacted by e-mail, requesting brief individual meetings to discuss the project. (See Appendix A for e-mail requesting teachers' participation). Four of the five agreed to participate, while one, a third grade teacher, declined to participate due to an illness in her family. A replacement participant selected from among remaining third grade teachers was identified by the principal based upon the criteria above. This third grade teacher was sent an email asking her to participate. This third grade teacher agreed to participate.

Prior to initiating the study, I met with each teacher participant and discussed with her the risks and benefits of this study. Teachers were not notified that they were selected because the principal thought of them as successful urban educators. Each participant was told that the principal suggested to me that they would be willing to participate in my study on urban educators. All participants were given an informed consent form (see Appendix B) that included information about the study and their rights as participants. All questions were answered prior to signing the consent. All of the teachers granted me access to their classrooms at any time for observations. However, to avoid scheduling conflicts (such as field trips, meetings, or school assemblies), classroom observations were scheduled in advance.

### **Description of Participants**

The five teachers are briefly introduced below to provide readers better insight into the study. Each teacher is given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The participants are described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Jodi, a Caucasian woman in her 20's, completed her internship at BEMS, where she has taught kindergarten for four years. She chose BEMS because of a sense of community within the school. Jodi describes herself as a consistent, energetic, and creative teacher with high standards.

Marlo, an African-American woman in her 30's, travels extensively because of her husband's career and relocates often. She has taught two years at BEMS and four years total. She teaches first grade. Marlo started her teaching career at a very affluent school, but after her first year, relocated and found a job at BEMS. Two years prior to this study, she had job offers at two other schools. However, when the BEMS principal interviewed her, Marlo felt needed and felt a sense of belonging. As a teacher, she describes herself as relational, outgoing, structured, and flexible.

Betty, an African-American woman in her 60's, has been teaching for 41 years, with 38 of those years at BEMS, where she teaches second grade. She started her teaching career at a suburban school, but asked to be transferred to an urban school. Betty is very knowledgeable about BEMS's history and has been directly affected by it. She was one of the teachers reassigned to teach at a predominately White school based on fulfilling the VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. After teaching the mandatory three years at another school, she transferred back to BEMS. Betty describes herself as driven, motivated, and self-sustaining.

Deborah, a Caucasian woman in her early 40's, has taught for ten years. Completing her internship at BEMS, she decided to stay, where she teaches third grade. She feels that she has not always been accepted by some of the parents at the school because of her skin color. However, having been at the school for ten years, she feels more comfortable and is beginning to "come out of her shell." Having no children of her own, she thinks of her students as her children. Deborah describes herself as a communicative, caring, and funny teacher.

Trisha, an African-American woman in her 60's, has been teaching at BEMS for 28 years, where she teaches fourth grade. When the school where she had previously taught for two years closed, she transferred to BEMS with the students who would be bused from the school

that had been closed. Although she could have been selected by the Office of Civil Rights to teach at a White school to diversify the teaching staff within the school district, her name was not “drawn” and so she remained at BEMS. Trisha describes herself as a strict disciplinarian who is “no nonsense” in the classroom.

### **Context of Study**

These case studies explore the thoughts and experiences of five teachers who teach at an urban elementary school that is located in Southeastern Tennessee, a school that has a deep, rich history. A pseudonym for the school’s name has been used for confidentiality purposes. The following sections describe some of the school’s history and how it was selected for this study.

### **Description of the School**

Banks Elementary School was established in 1976. Becoming a magnet school in 1996, it was the school district’s third magnet school program. It is located in the heart of the metropolitan area of a mid-sized city. This school was designated as a “technology” magnet school as part of an Equal Educational Opportunity Plan, which included renovating and partially desegregating urban schools. The school’s 1996 goal was to have two magnet classrooms per grade, representing about one-third of the school’s 750-student enrollment (Mayshark, 1996). By 2009, when data collection for this study was completed, all students enrolled at the school were part of the magnet program.

One of the goals identified in the Banks Elementary Magnet School mission statement is for every student to become proficient in technological skills. BEMS has, among other technological equipment, video and audio labs used for student television and radio-program productions (Mayshark, 1996). All fourth and fifth graders learn to operate video equipment and produce a television show featuring news about the school and daily announcements. Each

morning, the rest of the student body watches classroom televisions as students report the weather, the lunch menu, and other news. With technology being a vital force globally, it is assumed that students and parents will be drawn to this school because of its technological emphasis.

Despite the hope of diversifying the student population, Banks Elementary Magnet School has always been predominately African-American. In fact, the school's history includes a glimpse of African-Americans' fight to achieve equality. A former principal of the school recalls when the city she taught in had two school systems. One school system consisting of Black teachers and students, and the other, mainly consisting of White, suburban teachers and students. These separate systems may have contributed to segregating Black and White teachers and students before the climax of school desegregation issues in 1988 (Bordas, 2008). In 1986, the two school systems merged into one.

In 1989, the city's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a complaint against the merged school systems with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. Complaints alleged that school authorities were discriminating in hiring, promoting and assigning Black educators and in transferring Black students. During an investigation, the Office of Civil Rights found that the school system was in violation of Title VI regarding teacher assignment and student transfers. The county was also in violation of minority hiring and promotion regulations.

In 1990, the county's board of education asked the Office of Civil Rights for one year to develop a plan for bringing the system into compliance with regulations. Appointing a desegregation task force, the school board quickly implemented "The Draw," the process of pulling out of fish bowls the names of White teachers from suburban schools and of African-

American teachers from urban schools for the purpose of transfers. For example, if a White second-grade teacher's name was pulled out of one bowl, a Black second-grade teacher's name was pulled out of another. Then those teachers would take one another's place at their respective schools. Teachers who were chosen were required to transfer for three years to a school determined by the county board of education. If teachers did not cooperate with the decision, they would not be allowed to teach elsewhere in the county's school system. Many teachers decided not to comply with the board of education's decision; and as a result, they are still not permitted to teach in the county's schools. Two teachers in this study were working at Banks Elementary School at the time of "The Draw." However, only one was "drawn" and forced to transfer to another school.

In the summer of 1990, the county law director's office warned the school district that because it could not pass a compliance review, it might be taken to court by the Office of Civil Rights. As a result, during the fall of 1990, the Desegregation Task Force presented a plan to redraw school zones as well as close two high schools, three middle schools, and a dozen elementary schools. In January 1992, the NAACP filed with the Office of Civil Rights a second complaint about alleged inequalities in facilities, curriculum and supplies. In 1993, the county's school board accepted a desegregation plan and incorporated magnet schools to increase White enrollment at the five inner-city schools: three elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school.

At the time of this study, 685 students in kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade attended Banks Elementary Magnet School. The student population was 82% African-American, 13% White, 4% Hispanic, and less than 1% Asian. The staff consisted of 15 African-American and 49 White teachers. Banks Elementary is a Title I School and at the time of this study was identified as

failing to meet adequate yearly progress as measured by federal “No Child Left Behind” guidelines.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

Creswell (1998) mentions four main types of data collection in qualitative studies: observations, interviews, documents, and audio-visual materials. This case study included two of those types. Interviews coupled with observations allowed me to gain clarity about my participants’ actions as well as insights into their perspectives. While I observed the participants, new questions surfaced that I was able to ask during the interviews. When teachers told me what motivated these actions, I was able to use that information to focus future observations. Observation was very important to this research project because it offered a direct encounter with the phenomena of interest, whereas interviewing alone would have provided only secondhand information about what actually happened in class (Merriam, 1998). Both forms of data were essential to accomplishing the aims of this study.

#### **Interviews**

I selected interviews as one of my research methods because I wanted to learn from my five participants by having conversations with them about teaching (Hatch, 2002). The interviews were friendly conversations in which I as the researcher guided the participants to respond as informants. Spradley (1979) mentions three elements interviews should have, and these elements shaped the process of interviewing my participants. First, it was important that as a researcher I went into the interviews with an explicit purpose: to capture what the participant teachers thought about teaching and their conceptualizations of how they taught. Both the participants and I understood that although the interviews had a “conversational feel,” we were talking for a purpose. Although I made great efforts to avoid assuming an authoritative role

during the interviews, I guided and directed the direction of interviews. However, I did my best to allow them to do the majority of the talking, and to let them speak about what is important to them within the scope of urban education.

Second, it was important that I allow each participant to teach me. My participants were aware that I was interested in hearing them talk about what they do and how they see themselves. Furthermore, I did not make assumptions about what my participants meant. When the teachers used specialized words or acronyms during our interviews, I asked them to explain. Expressing ignorance of unfamiliar language allowed me to explore aspects of their teaching culture that would have possibly been overlooked (Spradley, 1979).

Third, sometimes the same questions were rephrased or expanded upon to allow the participants to go into more detail. It was interesting to find that what my participants might consider to be irrelevant was very important to my research project. Furthermore, I wanted them to share as much as they were willing to divulge.

Semistructured, face-to-face interviews were a primary source of data for this study. Planned questions were prepared for each interview, but the structure of the interview was flexible enough to follow the informant's lead (Hatch, 2002). Participants were asked open-ended questions to guide them as they spoke about their perspectives and experiences. Each interview lasted 45 to 50 minutes and was conducted after school or during the participant's planning period. I limited the interview time to promote a positive interview atmosphere and to encourage continued participation and cooperation throughout this research project. With the five participants being interviewed three times each, fifteen interviews were conducted during the data collection process.

Interviews in qualitative research are usually less structured than in quantitative studies. This study used semistructured interviews, allowing more flexibility in how questions were asked, enabling me, as the researcher, to maintain some control by using guided questions (Merriam, 1998). Each initial interview started with predetermined questions were identical in scope and focus (see Appendix C), but unique follow-up questions were asked and sometimes the teacher focused on another issue relevant to this study. Subsequent interviews started with prepared interview questions based on the previous interview and data from observations. After I completed the first interview, one of my dissertation committee members reviewed the transcript to check for biases or ways that I could improve future interviews.

I digitally recorded all interviews and transferred the audio files from my digital recorder to my personal computer. All audio files were then erased from the digital recorder. Interviews were emailed to a transcriber, who signed a confidentiality consent form. The participants' names were never mentioned on the audio recording or shared with the transcriber. New questions and observation focal points came from listening to the interviews a second time. After each interview was transcribed, I read them and made notes. I recorded potential follow-up questions in a notebook I kept on each participant. Transcripts of all of the interviews were placed in a binder and organized by interview date. Transcripts were reread, notes were made, and important comments were highlighted throughout the data-collection process and during data analysis.

## **Observations**

I observed the kindergarten teacher a total of fifteen hours, and I observed each first grade through fourth grade for twenty-three hours. Observations occurred on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Observations started at 7:30 a.m. and lasted until 12:30 p.m. for

kindergarten and until 2:45 p.m. for first through fourth grades. During my first observation in each classroom, I used what Spradley (1980) calls “a wide angle lens” (p. 57). These broad observations helped me take in all that was happening in the classroom and how the teacher acted and reacted. All observations occurred in the teachers’ own classrooms. Observing in each teacher’s natural environment allowed for a firsthand experience, while providing insight into how each teacher understands her setting (Hatch, 2002). I attempted to describe the atmosphere in the different classrooms and drew maps of each classroom, including room arrangement and elements that were on display.

During the observation process, I was a nonparticipant (Spradley, 1980). My focus was on the teachers and their actions, reactions, and their methods of communication. As a result, my participation in the classroom, including interaction with the students, was minimal during this study. Observing each teacher teaching all subjects, I noted how the teachers communicated new concepts, their teaching materials, their body language and tone while teaching, how they positioned themselves in the classroom, the questions they asked, and anything else I considered relevant to my study. During observations, I recorded raw field notes, capturing the teachers’ actions, reactions, and communication methods, including dialogs between teachers and their students. After each observation, I added more detail to the descriptions. I then typed the observations on my personal computer, printed them, and placed them in a binder. These observations provided insights not possible from the interview process alone.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

My goal as a researcher was to acquire knowledge about urban educators that I previously did not have (Agar, 1980). As a qualitative researcher, I became the data-collection instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Through typological data analysis, I used my findings to

answer my research questions. After clear topologies were formed, inductive analysis enabled me to more clearly develop and center my themes. Using cross-case analysis, as reported in Chapter 5, I methodically examined the data across all five cases to discover patterns and connections (Merriam, 1988).

### **Typological Data Analysis**

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) describe typological analysis as dividing data related to the phenomena being studied into groups or categories. My research project involved four research questions, and I used these to organize my primary topologies. Data analysis started with using my research questions to separate the entire data set into categories or groups based on these predetermined typologies (Hatch, 2002). This analysis was helpful in sorting each of the five teachers' beliefs about teaching and observed teacher practices. The analysis of data was guided by four research questions:

- (1) What led each teacher to become an urban educator?
- (2) How does each teacher describe her instructional practices and beliefs?
- (3) What are the similarities and differences among the teachers' practices and beliefs?
- (4) How do the teachers perceive the influence of their own cultural/ethnic background on their instructional practices?

Analysis began after the first interview and continued after each subsequent observation or interview. Data analysis started with highlighting sections of the interviews and observations that answered my research questions. Data elements related to becoming an urban educator (research question 1) were highlighted in purple. Beliefs about instructional practices (research question 2) were highlighted in green. Similarities and differences between instructional practices and beliefs (research question 3) were highlighted in yellow. Influences of

cultural/ethnic background (research question 4) were highlighted in blue. After identifying potential patterns within these typologies, I asked follow-up questions in subsequent interviews that clarified or probed more deeply into the meanings emerging from interviews and observations.

Data from observations and interviews were reviewed with the individual teacher after each scheduled interview/observation. Data were collected one teacher at a time, working up from kindergarten, to first grade, second grade, third grade, and then fourth grade. This process continued until three interviews and three observations were completed for each teacher. Once all data were collected and color coded according to the four research questions, I made four summary sheets for each participant, enabling me to focus on the main ideas of each of the four typologies within each case study (Hatch, 2002).

### **Inductive Data Analysis**

Inductive analysis as described by Hatch (2002) helped me to produce themes concerning urban teachers' practices and perspectives. During the typological analysis, I disaggregated specific data from my observations and interviews that represented specific typologies related to my research questions (Hatch, 2002). I arranged these data in summary sheets of each typology for each individual teacher, and I sorted teacher-specific summary sheets that related to each individual typology into individual piles.

Then, using the axial coding method of Strauss and Corbin (1990), I identified themes and subcategories within each typology. Axial coding allowed me to develop new themes, combine similar themes, and discover links and relationships within and between themes. After combining similar themes, three central themes were established: (1) Becoming an Urban Educator; (2) Being an Urban Educator; and (3) Teaching Practices of Urban Educators. I used

note cards to keep track of the themes and subcategories as they developed, which I linked to alphanumeric codes. I then returned to my raw data (transcribed interviews and observation notes) and labeled pertinent sections with the relevant alphanumeric codes.

With each theme, I used the summary sheets of each typology to help me locate the raw data that represented this theme. I began to chart the connections between central themes and the data (Hatch, 2002). By using the original codes, raw data, and summary sheets, subcategories of each central theme began to emerge. I made note cards with central themes on the top and related subcategories listed below. Within each theme I developed subcategories, as follows:

- 1) Becoming an Urban Educator
  - 1a) What led these teachers to become urban educators
  - 1b) How they describe themselves as urban educators
  - 1c) How they think their students would describe them
- 2) Being an urban educator
  - 2a) Teachers' perception of urban schools and thoughts about teaching in an urban school
  - 2b) Teachers' perceptions of their students
  - 2c) Teachers' major goals that motivate them while teaching
- 3) Teaching practices of urban educators
  - 3a) Teachers' descriptions of their teaching practices
  - 3b) Teachers' thoughts on how urban students learn best
  - 3c) Observable teaching practices
  - 3d) Teachers' perceptions of how culture/ethnicity influences their teaching.

As I looked closely at the data to ensure that each theme and subcategory was sufficiently supported by data, I saw a need to slightly modify my original research questions. I added one research question, modified one research question, and left two the same. This is how I arrived at the four research questions introduced in chapter 1. A new research question: “What are some factors that influenced each urban educator’s career choice?” was added in order to better understand the journey each of my research participants took in becoming an urban educator. I realized that I needed this research question in order to truly understand these urban educators’ practices and perspectives. This became my first research question. My second research question, “What are urban educators’ educational practices and beliefs about teaching?” was changed to “How do these urban educators describe their educational practices and beliefs about teaching?” My third research question remained the same “What are the similarities and differences that can be found between urban educators’ beliefs and practices?” My fourth research question remained unchanged: “How do urban educators think cultural/ethnic background influences their instructional practices?” I then created a conceptual outline for chapter four, in which the findings are presented based upon these four research questions.

### **Cross-case Analysis**

I completed a cross-case analysis that compared the data from each of the five teachers. This type of analysis systematically examines data from multiple case studies to identify relationships and patterns across cases (Merriam, 1988). A table was created listing each participant’s research pseudonym at the top, and the themes that arose from data analyses of each individual teacher were listed in rows. A check was placed in the box by the findings that applied to each of the participants. I reviewed the data that had checks, going back to the original data source to confirm my findings. These cross-case findings are presented in Chapter 5.

### **Chapter Summary**

This research project is a qualitative multiple-case study completed within a postpositive stance. The aim is to provide an understanding of five urban elementary teachers' perceptions and practices within the contexts of their classrooms. Data were gathered using two primary sources: interviews and observations. Data analysis was based on three models: typological analysis, inductive analysis and cross-case analysis. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data analysis and Chapter 5 presents results of the cross-case analysis.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Four research questions guided the collection and analysis of data in this study: (1) What are some factors that influenced each urban educator's career choice? (2) How do urban educators describe their educational practices and beliefs about teaching? (3) What are the similarities and differences that can be found between urban educators' beliefs and practices? and (4) How do urban educators think cultural/ethnic background influences their instructional practices? The five case studies presented in this chapter provide insight into what drives five urban educators to teach the way they do and their awareness of the practices they most often use in their classroom.

This chapter is organized into separate reports based on an analysis of each of the five case studies. Included in each report are three overarching themes related to the research questions: Becoming an Urban Educator, Being an Urban Educator, and Teaching Practices. Each of these themes has subcategories. The subcategories of the first theme, Becoming an Urban Educator, are what led these teachers to become urban educators, how they describe themselves as urban educators, and how their students describe them. The subcategories of the second theme, Being an Urban Educator, are these teachers' perception of urban schools and thoughts about teaching there, their perceptions of the students they teach, and major goals motivating them when teaching their students. The subcategories of the third theme, Teaching Practices, are these teachers' description of their teaching practices, their thoughts on how urban students learn best, what influences how they teach, observable teaching practices, and how they feel culture/ethnicity influences their teaching. As each subcategory is explored, these urban educators' beliefs and practices are presented. In chapter five, the differences and similarities among what these urban educators believe are effective teaching practices will be explored.

Generalizations related to the research questions emerge from a cross-case analysis and are presented in greater detail in chapter five.

Interviews and observations were used to answer the research questions. Data excerpts are utilized throughout the findings to support the generalizations being made. In this report, data sources are identified as (I) interview and (O) observation. Numbers are used to represent the first, second, or third interview or observation. For example, the second observation is coded as (O2).

### **Jodi: The Holistic Teacher**

#### **Becoming an Urban Educator**

Interviews with Jodi took place after school in her Kindergarten classroom, which was decorated with bright colors and had a large round rug in the front center. Different spaces in the classroom featured different centers, including a sight-word center, math center, and reading center. One wall displayed some of the students' work; and the other walls featured the alphabet, behavior chart and number lines. Students sat at tables surrounding the community carpet in the front center of the room in groups of four or five. The teacher's desk was located out of the way in the back of the classroom. Jodi's classroom arrangement was user friendly for her and her students. I was able to observe that her classroom was organized in a way in which learning materials and centers were accessible to students and placed where the teacher had easy access to them. Many of the bulletin boards and other wall displays had purposes other than decorations. Her classroom was neat, orderly and well organized.

During our interviews, she talked with conviction and purpose about her job and her goals as an educator. Jodi had no desire to become an urban educator when she first started college. She began her freshman year studying to become an accountant. After a summer job in

accounting, however, she realized that accounting was not the career path she wanted to take.

