A RESEARCH CONVERSATION ABOUT TEACHING READING

IN A DIVERSE SUBURBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Children of color in middle-class suburban schools experience marginalization
and low academic achievement, as do their counterparts in urban schools. However,
because they live in the suburbs and attend suburban schools, people often think that they
are doing well. Policymakers, residents, community leaders, and visitors make the
assumption that resources needed by children of color in suburban public school districts
are readily available.

The common image of wealth associated with the suburbs needs to be
demystified. Today's suburbs do not conform to stereotypical perceptions of
homogeneity, affluence, and high achievement. They are becoming increasingly diverse
and in need of resources to support people who do not have access to services and the
means to provide for their families. Some suburban public school districts serve a
growing multiracial student population, including more immigrant children. These
districts face the challenge of meeting all students' needs, as well as the needs of the
teachers who are held accountable for the success of this ethnically, racially,
linguistically, and economically diverse student population. Researchers are becoming

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aware of ways in which suburbs are transforming. More important, educators and administrators are beginning to rethink how they approach teaching and learning in diverse suburban public school districts.

This study explores teachers' and administrators' discourse about teaching reading to a racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student population in a suburban public school district. The study employs auto-ethnographic and action research methods within the frameworks of critical theory and critical race theory. Research methods include focus groups, semistructured topical interviews, Geographic Information Systems, document analysis, action research, and auto-ethnography.

This study has policy implications for the target school district and other suburban public school districts that are experiencing a racial and socioeconomic transformation. Suburban public school districts need to learn how to meet the demands of federal and state regulations as well as the needs of an increasingly growing immigrant and low-income student population. This study illuminates experiences of district administrators and teachers in an ethnically, racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse suburban public school district.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my daughter, Kioja, who endured countless days without mommy. Darling, keep on loving books.

À ma mère, Lizaire Jusselene qui m'a équipée pour être une intellectuelle dès le début, quel que fût son statut socio-économique, je te remercie pour tes prières, tes sacrifices, ta force et ton amour.

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

Over the past 40 years, many suburban towns in the United States have experienced changes, both physically and demographically. Previously, the typical suburban town was intended to be a residential area for White middle-class families and to serve as a retreat from city life and what living in the city represents (Jackson, 1985; Mohl, 2000; Teaford, 1997). Suburbs lacked diversity of race, class, transportation, and environmental features (Mumford, 1938; Teaford, 1997). Today, the identity of the suburbs is being reshaped by many factors: lack of cleanliness, how well the properties are maintained, the demographics of the area, the presence of graffiti, rising crime rates, poor school performance, and poverty (Murphy, 2010; Orfield, 2002b; Short, Hanlon, & Vicino, 2007).

Many suburbs today do not conform to the perceptions of stereotypes like homogeneity, affluence, and high achievement. Suburban public schools need to address the complex realities of students and parents who are attempting to live the middle-class lifestyle in the suburbs (Dippo & James, 2011; Phelan & Schneider, 1996). There are more immigrants and people of color living in the suburbs than ever before, with diverse cultures, languages, multiple needs, and challenges (Borjas, 2002; Frankenberg, 2008, Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). The conditions of the suburbs may also reflect those of the "inner city" with increasing social and political marginalization, economic exclusion, educational disparities between White students and students of color, and a host of other factors that can lead to poverty, racism, and challenges in the schooling experience (Phelan & Schneider, 1996). These conditions are creating the need for suburban public school districts to respond differently than they have in the past and to acknowledge and

address low student achievement, lack of parental involvement, absenteeism, and many other factors that may result from those issues (Dippo & James, 2011; Orfield, 2002b; Phelan & Schneider, 1996).

Suburban school districts also face the challenge of meeting the needs of teachers who are held accountable for the success of this ethnically, racially, linguistically, and economically diverse student population. School districts need to be able to interact with families that lack sufficient English language skills to communicate effectively with school staff and assist their children at home with their schoolwork.

The challenge of partnering with families who may be unfamiliar with the way in which the American school system operates is another issue that these school districts face. Many children of color in middle-class suburban schools experience marginalization and low academic achievement, just as their counterparts in urban schools do. They, too, are being cheated out of a quality education. However, because they are living in the suburbs and attending suburban schools, policy makers, residents, and visitors to the school often think that the students are doing well. They assume that the resources that children of color in suburban public school districts need are readily available and that their parents are highly visible at the school and provide the academic, social, emotional, and financial support that their children need to excel in school. However, children in suburban public schools today are different from the children who attended suburban schools in the past (Borjas, 2002; Frankenberg, 2008, Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Mikelbank, 2004; Murphy, 2010).

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to this study, with a brief description of the research purpose and the theoretical frameworks. This auto-ethnographic study is

informed by theories of immigration, critical race, and culturally responsive teaching. Chapter 2 begins with an auto-ethnographic vignette by the author as teacher-researcher. The vignette speaks to the degree to which who we are as individuals, the experiences that we have had, are always informing our research agendas and how we choose to present that research. This chapter reviews the literature that informs this study and the scholarly conversations to which this work contributes. It also outlines the research process used to design this study.

Chapter 3 begins with an auto-ethnographic vignette that highlights the experiences that led me to select auto-ethnography as a research method. The chapter describes the research paradigm and methods that I use to conduct this qualitative inquiry. Informed by critical theory as a paradigm, I interpret and analyze the data that I obtain from the focus group discussions and individual interviews.

Chapter 4 begins with an auto-ethnographic vignette that explains my decision to embark on this journey and choose the Oakwood Public School District as the site of this research project. This chapter also examines the history of Oakwood. Using the GIS software and document analysis, I explore the economic and demographic dimensions of the town. I examine the history of education in Oakwood and the role that changing demographics play in the ways in which teachers and administrators approach teaching and learning in an ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse suburban school district.

Chapter 5 provides detailed descriptions of how teachers talk about their approaches to teaching reading and the relationship between what the school district mandates for teaching reading and what they believe works. I use a critical lens to

analyze the participants' perspectives and assumptions they make that may not be serving the best interest of Oakwood's diverse student population. I provide a kaleidoscope of perspectives and invite readers of this work to move to a space of reflection and action. I attend to the purpose of this project by interweaving data, analysis, and interpretation.

Chapter 6 presents detailed narratives of how district administrators talk about their experiences of working with teachers to implement an effective curriculum in a diverse suburban public school district. Within this chapter I also attend to the purpose of this project by interweaving data, analysis, and interpretation.

In Chapter 7 I begin with an auto-ethnographic vignette that reflects on how this inquiry process has informed my practice. I review the findings of this auto-ethnographic study and discuss its implications. I illuminate the commonalities that teachers and district administrators share and present the suggestions that the participants make for improving the learning outcomes of students in Oakwood. I use a critical frame to analyze and interpret the findings of this study, discuss the limitations of the study, and provide areas of possible future research work. I conclude this chapter with a vignette that reflects on the goals of this research project. Unlike previous chapters where I use italicized font to distinguish my auto-ethnographic narratives from the participants' verbatim quotations, this discussion chapter is not written in italics.

**Research Purpose**

There is a limited amount of research and information about how suburban school districts are responding to this increasingly widespread growth of racial and cultural transformation. This study contributes to filling that gap. The purpose of this study is to explore teachers' and administrators' discourse about teaching reading to a racially,

linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student population in a K–4 suburban public school district. Reference to "discourse about teaching reading" includes the multiple ways in which teachers and administrators speak about their philosophies and approaches to teaching reading. It provides much-needed explicit narratives of the complex ways in which teachers and administrators approach the teaching of reading in an ethnically, racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse suburban population of students. It includes how they speak about district reading policies, curriculum resources, and professional development opportunities for teaching reading at the elementary level.

Three primary questions guide this research.

1. How do teachers talk about their approaches to teaching reading in a diverse suburban public school setting?

2. How do teachers talk about the relationship between what the school district mandates for teaching reading and their teaching methods?

3. How do district administrators talk about their experiences of working with teachers to implement an effective reading curriculum in a diverse suburban school district?

**Conceptual Framework**

The suburban community that is the focus of this study—Oakwood Public School District—is transforming racially, economically, and ethnically, and therefore faces a challenge regarding how to educate students who may have needs quite different from those of the typical White middle-class child. Theories of immigration, critical race, and

culturally responsive teaching (defined below) provide the conceptual framework for this auto-ethnographic case study. Figure 1 depicts the interconnectedness of the theories.
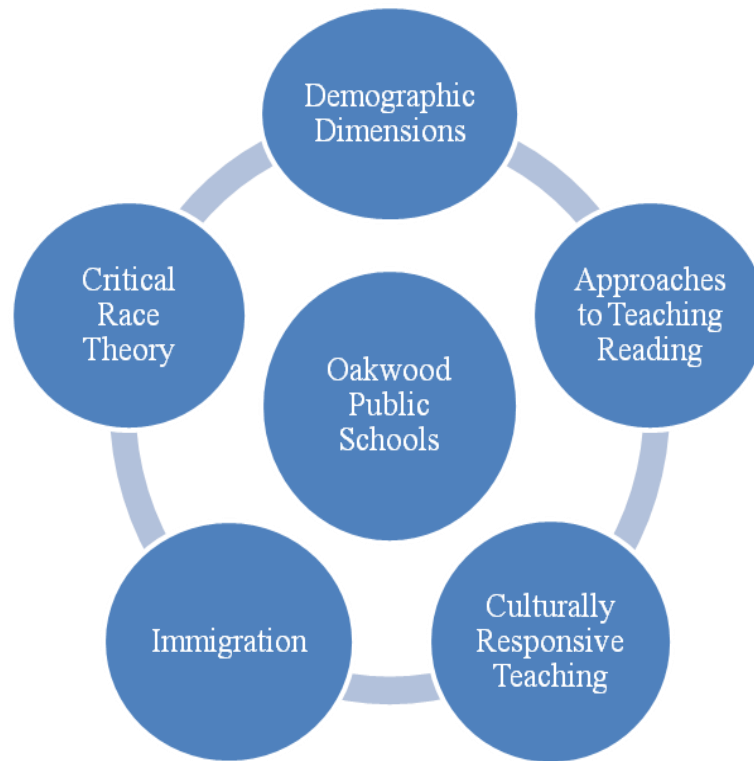


*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework relationship map.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Auto-Ethnographic Vignette

*I can still hear the principal's voice over the loud speaker. It is the beginning of Black History Month, and he's letting us know that we will be spending the month of February remembering and honoring famous African Americans. I can still see the posters depicting Harriet Tubman, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and George Washington Carver. As a young child who immigrated to the United States at the age of nine, during most of my school years I did not see myself in the books and materials that my teachers used, nor the celebrations that took place in school. Throughout my schooling experience, I continue to ask, "What about me?" I'm Haitian. There are no books about Haitian people, no acknowledgement of Haitian culture. Therefore, I redefine myself as "Black" so I can find a place to belong in school. This gives me a way to see myself a little bit in school, even if it is just one month a year.*

*It is this experience of not being visible in school, not having my cultural heritage acknowledged, that reminds me to acknowledge my students every day. That experience of being invisible makes me want to know whether my students were born here or in another country. I get to know who they are, who their families are, what their family traditions are, so that their needs are met in the classroom community. I don't want any child to leave my classroom feeling left out. My classroom library reflects my student population with books reflecting various cultures. Whether it's Zimbabwe, Puerto Rico, Ireland, or Pakistan, wherever my students are from, they will see their faces.*

*A girl in my classroom has only been in the United States for about a year. She lights up when I read a book about a little girl in Ethiopia, because she's from Ethiopia. Every time I read a book that represents a child from the classroom, I pull down the world map and tag where that country or state is located with a Post-it of who in our classroom community is from there. By the end of the year the map is covered with Post-its representing books we've read and the countries and states that have been represented. We see from whence we've come.*

## Critical Race Theory

Akom (2008) argues that, in the field of education, the current trend is to rely on notions of "Ameritocracy" to explain the role that racism plays in educational inequalities. Along the same lines, Duncan states, "It is fashionable nowadays to downplay and even dismiss race as a factor shaping the quality of life in the United States and instead to favor class-based and gender-based approaches to understanding social

oppression" (2005, as cited in Kumasi, 2011, p. 198). The growing number of middle-class Blacks is being used to support the belief that society rewards those who simply work hard and ultimately achieve the "American dream" (Akom, 2008; Kumasi, 2011). Akom (2008) points out that the acknowledgement that access to the "American dream" is restricted on the basis of racial identity and other forms of social difference is missing from this analysis.

Similarly, Kumasi (2011) argues that students whose language and cultural practices deviate from those of the dominant White culture are perceived to be abnormal or inferior. This perception positions White identity and White cultural and linguistic norms as being superior to those of non-Whites. Ladson-Billings (1998) posits that, as a new language and construction of race have emerged in mainstream discourses, the conceptual categories that have become placeholders for normative references to certain racial groups, while being cleverly disguised, are particularly offensive to non-White people. These conceptual categories of "school achievement," middle classness," "maleness," "beauty," "intelligence," and "science" become normative categories of Whiteness, while categories such as "gangs," "welfare recipients," "basketball players," and the "underclass" become marginalized and de-legitimized categories for "Blackness" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9).

As much as educators may downplay the role of racism and claim to be "color blind," subconscious practices of discrimination and a lack of cultural competency on the part of teachers and administrators continue to contribute to the growing disparities in White and non-White student achievement. A primary premise of critical race theory (CRT) is that racism in American society is normal (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Delgado

posits that, because racism is embedded in the fabric of American society, "It looks ordinary and natural to the persons in that culture" (1995, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 58). CRT scholars further posit that individuals and institutions manifest racist behaviors that can be characterized as neither intentional nor unintentional (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lawrence, 1987).