She said being an accountant was too isolated. Instead, she wanted to have a career in which she could have a personal impact on others:

*(II) I did not start out wanting to be a teacher; I started out wanting to be an accountant. But after working in that field for a summer in college, I decided this was not for me, and that I needed more interaction with people. I'm a people person. I needed to interact with others.*

This realization caused her to think about her mother's career as an urban educator and the joy her mother found in her interactions with parents and students. Jodi recalled visiting her mother's classroom and being involved in the school's events. She recalled these experiences as positive. Although her mother worked at urban schools, Jodi grew up attending private schools. She felt that pursuing a career in urban education would allow her to step outside of her comfort zone and experience something different. Jodi saw getting to know her students' families and becoming a part of the community as providing an opportunity and a challenge:

*(II) My mother has always worked as an educator in an urban setting. She is from Memphis, and she's worked with the Memphis City Schools, which is a major urban hub. I have definitely been influenced by my mother. As I was growing up, I was able to interact with her students and witness how she really loved the interactions with the parents and the students that are part of being a teacher. When I decided to become an educator, I wanted to think outside of my box because I went to private school. I did have interactions with other people unlike myself from other backgrounds mainly through visiting my mother's school and interacting with people my mother knew. So when deciding where I wanted to teach, I wanted something different than my background. I did have different experiences growing up, but I wanted to work with others who had different experiences than I have had. You're going to find differences among people almost anywhere you go. However, when I came to BEMS it was a totally different experience for me in an urban setting than it would have been in a suburban setting. It is a little bit more challenging here, and I'm always up for a challenge.*

When asked to elaborate on the challenges she expected to find within the urban school setting, she spoke of falsely perceived challenges versus the challenges she actually encountered. She identified falsely perceived challenges as the stereotypes that are placed on the parents of

children attending urban schools. For example, one stereotype is that the parents do not attend functions or meetings because they do not care about their children. Jodi sees this as an unfair judgment of some parents. She feels that most parents do care about their children, but some are unable to take an active role in their children's school because of conflicts with work or other difficulties. She recognizes the real challenges of single-parent households, students faced with adult problems, and nontraditional families. In this research nontraditional is defined as single parent households, extended family as primary caregivers, and families with homosexual parents. Jodi decided to teach at BEMS because, while completing her internship there, she felt that it had a sense of community within and outside of the school. She felt that she could ask fellow teachers for help and resources and receive help from the community outside of the school:

*(11) I did my internship, my primary placement at BEMS. I earned a Masters degree in Urban Multi-Cultural Education. My primary placement at BEMS was in third grade. When I interviewed, I knew I wanted to work for this school district; but this was the school I really, really wanted to work at. This school is unique because there is a sense of community within our school. Also, the surrounding community here in this urban setting is so involved with the school, which is so different from many urban schools. The churches, the daycares and leaders in this community are involved in what goes on in our school and with our families. It's just a community as a whole where everybody's involved. If you need somebody, you know who you can call on; or if you need resources for a child or for your classroom, you know you can call on somebody within the community. There are so many civic groups that are involved with our school to help us out whenever we need it.*

Jodi is an active member of the school's community. While I was interviewing her, she invited me to a community meeting at the local YMCA. She believes in the power of community to reach beyond what a single person can do. She mentioned several ways she became involved with the community, thanks to the help of another teacher:

*(12) One of the newer teachers that was here when I started had lived in the community for a very long time. So through knowing her and then participating in some things, I started getting involved. One of the things we did was we worked out at the church down the street, Saint Bethel and we worked out there; and I met some of the parents and the*

*grandparents and some of the community members through that. Getting to know them and going to ballgames, because her son was in the band at Johnson High School and seeing the kids there helped. Also, I got involved in a tutoring program, which was through a local church, and got to know the minister there. So I worked with the kids here and worked with his kids and things like that. Those are just a couple of ways of getting involved with the community.*

Jodi has taught at BEMS for four years. As a teacher, she described herself as creative and having high standards and expectations for her students. She described her role as a teacher in the following way:

*(I2) I'm the guide. They are the thinkers. They show me where they're at learning wise, and I know where they need to go. I know how to get them to where they need to go, so I'm guiding them along in the process.*

She wants her students to think of her as a teacher who helped them enjoy the process of learning. Jodi wants to instill in her students the joy and commitment to be lifelong learners. She wants all of her students to feel that they are successful and to enjoy learning throughout their school careers.

*(I2) I would want them to say I tried to always make learning enjoyable. I always tried to make connections with learning to things that interest them or things they know about so they understand why we are learning what we are learning about. I don't want them to think, 'Here I am learning this, but why am I learning this?' I try to make the learning useful. They need to know why they are learning what I am teaching them, and how they are going to put it into practice. I want them to think, 'When am I going to use this during my day?' I really hope that they enjoy the learning process. It goes back to helping my students become life-long learners. I have high expectations for my students. There are times when we get frustrated with things or don't feel so successful; but again, I hope that I build them up or we work together to build each other up where they do feel successful. I want them to feel excited about learning, especially in kindergarten. I am setting that foundation where they're not only grasping the concept but trying to help them feel successful about the things that they do so that they do enjoy learning throughout their school career.*

### **Being an Urban Educator**

Jodi defines *urban* in terms of its distinct location, but also in terms of her students' family structure learning needs and experiences. She also reflects on the challenges that she has

faced in an urban school that she doubts she would have faced at schools in suburban or rural areas.

*(I2) The urban setting is different than a suburban setting or a county school because you are working with different types of families...different family structures. The kids come in from various backgrounds. The way parents choose to or choose not to be involved in their child's work or classroom plays a role here. The kids here come with not only different life experiences but different learning experiences and needs. Some come with a little bit or a lot of experience with literacy and the outside world.*

Jodi spoke directly about the daily challenges her students face and how those challenges can be problematic as she strives to teach. She seems to be optimistic in that all parents care about their children and want what is best for them. However, she recognizes the adult problems that many of her students confront. She sympathizes with the situations they are faced with and understands how those situations may influence how they interact with her and others at school.

*(I2) A lot of our kids come from single-parent households, so it's a challenge to get the parent in for conferences. Also, when we do talk about or read some of these books containing two-parent families, the content does not resonate with all of my students. I have had a student who had homosexual parents. It was a challenge because that student's family was different than everybody else's in the classroom, and I had to deal with that. Sometimes kids come to school with adult problems. They've taken on some of the problems they see at home — like Mom's mad at Dad; or Dad's in and out of the house; Dad chased Mom with the car last night; or Mom ran away to another city; or Dad has a new girlfriend that's here and there; or Mama works late at night at certain inappropriate places, and so the children stay with Granny most of the time. It is very difficult for children who are in the middle of those adult problems, and they have to deal with them. Sometimes those problems cause the child to have emotional issues, such as aggression. It's hard for them to concentrate on their work and be here at school when they're worrying, 'Is Mom going to be safe at home, is my little sister going to be okay,' and things like that.*

While Jodi tries to understand what her students are going through, she still expects their best. She believes that all of her students have something to contribute to society. Her goal is to help them realize their value by instilling a sense of respect for themselves and others at a young age. Respect is a central theme that guides her teaching practices:

*(13) I believe that every child can learn to become a productive member of society. That everything we do helps them build on their knowledge. Everything they do should be towards helping them better themselves. Another big thing I want them to learn is showing respect. Respect is a big one in the classroom. I teach my students that we have to be respectful in everything we do. Part of being respectful is always doing our best job.*

## **Teaching Practices**

During interviews, Jodi articulated that to make learning meaningful and enjoyable for her students she focuses on the process rather than the product. She also spoke of striving to help her students make connections in their learning. When asked more directly to describe her teaching practices, she discussed her emphasis on teaching her students through movement. She expressed how she allowing her students to teach one another by way of oral language, as well as encouraging her students to engage in higher order thinking.

*(12) I always want to try to make learning enjoyable and make the learning useful. That goes back again to why am I learning it. How am I going to put this into practice? I also try to use different learning strategies. We use music to help us learn. We use movement with our bodies. I try to make learning very interactive in our classroom. Especially in kindergarten, you always have to keep them moving in order to keep them engaged. We do a lot of talking. We do a lot of “turn and talk,” where it’s not just me talking to them or showing them, but they are talking to each others. They have to think about what they are saying. They have to make the connections to and discuss them with their partners. They have to practice. They have to use higher order thinking and not just tell me the answer but explain how did they came about the answer. I want to know how in their brain they thought through a problem or how they figured out a word or whatever.*

When Jodi was asked to describe a typical day in her classroom, she focused on her teaching methodology, emphasizing critical thinking and drawing on students’ personal experiences by using oral language.

*(11) We always have a lot of discussion time during reading because they’re learning those reading strategies that we do inherently. While we are reading, we do a lot of stopping and thinking as well as making predictions. We do a lot of turning and talking while we are learning something new. We also do a lot with our alphabet. We do exercises with alphabet so they get their bodies moving. They’re not just reciting it and remembering it, but they are experiencing it. It helps when they put it to use with their body, you know, to your head, to your toes, things like that. The little ones need to get their bodies moving so they’re not sitting there for an extended period.*

Jodi also described her class's daily participation in a writer's workshop, giving students the opportunity to draw from and share their personal experiences:

*(I2) I find that students are much more successful when they write their own stories about their own experiences. It's something they know about. Yes, they're going to incorporate the words and the letters that they're learning. They're incorporating the writing strategies that they are learning while writing, but I'm not telling them what to write. It's their stories. They are much more successful when it's their own thoughts. Also, I think they feel a whole lot better about it and more comfortable about what they are writing when it's theirs and not mine or what the book tells them to do.*

When asked how students learn best, Jodi responded by including a combination of seeing, doing, and working. Jodi recognized that this combination is the way that she learns best, and she felt that her learning style influences the methods she uses to teach her students:

*(I2) I think they learn the best through actions and through interaction with the curriculum. They learn best when they are not just listening; there has to be a combination of listening, seeing, doing, working with each other, putting it into practice, teaching one another. All those different activities come into play for their best learning. The way I learn is, you know, I hear it, I see it, but then I need to do it. I need to be in there and be implementing or practicing the skill I just learned. So that's how I really model my teaching. We talk about it for a few minutes, like direct teaching, and then they go try it. They get in there and they do it. They put it into practice.*

During the observation process, I better understood the teaching techniques that Jodi described during our interviews. Also, the observations made me think of additional questions that I asked in subsequent interviews. During these observations I acted as what Spradley (1980) described as a nonparticipant, sitting out of the way at an empty table in the back of the classroom. During the first fifteen minutes of the first two observations, Jodi's students were curious about why I was there; but after a while, I felt that I blended in with their surroundings and became less obvious.

When the students entered the room at the beginning of the day, they seemed to know the routine they were expected to follow. When Jodi presented lessons to her students, they usually

gathered on the rug located in the front middle of the classroom. Early in the observation process, I realized that Jodi valued her students, recognized that they had their own thoughts, and encouraged them to express those thoughts. Before Jodi started her lessons, she gave her students the opportunity to talk. As the students gathered on the rug, I observed the following:

*(O1) Jodi: "This is your time. You are allowed to take this time and talk about anything that you want to talk about with your friends sitting beside you." After about two minutes, Jodi tells them that she is going to read a book to them.*

During a lesson about their letter for the week, the letter "N," she encouraged them on several occasions to turn and talk to their neighbors about the questions she posed that elicited higher order thinking. I observed the following:

*(O2) The teacher holds up a picture of a net. Jodi: "This is a net and can be used to catch fish. Turn to your neighbor and talk with them about a net for a while." Jodi calls their attention back to her after a while. She holds up a picture of a nose. Jodi: "Turn to your neighbor and tell them what a nose is used for." After about one minute, Jodi says, "Good readers what do we use our noses for?" Students tell her that we use our nose to smell and breath.*

*(O3) Jodi: "We are going to go over the quick words on our word wall. We are going to go over the quick word "play" because I know you will want to use it in your writer's workshop. Today our writer's workshop is about what we like to play. Turn and talk with your neighbor about what you like to play." Jodi gives them a few minutes to talk with their neighbors.*

During our second interview, when I asked her why she felt that this learning method was so important, she expressed that she values what her students bring to the classroom and their way of contributing to learning. She also suggested that learning to communicate effectively is an important skill to have in order to contribute to one's community and to society as a whole:

*(I2) One of the goals I have for our classroom is that they become the learners. I want my students to become the active participants. I don't want them to think my thoughts and that the teacher has all the correct thoughts. I don't want them to think the teacher is the one who does all the talking. We do a lot of turn and talk, no matter what it is. My students glean a lot of information from one another. Another goal I have for them is that they learn how to talk to one another, listen to one another, carry on a conversation, and learn how to share ideas with one another. That's why we do a lot of turning and talking,*

*because again, that's part of becoming a productive citizen of society. I want them to learn that they have wonderful ideas that they can share with others, but they also have to learn to listen to others' around them.*

Kinesthetic teaching methods were used frequently. The students used their bodies to learn the alphabet and their hands and arms to sound out words. The students were also given manipulatives during instruction time as described below:

*(O2) Jodi: "When we come to a word that we don't know, we stretch through the word. We start from the beginning and stretch through until we get to the end of the word. This is Duke." Teacher takes out a dog puppet and moves the dog's mouth while she taps on her shoulder, then the middle of her arm, and last her wrist as she sounds out a word. She has the puppet sound out the word "fit." She taps her shoulder and makes the sound of "f" then taps the middle of her arm and makes the short sound of "i" and touches her wrist and makes the last sound "t." The students make the same arm movements as the teacher as they stretch through the word fit. They stretch through the words a couple of times until they are saying the word smoothly. Teacher (while pretending the puppet is talking): "What is the word that we are stretching through?" The students say, "Fit." Teacher: "Now I am going to give you the sounds of the second word, and I want you to stretch through the word with your partner. Here are the sounds: P.....O.....T. Stretch the word out with your neighbor. You are doing a good job, good readers."*

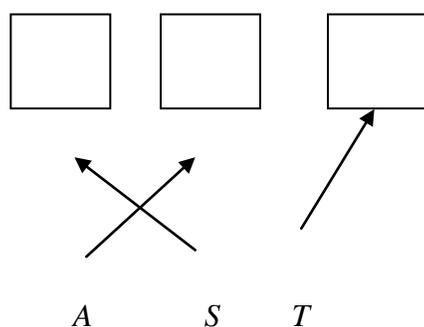
*(O1) Jodi gives each student a paper with a large number 6 on it. She instructs them to put the number six flat on the blue carpet in front of them. She tells them to start with their finger and trace the number six. She instructs them to start at the top and go down and around. She tells them that she is going to give them a fish to practice with. The teacher hands out small rubber fish. She tells the students to make the fish swim down and around to make the number six.*

While I was observing, it became evident that hands-on learning was central to the way Jodi thought about learning and teaching. Above are examples of the interactive or hands-on approach she used during every lesson. During our second interview, when I asked Jodi about her hands-on learning approach, she responded,

*(I2) Instead of just listening or talking, I incorporate other strategies such as working with manipulatives with work or writing. I think that working with kindergarten is creating the foundation for their learning. They have to not only see it and hear it, but also practice it. We do a lot of work with partners where they're talking to one another, but they also are able to use their hands with manipulatives. I think this is just another strategy. It is another way for them not only to practice what they are learning, but also to understand its importance. They also need to be able to teach one another what they have learned*

Jodi acknowledged using direct instruction, but told me that she tried to keep that part of her lesson under ten minutes and focus more on doing group work or individually practicing what was taught. While observing Jodi, I noticed that she frequently used technology in the presentation of her mini lessons, and children played interactive computer games during center time.

(O2) Jodi: *“We are going to use the chunk ‘at’ to make some words.”* Teacher writes the word ‘at’ on the board. Jodi: *“I know that this part of the word says ‘at.’ So if I add a new letter to the front of this chunk, I can make a new word. I want to make the word ‘sat.’ We sat on a bench.”* The teacher turns on a projector. There are three boxes on the screen, and the letters are under the boxes. Using a special pointer, the students have to put the letters in order to make a word. (This is an electronic computer program used with a projector system.)



*A student is called up to the screen and moves the letters on the screen to spell the word “SAT.” The teacher tells the other students to stretch through the word. They touch their left shoulder with their right hand and make the sound of “s.” They move their hand down to the middle of their arm and make the short sound of “a.” Last, they touch their wrist and make the “t” sound. The teacher goes through the words “pat” and “rat” and repeats the process of selecting a student to move the letters to spell the words and has all of the students stretch through the word.*

Jodi did not mention technology when I initially asked her about her teaching strategies.

During our last interview, I brought up technology use in her classroom to hear her perspective.

She responded by saying,

(I3) *We have the smart board and the document camera, and we have the computers that they work on. We use the Leap Frog games on the computer. It seems important nowadays to expose them to technology. I introduce them to it in kindergarten because as*

*they progress in their school career, there's going to be more technology and more ways to use it. Now the world revolves around technology. It's just another outlet, another mode of learning; and there's other ways and other places to get it. They enjoy it. They enjoy using it and get excited about it.*

When I asked Jodi what her students need from her as their teacher, she mentioned praise and encouragement. However, during interviews and while she was teaching, Jodi stressed educating the children about socially acceptable behavior at school and the concept of respect. Jodi acknowledged the importance of teaching her students how to behave and of not assuming that they know what is expected of them:

*(I2) In their household they're used to yelling out, screaming out to make sure they are heard. They want to be listened to, and I have to show them the appropriate way to be heard in the classroom. They need to know what is appropriate at what time. They need to know when an appropriate time to touch is and when they should keep their hands to themselves. Sometimes I have to tell them at school we just have to keep our hands to ourselves. It may be appropriate at home to touch and pull on somebody, and that's how you play. However, here at school someone might take that the wrong way, and people don't like to be touched. You never know. One of the big things to work on within this setting is teaching what's socially appropriate and what's appropriate in what setting. It's about showing respect.*

Jodi did not see the cultural difference between her and her students as a barrier, but she did recognize that more time and effort were needed to better understand and get through to them. Similar to the way she expressed that some of her students need to be taught what behavior is socially appropriate in different contexts, Jodi also tries to capitalize on what is culturally relevant to her students and teach from that perspective. To understand the home environment of her students and the community in which they live, she has sought ways to get to know her students' families and what is important to them. Jodi structures lessons around their personal experiences and knowledge and builds on that awareness. Jodi understands that her cultural background and experiences are different from her students, but she chooses to see this

difference as an advantage in the form of an opportunity for growth and learning for herself and her students:

*(13) I definitely don't see the cultural and the upbringing differences that exist between my students and me as a barrier. I guess I would consider them as strength, but it takes more time. You have to think about how to communicate effectively, and you have to learn and think about where the children in your class are coming from. You have to know who they are, who their families are, and who their parents are. It is important to get to know their parents, and sometimes you have to do home visits if you can't get them to come into the classroom. Once you get to know them and their parents, you can understand where they are coming from better. It helps to know how many jobs Mom is working or to see their family structure. It helps you to understand what has been made available to them. It helps you to know what kind of experiences they have had. You can find out if they have ever been to the zoo so they know what you are talking about if you decide to read a book about animals. You have to understand that. You have to find out if they know anything about farms if you are going to use the concept of farms or farming in your lesson. I've seen teachers come in talking about picking blackberries, and their students don't know what a blackberry is. We live in the city. That is why we need to know what type of experiences they have had. That is why it is real important to know your children, your families, but also to be aware of the community. You need to know what kinds of things are available in the community, so that you can understand what kind of experiences they've had. You also have to listen to your students so they can tell you what they know and what they have experienced.*

Understanding parents, members of the family and the students is crucial to how Jodi instructs her students. She views the students as informing her teaching methods and practices. Because her culture, upbringing, and educational experiences are different from the students she is teaching, she recognizes the need to learn about her students, their families, and their communities.

**Conclusion.** The concept of community permeates the teaching techniques Jodi uses and the way she views what being a successful urban educator involves. Jodi became interested in pursuing a career as an urban educator because she enjoys interacting with people. She thought interacting with people different than her would be challenging yet rewarding.

She is involved in her students' community through local church events and through interacting with her students' parents. She recognizes that knowing who her students are and

where they come from is central to finding ways to teach them effectively. She strives to use her students' personal experiences as a springboard to introduce new concepts or the prescribed curriculum. She also fosters a feeling of community within her classroom during instruction time when students are expected to share their thoughts and knowledge with fellow classmates.

Students often used group learning and hands-on learning under Jodi's supervision. Jodi feels that students learn best by seeing and doing and recognizes that this approach is the way she learns best. Jodi views herself as a guide, and one of her major goals is to help students recognize their potential and become contributors to society. As a result, she teaches the concept of respect as well as appropriate behaviors for the classroom and in other social settings.

### **Marlo: The Culturally Aware Teacher**

#### **Becoming an Urban Educator**

The initial interview took place in Marlo's first grade classroom. Two additional interviews took place in the librarian's office. Marlo's classroom was well organized, and it contained several interactive bulletin boards and posters that Marlo referred to during lessons. The students' desks were organized in groups of four or five; and Marlo's desk was located in the back corner of the classroom.

Her earliest experience with teaching came when Marlo was a teenager and she was asked to teach children's church. While other teachers in the church used a more direct instruction approach, she decided to use a more hands-on approach with her students. She said that she was just copying what her teachers did that made her excited about learning. During this time, she recognized that she wanted to pursue teaching as a career. She also reflected on her mother, who taught kindergarten in the church school. However, her path towards becoming a

teacher was not direct. Before teaching, she was the manager of a Radio Shack and helped support her family. During the time of this interview she was teaching for her fourth year:

*(II) When I was a little girl my mom actually taught kindergarten in our church school. So when I became a teenager they asked me to teach children's church. I actually went from working with infants, which you really did nothing with them, to teaching a five- and six-year-old group. Just seeing their faces light up with the hands-on stuff that I did versus everybody else reading out of the Bible and expecting them to remember was a new and exciting experience. I taught them that way because that's what my teachers were doing at school. I knew that it was activities that got me excited about learning something new. Because my teachers did that for me I did that for them. The kids at my church actually started enjoying coming to my class. After what I experienced while teaching at my church I knew that I wanted to be a teacher. It took me a long time to become a teacher though because I got married, had kids, quit college and managed a Radio Shack for seven years. This is just my fourth year of teaching. But nobody ever believes it.*

Marlo has worked at BEMS for only two years. Prior to teaching there, she taught at a military-based school. Her husband's career in the military caused her to move around a lot, so becoming an urban educator was not a choice. Marlo worked at a more affluent military-based school before coming to work at BEMS. She told me that other teachers were fighting over the teaching position she was leaving at her former school in another state. She researched BEMS before interviewing there and selected it over the other school because at BEMS she felt more of a sense of belonging and of being needed:

*(II) My husband's job in the military has caused us to move around a lot. I pretty much have to take what's given when we move to a new location. When we moved here, I had two offers, this school and Winter Hill Elementary. I just really knew that I was needed, and I felt a sense of being when I came to interview here at BEMS. I knew that I didn't want to walk away. I knew nothing about the kids. Of course, I did research and looked at the ratios and the little maps and stuff they had about the levels of poverty and the levels of richness. However, it wasn't a concern of mine to care about what kind of school I was at. I felt like my desire was to just teach anywhere I could be.*

Marlo felt that she could make a difference at BEMS. She strives to be a role model for her students. As an African American female, she wants her students to see her as a professional adult they can strive to become someday.