Even though CRT is embedded in multicultural scholarship and teacher preparation programs, many teachers continue to be ill prepared for the realities of teaching in suburban public school districts that have an increasingly diverse student population (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Educational scholars argue that, although attempts to infuse CRT into teacher training curricula have been partially successful in challenging the Eurocentric "difference as deficit" or "minority education" frameworks, the lack of standardized requisites for cultural competency, the numerous course requirements to be met within rigid time frames, and the persistence of a "race-neutral" ideology hamper the broader application of CRT in teacher training (Kumasi, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lopez, 2003).

The general mission of CRT is to analyze, deconstruct, and transform society for the betterment of relationships between race, racism, and power (Abrams & Moio, 2009). The tenets of CRT are used in education to examine the role that race plays in curriculum, student achievement, assessment, discipline policies, school funding, teacher preparation, and pedagogy. CRT is an ideal framework for this study, as it is a powerful tool to explain persistent inequities in education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Kumasi, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1998) stresses that, if we are serious about solving persistent problems of race, racism, and social injustice in schools and

classrooms, the use of stories by CRT scholars is a way to study, rethink, and communicate the experiences and realities of marginalized groups in the educational system. Similarly, Kumasi (2011) argues that "the power of CRT lies in its ability to avoid using cultural-deficit paradigms to explain the persistent achievement gap between White and non-White students" (p. 200).

## Culturally Responsive Teaching

A significant part of school reform over the past decade focuses on improvement of the academic performance of students who are racially, culturally, ethnically, economically, and linguistically diverse (Au, 2010; Belfield & Levin, 2007; Edwards, McMillon, Turner, & Lee, 2010; Gay, 2004; Gunderson, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Schmidt & Lazar, 2011).

Educational researchers find that, when teaching is connected with students' cultures, learning styles, backgrounds, and interests, their academic performance improves (Au, 2001; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noguera, 2008; Schmidt & Lazar, 2011). Edwards (2011) points out that "one of the greatest challenges that we face today is how to serve students whose literacy and language backgrounds are at odds with the literacy practices valued in schools" (p. ix). Efforts to link the home and school experience speak to the critical need for educational institutions to acknowledge and respond effectively to the increasingly growing diverse student population in America's classrooms.

Ladson-Billings (2009) argues that, in an attempt to locate the problem of discontinuity between what students experience at home and what they experience at school, researchers adopt terms such as *culturally appropriate*, *culturally congruent*,

*culturally responsive*, and *culturally compatible*. However, she states that only "the term *culturally responsive* appears to refer to a more dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 4).

The argument that curricula and teaching need to be culturally responsive is not new. Nearly half a century before educational scholars began to think about diversity in the suburbs and investigating the need for culturally responsive teaching, Dewey (1897) posited, "If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass" (p. 77). Later, in 1956, Dewey continued to advocate for a curriculum that balances culture and children's knowledge in order to extend children's learning experiences. It is worth repeating that over 50 years ago John Dewey argued that learning is rooted in the community and that it cannot operate in isolation.

Culturally responsive teaching is a perspective that acknowledges the dominance of Eurocentric ideologies and practices that are present in educational institutions. Teaching from a Eurocentric perspective has the potential to result in alienation and disinterest among children of color (Hanley & Noblit, 2008). One way to engage children of color in effective learning is to teach from a culturally responsive perspective. The principles of culturally responsive teaching dictate that the aim of teaching and learning begins with who students are and what they actually know, instead of what teachers believe they should know (Au, 2009; Gay, 2004; Hanley & Noblit, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Au and Jordan (1981) in their research with Hawaiian students find that, when teachers focus on using "talk-story" rather than the phonics approach to teach literacy, the students read and comprehend at a much higher level. In the same vein, Lazar (2011) suggests that when literacy and language practices are aligned, literacy achievement is more likely to happen. Schmidt and Lazar (2011) posit that culturally responsive teachers use literature in the curriculum to center students. By doing so, these teachers enable their students to make connections and understand how the material is relevant to aspects of their communities and themselves (Schmidt & Lazar, 2011).

Ideally, the elements of culturally responsive teaching are present in all facets of a curriculum. However, for the purpose of this dissertation, I focus on the role that culturally responsive teaching plays in the area of literacy. Au (2001) argues that culturally responsive instruction

> can bring students of diverse backgrounds to high levels of literacy by promoting engagement through activities that reflect the values, knowledge, and structures of interaction that students bring from the home. Culturally responsive instruction may create new literacies in classrooms, literacies that connect to students' home backgrounds . . . it can make literacy learning personally meaningful and rewarding for students of diverse backgrounds. (p. 3)
>
> Teaching approaches build upon the strengths that students bring from their home cultures, instead of ignoring these strengths or requiring that students learn through approaches that conflict with their cultural values. (p. 5)

Educational research suggests that the learning outcomes for children of color improve with culturally responsive teaching practices. The need to provide teachers with practical ways to infuse their daily teaching repertoires with culturally responsive strategies is particularly significant, given the racial and socioeconomic shift that suburban public school districts are experiencing.

## Approaches to Teaching Reading

Teachers and administrators have a wide variety of models and approaches from which to choose when deciding on a curriculum to prepare children to learn to read. Figure 2 represents the most widely used approaches in teaching reading.

Education scholars are not in agreement as to which teaching approach is most effective for teaching children to read. Some educators, such as Delpit (1996), argue that low-income children, African American children in particular, need direct, explicit instruction in phonics. Others, such as Strickland (1994), advocate for the Balanced Literacy approach. Strickland argues that teachers need to "foster inquiry-based curricula, in which individuals and groups of children pose questions and seek to answer" (p. 153). Strickland goes on to say that teachers need to "allow the teaching of literacy to be largely driven by needs arising from the content and questions that children are curious about" (p. 153).

Proponents of the Balanced Literacy approach argue that it provides optimum reading instruction for meeting the needs of various groups of students (Fountas & Pinnell, 2002; Kohn, 1999; Meier, D., 1981; Routman, 1996; Strickland, 2010). The Balanced Literacy approach relies on a range of components for teaching reading and

**Approaches to Teaching Reading**

**Phonics**

"Bottom up" approach

Emphasis on sound and skills

Recognizing patterns

Decoding words

Vocabulary

Sentence formation

Paragraph and text comprehension

Adams – Chall – Clay - Flesh – Pollard - Skinner

**Basal Series**

Comprehensive grade level texts

Anthologies, stories, poems, and essays

Highly structured

Daily lesson plans

Daily/monthly assessments

Publishing Companies

**Scripted Programs**

Early Success

Good Habits Great Readers

Reading Mastery Classic

Reading Mastery Plus

Soar to Success

Success for All

Wilson Reading System

Publishing Companies

**Words in Color**

Color coded phonemes, letters, syllables, and words

Word Chart

Fidel phonic Code chart

Gattegno

**Language Experience**

Based on personal experience, activities, and stories

Predictable and readable

Child centered

Focus on language, reading, writing, and art

Allen - Ashton-Warner – McGee & Richgels - Stauffer

**Balanced Literacy**

"Top down" approach

Child centered

Use of quality literature

Explicit teaching of phonics, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing skills

Emphasis on meaning

Calkins –

Fountas & Pinnell – Routman - Strickland - Vygotsky

*Figure 2.* Approaches to teaching reading. From (a) *Literacy for Children in an Information Age: Teaching Reading, Writing, and Thinking*, by J. E. Cowen & V. L. Cohen, 2006, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; (b) *Guiding Readers and Writers in Grades 3-6*, by I. C. Fountas & G. S. Pinnell, 2002, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; (c) *Teaching Reading With Words in Color,* by C. Gattegno, 2010, New York, NY: Educational Solutions Worldwide Inc.; (d) *Reading Essentials: The specifics You Need to Teach Reading Well,* by R. Routman, 2003, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; (e) *Essential Readings on Early Literacy*, by D. S. Strickland, 2010, Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

writing. Within this approach, teachers incorporate phonics, guided reading, guided writing, read alouds, literature circles, and conferring with students. According to Kohn (1999), it is the "belief that reading is more than decoding text" and the commitment to "helping children acquire decoding skills" (p. 2) within a context and for a purpose, that distinguishes Whole Language teachers from those who use the phonics or basal readers approach. Kohn (1999) further argues, "A child filled full of phonics rules may be able to pronounce a word flawlessly without having any idea what it means, much less what its relation is to the words sitting next to it" (p. 2).

Freppon and Dahl (1998) posit that balanced instruction is more complex than the term conveys and that it requires teachers to be knowledgeable about literacy research, assessment-based instruction, English language learners, constructivist learning, and the writing process. They further argue that these essentials—combined with knowledge of the alphabetic principle, phonics, word study, selecting leveled readers, phonological and phonemic awareness—are crucial to meeting the needs of a diverse student population (Freppon & Dahl, 1998). Along the same lines, Routman (2003) writes, "If we want our students to be excited about literacy, they need to have teachers who love coming to work, who are literacy learners themselves, who find ways to make curriculum relevant to children's lives, and who can put high-stakes testing in perspective" (p. 2).

Conversely, some educators advocate for such approaches as Words in Color, phonics, basal readers, and scripted programs. Words in Color is an approach for teaching children to read, write, and spell—all learning components targeted by traditional phonics programs. However, instead of relying on memorization, Words in Color presents all the difficulties of the language up front, but with a helpful clue–color (Gattegno, 2010). The

teaching approach that accompanies the Words in Color materials emphasizes the

algebraic nature of English, which means that letters, syllables, and words can be

combined in many ways (Gattegno, 2010).

Similarly, the phonics approach to teaching children to read breaks up the

regularities (rules) and many of the irregularities (exceptions) into separate lessons for

students to drill, practice, and memorize (Cowen & Cohen, 2006). Many phonics

programs require children to memorize vocabulary lists and follow a sequence of preset

lessons, whereas the Language Experience Approach allows students to interact with text

on multiple levels simultaneously. This strategy also allows teachers to teach a variety of

language arts lessons using the students' own words and language (Cowen & Cowen,

2006).

**Chapter 3: Methods**

**Auto-Ethnographic Vignette**

*As doctoral students, we are often encouraged to pursue the path of quantitative research methods for it is seen as a safer path to success and job attainment. I take my first qualitative research methods course, I am relieved to meet a professor who believes in using narratives and alternative forms of data representation in research.*

*Our professor tells us, "You can write a play, a poem, a vignette, or a combination of all three, create a kaleidoscope of the stories you want to tell!" I cannot believe my ears. Did she really just say that research can take the shape of poetry? I become inspired. I am being invited and encouraged to enter a space where people's voices matter, a space where numbers are not the only data source telling the story. I am being lured to enter a space where illumination, healing, empowerment, reflection, and action are the goal, a space where "I" can enter and be heard.*

*Our professor reminds us that the power of qualitative research lies in its ability to illuminate and move people forward. My dissertation emerges as my desire to conduct research that is meaningful for the students in my school district. I begin to find my voice and place in a community where researchers use narratives and counterstories to illuminate the experiences of those who are marginalized. More importantly, I find a committee who is willing to embark on this journey with me.*

**Research Paradigm**

Morgan (1997) advises that a researcher's chosen paradigm influences both the topics chosen to be studied and how to conduct the work. Specifically, the chosen paradigm dictates which method(s) the researcher will use, the type of questions to be asked, how responses are interpreted, and how to present the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Glesne, 2006; Hatch, 2002; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). I conduct qualitative inquiry within the critical theory paradigm.

Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) employ the term *criticalist* to refer to qualitative researchers who are guided by critical theory as a paradigm. They define a criticalist as "a researcher, teacher, or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism" (p. 164). They emphasize the need for critical

researchers to engage in inquiry that is connected to "an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society" and advocate for change (p. 164). Likewise, CRT scholars Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) express concern about the usefulness of education research that is conducted about the education of children of color but lacks the authentic voice of people of color, whether as researchers or participants.

As Denzin and Lincoln (2008) explain, critical race scholars use performative, storytelling auto-ethnographic methods to present the findings of their research. By using narratives to illuminate the voices of the marginalized, critical theory as a paradigm and CRT as a theoretical framework provide a lens for viewing and interpreting ever-shifting and constructed realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 2008).

I use a critical lens to ask participants to expand on statements made during the focus group sessions and the individual interviews. Race as a factor is critical in exploring how teachers and administrators are experiencing and addressing the demographic shifts in this diverse suburban public school districts. Critical theorists and critical race scholars embrace the notion that knowledge is symbolically constructed and that no one perception is "right" or more "real" than another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Glesne, 2006; Hatch, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2008). I agree with their position and believe that multiple truths and perceptions exist among the participants and myself. Consequently, I use a critical frame to examine assumptions and contradictions in narratives that might not be serving the best interests of children of color and to incite a conversation about existing reading policies, practices, and beliefs.

This dissertation provides a kaleidoscope of perspectives and invites participants and readers to move to a space of reflection and action. It is my intention that the participants and stakeholders embrace this project as an invitation to engage in dialogue about race and education, policy and pedagogy, and curriculum and achievement, however uncomfortable the conversation might appear at first. I use the five phases of the research process proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) to design this auto-ethnographic study. Table 1 depicts this research process.

## Researcher's Role

Qualitative researchers are "guided by highly abstract principles" (Bateson, 1972, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 12). These principles encompass four kinds of beliefs:

> ethics (axiology), epistemology, ontology, and methodology. Ethics ask, "How will I be as a moral person in the world? Epistemology asks, "How do I know the world?" "What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?" Ontology raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of the human being in the world. Methodology focuses on the best means for gaining knowledge about the world. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 91)

Fontana and Frey (2008) point out that, "in knowing others, we come to know ourselves" (p. 118). I take on the roles of participant, observer, teacher, and researcher to illuminate the experiences of teachers and administrators in the district. Qualitative researchers often use the term *participant-researcher* or *participant-observer* to describe someone who is already involved in the organization that they are studying (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, 2011; Glesne, 2006; Semel, 1994). I choose to identify myself as a teacher-researcher as I embark on this journey, based on the works of Corey (1953) and my professional background. Corey writes of the need for teachers to engage in research and encourages

them to participate in collaborative studies to evaluate and change their practice (1953, as cited in Ferrance, 2000).