*(11) I like being here because I feel like I make a difference. As you see, I try to dress professionally every day regardless of the dress code simply because I think that it shows our children a different role model. I want them to know that they don't just have to settle for any old thing, but they can become whatever they work toward. A lot of the kids aren't seeing African-American women as positive role models, so I really think that a lot of kids now in this school want to be teachers. They want to be teachers because of me, and that touches me so much. It's nothing else, because they don't really know me. They just see me, and that gives them a positive light. I smile regardless of what I feel like. I always hug them. I always tell them that I care about them and what they are doing. So it gives them a different type of thing to look forward to. They may not get positive feedback at home because a lot of their parents are so young, and sometimes their mothers aren't there. Many of our students are being raised by their grandmothers. The students' sense of need makes me feel like I belong here.*

When asked to describe herself as an educator, Marlo said she is the kind of teacher who believes every student is capable of learning. She also described herself as a structured teacher who works hard to form relationships with her students and to let them know she cares about them. Marlo feels that part of caring about her students includes establishing firm rules and consequences that govern her classroom. She indicated that she wants her students to feel they belong to a community within her classroom:

*(12) I firmly believe that every child can learn. I firmly believe that every child has to know that they can learn and believe in themselves. Students have to have a relationship with their teacher, and the classroom has to be like a community in order for children to feel open to talk about where they are struggling. There's nothing I won't try do to reach a child. At the same time, I'm a very structured person. There're rules, there're consequences, and relationships are very important to me in my classroom. I want to know something about every single one of my kids so that I can relate to them. I want them to know that I care enough about them to know something about them.*

When I asked Marlo what her students would say about her, she said she hopes they would say that she believes in them. She also said she wants to be remembered as a teacher that taught them to set life and learning goals:

*(13) I want to be remembered as a teacher who helped my student set goals. One big problem is the kids don't have goals. They haven't sat down and thought about goals they have for their life. They haven't set goals for the year. They haven't thought about goals for anything. They have no idea what it means to have a goal. So we discuss that in my class. We talk about goals from what they want to be when they grow up to goals of what*

*do they want to accomplish in first grade. I want to know what they want to come out of my classroom knowing. I constantly remind them of what they said they want to do. When students don't have goals, they don't strive to achieve anything. Many parents of our students have not set goals for themselves or their children, and they have no expectations to hold their children accountable for. One of my parents told me at the beginning of the year that it put her in awe that her child told her that at the end of the year she wanted to be able to read because she wanted to be lawyer. She told her mother that I told her that in order to be a lawyer she would have to go to school for at least eight years, and she has to start making good grades now. This student's mother told me that it put her in awe because she had never thought of what she wanted to be when she grew up. Her mother was very young, but she went back to college after telling me about that incident. It's really touching to see that little things that you can do as a teacher can transform a child's life and even family members.*

### **Being an Urban Educator**

Marlo defined *urban* in terms of a mindset and also in terms of socio-economic level. She compared BEMS with another school, which was considered urban, at which she taught. She told me the difference between BEMS and the other urban school was that students at other urban school where she taught were impoverished because of their mindset. They did not see value in education. Many of the children at the other urban school understood that their parents got money through illegal activity and did not view education as a way to become successful. Many of those children's goal was to follow their parents' lifestyle. In contrast, she noted that her students at BEMS are eager to learn but are far behind academically.

*(II) There are different kinds of poverty. I think that there are people that are impoverished because of their mind set. At one urban school I taught at, most of my students' parents had lots of money because of their lifestyle and doing illegal things, but the mindset of the people there was not for education. The kids did not care about education because of what they saw at home. The kids were smart, very smart. The parents were not so involved in their lives, but the school was. We had tutoring every day. We stayed after school for tutoring. Teachers were required to do tutoring. The kids weren't really low academically, not at all. Here at BEMS, we have kids that really don't have money. Their parents aren't lying about not having money. They don't have money. Some of the parents of the students that go here do participate in illegal activities to get money, but their children don't know what their parents are doing. They don't know how their parents are getting money. At the other school, the kids knew how their parents were getting money. They'd come to school and talk about it. We had kids selling pot in the bathrooms in elementary school because they knew that behavior. So they weren't*

*really looking for education to be their way out. Here you have kids more dependent on coming to school to get wealth, care, attention, food.*

Marlo indicated that teaching at BEMS has opened her eyes to the real world and has helped her to become a more well-rounded person. She admitted that because she came from a very supportive and loving family, she was less aware of the situations from which many of her students came. She spoke about the challenge of understanding students' misbehavior at school and how it was sometimes linked to problems at home.

*(I1) Being a teacher here has made me a better-rounded person. I really feel like it's made me a better parent even to be here. I have two school-aged children of my own. My son is in the sixth grade, and my daughter is in the fourth grade. Also, it's opened my eyes to the real world. My dad was military. My husband is military. So the real world as I saw it was a traditional family household with mother, father, and kids. My parents and family have always been really involved in my life. I've had friends that didn't have a strong support system at home, but they still had parents at home. I was oblivious to what really happens in regular people's lives, especially in these students' lives. Being able to see it first hand and see that everyone is not on the same page, and without a positive influence in their life they really don't have a good chance to succeed. It's been a real eye opener, a real heart opener. From having children that have been born addicted to drugs to being abused physically, sexually, whatever has been an opener to the real world. The aggression, anger, and inappropriate behavior of students stems from what is going on with them and what they are living.*

Marlo noted that lack of parent involvement is a problem at BEMS, but not a problem at the other more affluent school where she taught. However, she felt that being an African-American teacher in a school with predominately African American students made her students' parents feel more comfortable about getting involved.

*(I1) The first teaching job I had was in a million-dollar school. This school, compared to the first school I taught at, is totally different. The parental involvement is totally different. At the first school, I had parents fighting to do my folders in the morning; but at BEMS I have almost no parent involvement. However, I think I get a different level of respect here at an urban school. By being African American, I get a different level of respect for some reason. I actually do have more parent involvement than what other teachers tell me is normal here at BEMS. I really think it depends on your relationship with the students and the parents and how you are perceived by them, and how you get them involved.*

Marlo's main objective is to help all her students know that they are capable of becoming whatever they aspire to become. She wants her students, as well as other students at BEMS, to know there are opportunities for them that they may not have encountered yet. Marlo wants to expose students to different careers and experiences that they do not know about and show them how to achieve their dreams. She wants to inspire students and be a source of support.

*(13) Impact. I want every child that I encounter, whether it's in my class or in the hallway, to know that they can do anything that they set their mind to. I want them to know the avenues they need to take in order to reach their goals a lot of kids don't know how to achieve their dreams. They don't think that they can do anything other than work at Burger King because that's what Mom does. This is not just a job to me, but it's a calling. I just want to touch kids where they are and let them know they're not alone. They can always come talk to me. They need to know they're important. A lot of kids, believe it or not, do not realize they're important. They don't realize what they can do.*

### **Teaching Practices**

In our interviews about teaching practices, Marlo expressed her love for data and the importance of knowing how to read and interpret test results. She wants her students to know where they are, in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. She is troubled by the fact that often parents do not understand where their children are academically. Parents do not understand how their child ranks within the school or within the nation. She feels that it is important to take the time to teach parents how to read and interpret tests and report cards.

*(12) I love data. I test my students, and then I study the data and see where they need help. After I find out what they need, I get the help right away. We as teachers have to be able to read the data. We need to use pretests our students take at the beginning of the year so we can give our students the help that they need. The most crucial part for me is the first nine weeks. I get the parents in at the beginning of the school year, and I'm fortunately able to do that. A lot of teachers complain about problems with getting the parents in, but you have to be really direct with the parents and let them know how their children are doing district wide and school wide. So to me, the data is the most important thing.*

*(12) I have parent-teacher conferences; and if need be, I have gone to parents' houses. When they can't come here, I go to them. Being able to show a parent what data means is very important. A lot of times they don't understand what their child's report card even*

*means. Being able to explain the report card to them and where their child needs to be and where their child is currently is important to me. I send detailed grades home so the parents will know how to calculate their child's grade and what the benchmark tests measure. I send that data out, but I let the parents know I am here to go over that data with them. They need to understand why this is that and this is that and why their child is in the red over here and this one's over here in the green and yellow and how they can get their child there. Sending home letters in January for possible retainees really gives the parents a big eye opener.*

During observations, I noticed that Marlo expected the children to speak “standard English.” She corrected the children several times and had them repeat the standard English way of saying what they previously said. The following is one such observation:

*(O2) Marlo is preparing for her day. The students are entering the classroom. One student says, “It be cold.” Marlo says, “What it be cold?” The student corrects his grammar and says, “It is cold.” Marlo smiles at the student. (Marlo comes over to tell me that she, along with all the other teachers in the school, just found out that that they have to give a benchmark math test to all of their students this week.) A student is talking to another student beside him and says, “It almost comed on.” Marlo says, “What it almost comed on?” The student says, “No, no...I mean it almost came on.”*

During our second interview, I asked her why she felt correcting her students' speech was important. I wanted to know if it had anything to do with what Lisa Delpit identified as “hidden curriculum,” which can be defined as implicit social or behavioral rules from the dominate culture that individuals raised in upper and middle class environments were never explicitly taught but just seem to know.

*(I2) Most kids learn what they live. They are with me more than they're with their parents most times. They're with us for most of the day; so if we as educators teach them proper grammar, then even though they don't hear it at home, they learn that there is a difference. They have to differentiate between home and school. I really think it's important that they speak proper grammar even though culturally it's the Ebonic language. They have to learn that there's a time and a place for that. The goal is definitely not to lose your culture but to learn that if you don't learn to speak proper grammar then you're not going to learn grammar. I do correct them. I don't allow them to use the slang here that they're allowed to use at home. I don't allow them to say “yeah,” even though it's part of their culture. It's really manners also. They have to have proper manners because this is what they need in the real world. I'm not saying, “Don't embrace your culture, or don't embrace whatever it is that your parents are teaching you at home” because they have taught them the basics. However, they have to be able to*

*Speak eloquently and be able to talk to people. Even with sounds, I don't allow them to say "ther," they have to say "there" every time they see it in a book; and they can't say "an"; they have to say "and." That's really important because they're learning sounds. I really feel like it's really important; as kindergarten and first grade teachers, we need to make them do it now because it's harder to undo what we've done. Grammar is really important. Even with the smartest people, if they can't speak proper grammar, no one respects them. No one wants to listen to what you have to say if you can't speak properly.*

Marlo made it clear that she expects the best from all of her students and holds them to a high standard, often to a higher standard than some of the other teachers do. I asked her for an example of what she expects from her first-grade students that other first-grade teachers do not expect.

*(I2) I met with one of our teachers on the pod last night, and we were discussing writing. Still at this point in the year, she thinks that it's okay for our kids to use inventive spelling. I totally think inventive spelling is okay but not with basic sight words. I feel like it should not be so inventive if they are basic sight words that they see on a daily basis. If I have to read the context to figure out what the child is talking about that is not acceptable. It needs to be so close for me. We as teachers have different arguments. My argument is if you don't push kids to know that it's important to know high-frequency words then they won't grow as writers. A sight word is just that. It's sight. You cannot sound it out. So it makes no sense for children to try to invent the spelling of a word they're supposed to know by sight because most of them don't even sound the same. "Said" is a prime example. It doesn't sound the same as how it is spelled, so they're not going to be able to do it on that level.*

When Marlo was asked to describe her teaching style, she made it clear that she is not a dictator. She feels that her classroom is student driven, with students having considerable input. She feels that it is very important for students to work in collaborative groups. She often uses the results of tests she administers at the beginning of the school year to group children according to ability so that they can teach one another. In turn, Marlo sees herself as a facilitator in her classroom.

*(I2) I'm not like a dictator. I allow the kids to have a lot of input and hands-on involvement. I think it is the best way to go. It's not teacher driven, but student driven. A lot of the things that we do are student driven.*

While observing in her classroom, I noticed that she did expect a lot from her students. Although Marlo was there to help guide the lessons, many times the students were up front teaching their classmates. The students were also in charge of answering the telephone, using proper etiquette, and knowing what they were going to have for lunch that day.

*(O2) Students settle down, quietly go to their seats, and start working quietly on writing the morning message. They are also watching the morning announcements on the television. The menu for hot lunch is in script on the television while music is playing in the background. The teacher asks the students what is for lunch. Several of the students get closer to the television screen and try to read the menu for today. Some students read the menu together for the rest of the class to hear. Marlo helps them read the words “pizza” and “sweet and sour chicken.”*

*(O3) Marlo asks the class to read a sentence she has written on the board: “Have you seen birds?” Marlo asks them what type of sentence it is. One student tells the class that it is a question. Marlo says to that student, “Good job.” She asks another student to come up to the board and answer the question. The student writes, “I’ve seen an . . .” but the student does not know how to spell “eagle” and asks Marlo, who turns and asks the class how to spell “eagle.” The class sounds it out together while the student up front writes the word “eagle” to complete the sentence. Marlo tells the class they are very smart.*

**Conclusion.** During interviews and observations, Marlo expressed a desire for her students to know where they stand academically. Her strategies incorporated teaching her students what society deems to be proper etiquette, behavior and speech which she recognizes as essential to being successful.

Marlo became interested in teaching during her teenage years, but she did not become an educator until five years ago. She did not purposely choose to become an urban educator, but soon knew that this was her calling. Recognizing that the word *urban* is often associated with poverty, Marlo feels that poverty can be a mindset as well as a physical condition. She recognizes the challenges confronting urban students and makes a conscious effort to be not only a role model but also a source of support.

Marlo uses interactive and student-led teaching strategies in her classroom. She encourages students to teach one another and to become self-reliant and independent. She demands that her students set and reach their goals in her classroom. Marlo also feels that African American students learn best through hands-on activities and often uses that approach to teaching new concepts or skills.

### **Betty: The Teacher of Problem Solving**

#### **Becoming an Urban Educator**

Interviews with Betty took place after school in Betty's second grade classroom. Five computers were on one wall of her classroom. Several bins were along other walls with different activities or teaching supplies in them. Posters with the alphabet and punctuation marks were also featured on the walls. In the front of the room above the white board were behavior rules. Her desk was in the back corner of the room, and beside it was a half-circular group table where she held her reading groups. Her students' desks were arranged in a horseshoe shape, with the opening facing the white board.

Betty grew up in the urban community where BEMS is located. She decided to become an educator because her teachers deeply influenced her in a positive way and because she wanted a career through which she could give back to her community.

*(I1) I became a teacher because I basically wanted to give back to the community. Without the teachers that taught me, I think that I would not have wanted to be a teacher. I had really good teachers while growing up.*

Betty graduated from a segregated high school in the community she now teaches. She earned her Bachelors' and Masters' degrees in education from a college in Virginia. After she completed her degrees, she moved back to the community from which she came, wanting to give back by being a teacher. Betty came into the school system as a preschool teacher. The

preschools were held in churches or community centers at that time. Soon the school system decided to shut them down, so Betty taught at a suburban school for two years. After those two years, teachers working at suburban schools were told that if they wanted to teach at an inner-city school they could put in for a transfer. Betty did so and was transferred to BEMS, where she has taught for twenty years. BEMS was established in 1976, but the school was not integrated until 1990. In 1996, the school was renovated and became a magnet school with an open-classroom structure. The goal of the magnet concept was to diversify the student body by providing a cutting-edge curriculum that focused on technology, thus attracting students from outside the attendance zone. The student body has remained predominately African American. A lawsuit in 1990 caused the Office of Civil Rights to mandate equitable diversity of teachers across all school systems. Betty was one of the teachers reassigned to a suburban school with predominately white students. She remembers that time of the school's history this way:

*(II) I taught at Banks Elementary Magnet School about twenty years, and then OCR came through here. Because of a situation with the black and white cheerleading team at a high school, a lawsuit was brought about. When OCR came to our city, they found a lot of separation between blacks and whites. Most of the black teachers taught in the black schools. Most of the white teachers taught in the white schools. In order to integrate the schools, some of the teachers from the predominately black schools and some teachers from the predominantly white schools were selected to participate in a draw, where your name was put in a fish bowl and pulled out, and whatever school was pulled out of the other fish bowl, that was the school you had to teach at. I ended up at a predominantly white school because if I hadn't gone to the school, I would have had to quit. My philosophy was "I'm a teacher, I can teach anybody, and I can teach anywhere." It didn't bother me. So I did go to that school for three years. I did not have a bad experience. I was accepted, and I guess part of that was because of the staff and some of the parents. Some of the parents I knew through associations, through other people in general. So I didn't have a bad experience. After three years was up, I chose to transfer back to BEMS. In those three years, some teachers that were transferred did quit. Other teachers would not come to BEMS, so they had to quit. However, if they chose to come back into the system, they had to come back to the school that they were supposed to go to for three years and then transfer out. The second year they did the draw, you got to choose what suburban school you wanted to go to if you were selected.*

Betty feels fortunate because she has had experience with both suburban and urban schools. She feels that the children that attend these schools are basically the same, but the circumstances into which students are born make them different. Betty felt that although the students she teaches may be on different levels, they are basically the same when it comes to teaching them. Betty is a seasoned teacher and describes herself in the following way:

*(II) I am driven, motivated, self-sustaining. I don't give up easily. I keep trying, even if I fail. I keep trying and think of other things that I can do differently. I don't teach the same way every year.*

Betty felt that her students would say that she is a structured teacher who is organized and who teaches them to be organized and independent. She also teaches her students that they must have manners, yet she does not expect them to accept everything she does as the right way. She allows her students to tell her in a polite way when she makes a mistake.

*(II) First of all I'm structured. I'm very structured. There is a place for everything and everything in its place. I teach organization skills. Their desks must be left straight at the end of the day and paper must be picked up. I teach manners. They have the right to speak to me; but if I'm talking to a person, they have to use their manners and say, "Excuse me," or they have to wait. Not everybody's right in this world, so they do not fear telling me that I did something wrong. They have to learn that yes, adults do things that are wrong too. If they need paper, a pencil, or a book, they have the freedom to walk and get it in my classroom. They do not have to ask me. They must have independence. I cannot recognize each student every minute of the day asking me for a sheet of paper. This is the rule: walk quietly and get it. It's in a certain place. Everything has a place in this room. They have to put it back if they're finished with it. I am not going to clean up behind them. They have my routine down. I have five rules that they must follow; if they break a rule, there is a consequence.*

### **Being an Urban Educator**

Betty grew up in the urban community in which she now teaches. She recognizes that things have changed from when she was a student. While growing up in an urban environment, she did not experience what some of her students go through today. She never lived in what she termed "projects," where some of her students live; but she acknowledges that subsidized

housing back then is not what it is today when considering reputation and living conditions.

Betty also recognized that the term *urban* generally does carry negative connotations such as low income, low achievers, behavior problems, shootings and killings. However, she felt that these connotations do not accurately portray urban schools, which also have some positive attributes. For example, she mentioned that BEMS's curriculum and programs are on the cutting edge and that the teacher-student ratio is down this year.

*(11) Well, when you say urban education everybody knows that means inner-city. They know that it means low income. When you say suburban schools, they know that means upper income. Well, I was raised in the urban area, so urban is normal to me. I did not see a lot of shooting and killing when I lived there. However, things are different today. I never lived in the projects, but some of my friends lived in the projects when I was growing up. When I was growing up, the projects didn't have the stigma they have today. When you say urban schools, people automatically think low achievers, behavior problems, dysfunction; but that's not all of it. BEMS is on the cutting edge of most things. We have a lot of resources here that some of the other schools do not have. We have fewer students per teacher. For the first time in a long time, I have fourteen students in my classroom. In the past, I have had as many as twenty- one students in my classroom.*

Betty recognized that some of her students face difficult situations at home. However, she felt that she does not know their total situation because teachers at BEMS are no longer allowed to do home visits. Plus, she is limited in what she can do to help a student in a difficult situation because she has other students to think about. She often has to consider what is best for the class as a whole and focus less on her students' individual problems.

*(12) We have children with problems. We don't know what the home situation is, we don't know why they do some of the things that they do. You can speculate about what's going on at home, but you don't know. We have a lot of children who have one parent. I have a situation now where a brother and sister have different fathers and one child is obviously preferred over the other. We really don't know what's going on in that household, though. We have a lot of situations where we just don't know what's going on; and if we just had some insight about what some of these children go through, I think we would have a better understanding of the child. Situations can change in a heartbeat. My student's parent died in Iraq. The child and grandmother were waiting for him to come home because the grandmother had custody of him. The grandmother was waiting to turn him over to the dad when he came home, but that didn't happen because he died. Now she has two children that she has to raise that she wasn't planning on raising. She was*

*just supposed to be his caretaker until his father got back to the states. Then you have children whose parents have three different daddies, but all they see is their mama, and their daddy's not in their life. Then you have some children with a mother and a father, and you have some children with just a mother. The family unit really does play a big part in our students' life. We don't know what goes on in the home. Some days some of the students come in all upset and acting crazy, but you can't delve into private lives so much. You can't go over the edge with them and try and find out what is going on, so then you have to refer to your rules. You have to ask them what the rule says if they're upset about something. But you can't stop and talk to them. You have twelve others or fourteen others or sixteen others to teach. You can't console children, and they need more consoling now than they ever have. The situation is what it is. Some of the problems are coming out of the home environment.*

Despite the challenges that many of them face, Betty has high expectations for all of her students. One goal Betty has for her students is that they will pursue higher education or get a job later in life. She recognizes that times have changed from when she was growing up. However, she feels that one thing that has not changed is the fact that students need to be taught to be problem solvers and to think for themselves.