Kincheloe et al. (2011), like Corey, recommend that teachers join the culture of research and have more of a voice in the culture of education. They argue that, by doing so, a new level of educational rigor and quality will be achieved. My experiences as a woman of color teaching in a "suburban" public school district populated primarily by children of color are highlighted. I explore the role that racial and socioeconomic transformation of the student population plays in my teaching. My experience, combined with the ways in which teachers and administrators speak about their experiences, provide valuable material for reflection on collective practice. These narratives will be useful to the broader community where other school districts are experiencing similar transformations with their student populations.

Some critical theorists believe in completing inquiry with the community rather than on or to the community (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). They view knowledge as "subjective, emancipatory, and productive of fundamental social change" (Merriam, 1991, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 107). They believe in sharing control of the research with their participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, as the research is conducted, the researcher and the participants co-create meaning from what is being explored. The role of researcher and participants as co-creators of realities makes it impossible and undesirable for the researcher to be distant and objective (Chang, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 2008). This notion of inviting participants to take an active role in the research process is a means of "fostering emancipation, democracy, and community empowerment and of redressing power imbalances such that

those who are previously marginalized now achieve voice or human flourishing" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 118).

It is important that the participants in this study feel comfortable about their participation and safe about "exposing" their thoughts to their colleagues. My goal is to develop relationships of mutual trust, frankness, and respect with administrators and teachers whom I do not yet know well, as well as to deepen my existing relationships with colleagues. I want the educators and administrators who participate in this work to believe that it is worthwhile and to feel good about their investment in it.

As a teacher-researcher, I intend to honor the words of the participants and produce a report that "provides sufficient description to allow the reader to understand the basis for an interpretation, and sufficient interpretation to allow the reader to understand the description" (Patton, as cited in Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 5). Erickson (2011) writes that "the gaze of educational researchers, its potential for distorted perception and its status as an exercise of power over those observed has long been identified as being problematic and criticized by critics of qualitative educational inquiry" (p. 54).

The participants are the experts. Too often, researchers come into schools, conduct research, analyze, interpret, and misinterpret the viewpoints of participants in their reports. As a result, the participants are left feeling that their voices are not heard, as if their experiences are not valid and valuable enough to be honored and reported as they are told. Some qualitative researchers argue that, when the researcher's interpretation is deemed more appropriate than the voices of the participants, with only bits and pieces reported, misunderstandings and damage may occur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Erickson,

2011). As a teacher-researcher, I consider how best to honor the words of the participants. Using critical theory as a paradigm and CRT as a theoretical framework, I employ a combination of writing styles: analytical-interpretive narratives, vignettes, and poetry. These styles maximize illumination of our perspectives.

I use the present active tense whenever possible to present the participants' narratives and my analytical-interpretive auto-ethnographic vignettes and narratives. However, when the participants use past tense, I will use past tense. Sometimes when I am speaking I will use past tense in order to minimize awkward phrasings. I want the prevalence of active present tense to alert the reader to the persisting nature of racism.

Also, seeking a way to represent the emotions and beliefs expressed by the participants, I craft poems from the focus groups and interview transcripts, using exact words and language of the participants. Like Glesne (2006), I read, code, and re-read the interview transcripts, seeking words and phrases from the interviewee and juxtapose them to mirror the participant's rhythm and way of speaking (Faulkner, 2010; Glesne, 2006). As I read through the transcripts, I notice repeated words, as well as words shared by several of the participants, that I use to capture the integral nuance of being a teacher or an administrator in a diverse suburban public school district (Faulkner, 2010). I want the poems to capture the emotions and beliefs expressed by the participants, as well as the complexities of their personal and political experiences (Faulkner, 2010).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state that research provides the foundation for reports about and representations of "the Other." However, qualitative researchers can also create spaces where those who are studied ("the Other") can speak and be heard through the researcher. The interpretive practice of making sense of one's findings and presenting

them is both artistic and political (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In past research practices, researchers would initially write their research findings without any involvement or collaboration by the participants during the writing process. However, Erickson (2011) notes that today the participants of qualitative studies are expected not only to read the written product created by the researcher based on the findings, but also, at times, to participate in the writing process.

Hence, this dissertation is written and its findings created in collaboration with the teachers and administrators who generously give the time to share their experiences, in the hope of improving the educational environment in which we work and the educational outcomes of the students with whom we work. As Semel (1994) explains, the final product is informed by rich interplay between my own experiences and those of the participants. I actively interpret my stories to make sense of how they are connected with the participants' stories and the broader social and political context (Chang, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Erickson, 2011; Glesne, 2006; Lincoln et al., 2011; Schwandt, 2006; Semel, 1994).

As a teacher-researcher in this auto-ethnographic study, on two separate occasions I answer all of the interview questions that I use in this research. I first conduct a self-interview without assistance. A doctoral student colleague conducts the second interview, utilizing the interview questions that I develop. The dynamics of the two interviews differ. The face-to-face interaction of being interviewed enables me to engage in a conversation with a colleague rather than simply providing what seems like rote responses and moving through the questions as if I have a checklist to complete. I am able to reflect on the questions and elaborate on my answers because I have an audience.

During the second interview I make conscious decisions to be specific and detailed in my responses so that my colleague can have a clear sense of the experience that I am sharing. I also reflect on the interview questions to determine their effectiveness for the research. Both interview sessions are digitally recorded and transcribed by me within a week.

## Research Methods

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) write that qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive methods in their quest to seek better ways to understand the worlds of experiences that they study. This interconnectedness is identified in Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) five phases of the research process. Working within the critical theory paradigm, I use seven research methods to collect and interpret the data: auto-ethnography, action research, document analysis, focus groups, semistructured topical interviews, geographical information systems, and observation. Table 1 represents the research process.

Table 1

*Five Phases of the Research Process*

| Phase | Components |
|---|---|
| Phase 1<br>The Researcher as a Multicultural Subject | Biography of the researcher<br>Locating the researcher in history<br>Researcher's guiding traditions<br>Ways of confronting the ethics and politics of research<br>Researcher as designer, sense-maker, and storyteller |
| Phase 2<br>Theoretical Paradigms | Critical Theory Paradigm<br>Dialogic<br>Dialectical<br>Social criticism<br>Empowerment of individuals<br>Race, class, and gender<br>Collaborative<br>Advocacy<br>Change-oriented<br>Imparting social justice<br>Multiple methods<br>Multiple forms of data<br>Shared control<br>Emancipation<br>Lived experience<br>Emotionality<br>Personal accountability<br>Caring |
| Phase 3<br>Research Strategies | Participant observation<br>Action and applied research |
| Phase 4<br>Methods of Collection and Analysis | Interviewing<br>Auto-ethnography<br>Observing<br>Focus Groups<br>Document analysis<br>Geographical Information Systems |

Table 1 (Continued)

| Phase | Components |
|---|---|
| Phase 5<br>The Art, Practices, and Politics of Interpretation and Evaluation | Criteria for judging adequacy<br>Practices and politics of interpretation<br>Writing as interpretation<br>Policy analysis<br>Evaluation traditions |

*Note.* From (a) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed.)*,* by N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, 2011, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; (b) *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction,* by C. Glesne, 2006, Boston, MA: Pearson Education; (c) Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited," pp. 97-128 in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed.)*,* by N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, 2011, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## Auto-Ethnography

Auto-ethnography combines methods of ethnography and self-narrative to connect the personal to the cultural and political (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Muncey, 2005). For this project, auto-ethnography is framed in the context of the larger construct of racial transformation in suburban public school districts and its implications for the teaching of reading (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Muncey, 2005). The process of conducting an auto-ethnographic study is similar to that of ethnography.

As Chang (2008) explains, auto-ethnographers undergo the usual ethnographic research process of data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing. Chang also writes that auto-ethnography involves not only the study of the self but also the study of others. I approach this study with the participants' stories and my lived experience in

the district from which I write. I reflect on my own experiences and beliefs as a teacher in the district and weave my story into those of the participants.

A review of the literature on auto-ethnography as a research method reveals that it can take many forms and operate through the lens of many paradigms and approaches. Jones (2008) posits that auto-ethnography is a balancing act "of writing a world in a state of flux and movement, moving between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement [that] creates charged moments of clarity, connection, and change" (p. 207). She argues that auto-ethnography implicates all stakeholders and demands attention and participation, creating texts to change the world (Jones, 2008).

## Action Research

Qualitative researchers explain various paradigms in many ways. Some qualitative researchers include participatory action research as a paradigm rather than a strategy (Lincoln et al., 2011). However, based on the framework of Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) five phases of the research process and Levin and Greenwood's (2011) definition of action research, I adopt action research as a strategy rather than a paradigm.

> [Action research is] a set of self-consciously collaborative and democratic strategies for generating knowledge and designing action in which trained experts in social and other forms of research and local stakeholders work together. The research focus is chosen collaboratively between the local stakeholders and the action researchers and the relationships among the participants are organized as joint learning process. (Levin & Greenwood, 2011, p. 29)

The use of action research as a mode of inquiry allows me to explore my experience of teaching reading in a diverse suburban public school district and to engage in dialogue with my colleagues about their practices. This paves the way for the teachers, administrators, and me to reflect on our practices and makes it possible for us to choose new actions to improve the educational outcome of our students.

Learning from others while reflecting on the self is a common thread between auto-ethnography and action research. The involvement of teachers as researchers in their profession is another common thread shared by both methods. The notion of educators as researchers is critical to the empowerment of teachers, while providing a means for improving their craft and the learning outcomes of their students. Eysenck states that, as researchers, "sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases, not in the hope of proving anything but rather in the hope of learning something!" (1976, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 303). The current political climate of standards-based teaching and holding teachers accountable for the success and failure of their students can be seen as a call to arms for educators to take ownership of their field. I agree with Kincheloe et al. (2011) that teacher empowerment flourishes when "teachers develop the knowledge-work skills, the power of literacy, and the pedagogical abilities befitting the calling of teaching" (p. 166). Teachers need to become critical teacher-researchers and be more active in their classrooms and school districts. By conducting this auto-ethnographic study in my place of employment, I take an active role in my profession and provide teachers and administrators with a forum to voice their concerns, challenges, and perceptions of opportunities that they face. I incite a conversation about the role of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity in pedagogy and policy in relation to reading.

The active involvement of participants during the writing and reporting phases of this research process aligns with how critical theorists view truth and the inquiry process and how they choose to represent their findings (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Glesne, 2006; Hatch, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2003;

Lincoln et al., 2011). As a teacher-researcher, I seek transparency with the participants and provide them opportunities to proofread and make changes to the written product. I share copies of the interview transcripts with them, as well as copies of the vignettes, poems, and/or chapters that I write based on our interview conversations. The participants check the copies for accuracy and intent (Ladson-Billings, 2009). They are asked to return any comments to me within 4 weeks. I provide a return-addressed stamped envelope with my home address for the participants to return the documents to me. Once I receive their feedback, I review it and make necessary changes. The beauty of this practice is that, together, the teachers, district administrators, and I determine the story that we want to tell.

This research recognizes and acknowledges our expertise as teachers, as well as our indigenous knowledge on the teaching of reading in this culturally diverse suburban public school district. Together, as co-creators, we construct the current narrative (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Glesne, 2006; Lincoln et al., 2011). It is not often easy or comfortable for people to speak about their experiences, especially when it may involve issues of educational disparities between White students and students of color. This is often a difficult and uncomfortable dialogue. This kaleidoscope of narratives provokes thought and is meant to be of value to the school district without causing harm to the participants. This work has been created to make a difference for the district as well as for other diverse suburban public school districts that face a similar racial and socioeconomic shift in their student populations.

## Focus Groups

Focus groups with teacher participants from the four elementary schools provide inquiry regarding a broad perspective of how teachers and district administrators are approaching the teaching of reading to meet the needs of their diverse student populations. Focus groups also allow me to "think through" the process of engaging in and with real-world problems by gaining multiple perspectives from a group within a short period of time (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011; Morgan, 1997). Finally, focus groups provide preliminary data to get a sense of how the participants talk about their experiences and to determine whether the research questions are in line with their experiences and perceptions (Glesne, 2006; Morgan, 1997).

The focus group structure capitalizes on the collaborative, sharing, and reflective nature of teachers as we gain insight into how our experiences are different and similar. As Morgan (1997) explains, one of the strengths of focus groups is that they "reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would not be accessible without group interaction" (p. 20).

## Topical Semistructured Interviews

Topical semistructured interviews explore the specific practices of teachers and administrators and how they engage in those practices (Fontana & Frey, 2008; Glesne, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). Glesne (2006) defines *topical interviewing* as a form of data collection that "focuses more on a program, issue, or process than on people's lives" (p. 80). Using the topical semistructured interview approach rather than the structured technique enables me to adjust the interview questions as the inquiry process takes shape.

I use Ladson-Billings's (2009) interview protocol to develop the interview questions (Appendix A). The questions are designed to elicit open-ended responses from the participants and are formulated in a way that allows the participants to respond in detail by providing examples and explanations. When appropriate, the responses are followed by questions prompting the participants to elaborate on a given response. Moreover, the questions invite the participants to use words to paint a picture and tell the story of their experiences in a diverse, suburban public school district.

These interviews help me to learn about what I cannot see as a participant researcher and explore alternative explanations of what I experience in the field (Glesne, 2006). Qualitative researchers note that interviews are not neutral tools of gathering data. The interviews also stimulate my memory and invite me to excavate rich details of my experience and contextualize them in the sociocultural and political environment (Chang, 2008).