*(12) I tell them, 'You have to go to college. You have to do something. If you don't go to college, you have to go to trade school. I tell the children that you can't always use someone else's brain. You have to use your own brain. I feel like as far as a life skill is concerned if you can't stand alone and make your own decisions then someone might make the decisions for you, and they might be the wrong decisions. So if you're confident in that you can solve this problem, be it negative or positive, it was your decision and no one decides for you I feel that too many kids let other many children influence what they do.*

### **Teaching Practices**

Betty has been teaching for over 30 years, and she has noticed a change in the ways students are receptive towards learning. She feels that technology is influencing this generation of students. The culture of technology causes students to become accustomed to moving at a faster pace, which may cause students to approach learning differently than children twenty to thirty years ago; and society is prodding children to learn at an even faster pace.

*(13) Things have changed, and parents need to understand the things that have changed. So much has changed. During a conference, parents told me that back in their day they didn't get*

*this kind of advanced math until fourth grade. They're right; they didn't. We're already doing multiplication and regrouping in the second grade. When I first started teaching, we didn't teach regrouping in second grade. Regrouping was taught in the fourth grade. The world's moving at a rate that we cannot even begin to comprehend. The media is flashing this and that, and the kids are looking at it. They have X-box 360 and X-box 450. With all the technology like the I-phone and the I-pod, kids are always saying, 'I want this or I want that,' but some kids are not privileged enough to have the latest technology.*

The fast pace of society has caused Betty to emphasize teaching her students to be independent and to think for themselves. She encourages her students to think of their own solutions to academic and social problems. While observing a math lesson, I noticed that Betty encouraged her students to think of several ways to solve the math problem, instead of focusing on just one way.

*(O2) Betty: "If I don't know what  $9 \times 2$  is, what are some ways I can find the answer to this problem?" Student answers, "Write two nines and add them." Betty writes  $9 + 9$  on the board and asks the students what the answer is, and the students tell her it is 18. Betty: "What is another way I can find the answer to  $9 \times 2$ ?" Student answers, "You can draw two circles and draw nine dots in each circle and count them." Betty does what the students suggest. Betty and students count the dots together. Betty: "What is another way I can find the answer to  $9 \times 2$ ?" Student answers, "You can count by twos nine times." Betty asks the class to count with her by twos nine times. Betty: "See class, there are many ways to arrive at the right answer. You just have to think about it. I want you all to learn to think for yourselves."*

*(O1) Student says, "This book is hard, teacher." Betty answers, "What is hard about it?" Student: "It has a lot of word, and I forgot them." Betty: "Class, let's brain storm. We have a problem on the floor. He feels that this book is too difficult. What can he do?" Students in the class raise their hand to try and solve the problem. Betty calls on a student sitting down at his desk. Another student answers, "He can get an easier book." Teacher calls on another student who has his hand up. Another student answers, "He can get a chapter book and just focus on one chapter at a time." Betty: "Very good! Those are some options you can choose from."*

During observations, I noticed that Betty wanted her students to problem solve and come up with two or more different ways to arrive at the desired answer. Betty seemed more interested in the process of the students thinking of different ways to solve the problem than the right answer. I asked her about this approach to teaching in our second interview.

*(12) Sometimes when the students think there is just one way to solve a problem, we always go back and discuss what other way I can do it is. I want them to know there's more than one way to do most things. One thing about teaching students in this generation is that everything is fast. You've got computers, TVs, video games. Everything is boom, boom, boom. So children do not want to do a lot of thinking, and that is part of the problem. They think that you can push a button and that's your problem is solved, but you can't just push a button in the real world. You've got to think about what you are doing.*

Betty seemed very concerned with making sure her students could think for themselves, not only in an academic setting, but also in social or personal settings. She believed that we need to teach students to problem solve and to be independent at a young age. While I was observing, I noticed that she tried to incorporate problem solving into any situation. Later I asked her why she felt that teaching her students to problem solve is so important.

*(12) It is very important to me because if a child is out there in the street when are they going to decide that if they stay in the street they might get run over. You're not going to be everywhere with children. They have to learn what decisions they need to make. When they come and ask me about something, I say, "What do you think you should do?" I turn it back around on them because they're waiting for a yes or no answer from me about every little thing. I don't need to tell them what to do all the time. I need to let them think it out and figure it out on their own, to try to train them to solve problems. This is what's wrong with some of them now; they don't want to solve problems. I told them, "No one's going to tell you, step right, step left, step right." We don't have that mentality anymore.*

When I asked Betty when she started to think about learning and teaching this way, she responded,

*(13) Well, over the years students have changed. Back when I was in grade school, if an adult told you to do something, you just went on and did it. During that time, you didn't have a lot of students acting out. Now students are more influenced by their peers than by adults.*

During my three observations, I noticed that the students spent most of the day doing worksheets or other types of seat work. There were not many interactive lessons that allowed them to move or manipulate materials. Students silently worked on worksheets; and once they completed their work, Betty checked it. If it was not right, students were sent back to their desk

to work on getting the right answer. However, if their work was correct, they were allowed to read or to play an educational computer game. Several students seemed bored and tired and appeared to be rushing through the assignment in order to have time to play on the computer. Betty often went over the directions of two or three subjects at once and expected the students to work independently after all the directions were explained. I asked Betty how she felt her students learned best.

*(13) I think the learning style depends on students. Some students are oral. I have several students in here who are oral students. They like to talk. They can read; but when it comes to work, they want to drag through it, but they can do the work. The work's not easy, but they can do it. Computers have really ruined the students to the point that everything is done on computers, and they don't want to read or do school work.*

Betty did not feel that there is only one way students learn best. However, she did hint that some of her students are oral. I wanted to know her thoughts about the approach to learning I observed most often in her classroom, why her students spent most of the day working on worksheets, and why she frequently used direct instruction. I asked her how she felt about assigning her students pencil and paper work and about using direct instruction.

*(13) When I give you pencil and paper work, that tells me if you've understood and if you've mastered the skills. If you didn't, I need to go back and re-teach or do something different. I find out what I need to do differently to make you understand how to do measurements, for example.*

*(13) Well, I normally use direct instruction to make sure that my students understand what is expected of them. These students have to be kept busy, but you cannot just let it drag on. You have to go from thing to another. I know that someone came up to my classroom and said, "Well, they're just busy all the time." However, if you don't keep them busy, you're going to have more problems. The more I can have them do, and the more I can have them do individually, the more they can learn independently of me. So they're constantly busy. I have to stay on my toes.*

I wanted to know her goal for her students and if this approach to learning was helping her meet that goal. I asked her what she expected from her students.

*(I3) My expectation is for them to be on grade level and for them to do well on standardized tests. Testing is the way the world is going.*

I asked what she meant when she said, “Testing is the way of the world.”

*(I3) Well, because if you listen to the news, you know, everything is about if a teacher’s class still makes the gains, she gets “X” amount of dollars. So it’s going toward teaching test taking skills and not necessarily “learning” for the sake of its fun to learn. It is going towards it is necessary for you to know these skills and for you to master these skills.*

It seemed as though BEMS teachers were under a great deal of pressure to ensure that their students perform well on standardized tests. I asked Betty if she felt pressure regarding her students’ performing well on these tests and how that pressure influences the way she teaches.

*(I3) Yes, oh yes, definitely, definitely, because they’re talking about basing an increase to your salary on whether your students perform well on the test. Teachers definitely feel pressure. It’s a big thing. Like those teachers who got the two thousand dollars extra. We had one come to BEMS because she had high scores. So our students’ scores affected our salary. You teach test-taking strategies every day in some form. It doesn’t necessarily have to be formal all the time. It can be just like reading a story and asking them questions because when they have the test it’s the same thing. You read the story, you read the question, and you find the answer. It’s the same thing. We do think link on computers. It’s the same format. Story, question, answer. You teach test-taking skills every day. You always try to get that in every single day with all subjects because all subjects will be tested, you know, key subjects.*

Betty feels that being an African American has been strength, not a barrier, in her role as a teacher. However, Betty seems to automatically link ethnicity/culture with urban. In several situations, she seemed to use the concept of urban interchangeably with culture/ethnicity, as evidenced when I asked her if culture or ethnicity influences the way she teaches.

*(II) Well, I see my ethnicity/culture as a strength because I was raised in an urban area, and I lived in the neighborhood, and I know a lot of the parents. I go to church with some of them. I never left the urban area. I just think it’s an advantage because I might see a parent in a grocery store because I shop over here. It is a positive for me and a strength for me because I was raised here in this area, I know it. I know where to go, and I know where not to go depending on the time of day.*

When I asked Betty if culture, race or ethnicity influences the way she teaches her students, she did not seem to think so. She indicated that economic status is more of an

influential factor than race, culture or ethnicity. During our interviews, she expressed on more than one occasion that children are children and that she does not feel race matters. Again, important to note is that she seems to use the concept of race, culture, or ethnicity synonymously with socioeconomic status.

*(I3) Children are alike everywhere. I taught even in predominantly white schools. So children are children basically. You do have a little more challenge in the urban schools than you do suburban, and I've taught in both of them. You have a lot of bold behaviors in urban schools. You have a lot of students who might feel neglected in some aspects of their life. There are some things that you try to do something about and some things you can't. Some of students here just want attention from their parents. Some of them want attention from you. This class is smart, but I have some bold personalities in here, and I have to deal with those really strict. Parents are more involved at suburban schools because they want their child to excel fast. They want them to be on top. As far as the urban, some parents are reluctant to come to school, and I don't know exactly why. Things have changed a whole lot. Some of our parents here at BEMS are struggling to stay on their feet. They have more than one child. So it does make a difference. I think parent involvement is a big key*

When asked if she teaches differently at the urban school as compared to the suburban school where she previously taught, she responded,

*(II) No, because the way I taught in the suburban school was the way I teach and is the way I teach at BEMS. So no, it didn't impact the way I teach because kids are kids. You're always going to have some kids who are higher and some kids who are lower in every race or culture. That's the nature of it. Even though people think that the urban kids are lower, that is not true all of the time. Not all white kids are low. Not all black kids are high. Not all white kids are high. Children are children.*

**Conclusion.** Betty expressed throughout interviews and my observations confirmed that one of her major goals was for her students to be able to problem solve and learn to think for themselves. While observing her teach, I noticed that she expected her students to generate multiple ways to solve one problem. Also, she encouraged her students to think about how to solve social problems they encountered. She felt a need for her students to learn how to be independent and to think for themselves.

While teaching her students, she primarily used direct instruction and independent seat work. She did not use the technology (i.e., Smart Board and document camera) that was available in her classroom, and her references to technological advances seemed to have negative overtones. Betty is a veteran teacher with over 30 years of experience. Recognizing the changes since she first started teaching, she felt that things are faster paced and that the change has negative implications for how students are learning.

Other goals that Betty expressed concerning expectations she had for her students were for them to be on grade level and to do well on standardized tests. She admitted that she and other teachers felt pressure for their students to perform well on standardized tests. She also seemed to be concerned about the financial benefits that can be a part of students' good performance on tests.

Betty felt that students are students, and she did not feel that culture, race, or ethnicity influenced the way she taught or the way her students learned. She did feel that being African American was beneficial to her as a teacher at BEMS. During our initial interview Betty stated that she did not notice a difference between urban students when compared to suburban students. However, during our second and third interview she expressed that there were differences between urban students and suburban students. This discrepancy could be due to the fact that she felt more comfortable expressing her true feeling further along in this study. She felt there could be a difference between teaching urban students as compared to suburban students. She felt that urban students are bolder, have more behavior problems, and have parents likely to be less involved. However, she felt that all urban schools should not be stereotyped as completely negative.

## **Deborrah: The Relational Teacher**

### **Becoming an Urban Educator**

Interviews with Deborrah took place in her third grade classroom during her planning period. The desks were arranged in a circular shape around the outside of the classroom, with the students facing the center of the room. Math place value posters were on one wall, and stuffed animals and lots of books were placed around the classroom. Students' drawings and pictures of Deborrah with her family and students were on a bulletin board behind her desk, which was positioned in the front of the classroom. During our interviews, she appeared to be nervous and a bit unsure of herself. During our initial interviews, she did not look at me directly when I asked her interview questions. She also talked in a quiet voice that was unlike the louder voice she used when teaching her students.

Deborrah graduated from college with a degree in botany; but, she could not find a job in her field of study. After several failed attempts to secure a job in her field, Deborrah worked in a law office for awhile. However, she did not enjoy it. Her first experience with BEMS was while she was working for AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps is similar to Peace Corps, but it provides volunteer worker for those who are in need within the United States. She worked with children on several occasions and realized that she enjoyed those experiences. Her aunt encouraged her to pursue a degree in education, so she returned to school, earning her Master's degree in education. She completed her internship at BEMS in kindergarten and second grade. Since that time, she has moved to third grade, and has been teaching at BEMS for ten years.

*(II) Well, my original bachelor's degree is in botany; and when I graduated there was a governmental hiring freeze. There were no jobs to be found like with the USDA or the Forestry Service, even though I had connections through my uncle. I worked in a law office because I thought about law school, but it didn't really pique my interest. I worked for Americorps, and I enjoyed it. We actually came to BEMS and worked on some of the gardens that they had here, and I met the magnet facilitator. In Americorps, we worked*

*with some of the Boys and Girls Clubs around town and some of the Head Starts. I liked working with the kids that we worked with, so my aunt suggested that I pursue a career in education. I did my internship here at Banks Elementary Magnet School, and I just never left. BEMS feels like home to me. I know all the kids here. I guess I feel like I'm starting to come out of my shell. This year I'm the team leader in third grade; and even though that's more stress, I feel like maybe people are starting to take me a little more seriously. I don't know.*

During our first interview, I asked Deborrah to describe herself as an educator. She told me that it is difficult to describe herself, but she felt that she is tough and does not let her students get away with too much. However, she admitted letting other students whom she feels cannot control their behavior get away with inappropriate behavior. She also feels the need to explain herself to others, a tendency she thinks might be a negative trait.

*(II) Obsessive compulsive, the assistant principal calls me obsessive compulsive because I want to explain everything too much. I try not to put up with too much garbage. I tell my students there's a time and a place. I'll kind of let it slide from one because she has a tendency to have issues, emotional issues. She might have just a verbal outburst here and there. I might ignore her looks or eye rolling. A lot of those might just be twitches from her medicine. Then I might ride someone else a little bit harder because the unacceptable behavior is done on purpose. I mean, it's hard to describe myself.*

When I asked her what her students would say about her, Deborrah said that she believes her students love her and they think that she is funny at times. She admits that her job is a difficult one that has affected her health; but she feels she belongs at BEMS.

*(II) My students do tell me that they love me. I can be funny. They have said I'm the best even after I've screamed at them. My stress has been unbelievable at times. They've had me on high blood pressure medicine at times, but I still wouldn't give up working here. I just can't imagine being at another school.*

Deborrah also expressed the importance she places on teaching her students manners and respect. She feels that her responsibilities go beyond instructing her students academically. She wants to help them to become well-rounded individuals.

*(II) One thing I try to get across to my students is respect. I want my students to respect each other and themselves. We also work on manners. That's why I eat lunch with them every day. I don't have to. We have duty-free lunch, but I will eat lunch with them every*

*day and really work on table manners, saying, "Use your napkin. Use your fork." We work on manners. We work on "please" and "thank you" and "cover your mouth." I feel that it's not all academics to me. I think that academics are important, but I feel that my job is not just the academic part of it. There's a lot more to creating a well-rounded person.*

### **Being an Urban Educator**

When I asked Deborrah to elaborate on her thoughts about working at an urban school, she at first felt that there were only slight differences when comparing her school with a school of higher socio-economic status. She recognizes that at BEMS there are many more African-American students, students on free or reduced lunch and less parental involvement compared to suburban schools. However, she feels that BEMS and suburban schools face some similar challenges. In subsequent interviews, her opinion seemed to shift, and she expressed that she felt that suburban schools may get preferential treatment from those higher up in the school system.

*(11) I know compared to my friend's school in the suburbs there's just skin color differences. As far as behavior problems, there's not a whole lot of difference between the two schools. We might have more kids on free and reduced lunch, but as far as behavior, not too much of a difference. I know she has a lot of kids who have autism and Asperger's and oppositional defiance issues and kids who might not have slept real well the night before for whatever reason. So I don't know. I mean, it's just teaching in a school to me. I don't think of it as any different. I don't know any real differences. BEMS is the only school I've taught in. It's the only school I really know. I've visited other schools, but it's the only school I know.*

Although Deborrah has not taught at any other school beside BEMS, during our interviews she mentioned she has visited other schools that are not considered to be urban. When I asked her if she noticed differences between her school and the suburban schools she has visited, she said she had noticed some differences.

*(13) Well, the other schools seemed to have more parent involvement, monetary support; they seem to get a lot of money through fund raisers. Their desks all match. I guess I noticed little things like their carpet's not coming up in places. My friend's class just down the hall here at BEMS is freezing because they have no heat. It's 58 in there now, and they blew a fuse in another classroom from running a space heater. I don't know if it would have been fixed quicker if we were on a different side of town. I don't know if*

*maybe parents had called and complained. Also, some of our reading recovery classes are held in closets. I don't think they would teach their kids in closets at other schools that have more money.*

Deborrah described the students who attend BEMS as transient. She expressed her frustration with losing many students she worked with in the beginning of the year and of working hard to get to know a whole set of new students and catch them up midway through the year. She also depicted herself as playing many roles beyond educator. She expressed feeling a strong bond with her students and taking on the role of a second parent. She is not blind to the needs of her students and tries in conjunction with the school to meet their needs.

*(I2) The students at BEMS tend to be transient. A fair number of them will move around a lot to where their parents can find jobs. I have a student now who is moving to Florida because there are more job opportunities down there. We had a bunch who had to move two years ago when they closed down an apartment complex. It got condemned. Then they refurbished it and reopened it at the end of last year, so we had a bunch of new students come to school here because they had reopened it. We have a lot of moving and shuffling around.*

*(I2) I feel that I'm anything from Mom to Granny to nurse to . . . I don't know. I have one student who hardly ever comes with a winter coat.. A lot of times she'll go to the assistant principal, and he will fix her hair in the mornings because Mom just doesn't seem to have time to even brush her hair in the mornings for her. Then I have some who are in dire need of clothes, a washing machine, and deodorant. We have our Project GRAD person who will do a class for us, and they're getting to be about that age so that we can have her do the class for us on personal hygiene. Then we have others who come in who are dressed to the nines, and all they need is just a little push here and there, and they're good to go. So it just varies from one to the other.*

When asked about the goals she has for her students, she mentioned several. She also mentioned that her goals are often different for different students in her class. She did, however, mention some overall general goals that she desires that all of her students achieve. She wants them to learn how to show respect for others. Her long term goal is to help her students to become productive members of society which means they can adapt to any situation. Her immediate goals include helping her students make it to the next grade

## Teaching Practices

When it comes to teaching practices, Deborrah sees herself as a guide and not her students' boss. She does not necessarily want her students to conform to the way she thinks, but she wants to guide them in their own way of learning in order to meet their fullest potential. She admits that there are times when there is a disconnect between what she is trying to say and how her students understands what she is saying.

*(13) I'm not really the boss, but I'm more of a guide. Like, I kind of show them the way. I don't want to push and force them, but I want to help them get to where they need to be. I don't want them to conform to my way. Like yesterday, we were talking about a short story about animation in our reading book, and I had used an example using Hanna Montana and Mylie Cyrus. I said Hanna Montana is fake, meaning she is a made-up character; but when I said "fake" my students took it as "She's so fake." Well, I couldn't get myself out of that hole, so I just had to finally stop because they didn't understand. My use of the word and their understanding of the word just didn't meet. So I'm going to have to come back later this afternoon and retouch on that. Sometimes as the guide, I just have to stop and come back later, whereas, if I were the boss I might just say, "That's it. I said so." One child and I were having trouble. She was having a hard time understanding, so I just said, "Stop, stop." So we're just going to come back to it this afternoon.*

During our first interview, she told me that she makes an effort to cover all of the learning styles while instructing her students. During observations, however, I noticed that she most often used direct instruction during teaching. When I mentioned what I observed, she told me she has a tendency to lecture more. However, she said that she tries to think about her students' needs and adapts her instruction to meet them. During our interview she told me that she believes that she is preparing her students for what they will experience in middle school and high school in that in those grades teachers often lecture.

When I asked Deborrah how she thinks her students learn best, she told me she believes that everyone learns differently. Deborrah told me that at times she feels that she has to explain the same lesson four different ways so all of her students will understand. She told me that at the

beginning of the year most teachers take time to get to know their students and their needs. She felt conflicted about the question I asked because she feels that there is not one set answer for how students learn best. She feels that the students and their needs really influence how she teaches.

Deborrah feels that her method of instruction is different from other teachers in that she does not assign her students a lot of worksheets to fill out, and she only uses her textbooks when she feels she needs them. However, her reason for not using worksheets surprised me. She told me that she does not use worksheets because the school is almost out of paper and her students do not like them.