### Document Analysis

Wanting to confirm and explore more deeply the economic and demographic dimensions of the town, I track and analyze the evolution of Oakwood using the GIS software. A series of maps and graphs representing U.S. census data from 1960 to 2010 display the data that I find. I also examine planning documents to explore the history of Oakwood's school buildings, renovations, and additions made from 1960 to 2010. Last, I explore the policies, curriculum resources, and professional development opportunities for teaching reading at the elementary level to determine whether reading teaching practices and policies have shifted as result of the demographic changes. I draw additional data from district reports, in-district professional development workshops, staff

meetings, school board meeting minutes, newsletters, articles, correspondence, the district website, focus group interviews, semistructured interviews, photographs, personal memory, self-observation, self-reflection, and participant observation.

## Participants

Teachers participate in a focus group and/or an individual interview based on availability. Fifty-two classroom teachers and four reading specialist teachers from the four elementary schools are invited to participate. I attempt to recruit at least five teachers from each of the four K–4 elementary schools in order to provide a kaleidoscope of perspectives throughout the district. A total of 24 classroom teachers and 7 administrators self-selected to participate in the study. I realize that including a chart detailing the racial and ethnic demographics of the teacher participants would be useful; however, because of my commitment to anonymity, I am not including that information. The majority of the teachers and administrators who participate in this study are White. Table 2 illustrates the numbers of teachers and administrators who participate in the study.

Most of the participants are recruited via the Oakwood Public School District email service 3 weeks prior to the first scheduled focus group session. Teachers who do not have a chance to reply to email inquiries are recruited during a district wide literacy professional development workshops held in November of 2011. I use my personal email address and contact information to communicate with the participants throughout the study. However, participants are given the option of communicating with me via their personal email or continuing to use the district email service. All but five participants continue to

Table 2

*Study Participants*

| School and grade level | Participating teachers | Enrollment 2011-2012 | School location | Principal participated? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Eloise Greenfield (PreK-K) | 5 | 380 | Northeast | Yes |
| Sandra Cisneros (1-4) | 6 | 406 | Northwest | Yes |
| Sonia Sanchez (K-4) | 5 | 312 | Southwest | Yes |
| Patricia Polacco (K-4) | 8 | 306 | Central West | Yes |

communicate via the district email service. Each individual's participation is confidential and lasts approximately 6 hours. To safeguard identities, pseudonyms are used.

I decide to conduct the focus group sessions to obtain the views of teachers at various grade levels and years of experience throughout the four elementary schools in the Oakwood Public School District. I conduct two focus group sessions and 18 semistructured individual interviews for this auto-ethnographic study. A total of 24 teachers and 7 administrators participate. The administrators do not participate in a focus group session but are interviewed individually during the 2012 summer vacation.

The first focus group discussion is held in November 2011, the other in January 2012. Nine elementary school teachers participate in the first focus group (eight female teachers and one male) from various elementary schools in the district, with teaching experiences ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade in the Oakwood district. Three of the four elementary schools are represented in Focus Group 1.

The second focus group session involves five teachers from the same elementary school, with teaching experiences ranging from 6 to 22 years. They are all female teachers, with experience in teaching kindergarten through Grade 5. Due to family obligations and scheduling conflicts, the teachers from this school self-select the meeting date and time for the focus group session. Five participants from Focus Group 1 and one participant from Focus Group 2 participate in follow-up individual interviews.

In addition to the two focus group sessions, I conduct 12 individual interviews with teachers who are not able to attend a focus group session or who prefer to be interviewed rather than to participate in a focus group. Of the 12 interview participants, 4 are males and 8 are females. Consistent with the national trend in elementary education, there are very few male elementary school teachers in this district (Johnson, 2008; National Education Association [NEA], 2004; Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1996). Therefore, I make a concerted effort to include the perspectives of male teachers in the study by following up on several occasions until I receive affirmative responses from at least five of the eight male K–4 classroom teachers in the school district.

The first focus group session lasts 1 hour 42 minutes; the second session lasts 1 hour 20 minutes. Individual interviews range from 35 minutes to 95 minutes. Each focus group session and individual interview session is conducted at a location and time that is convenient for the participants. Two interviews are conducted in my home, two at a local restaurant in Oakwood, one at the participant's home, one in the computer lab at one of the schools, and the rest in the participant's classroom or office.

Each location provides different possibilities and opportunities for conversation. Interviews that are conducted in classrooms make it possible for participants to refer to

teaching materials that are available in the classroom, as well as the environmental print (charts) that they use as visual learning tools and resources for students. Interviews in restaurants or participants' homes feel more relaxed, less like interviews. They are more like two friends are sitting around engaging in conversation about their day-to-day activities and lives as educators.

I begin both of the focus group sessions by thanking each teacher for taking the time to participate in the research study, introducing myself, reviewing the purpose of the focus group, and letting all participants introduce themselves. The introductions include grades taught, number of years teaching in the Oakwood district, and current grade assignment. The focus groups begin approximately 15 minutes after all of the participants arrive. While the participants are getting settled, refreshments are available. Note cards and pens are provided for participants to jot down notes and keep track of their thoughts during the discussion. Once all participants arrive, introductions begin, the approved Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent form is explained, and time is provided for the participants to read and sign the consent form.

With the goal of the focus group in mind, I ask open-ended questions and allow the conversation to flow organically to topics that the participants want to discuss, but remain mindful of the questions that I prepare for the discussion (Appendix B). The focus group session is digitally recorded with permission from all participants, and I assure the participants that the recording will not be made available to anyone else. I also take notes during the discussion and keep track of my thoughts and additional clarifying questions. At the conclusion of each focus group session, I thank the participants again, indicate that the interview will be transcribed within 7 days, and assure them that I will provide them

with a copy of the transcript, vignettes, and any other written products that derive from the project.

As I complete each interview and focus group session, I reflect on the process and keep track in my field journal of thoughts, questions that emerged, and reactions to the interview. I transcribe the majority of the interviews within 7 days of their occurrence and use the transcripts as the basis for writing the vignettes. I want to transcribe the interviews immediately while the experience is still fresh. I do not wait until all interviews are conducted to transcribe and analyze and interpret the data. Glesne (2006) suggests that, to make sense of the data, researchers can begin reading through all available documents to "identify what appears to be important, and give it a name (code)" (p. 154). As I read through each transcript, I identify and code concepts, central ideas, and themes that are present in the narrative of the participants (Glesne, 2006). Writing is an ongoing process, and I continue to revisit my work as the interviews are conducted.

Once I arrive at a point where I feel comfortable in sharing the work that I have written based on the focus group discussions and the individual interviews, I give a colleague a draft to review and provide feedback. I am not quite comfortable in sharing the work with all of the participants just yet, but I want to obtain some initial feedback and get a sense of how the work will be received by the participants. I want to know whether I am on the "right" track in telling our stories. The colleague with whom I share the initial draft, comments that it is overwhelming and a bit much for teachers to read. My colleague also says that the content is very interesting and that she likes that I am also talking about my own experiences. She asks some clarifying questions that, for me, become points to address once I revise the draft based on her feedback.

Sharing my work with the participants provides an opportunity for them to complete fragmented thoughts. Often, during the focus group discussion, participants lose track of their thoughts or drift off to another point without finishing their initial idea. Having a participant of the focus group and individual interview read over the narrative provides clarity. My colleague recommends that I follow up with the participants and ask them what new perspectives they have gained from participating in this exchange. Consequently, I create a brief questionnaire for each participant to complete and mail back at their convenience (Appendix C). Somewhat concerned that teachers will find the 79-page document a bit overwhelming, I make it available nonetheless. Regardless of whether the participants read the work, I want them to have the opportunity to do so. I do not want to wait until I defend the dissertation to report back to the participants.

Participants of the focus group sessions and individual interviews talk candidly. I assure confidentiality and advise that any written or oral report will be presented in ways so that their comments cannot be attributed to any one particular individual. My goal is to honor, respect, and safeguard the identities of my colleagues. Consequently, whenever possible, similar statements made by two or more participants are combined to illuminate their experiences and point of view.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that "the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system" (p. 12). I reflect on my personal background and professional experiences as a woman of color to infuse my story into the narratives of the participants. Upon reviewing the interview transcripts, I examine conversations that engage issues of race, utilizing CRT as a lens through which

to view the data and interpret and share the findings with the teachers and administrators. As a teacher-researcher, I also use CRT in my interpretation while attempting to remain true to the essence and perspectives shared by the participants. I operate from a space of inquiry, collaboration, honor, empowerment, and action to incite a conversation about the experiences of teachers and administrators of a racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse suburban public school district. But I am also mindful of pointing out and critiquing socially constructed realities that appear to be working against the interests of children of color.

Consistent with critical theory paradigm, I interpret and represent data to write a contextually detailed narrative account of how this diverse suburban school district teaches reading and sets policy governing the teaching of reading (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Erickson, 2011; Jones, 2008; Lincoln et al., 2011). My background and experiences as a teacher in the school district shape my interpretations (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, I use a criticalist approach to create a multitextured tapestry of meanings. Figure 3 represents the steps that I take to analyze and interpret the data.