*(I3) A lot of them still use their textbooks. I'll pull out the textbooks when we need them, but we don't have very much paper left, so there's no point in doing the worksheets or the ditto sheets. My kids would rather talk than be talked to. I know some teachers talk to them. My kids don't like dittos unless they're like words that are chosen for their vocabulary words and stuff.*

During observations, I noticed that Deborrah would draw the students in by telling them real-life stories or describing genuine situations. While teaching the students about the difference between needs and wants during a science lesson, she told the students a story about her father. In another lesson, she used an example of dividing up a cake to help her students better understand fractions. This example appeared to cause the students to become more interested in what they were learning.

*(O2)Deborrah: "Today we are going to talk about needs and wants. On the board, I have two boxes that have two different headings. The first box has 'needs' written on it and the second box has 'wants' written on it. Let's think of some of our needs and write them in the needs box. My father is a diabetic, and he uses an insulin pump. When his sugar gets too low, his insulin pump gives him insulin. He would not survive without it. That is an example of a need he has. A need is something that we cannot survive without. What are some other examples of things that we need?" Students raise their hand and are called on to respond.*

*(O3) Deborrah: "Today we are going to review greater than, less than, or equal to fractions." Deborrah writes on the board  $1/6$  and  $1/8$  and ask the students which one is bigger? None of the students raise their hand. Deborrah, "Okay, I am going to have a birthday party and I have to cut my cake up into pieces so that everyone can have a piece. Would you rather have  $1/6$  or  $1/8$  of a piece of cake?" Deborrah draws two rectangles on the board. She divides one rectangle into six pieces and the other rectangle into eight pieces and asks the students which piece they would want. Deborrah: "Do you want a piece from the cake cut into  $1/6$  or  $1/8$ ?" Students say they would want a piece of cake from the one cut into  $1/6$ . Deborrah asks them why, and they say that the piece from the  $1/6$  cake is bigger.*

During our second interview, I asked Deborrah why she felt it was important to relate what she is teaching her students to real-life situations. She answered in the following way:

*(I3) Well, if you don't relate what you teach to what they know, it's just totally abstract to them and just completely over their head. I try to relate a lot of things to either myself or to them so they know this is real. For example, we were reading a story last week about carousel horses, and one of the statements in the story was "Original wooden carousel horses can go for anywhere between two hundred and eighty thousand dollars." One of my students made the comment that two hundred dollars wasn't a lot of money, and I said, "Stop right there." That told me that that person did not have a concept of what two hundred dollars actually was, so I said, "Okay, two hundred dollars — two hundred dollars will cover my electric bill for this month. Two hundred dollars is about what it costs every month for me to have insurance for my car. Two hundred dollars is what my satellite TV is with all the movie channels." I was just kind of going through a list, like, you know, two hundred dollars is, you know, this, this, this. After about ten minutes she kind of had an idea of what two hundred dollars really was. That was just a number to her. Now, whether she'll remember in fourth grade what the concept of two hundred dollars is I don't know, but right now she knows that two hundred dollars can cover a lot, at least for someone who's having to pay bills and buy groceries and things like that. I try to relate it to real life.*

There were other times when Deborrah related academic concepts to real life scenarios to help her students make a connection between prior knowledge and what was being taught. This help the students build a bridge between what they did not understand to concepts they were familiar with.

There were times when Deborrah did not hold her students accountable for correcting or taking ownership for their negative behavior. While observing, I noticed a few incidences when students' behaved in a way that was aggressive towards other students. Deborrah tried to

encourage her students to take ownership of their behavior, but if the student refused to do so, Deborrah seemed to back down and the matter was not pursued any further. Also, students were encouraged to participate in classroom discussions, but if they refused to engage in the discussion, they were given excuses for why it was okay for them to not participate. There was a pattern of Deborrah encouraging her students to do what she asked of them, but she often compromised and did not follow through on her original reaction to the incident. She appeared to want her students to like her and this often took precedence in situations that arose while I observed.

*(O2) Deborrah gets a phone call from the office. After the phone call, she hangs up the phone and calls a student over to her desk. She asks him if he was pushing and hitting other students in the bathroom. The student tells her that he did not do it. Deborrah tells the students that the office just called, and they saw him on the video camera pushing and hitting students in the bathroom. She asks him if he is sure he didn't do it. The student tells her again that he did not do it. The teacher asks the student if he was in the bathroom about ten minutes ago, and the student tells her that he was. Deborrah asks him again if he is sure he didn't do it. He shakes his head no. Deborrah says, "Well let's just say it was a case of mistaken identity." She tells the student to go sit down.*

*(O3) Deborrah is going over a vocabulary list with her students and asks one student what the word "confusion" means. The student pulls her coat up over her head and puts her head on her desk. Deborrah walks over to where the student is sitting and bends down and talks to her quietly. The student does not respond, so Deborrah says, "Well Kim is just feeling shy today. That's okay she doesn't have to answer." The student remains with the coat over her head for about twenty minutes and is allowed to just sit their undisturbed while the other students are working.*

In our third interview, I asked Deborrah if she feels the need to hold her students accountable. She told me that she does hold those students who are capable of performing accountable. However, for students who are not performing on grade level, she tries to encourage them and help them, but does not feel that "accountable" is the word that she would use. Deborrah also feels that many factors influence how her students perform academically, especially on standardized test. She feels that standardized tests do not consider all that the

students go through, and that should be considered. Deborrah feels like academics and achievement tests are not necessarily priorities, with all that is going on with her students.

*(13) I don't think some of the big wigs who are studying the test scores understand that there's a lot more going on than taking a test and academics. It's like, you know, if I didn't sleep last night, I'm not going to be in the mood to teach a great lesson today, and my kids are going to know it. They're going to be, "What's wrong, what's wrong?" They're not going to want to learn. They're going to want to be petting on me. And if I know that Angel was back in the emergency room getting glass out of her finger because her mom and step-dad had a fight and threw glass at each other, I'm going to be petting on her. It's a roller coaster.*

During our first interview, I asked Deborrah if her or her students' culture or ethnicity influences the way she teaches. She told me that it does not directly influence how she instructs her students. Deborrah also told me that there are times when she believes that her students forget that she is white and consider her to be just like them. She also mentioned how she has picked up on some music, words, and sayings that may be linked to her students' culture; but she does not feel that those factors influence the way she teaches her students. She did discuss a difficulty she had when she first started teaching at BEMS. Some parents did not want their child to be in her class because she is white. After working at BEMS for ten years, Deborrah no longer considers her race to be a problem and feels accepted by most parents and students.

*(12) Well, I know that I have had problems with parents in the past because of my being white. They did not like that. I've not had anyone pulled out of my class. They just said because I was white. They never said it to me specifically. It was second hand. No one's ever been pulled from my class, but they didn't make life easy, like if I had problems with their child they would not back me up. Not so much that any more since I, I guess learned how to roll with the punches I guess.*

**Conclusion:** Deborrah became a teacher after not being able to find a job in her field of undergraduate study. She completed her internship at BEMS and is completing her tenth year of teaching there. Although parents did not accept her at first because she is white, she feels that

teaching there for ten years has allowed parents and the community to accept and trust her. She feels comfortable there now.

Deborrah feels that there is more to teaching her students than just academics. She wants her students to become well-rounded people and go on to college or into the work force. Sometimes, however, the way she related to some of her students appeared to contradict this goal. She seemed to be more lenient towards some of her students, whom she felt could not perform. She seemed to feel sorry for some of her students and tried to make up for their plight in life by not holding them accountable.

Deborrah used direct instruction more frequently than other methods of instruction. When asked about why she used this method over others, she told me that she feels she is preparing her students for what is inevitable in high school and college. It seemed helpful to her students when she used real-life examples and situations in lessons. She wants her students to know and understand what they are studying, and she wants to make learning real to them.

She does not feel that ethnicity or culture influences how she teaches or how her students learn. She does not see significant differences between students in an urban community and those from a suburban environment. She did mention that students in a suburban school may get preferential treatment when it comes to making sure their school has proper heating, space or maintenance.

### **Trisha: The Authoritarian Teacher**

#### **Becoming an Urban Educator**

Interviews with Trisha occurred in her fifth grade classroom after school. Her classroom had many faded homemade posters on the wall, along with several posters of famous African Americans, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass. Her students' desks were in

rows of two facing the white board in the front. In the front center of the room was an overhead projector that was not being used at the time. Trisha's desk was located in the front left of the classroom. During our interviews, Trisha seemed very confident. She mentioned several times that this was her last year teaching and that she was looking forward to retirement. Trisha was very direct during the interviews. Many times, I asked her to elaborate because her answers to my questions were short.

Trisha originally wanted to become a nurse and had a scholarship to go to nursing school. However, she did not feel that she would be successful doing the science and math required for a medical career, so she opted to become a teacher. Another factor that influenced her choice was that she remembered the great teachers she had while growing up in an inner-city area.

*(II) I actually got a scholarship to go to St. Mary's School of Nursing. Now that was my plan, but somewhere in between my going to school and my enrolling, I changed my mind. I just decided that nursing was going to be a hard career for me because I didn't really have the math and science background. I just thought I'd be more successful at something a little bit more social I guess. Also, I had great teachers when I was growing up. I always looked up to them as great role models. They were about the only role models that I came in contact with as a young person. I grew up in an inner-city area, so teachers and maybe a doctor were about the only people I really ever came across professionally. I guess it was just by example. I just thought they presented themselves as professionals, and I liked that idea of having a professional career.*

She remembers several of her middle school teachers encouraging her to set goals for herself. She also remembers walking by a college everyday to get to her middle school, and she feels that exposure motivated her and influenced her decision to become a teacher. She wanted to teach in an urban school because she grew up in an urban environment and believes that teaching in an urban school is a way she can give back to her community.

*(II) Well, personally this is where I wanted to teach. I wanted to give back to my community by becoming a teacher. I remember as a child the challenges that were there for me as an inner-city kid. A lot of times if kids from the inner-city don't have somebody that gives them that time and attention and that extra effort to say, "Okay, I see this in you, and I think you can be successful with this, or that." I feel that one little positive*

*statement that a teacher might make to a kid might make the difference in his life or her life. I remember, as a youngster, I had teachers who gave me that kind of time and attention. The extra effort that they put in for me made a difference in my life, so I figure that might make a difference in another kid's life.*

Trisha has been teaching at BEMS for twenty-eight years. She was transferred, along with other teachers and students, to BEMS after the city closed the school where she previously taught. She was one of the teachers in the draw described above; but unlike Betty, she was not selected to be transferred to a predominately white school. Trisha remembers the “draw” as an uncomfortable and awkward time. Many of the teachers with whom she started teaching were selected to be transferred to other schools, and ten or more new white teachers were selected to teach at BEMS. Trisha remembers being one of the few black teachers at BEMS; and was one of only five black teachers at BEMS during the time of this interview. This is how she remembers the time of the “draw”:

*Twenty some years ago they had what they called a “draw” to help balance the number of black teachers across the whole school system. The thought was to put all of our names into a little drum and turn it around and draw names out of it. That’s how they decided what black teacher was pulled out of all of these inner-city schools to filter out into the predominantly white schools. My name just happened to not get drawn. That’s how I ended up staying here. There was a need for at least ten percent of black teachers to be in every school building in the County. The ones that got drawn had to go to a new school for three years. I had to make that adjustment because my whole team left, and I was the only black teacher here for a long time. I’m still only one of five black teachers here at this building to this day, so there are not a whole lot of black teachers here at BEMS. There’s not more than about one or two in each grade level. It was something that had to be done, and I guess it was kind of uncomfortable initially. Just thinking about your name being thrown into a drum and rolled around, and then they pulled out a name and if it was your name you had to go — either that or you had to give your job up.*

When I asked Trisha how she would describe herself as an urban educator, she described herself as strict, stern, and no nonsense. She told me that other teachers and occasionally the principal call on her when students outside of her classroom are misbehaving. In her words, (11) “*A strict disciplinarian is the best way to describe me.*”

Trisha makes it clear that she is the one in charge. She wants her students to follow her directions because she feels that she can lead them to success if they are willing to work. She wants her students to think of her as the one who is there to teach them what they need to know. Her students are there to learn from her.

*(11) I'm the teacher, they're the learners. Hopefully whatever I'm trying to teach they're trying to learn, and they learn. That's the ultimate goal, you know. So that's kind of been my philosophy ever since I started teaching. If you put in the hard work and put in the time and effort in education, you'll be successful in your life.*

### **Being an Urban Educator**

During our initial interview, Trisha told me that being an urban educator was very challenging for her. When she thinks of what an urban school means to her, she automatically thinks of inner-city and a population of predominately African-American students. However, she feels that her students are not all the same; needs vary from student to student. She has learned that some of her students are very resilient; although serious problems are looming at home, they are able to put them aside and focus on school work. However, other students she works with constantly need her time and attention regardless of whether the situation at home is positive or negative. One common theme that includes all of the children she has taught in an urban school is that her students need clear, concisely stated boundaries.

*(13) They have to have boundaries. Many of our kids come from homes where they tend to be able to do pretty much what they want to do when they go home in the evenings. They eat whatever they want; they watch whatever they want on TV; they can talk on the phone all night; or stay up at their relative's house all night. Boundaries or rules are real lax at most of our children's homes, so we tend to have to have very good boundaries for them here. They need to know what they can do and what they can't do so that they won't get disruptive or off task or keep others from learning.*

Many of Trisha's students come from single-parent households and are frequently confronted with adult problems. Although Trisha recognizes that many of her students face challenges that children from more privileged environments do not face, she does not see their

challenges as an excuse for them not to succeed. Coming from a background similar to that of her students, she feels she is a tangible example of the success they can achieve.

*(13) It's very challenging for some of my students to even make it to school. They have a lot going on in their homes usually. Most of them come from one-parent homes. When they get here, it is challenging for some of them to want to try to do a good job at school because they've got a lot of stuff going on at home. I'm sure that stays on their mind when they get to school. I have empathy and sympathy for them because I've been through the same type of things. I can always use myself as an example of rising above any kind of adversities or shortcoming they may have to be successful in life. Education is the key. I tell them that just about every day. I let them know that education is going to be the key to getting out of a lot of the problems they might be having in their life, but they've got to be willing to put in the hard work to get there.*

When asked about her major goals for teaching her students, she told me that she wants them to learn. Trisha has high expectations for all of her students and wants them to have a desire and a will to learn.

*(12) Well, my goal is for them to learn. I expect them to do their very best. I still have that quest for knowledge, and I want my kids to have it too. I want them to want to learn as much or more than I could probably ever teach them. I just want them to always be hungry for learning. So, yeah, my expectations have always been very high for my kids. I want them to achieve and be learning at all times.*

### **Teaching Practices**

During our interviews, Trisha was very forthcoming about the type of teacher she is.

During our first interview, she described herself in the following way:

*(11) I'm a lecture-type teacher, so I use that podium right there and an overhead. I'm real structured, real organized about doing things and wanting things done a certain way. Some teachers may be a little bit more casual, but I'm not. I guess that's the difference with me. I'm a little stern and straightforward about what I want and what I expect from kids because I think kids need those kind of boundaries to keep order in my classroom. You can't really do a lot of teaching when you don't have that order.*

When I asked her to elaborate on her teaching method, she talked about the challenge of teaching students in one classroom in one grade but on multiple ability levels. She told me that one of her challenges as a teacher is that her students are not all on grade level. She feels that to

meet their needs and to ensure as much learning as possible, she needs to be as direct as possible. She expressed her concern that younger teachers attempt to make learning fun and neglect the learning objective they set out to reach.

*(12) It's just real cut and dried. I'm not too much on the fun side of doing stuff all the time. Younger teachers tend not to understand that there's a good balance with keeping activities fun for kids, but at the same time you've got to make sure you get those points across in that set amount of time. If you get too far into games or interactive stuff with kids, you get them too far out there you can't get them back into the meat of the lesson. There is a very fine line for most teachers to learn how to keep kids focused throughout the lesson so that they are actually learning something and hopefully will do well on the test. I try to make sure that the children are given the opportunity to learn the curriculum. A lot of times we have so much information to give our students on a daily basis, and there are different learning abilities among those twenty kids that you have in your room. There is a fine line when it comes to teaching and addressing those different learning abilities that you have in the classroom. You have to make sure you reach each one of your children during the time frame that you are given. It's a one-shot deal when you have them for that year, and you want to make sure all of them have an equal opportunity to learn as best as they can.*

While observing, I noticed that Trisha's classroom was very quiet. Students were not sharing or conversing about the work they were doing. Each lesson started with Trisha getting up at her podium and presenting the lesson to the students. The students were not permitted to talk or ask questions during that time. After she presented the lesson, the students worked silently and independently. If they had questions regarding the assignment, they raised their hands and were given permission to ask the teacher for help at her desk. During our second interview, I asked Trisha how students learn best. Her response was one-on-one instruction, but that with increasing class sizes, addressing each student's needs one on one is difficult. Trisha also feels that direct instruction is an effective way to keep students focused.

*(13) One of the things that I find is most important when it comes to learning is one-on-one time and attention. Unfortunately, as they get older, that time becomes less and less possible because of large class sizes, but they need a lot of that one-on-one time to process learning. A lot of times when I'm up there teaching, I'm thinking they are getting it; but then when I bring them over into a small group and I work one-on-one with them, I realize they've missed so much. Then that's when I realize if I don't take the time to*

*assess individually, I'm going to lose out on making sure kids actually have learned what I've been trying to teach. I have to give them that one-on-one attention almost daily. I think direct instruction is a concrete method. Nowadays, it's hard to keep kids focused, so I try to keep instruction as direct as possible so that they won't be going to the left and right. I want to keep them focused on the learning needs they have or a particular skill they need to learn, and that's what I do. I've been doing it for thirty years, so I guess something must be working right.*

BEMS used to be an open-space-school. Trisha feels that this influenced the approach that she now uses to teach her students. She remembers what it was like when three to four other teachers, including herself, taught in one large, open classroom with no walls to divide groups of students. Trisha and her students could observe different methods of teaching and different activities going on all around them. During an interview, Trisha spoke about the difficulty she encountered with keeping herself and her students focused.

*(II) Initially, before this school was remodeled, it had an open space concept. There were no walls between the classrooms, so there were different types of teaching going on all around the classes. You've got this teacher over here on the left and on the right of you that you're hearing. There were different things going on with different classes, so you had to be able to keep your kids focused and yourself while that was going on. That has been one of the most challenging experiences I have had during my teaching career. If you weren't real focused with your teaching and with keeping your kids focused on what's going on, you'd lose it real quick. When I learned how to teach in that atmosphere and teach well, everything else I've done since then has been very easy, very easy. So it's different. Immediately, the first thing I noticed when I got inside of these closed-in walls was the quietness.*

I observed Trisha using direct instruction during all three of my observations. The students were very quiet and did not ask many questions. Many of the students seemed lethargic and indifferent. Most of the time while I observed, the students were completing work in their textbooks, on the overhead projector, or on worksheets. I observed two incidents that reflected on Trisha's teaching approach. The first involved a student caught copying another student's work. The second incident involved a student who chose not to complete an assignment that he had failed to turn in. She did not coddle him and try to convince him to complete the missing

work, but she let him make the decision as to whether he wished to complete the assignment. She reacted in a way that the world would react:

*(O2) Trisha: "Sam, come up to my desk. Did you copy this from Peter? Trisha holds up two hand drawn maps for Sam to compare. Sam: "No" Trisha: "Well, it looks the same as Peter's map. Peter, come up here." Peter approaches Trisha's desk. Trisha: "Did Sam copy your map Peter?" Peter: "Sam asked to borrow my map." Trisha: "Oh, he did?" Peter: "Yes, he did." Trisha: "Sam you are going to get a zero. That is one thing that I do not tolerate is cheating. Cheating is dishonesty, and dishonesty can get you into a lot of trouble in life." Trisha rips up Sam's map and gives it to him while telling him to throw it away.*

*(O3) Trisha is sitting at the back table next to me grading papers. Jim is sitting at his desk with his head down and the hood of his sweat jacket pulled over his head. Trisha calls out to Jim while keeping her eyes on the papers she is grading. Trisha: "Jim I do not have your math assignment from yesterday. Did you do it? Jim: "Yeah, I did it." Trisha: "Well did you turn it in?" Jim: "No, I think it is in my desk." Trisha: "Well do you want to look for it so I can grade it?" Jim: "No" Trisha: "So, you want to get a zero for that assignment?" Jim: "Yeah" Trisha: "Okay, that is your choice."*

During our last interview, I asked her about these two incidents. First, I wanted to know if I had captured them correctly; secondly, I wanted to know why she chose to respond the way she did. She told me that I did capture them correctly and then responded to my second question:

*I can have empathy and sympathy for a child and the circumstances they come from, but my expectations are still going to be the same for him or her in this classroom. I'm still going to want the same amount of work, the same amount or whatever the expectation is still there, but I can sympathize if that child came to me with a certain situation that she expressed to me. But that's about it. I still would have that same expectation. I want kids to know that that's the real world. The real world is not just going to cater to you just because you're having this or that problem while a situation is going on. You're still going to have to produce or, do whatever you've got to do to do that job or that career. You've still got to be able to do it. That's why I try to let kids know that there might be a lot of things that may be going on at home or this or that is happening to your personal life, but the same thing with me. I've still got to come to work, still got to do what I've got to do, and it has very little to do with what's going on at home. So that's the real world. Now, I have to prepare them for that, and I can't let them think that because they're having these kinds of issues or this kind of situation that the world is going to treat them differently. It's not. So, it would be really hindering them if I treated them any differently. So I don't do that.*

During our second interview Trisha mentioned that she felt one-on-one instruction is how students learn best. While observing, I noticed that when her students were having difficulty understanding, they came up to her desk and she taught them one-on-one.

*(O2) Sharee raises her hand and Trisha calls her up to her desk. Sharee: "I don't know how to do this math." Trisha: "Well, let me see what you have done. Tell me how you got that answer." Sharee: "Well, I added these numbers together." Trisha: "Oh, no that is not how you do it. These are fractions, so you are not subtracting or adding you are dividing. Let me show you how to do it." Trisha explains how to figure out the problem. Trisha: "Now, stay here and do the next problem while I watch. Good, you got it. Now go to your seat and do the rest of them."*

When I asked Trisha if she felt that her or her students' ethnicity influence the way she teaches, she told me she does not feel it does. However, as one of the few African-American teachers, she does feel a lot of pressure to present herself in a way that students can perceive her as a positive role model.

*I have different races of children in my room every year. I don't teach any child any differently. I actually try to be very unbiased about that. I don't see race when I'm up there teaching and instructing. All I see is children. I don't really see that's a white child or that's a black child or whatever different race. Maybe some other teacher might, but not me, because I can't say that when I'm up there teaching that I'm thinking, "Oh, this child over here needs to hear it this way and this child over here needs to hear it that way." I don't think like that. It just becomes completely unbiased.*

*Being one of the few black teachers here has been challenging; about ninety percent of our population is black, but the ratio of black students and white teachers is almost opposite. You just have to be mindful of the fact that kids are going to look to you for an example and guidance a lot of times because you are the same race they are. I am a black teacher, so I want to make sure I could give back to the younger people in my generation, you know, race. I always want to make an effort to be a positive influence on any child that comes in contact with me.*

**Conclusion:** Trisha has an authoritarian teaching style in her classroom. She makes it clear that she is there to teach her students what she feels they need to learn. Before deciding to become a teacher, she wanted to be a nurse, but felt that that the course work to become a nurse would be too difficult. She became an urban educator because she felt she could give back to her

community. Trisha recognizes that the teachers she had while growing up also influenced her decision to become an educator.

Trisha uses lecture or direct instruction in her classroom to teach her students. She feels that this is the most concrete way that students can learn effectively and quickly, and is the best way to meet the demands of teaching several students on different levels. When her students need additional help, she supplements direct instruction with one-one-one instruction, which is actually her preferred way to teach. However, because of time constraints and large class sizes, she is unable to use the preferred method all the time.

Trisha sees herself as a role model for her students because she is one of the few black teachers at BEMS. Growing up in an urban environment, she experienced some of the same conditions that her students are faced with. She is sympathetic with her students' needs, but still holds her students to a high standard.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter reports the perspectives of five urban educators concerning their educational practices and beliefs, including how culture/ethnic background influences their teaching. The Chapter is organized into five case studies. Three overarching themes related to the research questions are explored: Becoming an Urban Educator; Being an Urban Educator; and Teaching Practices. Each theme includes three subcategories that are described within their sections. The subcategories of the theme "Becoming an Urban Educator" are what led these teachers to become urban educators; how they describe themselves as urban educators; and how their students describe them. The subcategories of "Being an Urban Educator" are the teachers' perception of urban schools and thoughts about teaching in an urban school; how they perceive the students that they teach; major goals motivating them when it comes to teaching their

students. The subcategories of “Teaching Practices” are the teachers’ descriptions of their teaching practices; their thoughts on how urban students learn best; what influences how they teach; observable teaching practices; and how they feel culture/ethnicity influences how they teach.

Differences and similarities between what these urban educators believe to be effective practices in teaching will be presented in a cross-case analysis at the beginning of chapter five. Also presented in chapter five will be conclusions based on the findings as well as recommendations for further research concerning urban teachers’ perspectives and teaching practices.

## **CHAPTER 5: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore underlying connections between teachers' beliefs and practices and how they are expressed in the classroom. More specifically, this study was designed to answer four research questions: (1) What are some factors that influenced each urban educator's career choice? (2) How do these urban educators describe their educational practices and beliefs about teaching? (3) What are the similarities and differences that can be found between urban educators' beliefs and practices? and (4) How do urban educators think cultural/ethnic background influences their instructional practices? The study used two data sources, interview and observation, to capture five case studies. These data sources provided insight into what drives the way these urban educators teach as well as the teaching practices they most often use.

This final chapter includes a cross-case analysis based on the data presented in Chapter 4, my conclusions regarding this research, recommendations, and my reflections on this study. The cross-case analysis presents each of the five case studies' salient features and captures common themes and differences reported in Chapter 4. The five cases were individually analyzed to identify similarities and differences, thus providing collective views as additional meanings represented throughout the data are explored. The cross-case analysis is organized similarly to the organization of data in Chapter 4. Related to the research questions are three overarching themes: Becoming an Urban Educator, Being an Urban Educator, and Teaching Practices. Each of these themes has subcategories. The subcategories of the first theme—Becoming an Urban Educator—are what led them to become urban educators, how they describe themselves as urban educators, and how they think their students would describe them. The subcategories of the

second theme—Being an Urban Educator—are the teachers' perception of urban schools and thoughts about teaching in an urban school, teachers' perceptions of their students, and major goals motivating these teachers when teaching. The subcategories of the third theme—Teaching Practices—are teachers' descriptions of their teaching practices and how urban students learn best, observed teaching practices, generational differences, and how they think culture and ethnicity influences their teaching practices.

### **Cross-case Analysis Findings**

#### **Becoming an Urban Educator**

Many variables influence teachers' career choices, particularly in the context of schools serving children primarily from low-income and diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Researchers have identified perceived teaching ability as one of the highest-rated influences on choosing teaching as a career (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Research has also linked a teacher's positive teaching and learning experiences to choosing a teaching career (Book & Freeman, 1985; Lortie, 1975; Wright, 1977). Other factors, such as job security and time for family, have also been found to be influential in deciding to become a teacher (Richardson & Watt, 2005). Other researchers have found that family, including parents' career choice, is a determinant when deciding to pursue a teaching career; and many teachers recall their aspirations to teach started in childhood (Ng & Peter, 2010). It is reassuring to know that teaching is not usually a career that people default to when other career choices do not materialize (Richardson & Watt, 2005).

**What led them to become urban educators.** Only two out of the five teachers in this study knew before entering college that they wanted to become educators. Four out of the five chose teaching after they considered or pursued other career paths. Jodi, a kindergarten teacher, started college with a desire to become an accountant, but quickly realized she wanted a career

that involved working and communicating with people on a daily basis. Marlo, a first-grade teacher, managed a Radio Shack for many years before returning to college to pursue a teaching degree; but she had a strong desire from an early age to become a teacher. Deborrah, a third-grade teacher who earned her undergraduate degree in botany but could not find a job in her field of study, later decided to teach after interacting with students through AmeriCorps. Trisha, who taught fourth grade at the time of this study, originally wanted to pursue nursing; however, feeling she did not have a strong background in science and math led her to believe that teaching would be a better career choice. Of the four, only Betty, who had taught for over thirty years and at the time of this study taught second grade, always knew she wanted to become an educator; thus, teaching was her first and only career choice.

The major factors influencing these teachers to become teachers were family, former teachers/professionals in their community, community solidarity, the promise of a challenging career, and confidence in their teaching ability. When deciding to become a teacher, Jodi was deeply influenced by her mother. Jodi reflected on her mother's positive experiences as an urban educator in a public school and the learning experiences she had during her childhood visiting her mother's classroom. She was the only teacher in my study who chose to be an urban educator because she desired a challenging career that required stepping outside her comfort zone.

By watching her mother teach Sunday school children, Marlo was also influenced positively to become a teacher at an early age. Marlo acknowledged that other teachers from church and school also influenced her decision. She started teaching children at her church at an early age, and this experience contributed to her confidence in her teaching ability, which, in turn, also influenced her career choice. In contrast to Jodi, Marlo did not specifically seek to become an urban educator, but took a position at BEMS only because of an opening there when

she was seeking a job in the area. Although she has remained at BEMS for four years, she indicated that she believes she can be successful teaching at any school, regardless of the location.

As with Jodi and Marlo, family was influential in Deborrah's decision to become a teacher. Deborrah's aunt noticed that Deborrah enjoyed working with children and believed she could be a successful teacher, encouraging her to return to school and earn an education degree. Deborrah had worked with inner-city children during an AmeriCorp experience. This experience influenced Deborrah to do her student-teaching internship at BEMS and then teach there, where she has remained for over ten years at the time of this study.

Betty and Trisha, who both grew up in the urban community surrounding BEMS, chose to become teachers because of the strong influence of teachers they had during their childhood. Trisha remembers admiring her teachers and other professionals in her African-American urban community as role models and desiring to become like them. Betty and Trisha's decision to become urban educators at BEMS was influenced by segregation and the limited availability of jobs for African-American teachers concentrated in urban areas. Their decision to remain at BEMS, where both have taught for over twenty-five years, can be attributed to the solidarity they feel with their community and their desire to give back to the community in which they grew up. Trisha and Betty both participated in the "draw," but only Betty was selected to move to a suburban school. However, after completing her mandatory time teaching at a suburban school, Betty returned to BEMS because of her desire to work as an urban educator in her community.

Although each of the five participants took different paths to become urban educators, all feel that they made the right career decision. They also feel confident in their ability to teach the

children at BEMS and plan to continue teaching there. After teaching at BEMS for four years or more, this study's participants feel connected to the community within and outside of the school.

**How they describe themselves as urban educators.** Self-reflection and self-awareness are critical to being a successful urban educator (Eggen & Kauchak, 2008). Teachers must reflect on their system of beliefs and assumptions as they relate to their students because this system ultimately influences expectations and practices (Diffily & Perkins, 2002). Self awareness also helps educators reflect on and improve their teaching practices and provides direction in setting goals for their students and themselves. As a result of the importance of self-reflection and self-awareness, I asked the participants in my study to discuss how they perceived themselves as educators.

All of the teachers discussed the expectations and standards they set for their students. Jodi, Marlo and Betty expressed that they had high expectations and standards. Jodi viewed her teaching role as a guide, creatively helping her students through the learning process. Betty thought of herself as a guide but also as a teacher of problem solving. She wanted her students to be able to think and develop different solutions to their academic and social problems. Both Jodi and Betty stressed the importance of teaching their students and modeling for them how to think for themselves. Conveying similar thoughts but in a different way, Jodi expected her students to do well academically and show respect for others. Marlo emphasized that every student is capable of learning, and she consistently set high standards for all of her students. She spoke about particular students who had been moved from other classrooms, where, according to her, their teachers had given up on them. Those students, however, had become actively involved in learning in her classroom. Based on observing the interactions of Marlo with her students, she took responsibility for helping them be academically successful through well-planned lessons, a

rich learning environment, and abundant emotional support. She also supplied other needed resources, such as breakfast for a hungry student who came to school too late to receive the school's free breakfast.

In contrast, Trisha did not express direct responsibility for her students' success or failure. She said that it was her job to teach her students and their job to learn. If her students worked hard, she maintained that they could be successful. When her students chose not to work hard to complete assignments, she accepted their decision as their right, without discussing with them the consequences of incomplete assignments or getting their parents or the principal involved. Thus, Trisha's interactions with her students conveyed that they alone were responsible for their successes or failures.

Another part of participating teachers' self-reflections dealt with structure. Marlo, Deborah, and Trisha perceived themselves as structured, but on varying levels and for different reasons. Marlo felt that structure in her classroom let her students know that she cared. From Marlo's point of view, structure meant establishing a routine, expecting students to follow the routine, and implementing rules and consequences for not following established rules. Marlo felt rules enabled students to trust her and one another as they worked towards establishing and maintaining a sense of community within the classroom. She said that this type of structure allowed her students, many of whom she postulates come from home environments without structure, to feel safe in the classroom.

Deborah expressed that she needed to be more lenient with students who have social or emotional problems. Admitting that she was strict with some students, she said, "I do my best to try to not let students get away with too much." In my observations, Deborah's classroom seemed the least structured, and she seemed the most lenient of the study's five teachers. Unlike

the other teachers, Deborrah seemed particularly concerned with her students liking and accepting her.

On the other end of the spectrum, Trisha expressed that she felt she was a strict, stern, and no-nonsense type of teacher. She seemed to implement structure as a way to maintain classroom control. When Trisha was asked to identify the role of her students in their learning process, she explained that they were there to learn whatever she was teaching. During my observations, she never asked for their thoughts or input regarding the subject matter being presented. In fact, Trisha expressed pride that her students were very quiet. For her, control over her students seemed to mean that learning was taking place.

In summary, these teachers' self-perceptions often included having high expectations for their students. *Structured* was also a common term three of these educators used when describing themselves. Each teacher's self-perception was unique and connected in many ways to the goals each set for students and to personal teaching goals, which are detailed later in this chapter.

**How they think their students would describe them.** Trisha said that she wanted her students to view her as a source of knowledge, as someone there to teach them what they need to know. In contrast, Jodi appeared more interested in her students learning to love the learning process than how they perceived her. In her teaching and during interviews, she emphasized connections between the students' personal interests and what they were learning. Jodi said that she wanted her students to view her as a teacher who encouraged them to find ways to make learning meaningful, while feeling a sense of accomplishment. Marlo said that she wanted her students to see her as encouraging them to set their own goals as they become lifelong learners. Betty said that she wanted her students to see her as encouraging them to problem solve and to think for themselves. Deborrah said that she wanted them to know that she loved them.

**Conclusion.** Family and community are themes that appear frequently when considering what led these teachers to choose a career as an urban educator. During this study, it became clear that family as well as other positive role models within the community led Jodi, Marlo, Betty, Deborrah, and Trisha to become urban educators. However, the sense of community they feel within the school environment and the relationships they have built with the neighborhood community have compelled them to remain urban educators.

These teachers used distinct words to describe who they are as urban educators. Three of the teachers often used the word *structure* as they searched for vocabulary that would adequately represent their views. However, as they elaborated on their understanding of the word, it had different meanings for Marlo, Deborrah, and Trisha. Marlo interpreted *structure* as caring; Deborrah interpreted *structure* as more helpful for some, but not all, students; and Trisha viewed *structure* as a way to control and manage her classroom. All three teachers mentioned *structure* as an important aspect of who they are as urban educators.

Also, being an educator with *high expectations* had different underlying meanings across these teachers. Marlo believed all her students could accomplish the *high expectations* she set for them and felt responsible for making sure they accomplished the goals she set. She admitted to making extra efforts to work with students so they could reach her *high expectations*. Jodi admitted to setting *high expectations* for her students, but seemed to focus more on the goals and not on making sure her students met the goals she set. Jodi focused on her responsibility as a teacher to teach her students according to the standards that have been put in place by administration. Trisha believed in setting *high standards* for all of her students, but believed that it was her students' choice to accomplish or not to accomplish the goals that were set. While

Marlo, Jodi, and Trisha expressed that they have high expectations for their students, each teacher's ideological expression of *high expectations* was different.

Jodi and Betty felt that their role as urban educators was to guide their students in the learning process. While Jodi described her role as guiding her students by making learning creative and fun, Betty felt that guiding her students in learning to become problem solvers was important. Each of these urban educators has been influenced by family and community beyond their decision to become urban educators. The way they view the world and understand the concepts they use has been directly influenced by their belief systems and how they understand the world. As mentioned in chapter two, researchers have shown a correlation between beliefs and teaching practices (Abelson, 1979). Brown and Cooney (1982) have found that cultural transmission influences how we understand the world around us, the skills that we learn, and how we think. Cultural transmission often occurs within family units. Family and community influenced each of the participant's decision to become an urban educator. Also, cultural transmission may have influenced the way each of these urban educators conceptualize her role as an urban educator and how she thinks about teaching.

### **Being an Urban Educator**

The dictionary defines *urban* as "a term pertaining to a city or town." However, in use, the definition of *urban education* varies widely and is extremely complex. Inextricably connected to the meaning of *urban education* are social, economic, and political variables that are present in the urban environment and that inevitably impact students and teachers in urban schools (Olson, 2003).

### **Teachers' perceptions of urban schools and thoughts about teaching in an urban school.**

When the five participating urban teachers were asked to define *urban*, many of them agreed that one aspect of urban could be conceptualized as “inner city.” Other common themes included more minority students, lower socioeconomic levels, and non-traditional family structures. However, these teachers' focal points differed, making each view of urban education unique and personal.

Jodi admitted that while she was attending college the word *urban* did influence her decision when she thought about where she would like to teach. In fact, she enrolled in the Urban/Multicultural Program during college with the intention of becoming an urban educator. Jodi's definition of *urban* extended beyond the atmosphere of inner city. Instead, Jodi focused more on how the needs of students attending urban schools differ from those of students in suburban schools. Discussing how family units are often different in urban schools, she mentioned that some of her students are being raised by their grandmothers or have same-sex parents. Also, students come into her classroom on different levels, with some having experienced and knowing a lot and others having limited experiences and knowledge. Thus, Jodi's definition of *urban* focused more on her students and the people she has encountered while working in an urban environment.

Marlo viewed *urban* as a mindset that she attributed to living in poverty. She felt that some parents and children do not see the value of education or aspire to reach academic or personal goals because their mindset is directly influenced by poverty. Comparing her urban school with a more affluent school in which she taught, Marlo identified big differences between the two. While teaching at BEMS, She has noticed less parental involvement, but feels being African American has helped her connect more with African-American parents. While teaching

at the more affluent school, she experienced more than enough involvement of parents who highly valued education and learning. Marlo also recognized differences in social-economic levels among her students in an urban community when compared with students in suburban schools. While recognizing that BEMS has many resources because it is a Title I school, she spoke about how more affluent schools have parents who are teacher advocates with the necessary knowledge to go through proper channels to get what teachers need. Plus, the parents in more affluent schools have more expendable resources and can contribute more time and money to the school.

Noting that the differences between urban and suburban schools are only skin deep, Deborrah said during our initial interview, “Suburban schools, just like urban schools, have behavior problems. I feel the only real difference is that we have more Black students and they have more White students.” However, during later interviews, Deborrah’s thinking seemed to shift as she noted that suburban schools received preferential treatment. She spoke of several classrooms in her school that do not have heat during the winter and of special education classes being held in closets due to lack of space.

Having been in the BEMS community for over thirty years, Betty said that the meaning of *urban* has changed during that time, that *urban education* has a more negative connotation than in the past, and that today people associate low achievers with behavior problems. When she was growing up in the community, the word *urban* had fewer negative associations. Betty recognized some positive aspects of BEMS as an urban school, such as cutting-edge technology/programs and low student-teacher ratios.

Like Betty, Trisha has taught at BEMS for over 25 years. Trisha conceptualized the term *urban education* by referring to the inner-city population that is mostly African American. She

defined *urban education* by focusing on the problems that she faces daily. For example, she spoke about single-parent households and the lack of parent involvement, and she expressed that parent involvement might not be such an issue if she were working at a more affluent school. Having taught at BEMS for the majority of her teaching career, Trisha noted that several students at BEMS are behind academically because they have serious problems at home that make focusing on school difficult. These problems Trisha identified include, but are not limited to, parents on drugs, homelessness, unstable home environment, abuse, hunger, and lack of sleep.

Each of the five teachers made a conscious decision at some point to become an urban educator. Their understanding of *urban* often focused on the students who attend the school and their parents. Three of the teachers interviewed have taught at BEMS for their entire careers, and they have only visited other schools that are more affluent. Betty and Trisha have taught at BEMS the longest and grew up in the BEMS community. Thus, they understood the word *urban* as insiders. In contrast, Jodi, Marlo, and Deborrah focused on the challenges that are often present in urban schools.

### **Teachers' perceptions of their students.**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, urban educators are confronted with numerous challenges. When asked about their perceptions of their students, these urban teachers often focused on the numerous challenges encountered while working with their students. These challenges often impede students' academic progress, and educators are often limited in the type of help they can provide to keep home problems from being brought into the classroom. Many urban educators must strike a balance between being a teacher and filling other roles, such as counselor and provider, which are lacking in many of their students' lives. When asked about their students, the majority of the participating urban educators agreed on three of the most pressing challenges:

lack of parental involvement, behavior problems, and additional needs that are difficult to fill. For example, Jodi and Trisha felt a parent in a single-parent household had more difficulty getting involved in his or her child's school life. Specifically, they mentioned the difficulty of getting parents to attend parent-teacher conferences and other school-sponsored functions. They felt that many parents could not attend because of work schedules. Although Betty and Marlo did mention lack of parental involvement as a problem, they did not attribute it to the single-parent household. In contrast, Deborrah did not mention lack of parental involvement as a challenge related to being an urban educator.

Another challenge discussed was behavior problems. For example, Jodi and Marlo spoke about home problems translating into behavioral problems at school. Jodi described children she had taught who went home to domestic violence and dysfunction, which were, in turn, manifested as emotional issues in the classroom. Betty agreed that students in urban settings do have more behavior problems when compared to those in suburban schools, but attributed this difference to urban students' bolder personalities, which she thought may be a survival tactic at home. Trisha did not mention behavior problems as a challenge, possibly because she commanded control within her classroom. However, Trisha did say that many of her students had adult problems, which she viewed as challenging. Such problems can include, but are not limited to, homelessness, hunger, unstable home environments, abuse, and lack of health care or appropriate hygiene.