According to Chang (2008), a critical, analytical, and interpretive approach to viewing auto-ethnographic data will detect cultural undertones of what participants recall, observe, and tell. Wolcott (1994) suggests three means of transformation, moving from data organization to making meaning: description, analysis, and interpretations. Moreover, Wolcott suggests that researchers stay close to the data as they are originally recorded and let the data "speak for themselves" (as cited in Glesne, 2006, p. 164). This approach is referred to as "description." Data interpretation differs from data analysis.

```
┌─────────────────────────────┐         ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│  Conduct the interviews     │         │ Reflect on the interview in field│
│                             │         │ journal                          │
└─────────────────────────────┘         └─────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Transcribe each interview within seven days of being conducted     │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Read through the transcript to get a sense of the interview        │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Read through the transcripts again and code for emerging themes    │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Write a vignette for each interview based on the transcript within  │
│  two weeks of transcribing the interview                            │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Provide participants with a copy of their transcript and           │
│  vignette to check for accuracy and/or make revisions               │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Reread the transcripts and generate categories based on the themes  │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Establish a relationship between the categories                    │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────────┐         ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│  Analyze and interpret the  │         │  Write up the findings           │
│  data                       │         │                                  │
└─────────────────────────────┘         └─────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Share the findings with the participants and obtain their feedback  │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Adjust the write-up based on participant feedback                  │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

*Figure 3*. Process of analysis and interpretation.

Analysis, according to Glesne (2006), entails "identifying essential features and the ways in which the features interact" (p. 164). On the other hand, interpretation, according to Wolcott (1994, as cited in Glesne, 2006) occurs when the researcher "transcends factual data and cautious analysis and begins to probe into what is to be made of them" (p. 165).

Consistent with auto-ethnographic methods, I attend to the purpose of this research project by interweaving data, analysis, and interpretation.  Chang (2007) writes that auto-ethnographers use data analysis and interpretation by moving back and forth between self and others, zooming in and out of the personal and social realms, and submerging in and out of data in order to produce an auto-ethnographic narrative. Therefore the chapters are structured in a way that allows me to come in and out as author-researcher. Figure 4 illustrates this process.

Auto-ethnographic vignette of the author as researcher introducing the chapter – Italicized font

Verbatim quotations by study participants – Regular font

Interpretation and analysis by the author as researcher – Italicized font
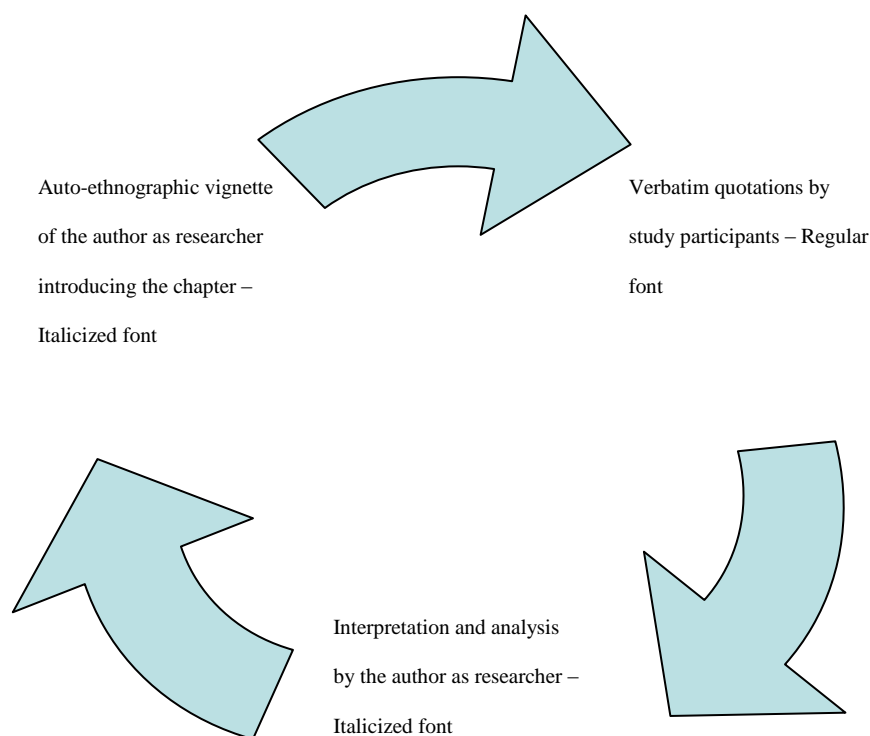
*Figure 4* – Narrative Reporting Process

       Additionally, throughout the dissertation an italicized font is used to distinguish my analytical interpretive auto-ethnographic voice from the verbatim quotations that represent the voices of the participants.

**Chapter 4: Research Site: Oakwood**

**Auto-Ethnographic Vignette**

*I become fascinated with the town of Oakwood a few years ago when a colleague interrupts a conversation I am having about the lack of parental involvement in suburban school districts. He yells out from across the room, "Oakwood is not suburban, it's urban!" I respond, "Don't tell that to the people living there." Notions of urbanism and suburbanism fascinate me. I learn that an area university bases its decision to place student teachers in the Oakwood Public School district on the premise that it is an urban school district. Some parents in the district are baffled by the school board's decision several years ago to hire an educational expert who specializes in urban studies to conduct a study on the academic achievement gap.*

*I begin to wonder about who, or what, determines whether a town is urban or suburban. What factors are considered when a town moves from suburban status to urban, or vice versa? What roles do the demographics of its schools play, in contrast to the overall demographics of the town, in the perception and labeling of a town as urban? How is the school district managing the racial and socio-economic transformation that it is experiencing? As a woman of color teaching in the Oakwood school district for more than twelve years, these and other questions demand exploration. I want to examine what's going on in Oakwood. Why are the kids in Oakwood not doing as well as other kids in Reading County.*

*In August 2011 I request a meeting with the Superintendent of the Oakwood Public School District to discuss ideas for this dissertation and how the district might benefit from my work. A few weeks later we meet and I narrow my focus to the teaching of reading at the elementary school level. The Superintendent states that my study will provide much-needed illumination about how elementary teachers in the district teach reading and what can be done to increase student achievement in language arts.*

**Overview of Oakwood**

Oakwood Public School District provides optimum opportunities for exploring how a diverse suburban school district attempts to negotiate the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic transformation. It also provides specific insight into the experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and challenges that the teachers and administrators in the school district face as they work to meet the needs of their diverse student population and their families. This chapter examines the history of Oakwood to provide a context for

understanding the economic and demographic dimensions of the town and the Oakwood

Public School District. In particular, the shift in economic and demographic conditions

within the town of Oakwood generates new challenges for the school district, given its

transformation into a culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse

public school district. Maps created using the GIS software are presented to highlight the

evolution of Oakwood and the school district from 1960 through 2010.

The perception that some teachers and administrators hold about Oakwood being

a White middle-class suburban public school district may serve as a barrier to addressing

issues of race and education and its influence on curriculum and educational policy

makings in the district. Oakwood, as a built environment, is distinctly suburban;

Oakwood's existence on the periphery of a large metropolitan city creates the perception

that it is suburban; and its residents seem to identify themselves as suburban dwellers.

Hinchcliffe (2005) argues that there is no clear definition of a suburb; although the

literature on suburbs is extensive, the subject remains elusive. Hinchcliffe posits that "for

some, the suburb is a geographical space; for others, a cultural form; while for others still

it is a state of mind" (p. 899). Conversely, other urban and suburban scholars argue that

there is no longer any real distinction between urban and suburban (Berube, Katz, &

Lang, 2006; Florida, 2013; Gans, 1968).

This ambiguous view of urbanism and suburbanism is compounded by the fact

that urban and suburban landscapes in this northeastern state are often difficult to

identify. Much of the state's urban and suburban areas were transformed from farms or

villages. The state's urban landscape does not resemble urban spaces like New York City.

Many of them are relatively small, nonwalkable, and devoid of high-rise buildings, and

they consist primarily of single-family or multi-family dwellings. However, the cultural

power of that dichotomy persists as reflected in the conversations with participants in this

study and, I would argue, in the perceptions of many who live and work in Oakwood.

These perceptions seem to influence the policies that Oakwood and similar public school

districts make as they establish curriculum and interact with students and their families.

Oakwood is situated in a northeastern state. Oakwood is home to approximately

38,876 people representing various ethnic, racial, political, and religious groups. The

racial make-up of Oakwood is 49% White, 30% Black, 9% Asian, and 12% other

(Socialexplorer.com, 2013).

Many policies and practices shape the landscape of Oakwood between 1960 and

2010. The practice of blockbusting, red lining, or steering African Americans to a

particular section in Oakwood is common from the 1960s and well into the 1980s.

Court documents (*Summer v. Teaneck Twp*., 1969; herein *Summer*) define *blockbusting*

as the practice of causing homeowners to sell their property for fear that their

neighborhood's racial, religious, or ethnic composition will soon change drastically.

According to an Oakwood resident, blockbusting is strong in Oakwood during the 1960s

(Schneider, as cited in Teaneck Public Library, 1984a, para.). Figure 5 illustrates this

disparity.

Many Oakwood residents contend that the practice of blockbusting needs to stop

and appeal to the town council to create an ordinance that will make it a violation of

township laws to engage in blockbusting practices in Oakwood. The Real Estate Board of

New Jersey objects to this ordinance and subsequently files an appeal with the courts,

arguing that it is inappropriate for municipalities to create ordinances preventing certain

real estate practices (*Summer*, 1969). However, in 1969 the New Jersey Supreme Court unanimously upholds the validity of Oakwood's antiblockbusting ordinance (*Summer*, 1969).

Racial Demographics
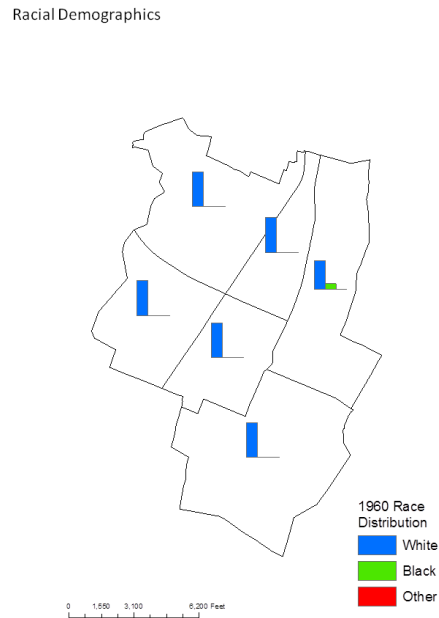


*Figure 5.* 1960 racial demographics in Oakwood. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/

In 1980 the township of Oakwood receives a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, to document the ethnic, religious, and racial diversity in Oakwood. As part of the oral history project, 100 Oakwood residents are interviewed and photographic displays of the Township's early days are compiled into a booklet. Information from this oral history project reveals that realtors steer African Americans into the northeast section of town. A long-time Oakwood resident explains that, with great reluctance, realtors admit that there is another part of Oakwood; they say, "You don't want to live there" (Davage, as cited in Teaneck Public Library, 1984b, para. 12).

In 1990, 72% of the northeast Oakwood population is African American,
compared to 7% to 28% in other neighborhoods in the town (Socialexplorer.com, 2013).
Figure 6 shows the distribution of race throughout the six census tracks.

Racial Demographics



*Figure 6*. 1990 racial demographics in Oakwood. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by
Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/
reportdata/

Reardon and Bischoff (2010) argue that discriminatory housing practices create a
different set of residential options for Black and White families with identical income and