Yet another challenge that these urban educators discussed was meeting their students' needs. Marlo, Betty, Deborrah, and Trisha felt that many of these needs were difficult or impossible to meet. Betty expressed that she could not help children overcome problems they faced at home and brought to school. Instead, she felt her duty was to focus on the needs of the

class as a whole, rendering her incapable of sorting out and resolving her students' personal problems. She felt that she could do more good by focusing on the class's academic success collectively. Marlo and Trisha discovered that many of their students needed more time and attention because they were behind their peers academically. They both found meeting all of their students' academic needs to be difficult because of the varying abilities and levels within their classrooms. Although they felt teaching on grade level was important, they tried their best, sometimes unsuccessfully, to meet the needs of students below grade level. Deborrah also felt constrained when trying to meet all of her students' needs, but spoke about this constraint on a more personal and less academic level. She felt she played many roles beyond educator, such as second parent and nurse. Deborrah related that many students who attend urban schools are transient due to homelessness or job unavailability, causing them to move frequently. Deborrah experienced an influx of students throughout school year, making it difficult to ensure that all of her students were on grade level by the end of the year.

In discussing perceptions of their students, these teachers focused on the challenges that many students face. All of the educators were confronted with the pressure of these challenges. However, some of these teachers felt compelled to try addressing these challenges that reached beyond academic learning, while others did not feel the need to help in that way. Betty, in particular, felt that addressing students' academic needs was more prudent than focusing on personal and emotional needs.

### **Major goals motivating these teachers when teaching.**

Successful urban educators believe that all of their students can learn, and they set high expectations regardless of their students' background (Zeichner, 2003). Despite the challenges confronting each urban educator in this study, they all had established goals related to helping

their students succeed. These goals motivated not only their students but also the teachers. The most common goals were for their students to become productive members of society and to think for themselves.

Jodi, Marlo, Betty, and Deborrah said they wanted all of their students to become productive members of society. Jodi defined *a productive member of society* as one who contributes to society in a meaningful way. Marlo wanted her students to be productive by becoming whatever they aspired to be. Both Betty and Deborrah viewed becoming a productive member of society as joining the work force and/or going to college.

Marlo and Betty had the goal of helping their students be able to think for themselves. Marlo wanted all of her students to realize that they do not have to limit themselves to what they see within their household or community. Instead, she wanted her students to aspire to greatness. Marlo acknowledged her job as an urban educator included exposing her students to the many possibilities available. Aware of the peer pressure many of her students would confront later in life, Betty wanted her students to learn to be problem solvers and to think for themselves. She felt that if she could teach them to think for themselves, they would be able to make the right decision if asked to participate in illegal actions.

Jodi and Deborrah shared the goal of teaching their students to respect themselves and others. They were the only teachers who expressed respect as a specific goal. The other teachers might have alluded to respect, but did not mention it as a specific goal. Jodi said that many students enter her classroom not knowing how to behave at school. As a result, she discussed how she had to teach some students not to touch other students without permission, and how to be heard by others without yelling. Above all, she wanted her students to learn how to be respectful of one another and to earn respect from others. Deborrah discussed how she teaches

her students to use proper table manners while eating lunch with them every day as a way of teaching them respect for themselves and others. Deborrah also mentioned teaching students social cues, such as when to speak or listen. Both teachers believed that knowing how to both interact with others and respond to certain situations is a form of respect.

While four of the teachers listed several goals for their students, Trisha only mentioned one: to learn. When asked to elaborate on this goal, Trisha said she wanted her students not only to learn but also to desire to learn. Unlike the other teachers, Trisha does not view school as a place where skills outside of academic learning should be directly taught. Her focus and goals involve primarily academic learning and growth. She discussed the need for enforcing strict rules and boundaries to create an environment where students can learn and where they do not distract others from learning. She also mentioned that meeting academic goals set by her supervisors is important to her because doing so means she is doing her job.

**Conclusion.** *Urban* is a complex term and each teacher searched for her own terminology to express how she understands urban education. Jodi sought a challenging career, and urban education spoke to her desire to meet new challenges while working with people. When Jodi considered what *urban education* meant to her, she reflected on the students, parents and teachers that she works with daily. She recognizes that many of her students come from varied and sometimes challenging environments. Marlo recognized the challenges that her students and their parents encounter as well, but she viewed these challenges as mindsets that need to be confronted and overcome. Initially, Deborrah was hesitant to admit differences besides skin color when comparing students in suburban schools with those in urban schools. However, in later interviews, Deborrah expressed that some differences do exist. Deborrah felt that because urban schools are sometimes given less priority, students suffer. Recognizing that *urban education* has

been stigmatized, Betty strived to think of positive aspects of urban education. She spoke about how the school does get money and materials because it is a Title I school, and class sizes were small. Like many of the other teachers, Trisha focused on the challenges she has encountered working in an urban school. For example, while teaching fourth grade, she has noticed that many of her students are behind academically; this academic deficit makes it difficult for her to ensure that all of her students complete fourth grade on grade level.

As these teachers reflected on their perception of their students, they all focused on the daily challenges (including coming to school hungry or living in an unstable home) their students face. Yet, several of the teachers discussed their students matter-of-factly, rather than with pity. While the goals motivating these teachers to teach varied, their perceived roles as teachers were reflected in their goals. Jodi, Marlo, Betty and Deborrah felt that their responsibilities extended beyond academic learning. For Jodi and Deborrah their goals included teaching their students respect for themselves and others as well as understanding social cues. Marlo and Betty identified the goal of helping students learn to think for themselves. Betty taught her students to problem solve inside the classroom as well as to resolve conflicts outside the classroom. Marlo encouraged her students to set life goals and learning goals. Trisha's goal focused on learning and on meeting academic goals set by administration. She felt that meeting those goals would mean that she was doing her job. Each of these urban educators' thoughts varied about the definition of urban education, their perceptions of their students, and major goals that motivate them while teaching.

## Teaching Practices

### **Participants' descriptions of their teaching practices and how urban students learn best.**

All teachers have a teaching philosophy (i.e., beliefs about teaching and learning) that guides the way they teach. A teaching philosophy influences classroom practices, directs goals set for students, and guides how lesson plans are designed and implemented (Abelson, 1979; Bandura, 1986; Lewis, 1990; Pajares, 1992). In this section, the variations in how each urban educator described their teaching practices are explored. The themes that are presented in this section are student-centered learning, teacher-centered learning, concrete skills and higher order abstract thinking skills.

**Student-centered learning.** Often, student-centered and teacher-centered learning are conceptualized as being on a continuum with teacher-centered learning on one end of the spectrum and student-centered learning on the other; but, they should not be thought of in such a dichotomous way (Cuban, 1983; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). It is not uncommon for teachers to use both teacher-centered and student-centered approaches to learning and teaching in their classrooms. In this study, I focused on the urban educators' practices that were the most prominent and used most frequently during observations. I also focused on the teaching practices each teacher spoke of using in her classroom.

Student-centered practices focus primarily on the students' learning (APA Task Force on Psychology in Education, 1993). The complex learning environment of the classroom is taken into consideration through a holistic approach. Student-centered learning takes into consideration the students' individual learning needs, motivation levels, and developmental needs (Lambert & McCombs, 1998). Instructional practices are based on students having the opportunity to draw on their own experiences and contextualize learning experience in their own way. Student-

centered learning views learning as a natural, constructive process (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Learning happens best when it is meaningful to the learner. Teachers who utilize this approach to learning and teaching realize that learning extends beyond the classroom walls, and they try to instill in their students the goal of becoming lifelong learners. Learning goals are realized and achieved by collaboration between student and teacher (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Cuban (1983) identified observable measures that highlight the expectations for student-centered learning: evidence of student choice in organization of content and class rules, varied instructional approaches/materials, and more or equal student talk and questions than teacher talk. McCombs and Whisler (1997) found that students of teachers who use more student-centered learning approaches exhibited greater achievement and motivation.

Three of the teachers in this study felt their students should be actively engaged and interactive in their learning. Jodi, Marlo, and Deborrah said that students learn best via hands-on experiences. Viewing herself as a facilitator in a student-driven classroom, Marlo said she encouraged her students to teach one another and to shape their own learning goals. Believing that her students learned best by doing, seeing and experiencing, Jodi expressed that she tried to make learning interactive by using manipulatives and allowing students to communicate with one another about what they were learning. While Deborrah spoke of student centered learning as the best approach to use while instructing her students, she admitted to using teacher-centered approaches most often, and she did not describe any specific student centered techniques she used in her classroom.

Marlo and Jodi used specific examples while describing the student centered approaches they most often used in their classrooms. Both Jodi and Marlo spoke of ways they use hands-on learning. Jodi discussed learning through body movement, and Marlo discussed providing her

students with real-life experiences to help facilitate learning. Jodi and Marlo spoke of drawing from their students' personal experiences as a way to help make connections to new material and to help students become more committed to the learning process as life-long learners. Jodi and Marlo spoke about their teaching approaches in a flexible way and seemed interested in drawing on their students' interest through the use of hands-on learning activities. Both Jodi and Marlo seemed interested and willing to try new, creative teaching methods.

While Jodi, Marlo, and Deborrah all identified student centered learning as best practice in teaching urban students, only Jodi and Marlo spoke directly about how they use student centered approaches in their classrooms. Interestingly, the younger, least experienced teachers (Jodi and Marlo) who have taught fewer than five years, were the teachers most committed to student-centered teaching, a finding that will be discussed in more detail below.

**Teacher-centered learning.** Axelrod and Kim (2005) argue that teacher-centered learning is the best way to teach urban students. In *Direct Instruction: An Educators' Guide and A Plea for Action*, they explain that many urban students come from home environments that do not afford them the educational opportunities and experiences that suburban students usually experience, and therefore some urban students enter kindergarten already behind their suburban peers. These researchers believe that a direct approach to learning is the only effective way to catch students up to their more privileged peers and prepare them for their future.

Teacher-centered learning is often associated with the "transmission" models of teaching and learning. In this approach to learning, information is transmitted to the learner by the teacher (Bonks & Cunningham, 1998). In a teacher-centered model of instruction, development of instruction and control of the learning process are retained by the teacher (Wagner & McCombs, 1995). The teacher's role is to give knowledge that has been defined and organized by the

teacher to the students. Usually, teacher-centered classrooms are characterized by teachers speaking more than students, and the teacher questioning the students for a direct precise answer (Daniels, Kalkman, & McCombs, 2001).

Of the five teachers in this study, the most experienced teachers, Betty and Trisha, both expressed a firm belief in direct instruction. Direct instruction is one teacher-centered approach that uses explicit guided instruction, most often to teach skill-oriented tasks. This teaching method offers a more direct approach than do passive teaching styles that encourage students to take a more explorative role. Direct instruction relies on strict lesson plans and lectures. It emphasizes the use of face-to-face instruction. The teacher often uses carefully articulated lessons in which cognitive skills are presented in small units (Carnine, 2000).

Betty said that direct instruction along with seat work was the best way to ensure students knew and understood the material she presented. Trisha and Deborrah also identified direct instruction as an effective teaching method. Betty, Deborrah, and Trisha stated that they frequently used direct instruction. During interviews, Trisha and Betty articulated their commitment to presenting content in a format that would ensure students directly heard and saw the information, often in the form of direct instruction. The teachers who have taught the longest conveyed that they were more direct in their approach to teaching.

**Concrete skills and higher order abstract thinking skills.** Higher order thinking skills include critical, logical, reflective, and creative thinking. The foundation of higher order thinking builds on concrete thinking skills. Without concrete thinking, critical higher order thinking would not be possible. Teaching students higher order thinking skills helps them improve their content knowledge, lower order thinking, and self-esteem (McDavitt, 1993; Son & VanSickle, 1993). Two of the teachers in this study emphasized basic skills, making little reference to higher

order thinking. Trisha focused on making sure her students were taught the basic academics and did not comment on higher order thinking skills. Marlo agreed on the importance of basic academics, but especially stressed the importance of teaching her students basic life skills, for example Standard English and how to properly answer the phone. Like Trisha, Marlo did not focus on higher order thinking skills.

In contrast, Betty emphasized that students need to develop multiple ways of processing information, learn to think critically to solve academic problems, and learn ways to effectively communicate those solutions. Betty and Deborrah noted that thinking and problem solving were very important to the learning process, and Jodi made direct reference to using critical or higher-order thinking as a way to engage students in learning. Varying emphases regarding concrete and higher order thinking skills did not appear to show a relationship with the number of years taught or to age differences.

### **Observed teaching practices**

This study found evidence of a connection between the way the teachers taught and their perceptions of their teaching methodology. Generational differences were sometimes evident in teaching philosophies and practices. Furthermore, many of the teachers shared common teaching practices. The themes that are presented in this section are student centered learning, teacher-centered learning, use of technology, and standards and praise.

**Student-centered learning.** Jodi and Marlo both used student-centered approaches to learning in their classroom more than they utilized teacher-centered approaches. On several occasions, Marlo's students taught one another, assuming the instructor role while Marlo guided them. Marlo and Jodi asked their students to share with the class times they had seen examples related to the lesson and asked questions prompting students to draw from their prior knowledge

to make connections. Jodi frequently used “turn and talk,” a technique in which students were asked to talk to the person sitting beside them about the new concepts being taught and how those concepts connected to their experiences outside of the classroom.

Jodi and Marlo also used hands-on, interactive ways to engage their students in the learning process. Jodi used the Alphabet Exercise, encouraging students to use movement to learn the sounds and names of the letters. Marlo used a number game in which students used their bodies as an interactive way to make math engaging. At times, Marlo and Jodi used direct instruction, but only for periods of no more than fifteen minutes at a time. As a result of these varied activities, their students seemed engaged and excited about learning. Both teachers used manipulative and body movement to get and maintain their students’ interest.

**Teacher-centered learning.** Observations showed that Betty, Deborrah and Trisha most often used direct instruction in their classrooms, and my observations indicated that their students seemed less engaged in what was being taught. While Betty encouraged students to think of more than one way to solve a problem, her classroom format remained teacher-centered, with her students always at their desks facing the teacher. Her students did have the opportunity to speak when they raised their hands, but always in response to her direct questions. While Betty made efficient use of classroom time in presenting her prepared lesson plans, no classroom discussions that included original contributions from students were observed in Betty’s classroom.

Similarly, Deborrah spoke most of the time and asked for little student input, focusing instead on stories from her life to engage students. The stories were related to what was being taught, stories did hold the students’ interest some of the time, and students did ask questions about her stories. However, students were not interactive during this process, and they listened

most of the time. The interview data from Deborrah were a direct reflection of what I noted during observations.

Trisha used direct instruction exclusively, and her students were often engaged in seatwork. Her classroom was the quietest and the least interactive of the five classrooms observed. She presented the lessons to the students by using lectures. The students sat quietly and listened to the lessons that were presented, and the students occasionally asked questions. Trisha taught her students in ways that were similar to the ways she spoke of her teaching practices during our interviews.

**Use of technology.** Research indicates that educational technology can facilitate the development of students' higher order thinking and metacognition skills when urban students are taught to apply the process of problem solving and are allowed to use technology in the development of solutions (Murphy, Richards, Lewis, & Carman, 2005; Triona & Klahr, 2003). The use of technology as a teaching practice varied among the teachers in this study. During the time I observed Betty, Deborrah, and Trisha, they did not use the technology available in their classrooms. Betty and Trisha arranged their rooms in ways that made their Smart Boards inaccessible. Both Betty and Trisha opted to use an overhead projector, while Deborrah used a white-board. In contrast, Jodi and Marlo used their Smart Boards and other technology during almost every lesson. Jodi set up a phonics computer game on the projector as one of the centers that all her students had the opportunity to use. Marlo used the Internet to show her students video clips of other countries and the people who lived in those countries. Differences in use of technology were apparent and seemed related to generational differences.

**Standards and Praise.** Teachers' standards/expectations for their students affect the learning opportunities that they provide, academic learning time, curriculum coverage, and

student' self-standards; and all of these affect student achievement (Proctor, 1984). Interviews conducted by Weinstein (2002) consistently found that urban students from first grade through fifth grade thought teachers had higher expectations for higher achievers and gave those students more opportunities and choices. Jodi, Marlo and Betty maintained high standards for all their students. Quick to enforce rules and encourage students to do their best, they did not allow students to avoid consequences because of difficult home lives or because they claimed they were unfamiliar with classroom or school rules. In contrast, Deborrah often did not enforce consequences for negative behavior. Trisha did enforce consequences but seemed indifferent about whether or not her students completed their work. Trisha made it clear that she follows the standards that she is required to teach; but if her students chose not to complete assignments she did not feel responsible for making sure they did so.

Brophy (1981) found that praise is a significant reinforcement method for teachers because it builds self-esteem, provides encouragement, and builds a positive relationship between the teacher and the student. However, he cited additional studies that report that classroom praise is infrequent (Thomas et al., 1978; Luce & Hoge, 1978). Burnett (2001) used Elwell and Tiberio's Praise Attitude Questionnaire (1994) and measured primary school students' preference for teachers' praise. A sample of 747 students age 8-12 participated in the study. The results showed that 91% of the students preferred to be praised often or sometimes, while only 9% reported that they never wanted praise. Marlo and Deborrah offered their students a great deal of praise. I watched Marlo offer encouragement and praise to her students while they were completing assigned tasks. Also, it was not uncommon for her to hold students close while talking with them about a rule that was broken or to congratulate them on a job well done. More

than the other teachers, Marlo seemed focused on getting to know her students on a personal level.

**Generational differences.** An important discovery during this research process was that generational differences and values related to those differences contributed to how each educator perceived and enacted teaching and learning. The generation in which they were socialized appeared to influence how these teachers taught their students, the goals they set for their students, and how they understood their responsibility as an urban educator.

The three generations represented in this study were Baby Boomers, Generation X, and the Millennial Generation (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Generalized characteristics and styles of each generation were exhibited in the manner described below. Trisha and Betty were born between 1946 and 1964 and are Baby Boomers. Baby Boomers have been described as optimistic, workaholic, loyal and idealistic. This generation was born during the time of Civil Rights, the Vietnam War, and space travel. Marlo and Deborrah are a part of Generation X (1965-1980). This generation grew up during the time of Watergate, latchkey kids, the end of the Cold War. They have been described as being skeptical, technologically literate, self-reliant, and fun. Jodi is a part of the Millennial Generation (1977-2000), which has been described as being more globally concerned, cyber-savvy and realistic. Jodi grew up during the time of digital media, the 9/11 terrorist attack, and AIDS.

Baby Boomers Betty and Trisha had the common belief that if their students work hard they will succeed, which may be associated with their strong work ethic. Both have worked loyally for BEMS for over 20 years. Betty and Trisha had more traditional teaching styles, primarily relying on direct instruction, which may be attributed to their discomfort with ambiguity. Baby Boomers tend to be less technologically savvy, and do not easily adapt to

change. While observing, there was little use of technology in Betty and Trisha's classroom. They wrote on white boards or overhead projectors, showing how math problems should be solved or how sentences should be punctuated. Success in doing their job was very important to them. A good responsible teacher, from their perspective, worked hard and put in long hours to accomplish the task. Both Betty and Trisha were proud of their long teaching careers at BEMS.

Marlo and Deborrah are a part of Generation X and seemed more independent in their teaching approaches. They were more eclectic in their pedagogical practices than Betty and Trisha. Both Marlo and Deborrah seemed more comfortable with using technology in their classrooms, but less so than Jodi. Marlo and Deborrah were interested in how their students felt about the process of learning, and strived to make learning fun. While teaching their students, they would ask them if they were having fun or if they enjoyed how they were learning. Students engaged in activities that required them to move around and interact with one another. Both teachers demonstrated independence and self-reliance when they spoke of different situations in which they felt they had to personally get involved to make sure the goal was accomplished. Time with their students was important to them. Both Marlo and Deborrah were interested in making sure their students had mastered the skill being taught, and they utilized varying teaching techniques to make learning happen. They would tell their students stories to make sure the students understood. As urban educators, they felt responsible for providing a balance between innovation and structure for their students.

Jodi was the most technologically savvy of all five teachers. She is a part of the Millennial Generation. She incorporated technology in some way for every lesson that she taught. Students used the Smart Board during centers time, and she used interactive computer programs to teach math and reading. Jodi was interested in her students enjoying learning while

using technology. She wanted her students to develop a comfort level using computers as a foundational tool, much the same as a calculator or a ruler. While teaching, she was effective at multitasking and expected her students to multitask as well. During one lesson, while teaching reading, she switched her focus to a math concept they had worked on in the past, then within the same hour, she returned to the reading lesson. Jodi seemed confident when speaking with me about her pedagogical practices. She was aware and interested in the diversity of her students and the differences between herself and her students. The individuality of her students was important to her. Jodi was interested in finding new ideas to help her students learn and to make herself a better educator.

The Baby Boomer teachers relied more upon similarities of students and a limited number of learning techniques, while the Generation X and Millennial teachers seemed more aware of the individual learning styles of each student and utilized that diversity in more flexible and adaptive ways (Zemke, Raines, & Filipezak, 2000). Generational differences are important when we consider what motivates urban educators in the classroom. The generational differences of the studied five teachers were apparent in the ways they taught and related to their students. This information can be useful in working with, preparing and understanding urban educators from different age cohorts.

### **How they think culture and ethnicity influence their teaching practices.**

Cultural influences are an important component of this study. All of the teachers felt that the impact of poverty was more influential than race or ethnicity in how they taught. However, Jodi and Deborrah did mention racial and cultural differences as a challenge in their classrooms. Because their race and/or ethnicity was same as that of their students, Marlo, Betty, and Trisha expressed that they felt more connected to the community, parents and students than Jodi and

Deborrah. Betty, Deborrah, and Trisha felt they did not teach differently based on race, ethnicity, or culture.