assets. Black families are severely limited by such practices, causing uneven geographic
distribution of income groups within a certain area and leading to inequality in social and
educational outcomes. The extent to which the lowest-income households are isolated
from middle- and upper-income households is a characteristic of spatial segregation of
poverty (Reardon & Bischoff, 2010). Likewise, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue
that the issue of income and property relates to education and manifests in explicit and

implicit ways. The quality and quantity of curriculum vary with the "property values" of schools; in affluent communities with higher property values, residents tend to resent paying for a public school system whose clientele is largely poor children of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

During the 1990s the northeast and southeast sections of Oakwood experience the highest level of poverty. However, there is an increase in poverty in all sections of Oakwood except for the Northeast and Central sections of Oakwood during that period. Figure 7 illustrates the poverty level and growth of poverty in Oakwood.
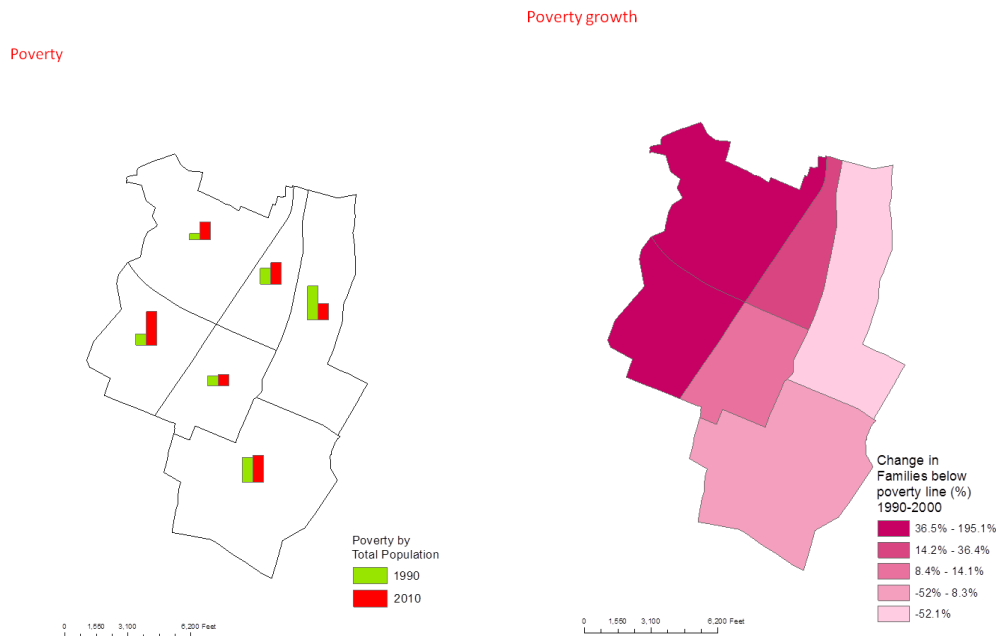


*Figure 7*. Growth in percentage of Oakwood families below the poverty threshold. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/

The 2000 Census report reveal that the northeast, central west, and southwest neighborhoods of Oakwood experience the highest levels of unemployment, in contrast to

the other neighborhoods in Oakwood. Figure 8 illustrates the unemployment differences

among Oakwood's six census tracks.
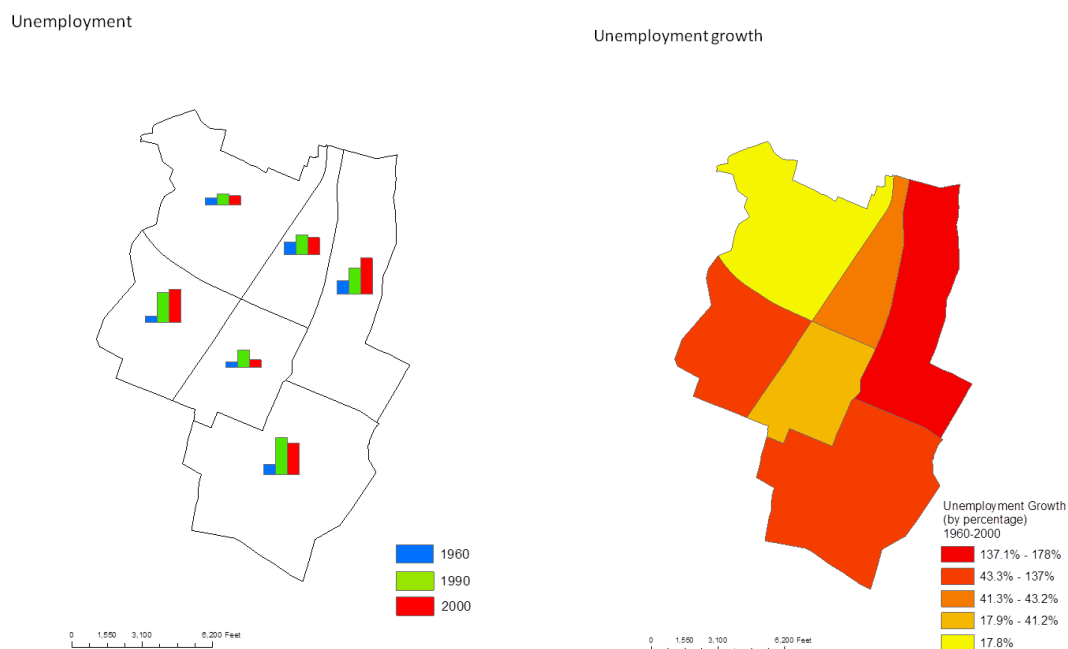


*Figure 8.* Unemployment rate in Oakwood. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Social Explorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/

Additionally, the 2000 Census report reveal that the properties in the northeast

section of Oakwood are less costly than in other neighborhoods, even though they may be

comparable in size and features to homes in more desirable parts of Oakwood that non-

African American home buyers inhabit. Figure 9 illustrates this disparity.
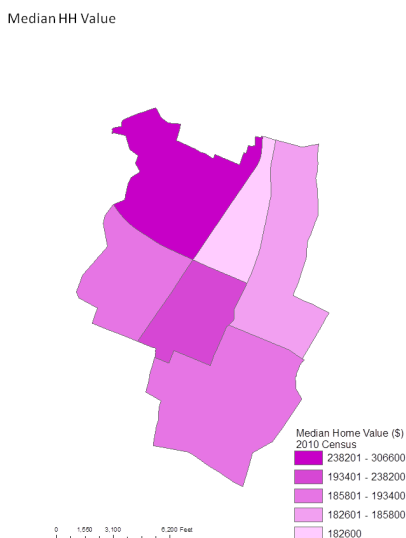
Median HH Value



*Figure 9.* 2000 median home value in Oakwood. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Social Explorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/ reportdata/

As Figure 10 indicates, since the 1960s, the population density in Oakwood is essentially the same.

Density
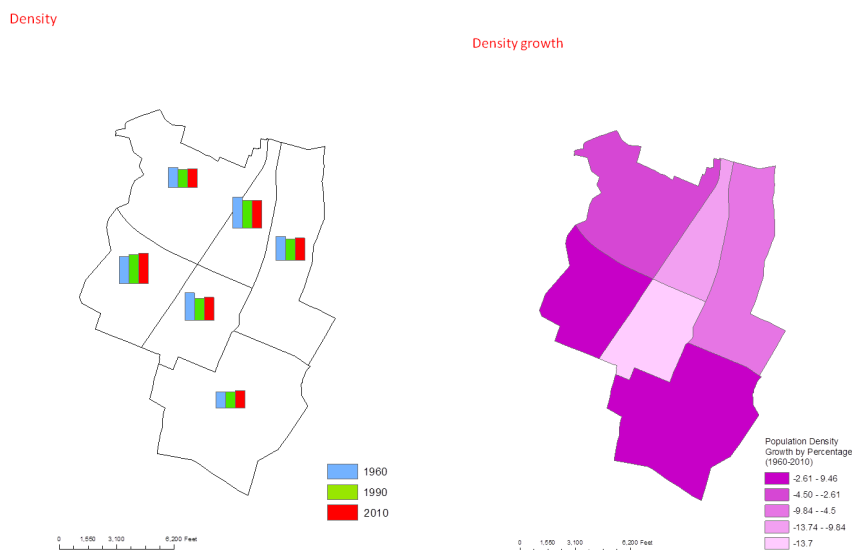
Density growth



*Figure 10.* Density growth in Oakwood from 1960 to 2010. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/

However, even in 2010, the northeast section of Oakwood continues to have a greater concentration of African American families, while the northwest and central neighborhoods of Oakwood are more populated by Whites. Figure 11 shows this disparity.
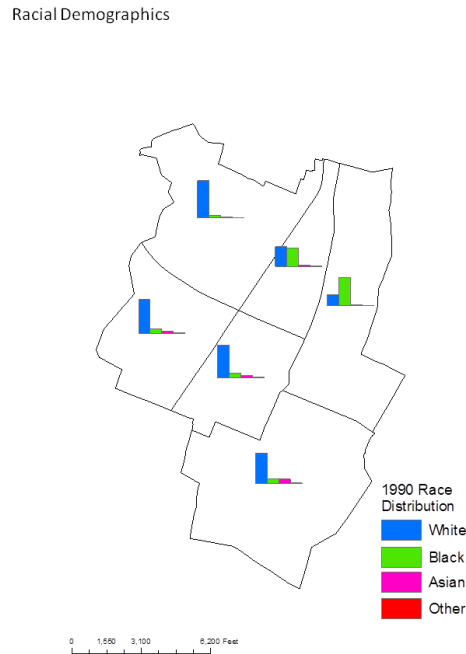
Racial Demographics
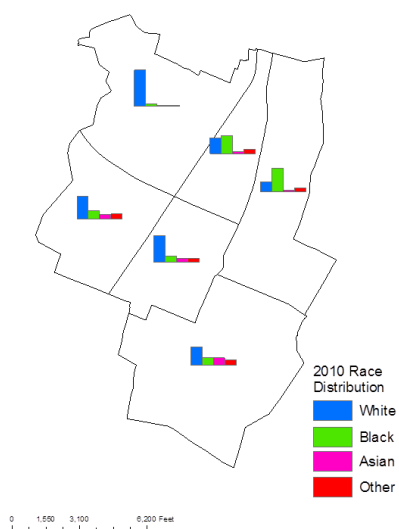


*Figure 11*. 2010 racial demographics in Oakwood. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/

These trends of income disparities, unemployment, and poverty in the suburbs speak to the need for policy makers, suburban public school administrators, and teachers to address how "social class characteristics in a stratified society like ours may actually influence learning in schools" (Rothstein, 2004, as cited in Berliner, 2006, pp. 8-9). Recent research indicates that poverty negatively affects the academic achievement of students because the families have fewer options for health care, housing, and high-quality education (Lazar, 2011).

The suburbs are becoming increasingly diverse and in need of resources to support families that do not have access to services and means to provide for their families. Although the suburbs are commonly associated with affluence, much scholarship shows that many residents of suburbs are low income (Frankenberg, 2008, Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012).

Researchers are beginning to pay closer attention to ways in which the suburbs are transforming. More important, educators and administrators are beginning to rethink the ways in which they approach teaching and learning in their diverse suburban public school districts.

**Immigrants in Oakwood**

Oakwood is experiencing an increase in the numbers of immigrants, families living in poverty, and unemployed residents. Like parts of central cities 50 years earlier, Oakwood is attractive to families, with or without children, and including displaced poor families, as well as many recent immigrants (Morrill, 2008). Figure 12 illustrates the foreign-born population and growth of foreign population in Oakwood. The numbers also speak to the attractiveness of newer suburban areas like Oakwood for immigrants. Figure 12 also illustrates the changes in Oakwood's immigrant population from 1960 to 2010. These maps indicate in which Oakwood neighborhoods immigrants tend to settle. The southeast, central west, and northeast sections of Oakwood have a higher percentage of immigrants than the northwest and central sections.

The areas where Oakwood's immigrant populations are the highest also coincide with trends in homeownership and rental status. As Figure 13 illustrates, the central west and southwest neighborhoods have a higher percentage of rental properties than other

areas. The northwest neighborhood, which has the highest median home value, has experienced the least amount of immigrant population growth.

Foreign Born Growth

Foreign Born

Foreign Born
1960-2000
% Change

108.9% - 140.8%
80% - 108.8%
72.9% - 79.9%
9.7% - 72.8%
9.6%
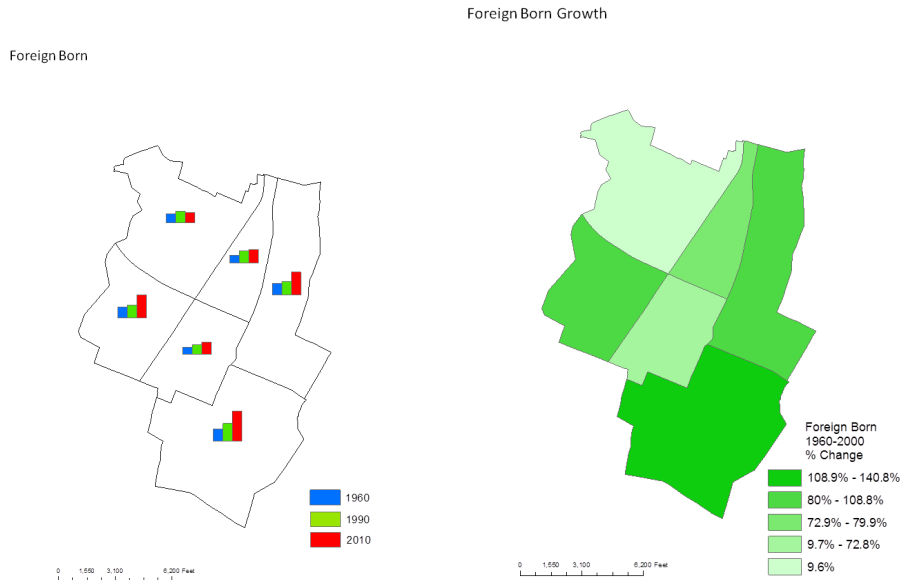
1960
1990
2010

*Figure 12.* Foreign-born population in Oakwood, 1960-2000. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/

Immigrants historically view America as a way out of impoverished lives. They believe that in America they can gain access to better employment, education, and health care. Emigrating to the United States is viewed as a means of providing for one's family and supporting those who are left behind in the place of origin. Just as immigrants contribute to the growth of cities during the 1800s, over the past couple of decades, immigration has become a contributing factor in the transformation of some suburban towns.

Immigration scholars argue that the way in which post-1965 and new immigrants settle and assimilate in the United States will be different from that of their predecessors. They posit that today's immigrants will not follow a straight line of assimilation. Today's

immigrants who are able to bypass the city and traditional enclave areas of settlement go directly to the suburbs (Alba & Nee, 2005). Alba, Logan, Stults, Marzan, and Zhang (1999) note that, upon arrival, immigrants settle directly in suburban areas, with some moving to the suburbs after living in urban areas for a short period of time.
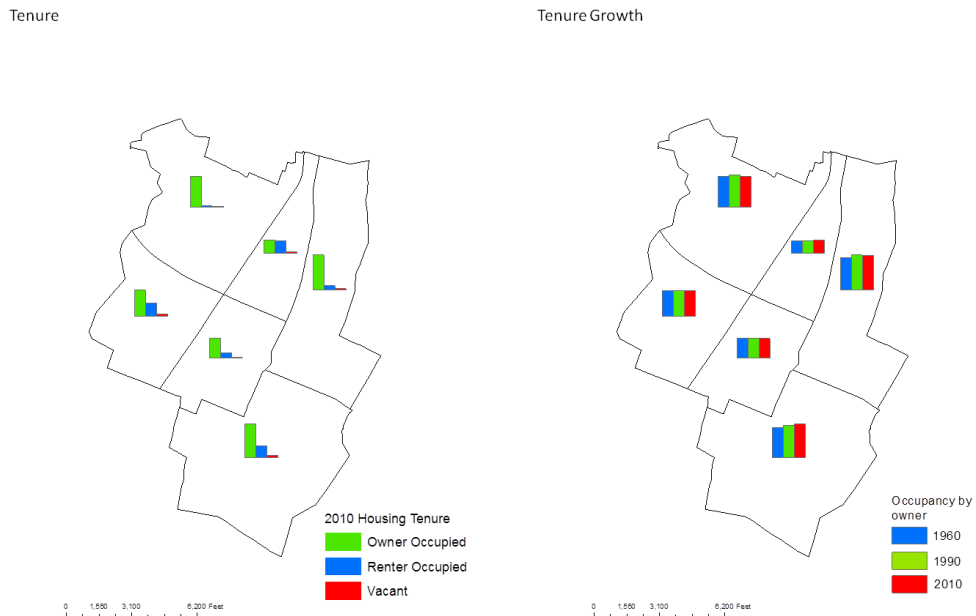


*Figure 13.* Tenure status in Oakwood. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/

According to Zunz (1982), once immigrants begin to progress socioeconomically and learn about the American way of life and their surroundings, they have a tendency to move outward from the initial ethnic enclaves in search of better living conditions. However, Borjas (2006) cautions that "the rate of mobility enjoyed by prior immigrants will not continue because unlike the manufacturing jobs filled by foreign born at the turn of the twentieth century, the economic sectors in which contemporary immigrants are

employed do not provide avenues for economic betterment" (p. 55). Immigrant scholars also report that, in large metropolitan areas, more than half of the minority students attend schools in suburban districts (Frankenberg, 2008, Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012).

This shift in the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic representation of the public schools' student population compared to the overall population of the town is creating a need for suburban schools like Oakwood to learn how to provide educational services and integrate the needs of their large number of immigrant, English Language Learners (ELLs), and low-income students.

### History of Education in Oakwood

The town of Oakwood prides itself on the diversity of its residents and its schools. In 1954 the Supreme Court rules in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that segregation in public education is unconstitutional and concludes that "segregation of White and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn".

Ten years later, the Oakwood school district commits itself to educating all of the children in the community regardless of their race. While this is a decision about embracing diversity and "doing the right thing," it is also a matter of legal reality, since the public schools in Oakwood are zoned by neighborhood and the neighborhoods in Oakwood are virtually all White, with a single exception. It is only a matter of time before the federal government intervenes and demands that Oakwood desegregate its public schools. As Figure 5 illustrates, the Northeast neighborhood of Oakwood has the highest percentage of Black residents during the 1960s. Because of such practices and trends as blockbusting and White flight, Black families are clustered in the Northeast

neighborhood, and children from this neighborhood attend either Washington Irving or Eloise Greenfield elementary school (Damerell, 1968; Kelly, 1995). Although only 4% of the town residents are Black, 40% and 54% of the student population at Eloise Greenfield and Washington Irving elementary schools, respectively, are Black. These percentages are projected to reach 72% by 1966 if the Oakwood Board of Education does not take steps to integrate its public schools, thereby avoiding federal intervention to force the school district to desegregate its schools (Damerell, 1968; Kelly, 1995).

The Superintendent of Oakwood Public Schools in the early 1960s recognizes the need for racial diversity and the importance of children interacting and learning with and from each other and urges the school board to implement policies to facilitate this interaction (Damerell, 1968). As a result of the Superintendent's persistence in advocating for change, in 1962, the Oakwood School Board attempts to address the matter by adopting a Voluntary Optional Pupil Transfer Plan. During the 1962-1963 school year, five Black families participate in the pilot program (Damerell, 1968).

In the following year the Oakwood School Board begins to explore plans for integration at the urging of the Superintendent. The Oakwood Superintendent believes that the problem of racial imbalance in the school district is not the Black families' alone to bear. The Superintendent appeals to the community and urges them to meet with him, present their ideas, and discuss the future of the Oakwood Public School District in deciding its own fate rather than having the federal government order them to desegregate. Damerell (1968) argues, "It is about time that we White people took our responsibilities to the Negroes seriously. . . . You know and I know that equal education stops when Eloise Greenfield school becomes predominantly Negro" (p. 255).

Many Oakwood citizens agree with the Superintendent and form their own committees and submit plans for school integration.  According to Damerell (1968), Oakwood Citizens for Public Schools, which has a predominantly Jewish membership, is repeatedly attacked by opponents for "pressing the hardest for integration" (p. 208). However, many Oakwood residents, Blacks and Whites, object to the Voluntary Optional Pupil Transfer Plan, as well as future plans to integrate the student population permanently. Some Black residents object to the voluntary transfer plan because the transfer will put "a heavy burden on young shoulders" (Damerell, 1968, p. 198). Other Black residents like Mrs. Smith, agree to participate in the plan the following school year, noting that

> children don't have fears; we, the parents, carry the fears for them because of past experience or well-known episodes. It was a sacrifice to send our child to another school, Eloise Greenfield is an excellent school, but my husband and I felt we were doing something to solve a problem. (as cited in Damerell, 1968, p. 198)

Some Black residents also argue that, when schools become predominantly Black, not only does the school become stigmatized but "White and Negro" teachers who do not expect Black children to learn tend to stop teaching (Damerell, 1968). Although many Black families do not want to perpetuate the stigma of inferiority that some Whites hold about Blacks, they begin to support the Superintendent's push for integration.

Some White residents write letters to the editor of *The Record* and the *Sunday Sun,* voicing their objections, arguing that the "Negroes had created their own problem by moving into the northeast neighborhood . . . but expect the White people to solve those problems or face demonstrations, boycotts, sit-downs, lie-downs, garbage-spreading" (Damerell, 1968, pp. 229-230). Some Oakwood residents also argue that one of the primary advantages of having children attend school in their neighborhood is their ability

to walk to school and perhaps even go home during lunch periods (Damerell, 1968;

Kelly, 1995). During a meeting with the Superintendent, an Oakwood resident comments,

"I'm not going to let my kid eat lunch in school where I can't see what he's eating"

(Damerell, 1968, p. 254).

The path to desegregation is not a smooth one. However, in 1964, the Oakwood

School Board votes 7 to 2 in favor of busing students to schools that are not located in

their immediate neighborhood, making it easier to desegregate its schools and avoid

federal intervention (Damerell, 1968; Kelly, 1995).

In 1964, when Oakwood votes to desegregate its schools, there are seven

elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. In 1997 the School Board

closes three of the elementary schools and converts one of the schools to house the

administrative offices. Numerous renovations and additions are completed on the

remaining K–4 elementary schools to accommodate students from the schools that are no

longer in operation (Table 3).

Table 3

*K–4 Public Schools in Oakwood Public School District*

| School, grade level, location | Original construction date | Additions | Renovations 2002-2012 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Eloise Greenfield Grades: PreK-K Northeast section | 1927 | 1988 New library, nurse's office, ESL room, bathrooms, hot water heater | 2006 Renovation of office into a conference room/bathroom into handicap accessible 2012 Lighting retrofit, Install solar canopies in parking lot & walkways, Replace ventilation units/boilers/air handling unit; patch & repair roof |
| Sandra Cisneros Grades: 1-4 Northwest section | 1923 | | 2008 Replace roof 2008 Update plumbing for roof drain 2010 Install incline platform lift 2012 Lighting retrofit, Replace two burners and twenty-eight ventilation units |
| Sonia Sanchez Grades: K-4 Southwest section | 1925 | | 1948 Rebuilt 2004 Interior alteration to office space 2004 Remove floor covering 2007 Install fence 2008 Create new office 2012 Asbestos abatement, Lighting retrofit, Install solar canopy over front walkway and rear parking lot, replace two boiler and two rooftop units |
| Patricia Polacco Grades: K-4 Central West section | 1926 | 1996 New library, faculty lounge, technology lab, cafeteria, five storage rooms, 11 classrooms, five bathrooms | Interior renovation 2002 Reroofing 2005 Reroofing 2009 Update electric 2009 Lighting retrofit 2012 Replace two burners on existing boilers |

Source: Personal communication, staff member, Oakwood (NJ) Building Department.

Figure 14 illustrates the shift in private and public school enrollment of Oakwood students within each of the six census tracks from 1960 to 2010. As shown, since the 1960s, the Oakwood Public Schools experience a decrease in the number of students attending its public schools, which may speak to a level of dissatisfaction with students' performance in the school district. The most prominent change takes place in the northwest neighborhood of Oakwood. In 1960, 88% of the students from the northwest neighborhood are enrolled in the Oakwood Public School District, while in 2000, that proportion decreases to 12%.

School Enrollment (Public/Private)
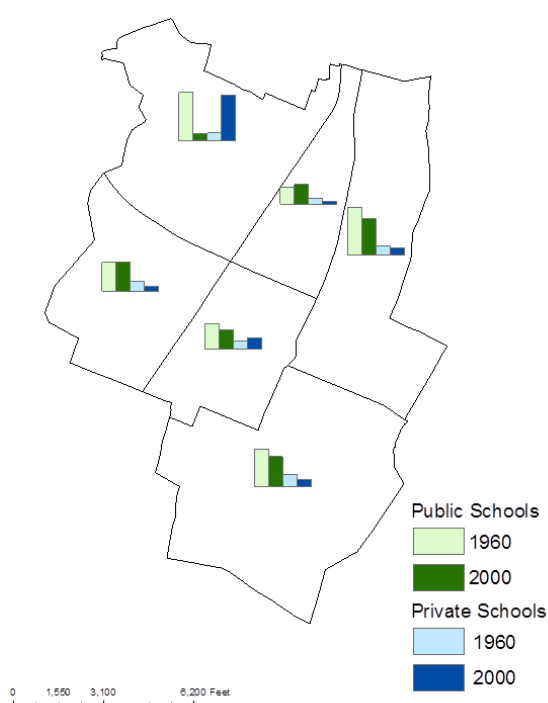


*Figure 14.* Student enrollment in Oakwood public schools. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/ pub/reportdata/

The enrollment trends of the northwest neighborhood and those of other neighborhoods in Oakwood symbolize friction among the residents whose children do not attend the local public schools.  Much of the friction is between Jewish and non-Jewish residents, with the sentiment being that the Jewish residents are taking over, as is the sentiment during the 1960s when Oakwood elects its first Jewish mayor (Alexander, 2011a; Damerell, 1968; Yudelson, 2011b).

Tensions between Jewish and non-Jewish residents can be traced back to the late 1940s, when Oakwood's White Protestant community feels that the "Jews were taking over" when four of the nine school board members are Jewish (Damerell, 1968). W. E. B. DuBois writes in 1903 that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (p. 19). However, in 1961 New York University professor Henry T. Lipman, in his final report to the Mayor's Advisory Board in Oakwood, notes that religious friction in Oakwood is greater than racial tension. Many residents fear that, if the population trend continues, the Oakwood Public School District will eventually resemble that of Bedford Stuyvesant in New York City, where the town council and the school board are controlled by a population that does not benefit from the services being provided in the public schools and may not make choices for other people's children that the children's parents would like. To Dubois's and Lipman's arguments, I add that the problem of the 21st century encompasses religion and class, as well as color.

Racial and religious tensions are once again exposed in Oakwood during the summer of 2011. When the Oakwood Board of Education votes to eliminate busing for students at the K–4 level, it also votes to consolidate the bus stops for private school students. The Board argues that the elimination of courtesy bus service for students living

within 2 miles of their zoned public school is a result of budget cuts and that the

consolidation of bus stops will save the school district $85,000 (Alexander, 2011a;

Yudelson, 2011). The racial and religious tensions are compounded when an Orthodox

Jewish resident of Oakwood, who is the chairman of Cross River Bank, offers to donate

$85,000 to the Oakwood Board to restore the bus stops for private school students

(Yudelson, 2011).

Upon learning of the bank officer's offer and the Board's consideration to accept

the offer, parents and community leaders voice their objections over the lack of

consideration for the safety of all students, public and private. During the summer of

2011, a group of concerned parents in Oakwood, called Safe Oakwood, organize a town-

wide meeting with parents and district administrators to discuss the busing controversy.

During the meeting, an African American parent describes the division between

Oakwood residents as "the elephant in the room, and it weighs far more than 800 pounds

. . . not having the conversation is killing us" (Alexander, 2011b, p. 1). Conversely, an

Orthodox parent expresses the following sentiment: "I have never looked at anyone in a

negative way, and now I feel I am looked at in a negative way, and now I am

uncomfortable" (as cited in Alexander, 2011b, p. 1). Table 4 presents the demographic

makeup of the town compared to the student population of its public schools. Similarly,

Table 5 provides a description of where nonpublic school students, primarily Jewish, in

Oakwood attend school. As shown, 1,935 students attend private Jewish schools, 79

attend private Catholic schools, and 306 students attend the Oakwood Community

Charter School (Alexander, 2011b).

Table 4

*Ethnic Distribution of the Population of Oakwood Public Schools and the Town*

| Race | Public school population | Town population |
|---|---|---|
| White | 12.5% | 46.1% |
| Black | 43.8% | 25.8% |
| Hispanic | 28.2% | 16.5% |
| Asian | 13.0% | 9.0% |
| Other | 2.6% | 2.6% |

Source: *Proposed Busing Changes in Teaneck Draw Hundreds to Community Meeting,* by A. Alexander, 2011b, retrieved from http/www.northjersey.com

In this northeastern state, schools are funded primarily by local property taxes, a system that creates unequal distribution of school funding because tax rates are higher in suburban areas. Recognizing the difference in funding and quality of education in public schools throughout the state, in 1975 the state establishes a system for categorizing and ranking its 611 public school districts, known as District Factor Groups (DFGs). This system is based on property tax revenues, allowing the state to rank public school districts on a spectrum ranging from A and B (representing the poorest school districts) to I and J (the wealthiest school districts). The creation of racially and economically segregated communities creates a public school system in Oakwood that does not reflect the overall population of the town. As a consequence, the public schools are provided federal and state funding as if they are, indeed, part of an affluent GH DFG when in fact

they are educating a high number of children with needs similar to their counterparts in urban districts.

Table 5

*2011-2012 Charter and Private School Enrollment of Children in Oakwood*

| School | Number of students enrolled from Oakwood |
| --- | --- |
| Ben Porat Yosef Yeshiva | 102 |
| Bruriah High School | 34 |
| Frisch High School | 206 |
| Moriah | 163 |
| Noam Yeshiva | 461 |
| Solomon Schechter | 93 |
| Yavneh Academy | 431 |
| Yeshiva of River Edge | 445 |
| Reading Catholic High School | 13 |
| Holy Angels High School | 13 |
| Harding Catholic High School | 53 |
| Oakwood Community Charter School | 306 |

Source: *Proposed Busing Changes in Teaneck Draw Hundreds to Community Meeting,* by A. Alexander, 2011b, retrieved from http/www.northjersey.com

Basing this flawed system of assigning DFG rankings to public school districts on property tax revenue, rather than taking into consideration the student enrollment population at public schools, leaves children in school districts such as Oakwood at a disadvantage. Schools such as some in Oakwood that happen to be in a suburban setting

yet are educating a large number of children from low-income families are not funded like their counterparts in lower DFG rankings. Another factor that exacerbates the difficulties of funding suburban school districts is that the residents who do not have children or opt not to send their children to the public schools often object to proposed school budgets. This, in turn, becomes a fiscal challenge for funding the programs that Oakwood's student population needs.

During the 1990s, Oakwood begins to experience a divide between social classes, with the central west neighborhood experiencing the highest number of families living in poverty and the northwest section experiencing the highest median income. The median incomes in the northwest and central neighborhoods of Oakwood are higher than those of other neighborhoods in Oakwood. Figure 15 illustrates this movement.
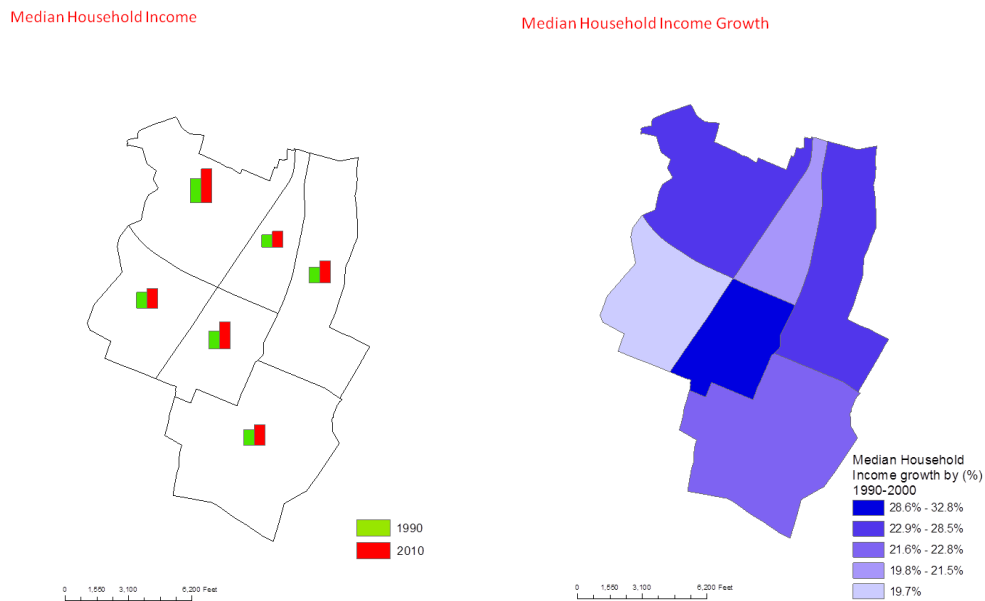