Being the only White teachers in my study, Deborrah and Jodi felt that it took more time and effort for them, compared to their colleagues, to understand and get through to their students. Deborrah had experienced dissonance between what she was trying to communicate to her students and their interpretation. She also experienced difficulty at the beginning of her teaching career at BEMS when she felt that parents did not want their children to be placed in her classroom because she was White. Jodi, however, did not mention any difficulty with parents because of her race. She expressed that she tried to better understand her students by getting involved in the community and by visiting her students' families. Unlike Deborrah, Jodi felt that her students' race, ethnicity, and culture influenced how she taught. She tried to structure her lessons around her students' personal knowledge and experiences, and she saw the differences between her students and her as an opportunity for growth. Jodi and Deborrah were the only Caucasian teachers in this study and their experiences as Caucasian urban educators were different in some ways from the experiences of Marlo, Betty, and Trisha, who are African American women.

Marlo, who did not grow up in poverty, mentioned that she was unaccustomed to many of her students' poverty level. She felt that she had to teach her students differently, but only because they might lack prior knowledge as a result of poverty. However, like Betty and Trisha, she is comfortable at BEMS and feels that her race allows her to communicate with parents and students on a less guarded level. As African-American teachers, Marlo, Betty, and Trisha feel that they have the opportunity to be role models for their students.

Unlike Marlo, Betty and Trisha grew up in the community and feel that they are connected to the community beyond similarity in race. Having taught in the community for so long, they are connected to it in additional ways because they have taught the parents of the children they are currently teaching and in some cases even their grandparents. They both expressed a familiarity and comfortableness with the urban environment in which they teach.

Deborah, Betty and Trisha did not feel that they had to teach differently because of their students' race, ethnicity, or culture. These teachers felt that all children are basically the same and can be taught the same way. They all expressed that race did not make a difference when asked how race influenced the way they taught. However, Betty expressed that she feels students in urban schools have bolder personalities, but this factor may have more to do with perceived urban culture than with race.

Trisha emphasized that she has high expectations for all of her students. She feels that since she succeeded while coming from the same environment and background as her students, they should also succeed. Therefore, she does not make exceptions for them because of their difficult circumstances. She expressed that the world will not lower its standards just because someone is disadvantaged, so she feels that expecting less from her students would be a disservice to them. Betty, Trisha, Marlo, and Jodi expressed the need to hold their students to high standards despite the challenges their students face. On the other hand, Deborah makes exceptions for some of her students and does not hold them all to the same standard. She expressed that every child has different needs and that she does her best to meet those needs.

In summary, culture does impact each of these urban educators, but in different ways. Neither Jodi nor Marlo grew up in poverty; thus, both came to BEMS unfamiliar with the poverty their students face. In contrast, Betty and Trisha grew up in the BEMS community and

better understand the community their students are coming from. Jodi and Deborrah, the two Caucasian urban teachers in this study, spoke of having to exert more effort to understand their students and the differences that exist between them and their students. Deborrah experienced problems in her relationships with her students' parents because she is Caucasian and the majority of her students and their parents are African American. On the other hand, Betty, Marlo, and Trisha felt that being African American helped them better connect with parents and students.

### **Conclusions**

This study's findings are based on careful analyses of interviews with and observations of five teacher participants. The results pertaining to each teacher were reported in Chapter 4, and the findings from a cross-case analysis were presented in the previous section of this chapter. Conclusions based on these findings as well as my reflections on this study are presented below.

Based on this study's analysis, I have drawn the following conclusions related to influences on deciding to become an urban educator; self reflections on being an urban educator; urban educators' definitions of urban education; urban educators' perceptions of students; goals urban educators have set for their students; teaching philosophies and practices; and cultural influences on teaching practices.

The following conclusions are related to influences on deciding to become an urban educator:

- Family and/or individuals in the community were influential in many of the participants' decisions to become educators.
- The participants decided to teach in urban schools because they felt a sense of belonging and/or because they felt a sense of solidarity with the community.

- The teachers who had taught at BEMS for the least number of years saw teaching at BEMS as an opportunity to challenge themselves.

The following conclusions are related to the urban educators' self reflections:

- Three of the five teachers who participated in this study said they had high expectations for all of their students.
- Three out of the five teachers described themselves as tough, strict, or structured.
- The self-reflections of each teacher were directly related in some way to the teaching practices implemented in her classroom.
- The educators with the fewest years of experience expressed the importance of creating a community within their classroom more often than the more experienced teachers.

The following conclusions are related to urban educators' definitions of urban education:

- Challenges were often the primary focus when defining urban education.
- Several of the participants associated urban education with a school that serves primarily African-Americans and/or inner-city students.
- Several of the educators focused on their students' needs and the challenges both teachers and students face.
- Teachers who had taught at BEMS for the longest acknowledged the challenges of teaching at an urban school, but seemed more comfortable with the challenges and less influenced by them.

The following conclusions are related to urban educators' perceptions of their students:

- Inquiries about these educators' perceptions of their students always led to descriptions of challenges the students face.

- Four of the five participants viewed lack of parental involvement as one of the major challenges of teaching at an urban school.
- All the educators indicated that adult-related problems (such as hunger, unstable living conditions, lack of parent involvement, abuse and other issues affecting their students) are major challenges associated with being an urban educator.
- All the educators acknowledged that the challenges their students face often impede meeting academic goals they set for students.

The following conclusions are related to perceived goals urban educators have set for their students:

- Four out of five of the teachers set a long-term goal for all of their students to become productive members of society.
- All five teachers established for their students the goal of becoming lifelong learners, problem solvers, and independent thinkers.
- The teacher who had taught at BEMS the longest seemed more focused on academic goals than on social and emotional goals.
- The goals each teacher set for her students reflected the generation the teachers come from.
- Teachers who had taught at BEMS for the least number of years were more holistic in their teaching goals, addressing social and emotional issues as well as academics.
- Teachers who had taught at BEMS for the least number of years seemed more hopeful and positive about the success of their students.

- The life-skill goals teachers set for their students were often reflected in teaching practices observed within the classroom.

The following conclusions are related to teaching philosophies and teaching practices:

- The two participants who had taught for the least number of years had teaching philosophies that encouraged hands-on interactive learning.
- The three participants who had taught for the most years relied on a direct instruction approach to teaching and learning.
- The two teachers who taught the longest seemed more set in their ways and less flexible when asked about teaching practices beyond direct instruction.
- Teachers of lower grade levels, compared to those of higher grade levels, used more hands-on approaches to learning.
- The generational differences of the teachers appeared to influence their teaching philosophies and teaching practices.
- Technology was used most often by the teachers who had taught the fewest number of years.
- Drawing on their students' experiences and knowledge seemed more important for the teachers who have taught the least number of years.
- More experienced teachers were more structured and traditional in their approach to teaching.

The following conclusions are related to cultural influences urban educators' practices:

- All African-American participating teachers viewed their race as an advantage in working with African-American parents and students

- Caucasian teachers felt that more time and effort was needed to better understand and be understood by their African-American students and parents.
- Participants who were not African-Americans felt that working with students outside of their own race was challenging, but did not feel that it put them or their students at a disadvantage.

My research contributes to existing research in many ways. First, there are similarities and differences between my research and other research regarding why teachers choose a career in education (Book & Freeman, 1985; Lortie, 1975; Watt & Richardson, 2007; Wright, 1977). The importance of teacher role model and personally rewarding teaching experiences mirrored previous research done (Book & Freeman, 1985). However, the desire “to give back” to their community as a reason for urban educators’ career choice was a finding I did not find in existing research. The finding that the two longest-serving teachers had roots in the local community and still want to “give back” many years later suggest value in thoughtful mentorship programs for promising urban youth with an interest in pursuing careers in urban education in their own communities.

Second, characteristics of successful urban educators described in literature were not consistently found in the urban educators in this study (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Howards, 2001). In my study, applying cultural relevance while teaching, sharing authority in the classroom, using technology in the classroom, and implementing diverse teaching repertoires were practiced and valued most by the two youngest teachers with the least number of years of experience, and were less valued and practiced by the three older teachers with the most experience. Furthermore, I observed that students seemed more involved and engaged in the two classrooms whose teachers practiced and valued these successful practices of urban

educators described in the literature. My findings were consistent with the work of Eggen and Kauchak (2010), who found that student engagement, was directly linked with student involvement.

Third, I discovered striking generational differences in teaching philosophies and practices that was not present in the literature I reviewed. More experienced and older teachers utilized mostly behaviorist strategies and made limited use of technology. The least experienced youngest teachers utilized mostly constructivist strategies and made extensive use of technology. Generational differences were observed in my study. The current emphasis on student-centered learning in schools of education may explain the teaching strategies of the youngest teachers (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Pressure to teach to standardized tests likely influenced a least one teacher who practiced direct instruction. Alternatively, it is also possible that with experience, teachers tend to adopt more direct instructional practices.

Finally, my investigation into the effects of racial and cultural similarities between urban educators and their students confirmed the value many African-American teachers place on being role-models, and confirmed the challenges Caucasian teachers face in negotiating cultural and racial differences (Dickar, 2008; Michie, 2007). All five teachers emphasized the role additional socioeconomic factors have on school performance which seemed to be one of the most challenging factor of teaching at an urban school (Bartz and Evans, 1991; Grossman, 1995; Domanico, 1994; Kozol, 2005; Heilig, 2011). My research not only supports existing literature, but it has contributed new insight into area of urban education that needs additional research.

### **Recommendations**

Throughout the research process, I was able to examine these urban teachers' experiences as an outsider, allowing me the opportunity to think about recommendations for urban educators

and those who teach them. Also, as a researcher it is important to make recommendations that can advance existing urban-education research. Therefore, recommendations for urban educators, teacher educators, and researchers are described in the following section.

### **Recommendations for urban educators.**

Most importantly, urban educators must become culturally relevant teachers who understand that it is their responsibility to learn about their students' culture. Culturally relevant teachers use their students' cultural backgrounds as a basis for learning (Ladson-Billings, 2001). They recognize that their students have prior knowledge that can be built upon, and they capitalize upon that knowledge. Culturally relevant teachers see their students' culture as a vehicle that can be used to help students excel academically (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

While conducting this research, I noticed that Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennial teachers seemed isolated from one another within the school. Each teacher did participate in grade-level meetings, but few had the opportunity to observe other teachers' teaching practices. Teachers need to foster a community among their fellow teachers. In the literature review, I wrote of the importance of community concerning the neighborhood of the school (Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, urban educators could also benefit from establishing a community among other urban educators within the school. If urban educators formed a community of educators across grade levels, ages, races, and cultures, they could enrich their teaching practices and their understandings of others' perspectives. Also, it would be helpful if diverse teaching styles were connected through team teaching. Developing a professional community among urban educators can help to establish a safe environment for teachers to discuss difficult issues, teach teachers to listen carefully to each other's ideas and perspectives, foster a commitment to help fellow urban educators within the group to learn, and develop their

teaching practices and understandings of urban schools (Wenger, 1996; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001)

When I first started interviewing this study's five teachers, they seemed to have difficulty fully describing their teaching practices. Journaling and regular discussions with other teachers would allow urban educators to become more aware of various teaching practices. Self-reflection on teaching practices would also encourage teachers to think about how they are meeting their students' needs. Researchers have found that successful educators are reflective on their teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Engaging in reflective practice is one way urban educators can improve student learning (Clarke, 2000).

Urban educators are required to be so much more than simply instructors because their students often need so much more. Several of the teachers in this study mentioned that their students needed to be taught social skills. Thus, I believe that urban educators should develop strategies to improve the social, psychological, and moral growth of their students. Holistic instruction goes beyond just teaching academics; it includes helping students develop socially, psychologically, and morally. It includes helping students develop basic skills in these areas that may not be taught at home. Teaching urban students in a holistic way will enable them to experience success academically and interpersonally (Delpit, 1995; Howards, 2001).

Urban educators need to embrace new ways of teaching and learning through technology in order to enrich their classrooms. Triona and Klahr (2003) have found that using technology in the classroom can provide an experience similar to hands on learning. Technology provides a new way to capture students' interest in subject matter, and makes it possible to teach skills that extend beyond the classroom and into the students' future. The world continues to advance in the

sphere of technology, and it is important to make sure all students are equipped to function in this technological age.

Urban educators also need to be well prepared in areas of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. Eggen and Kauchak (2010) make it clear that these three components of knowledge are essential to providing sound teaching. A strong foundation in content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge make it possible for urban educators to infuse culturally relevant content into the curriculum and focus on developing skills necessary for academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

### **Recommendations for teacher educators.**

Teacher educators need to find ways for their students to become socioculturally aware and able to talk about and explore racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. Sociocultural awareness is the awareness, recognition, and affirmation of one's own and others' cultural identity (Gay, 1995). As future educators find ways to openly talk about the differences that exist between them and their future students, they will be more prepared to address needs that arise within their classrooms. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that racial similarities between teachers and students do not always translate into teachers understanding influential cultural implications within the urban environment. Thus, experiences leading to improved cultural awareness will help future teachers to understand that they are responsible for learning about their students' culture and the role it plays in education. Student teachers who are socioculturally aware will have the capability to teach their students in ways that are culturally relevant (Nieto, 2005).

Teacher educators need to speak openly and honestly about the challenges that are often present in urban schools. The only way teacher educators can have a firsthand knowledge about the challenges present in urban schools is by getting involved in those schools and the urban communities that surround them. Murrell (2001) expressed that in order to successfully teach urban students, teachers need to be aware the many factors that may influence their students' learning and development. Future urban educators need training in directly addressing the challenges associated with urban education. Becoming a part of the urban communities that surround urban schools will provide teachers with an understanding of where their students are coming from and a better understanding of their students' needs and capabilities (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Professional development for urban educators needs to continue throughout their careers. Topics for professional development should include the use of state of the art classroom technology and recently researched teaching practices. Mecklenburger (1990) suggests that students and teachers can share a rich world of information through text, sights and sounds by way of technology. As mentioned in chapter 2, successful urban educators understanding how to represent subject matter in a way that students can understand, and they also know what motivates their students to learn (Darling-Hammond, L., & Baratz-Snowdon, J., 2005; Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Urban educators will be better prepared to meet their urban students' needs and will be less likely to stagnate if they continue their training throughout their career.

### **Recommendations for researchers.**

Qualitative research is vital to understanding the experience of urban educators. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) note, "Qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect" (p. 1). While quantitative research helps in understanding

what urban educators are doing in their classrooms and how they are doing it, it does not answer the question of why they do what they do. Reality is socially constructed and qualitative research helps educators to make sense of reality (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Understanding why urban educators use certain teaching practices is essential to building a more complete knowledge base that will help to better prepare future urban educators; therefore, more qualitative studies of the beliefs and practices of urban teachers are recommended.

In addition, both qualitative and quantitative researchers need to make their research findings more assessable and applicable to urban educators. The schism between practice and research needs to be bridged. Researching urban education is fruitless if it does not translate into practical ways teachers can locate and implement researchers' findings. Researchers have the responsibility to do what they can to make their research accessible to urban educators.

Because of the complexity of urban education, more research is needed regarding urban educators' perceptions and teaching practices in an effort to identify more effective strategies for teaching urban students. In turn, these strategies can be tested; and those proven to be effective can later become strategies taught to and utilized by pre-service and in-service teachers. During this study, I examined three generations of educators' teaching philosophies and teaching practices. More research needs to be done to carefully analyze differences in generational teaching philosophies, styles and practices. Finally, research on teachers' perceptions can help principals and teacher educators to interview candidates more effectively and determine if they are good fits for teaching in urban schools.

### **Reflections**

In this section, I will reflect on my experiences during this research. At the beginning of this study, it took time for the teachers to trust me. During our first meeting and interview, I felt

as if the teachers simply responded with what they thought was the “correct” answer. However, as I continued to interact with these teachers during interviews and observations, I earned their trust and they opened up to me. As a result, I am confident that my data accurately reflect my participants’ beliefs and practices.

At times, bracketing my thoughts and expectations about what each teacher should be doing was difficult; but, I did my best to record observations and interviews without value judgments in order to ensure my opinions did not influence my data collection. I wanted to observe with the intention of later asking the teachers meaningful questions to better understand their teaching philosophies. At times, constructing questions that probed for deeper meanings and beliefs was difficult. Yet, such probing was necessary to better understand how urban teachers think and operate. Fortunately, the teachers were supportive; and I believe that all five teachers found reflecting on their teaching practices and methodology to be helpful.

Data analysis was extremely enlightening. I found a significant contrast between the more experienced and the less experienced teachers in terms of the ways they thought and taught. Grade level may have also been influential in how these urban educators decided to teach their students. Urban educators who taught higher grade levels used more direct instruction approaches. Urban educator who taught lower grade levels often used more constructivist and hands on learning approaches to teach their students. It is possible that those urban educators that taught kindergarten and first grade used more hands-on learning approaches because their younger students needed more visual and hands on learning experiences to make sense of the content being taught. It is also possible that some of the urban educators felt that older students need less concrete examples, hands-on learning, because they are likely to be more able to engage in abstract thinking. However, research has shown that older students also benefit from

hands-on cooperative group learning (Ibrahim, 2006). I also found similarities among all the teachers and sometimes among teachers who were of the same race. The cross-case analysis allowed me to compare the teachers and to discover new meaning in their responses to the interview questions and in my observations of them teaching.

Most importantly, I was impressed with the commitment and dedication of these teachers to their profession and to their students. I have always been fascinated with how urban educators address the demands and challenges they face and still manage to provide quality learning opportunities. Although each teacher approached learning and teaching differently, they all wanted their students to become productive members of society. I am very grateful to all the teachers for the opportunity to observe and interview them in order to better understand their important work.

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**APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Email Sent to Selected Urban Educator Participants**

Dear Teachers,

My name is Meredith Murray and I am a doctoral student in the Cultural Studies Program at the University of Tennessee. Over the years, as a teacher and graduate student, I have had a deep interest in understanding methods of instruction and how teachers think about their practice. This is the focus of my dissertation study.

I would like very much to conduct my dissertation study at Banks Elementary Magnet School and hope I can extend an invitation to you to participate. The study is an attempt to learn more about teaching and student learning and how you think about the methods you use for instruction.

At your earliest convenience, I would like to meet you in person to become better acquainted and to explore the plan for my dissertation study in greater detail. During that time, I would also like to discuss a convenient time to meet your students, observe your classroom, and get a better understanding of classroom and school routines. I deeply appreciate the contributions teachers make to their students and to graduate students like me. I hope you will accept my invitation to participate in the study and give me the opportunity to learn from you. I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Meredith Murray

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent Form for Urban Educators**

### **University of Tennessee**

#### **Project Description for Participants and Consent Form**

##### **Title: Urban Teachers' Perspectives and Teaching Practices**

##### **Who is the researcher and what is the goal.**

The principal researcher, Meredith Murray, a doctoral student, in Cultural Studies at the University of Tennessee is studying what urban elementary teachers identifies as current and past influences on his/her teaching and their impact on his/her teaching. The goal of this study is to learn more about urban teachers and their teaching methods.

##### **What does your involvement entail?**

If you agree to participate, I will visit your classroom one times a week for three days during October 2009 through May of 2010 to observe your teaching. Observations will last for the whole day. I will take on the role of the observer and low level participant taking notes as I keep interaction with children to a minimum. Occasionally, I will informally interview you before and/or after observations when the students are not present and will take notes either during and/or after these brief conversations.

I will conduct three tape-recorded interviews with you (at the beginning, middle and end of the study). I will ask you a series of open-ended questions designed to capture your thoughts on teaching. Each of these interviews will take approximately one hour to complete and will be transcribed by me or by a typist who will signed a confidentiality agreement.

##### **Risk to you during research.**

You should not experience any foreseeable risk by participating in this research project. Your participation is completely voluntary. Pseudonyms will be used for all names and locations. Your identity and the school's identity will be protected as much as possible in published reports of the research or in research presentations at professional meetings. Data will be stored securely and will be made only available to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission to do otherwise.

### **Benefits**

While you will not be compensated directly for your participation, you may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your teaching practices. In addition, your participation will aid in benefiting others who are interested in learning more about urban educator's teaching methods.

### **Your participation is voluntary.**

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 without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you want to withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data from the interview will be destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant's Initials

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Meredith Murray, at 416 Claxton Complex, 1126 Volunteer Boulevard Knoxville,

TN 37996-3456, and by phone at 865-605-5633. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

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## CONSENT

**I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION, HAVE RECEIVED A COPY OF THIS FORM, AND AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.**

**Participant:**

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Name	Signature	Date
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**Researcher:**

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Name	Signature	Date
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### **Appendix C: Initial Participant Interview Protocol**

1. When someone you don't know asks you what you do what do you tell them?
2. The word "Urban" carries a lot of connotations in literature. What does teaching in an urban school mean to you?
3. What contributed to your decision to pursue teaching as a career?
4. What factors contributed to your decision to become an urban educator?
5. What are your thoughts about teaching at an urban school, and when did you decide that is what you wanted to do?
6. How did you become a teacher at this particular urban school?
7. What do you know about the history of this school and has it influenced you in anyway?
8. What are three or four principles that you would say guide your teaching practices?
9. What words describe you as a teacher?
10. What words describe teaching practices you use in your classroom?
11. Can you describe a typical day in your classroom?
12. Based on your teaching experience, what do you think the role of the teacher is in the learning process?
13. How do children learn best?
14. How many years have you taught at this school?
15. What have you learned about the needs of your students at this school?

## VITA

Meredith Elise Murray Staddon was born in Denver, Colorado. She attended Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama, where she earned a Bachelors of Science in 2001 in Elementary Education. In 2003 she earned a Masters of Arts in Special education from the University of California, Riverside. She has taught both in public and private elementary and middle schools in California and Tennessee. She also taught Educational Psychology to undergraduate students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In December 2012, Meredith earned her doctorate in Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.