*Figure 15*. Median household income, Oakwood. Source: *Demographic Reports,* by Socialexplorer.com, 2013, retrieved from http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/ reportdata/

Since the 1990s, poverty in American suburbs has increased significantly at a rate greater than that of the central cities (Murphy, 2010). Researchers report an increase in poverty trends in the suburbs of 66% between 2000 and 2008, with an increase of 66%, compared to 47% in the central cities (Kneebone & Garr, 2008). Poverty in the suburbs is characterized by deteriorating housing, failing schools, few social services, high crime, and few job opportunities (Murphy, 2010). The federal guideline for calculating the poverty thresholds are $11,170 for a single person, $15,130 for a family of two, $19,090 for a family of three, $23,050 for a family of four, and $27, 010 for a family of five (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2012). Compared to its neighboring suburban public school districts, the current student population attending Oakwood Public Schools is primarily students of color. Oakwood's K–12 student population is 88% children of color, compared to 24% to 37% for its neighboring suburban public school districts. The student population in Oakwood Public Schools does not reflect the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the town, as shown in Table 4. Figure 16 illustrates the racial make-up of Oakwood Public Schools compared with the make-up of its neighboring public school districts in Reading County.

Compared to its neighboring districts, the Oakwood Public School District is not only more diverse ethnically and racially but also has a higher percentage of students and families living below the poverty level, based on the federal government's guidelines. Figure 17 shows that 31% of Oakwood's student population and their families are living below the poverty line, as indicated by the number of students who are receiving free or reduced-price lunches. In contrast, 8% or less of the students in Oakwood's neighboring public school districts are living below the poverty level.

**Oakwood and its Neighboring Districts**
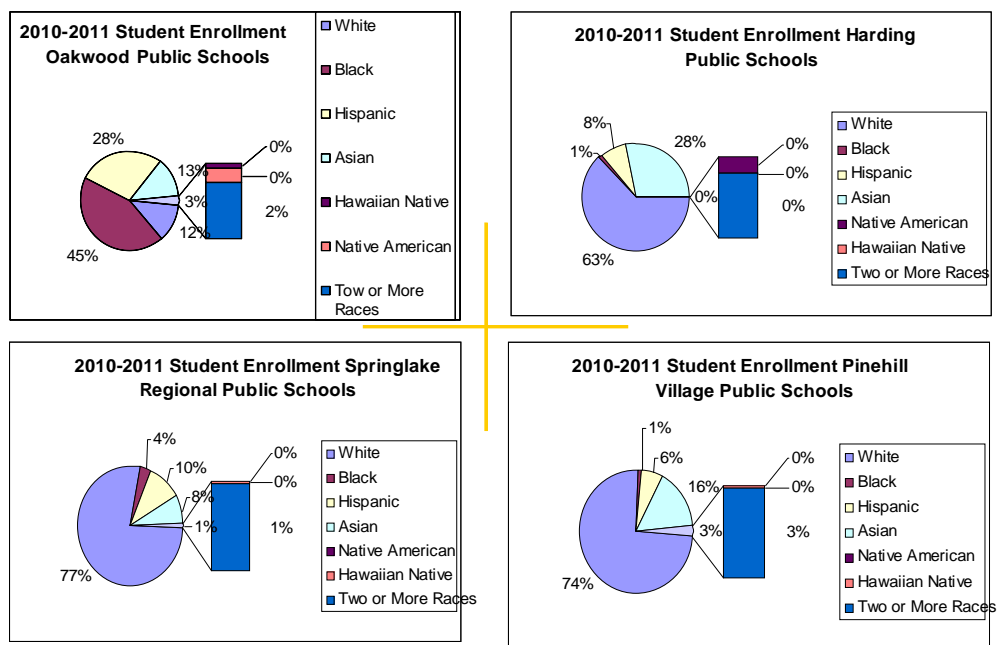


*Figure 16*. Racial demographics of student enrollment in Oakwood. Source: *New Jersey Department of District Factor Groups (DFG) for school districts,* by New Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/ reports

Since voting to desegregate its public schools voluntarily, the Oakwood Public School District is accused of myriad race-based transgressions. In 1994 the School Board establishes three committees to investigate the possibility that racial and/or ethnic bias contributes to or causes inequities in the education of children of color. The committee consists of 21 members who spend 6 months investigating the charges of institutional racism in Oakwood's public schools. Institutional racism is defined by the committee as "the intentional or unintentional institutional process, practices, and policies, or lack thereof, that moves or separates a person or group of people by virtue of race, into a path

**Free and Reduced Lunch Status**
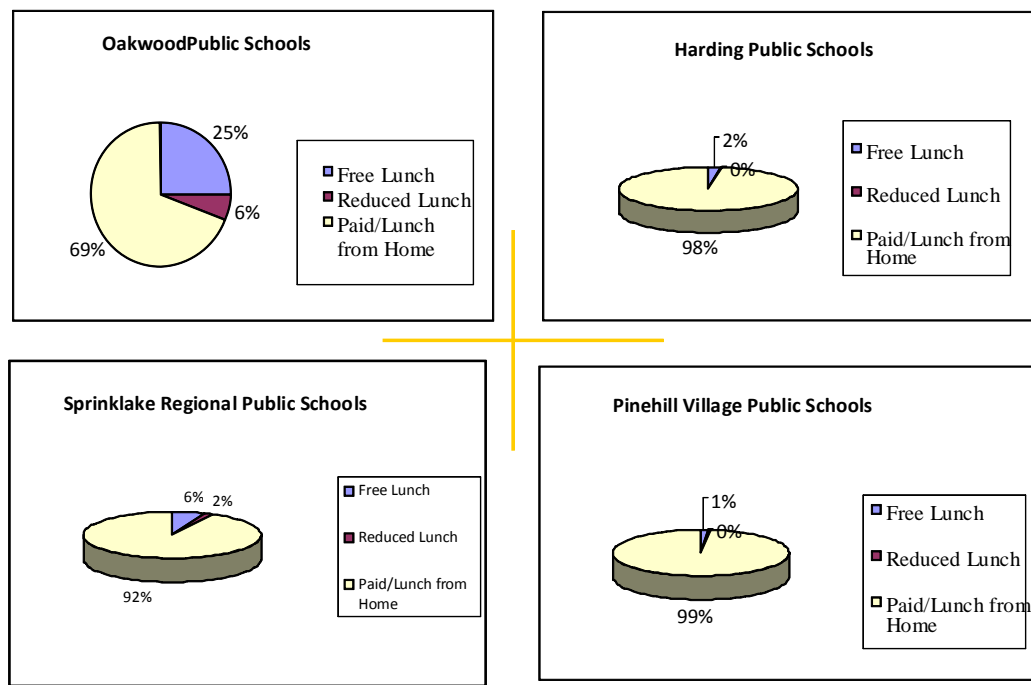


*Figure 17.* 2011-2012 free and reduced-price lunch status in Oakwood and its neighboring districts. Source: *New Jersey Department of District Factor Groups (DFG) for school districts,* by New Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/reports

that keeps him/her/them from achieving their full potential" (Hillman-Harrigan, Leftkowitz, March, Michael, & Pinkett-Heller, 1994, p. 16). The group meets on monthly and bimonthly bases to study achievement data, tracking policies, extracurricular activities, hiring policies, and curriculum.

The committee sponsors community forums to gather input from parents, teachers, and students. They also conduct teacher surveys and meet with parents privately to hear their concerns. Only five teachers respond to the survey, and the original student

members of the committee cease to participate (Hillman-Harrigan et al., 1994). The 6-month investigation reveals that substantial disparities exist between the academic and social achievement of White and Asian students and that of their African-American, and Latino, peers (Hillman-Harrigan et al., 1994). The committee finds significant, longstanding, and substantial disparities in student performance across racial categories. The findings from the committee's investigation reveal that institutional racism exists in the Oakwood school system, although it is not necessarily intentional.

The committee also points out that the failure of the Oakwood school system to treat the situation as an emergency and make an all-out effort to turn things around constitutes institutional racism (Hillman-Harrigan et al., 1994).

This notion of unintentional racism is one of the facets of the American school system that critical theorists seek to remedy. Lawrence (2010) argues that the injuries of racism reside in the continued existence of a widely shared belief in White supremacy that is, more often than not, unconscious. It is this notion of unintentional racism that prevents institutions from making and maintaining a commitment to remedy disparities. The committee recognizes the need to address disparities found in several areas: (a) general student achievement, (b) academically gifted and talented/honors/ advanced placement, (c) remedial classes, (d) special education (self-contained/resource room), (d) tracking, (e) parental involvement, (f) guidance/forum/at-risk programs/ discipline/school environment, (g) Asian/Indian students' special concerns, (h) extracurricular activities, (i) curriculum of inclusion/multiculturalism, and (j) instructional staff/human resource management (Hillman-Harrigan et al., 1994).

The problematic academic experiences of children of color in Oakwood Public Schools persist. The same issues that are raised in the 1960s—the same issues that lead to the federal government's investigation of institutional racism—continue to exist in 2013 in part because of Oakwood's failure to address and remedy those circumstances. In 2005 the district hires Pedro Noguera from the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University to conduct a study on the achievement gap between minority students and White students in Oakwood Public Schools. His findings and recommendations do not differ substantially from those made by the committee more than 15 years earlier. Noguera, Sealey-Ruiz, and Fergus (2006) find that, based on district data, the achievement gap between students of color and White students continues to widen; one third of the graduates of Oakwood High School are not passing the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), and most of the failing students are students of color. These students are earning their diplomas through the Special Assessment Review (SRA) method, which is renamed the Alternate High School Proficiency Assessment (AHSA) in 2008 by the New Jersey Department of Education in response to widespread criticism that the SRA is a "back door" to obtaining a high school diploma for students who fail one or both sections of the HSPA (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008).

Noguera et al. (2006) report that, for each state standardized examination, Black and Latino students have lower mean-scaled scores than White or Asian students. They find that, among Black and Latino students with disabilities (SWDs), a disproportionate percentage are classified as Learning Disabled (LD). In the same vein, Noguera et al. report that, when race and gender are combined, there are significant test score differences for the 2005 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK),

Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA), and HSPA exams in both Language Arts Literacy and Mathematics (Noguera et al., 2006).

Thirty-nine percent of Black SWDs and 40% of Latino SWDs are classified with LD. This compares with 25% of White SWDs and 24% of Asian SWDs; Black students are 1.26 times and Latinos are 1.18 times more likely than other groups to be classified with LD. Whites and Asians are the least likely to be classified (0.64% and 0.75%, respectively). Whites are 1.5 times and Blacks are 1.16 times more likely than other groups to be classified with Emotional Disturbance (ED); Black males represent 69% of the Black population in Special Education, and 25% of Black males in Oakwood are in Special Education. Latino and Asian males represent nearly 60% of the Special Education population within their racial groups.

The evidence from the report by Noguera et al. (2006) further shows that White and Asian students are overrepresented in fourth-grade Gifted and Talented courses, while Black and Latino students are underrepresented. A total of 17.2% of White students and 16.7% of Asian students in the fourth grade are in the Gifted and Talented programs, compared with 5.7% of Black Students and 3.9% of Latino students. Black parents perceive that administrators and teachers are not paying sufficient attention to how the curriculum can be made culturally relevant to Black and Latino students. In addition, teachers, parents, and students have differing perceptions of teacher and instructional quality in Oakwood Public Schools.

For more than three decades, Oakwood Public Schools experiences disparities in student achievement. Student achievement in Oakwood Public Schools, compared to its neighboring suburban school districts, is low and leads to an increase in criticism of the

schools' performance and management by residents and community leaders. Most recently, the 2011 *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card* (New Jersey Department of Education, 2010) indicates that student achievement in Oakwood reflects a disparity not only between the Black and White student populations but also among Black, Asian, and Hispanic students.

The achievement gap among Oakwood's students and those in the same DFG is narrower in Language Arts Literacy for both third and fourth graders. However, the gap in Oakwood compared to public schools within the same DFG is more prominent in the area of mathematics for both third and fourth grades, as shown in the next set of figures. These figures also illustrate how the African American and Hispanic students compare to the Asian and White student population within the district, across the state, and compared to neighboring suburban public school districts within the same DFG grouping.

A comparison of the district data between White and Black students reveals that the gap in language arts is much higher in the third grade than in the fourth grade. The third-grade Language Arts Literacy assessment shows that 40.8% of the Black students perform at the Partially Proficient level, compared to 28.6% of the White students. Figures 18, 19, and 20 illustrate this achievement gap. The fourth-grade district data for Language Arts Literacy indicate a narrower achievement gap. Of Black students, 38.1% perform at the Partially Proficient level, compared to 31.3% of White students. Figures 21, 22, and 23 illustrate this disparity. A comparison of the district data for the fourth grade NJASK mathematics examination reveal that 15.6% of Oakwood's White students perform at the Partially Proficient level, 50.0% perform at the Proficient level, and 34.4% perform at the Advanced Proficient level. In contrast, 31.9% of Oakwood's Black

students perform at the Partially Proficient level, 53.1% perform at the Proficient level,

and 15% perform at the Advanced Proficient level. Figures 18--29 illustrate this disparity.
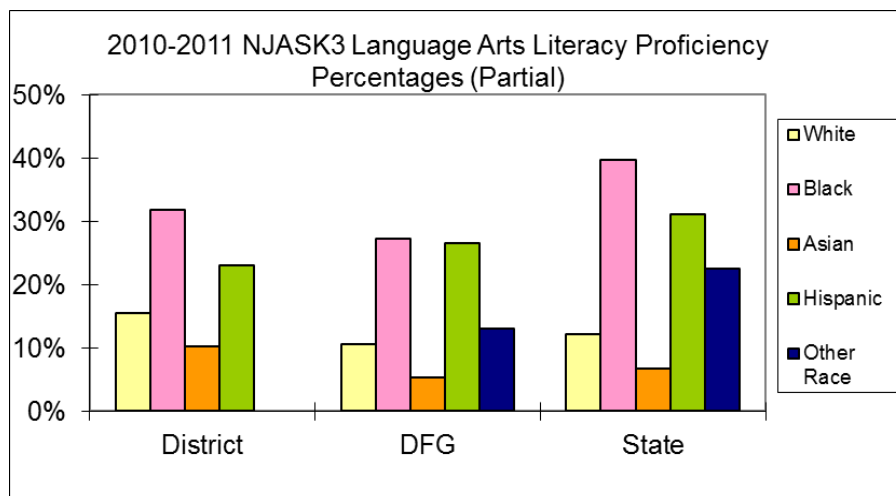


*Figure 18.* 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 3
Language Arts literacy proficiency percentages (Partial). No district data available for
Other Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey
Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/
reports
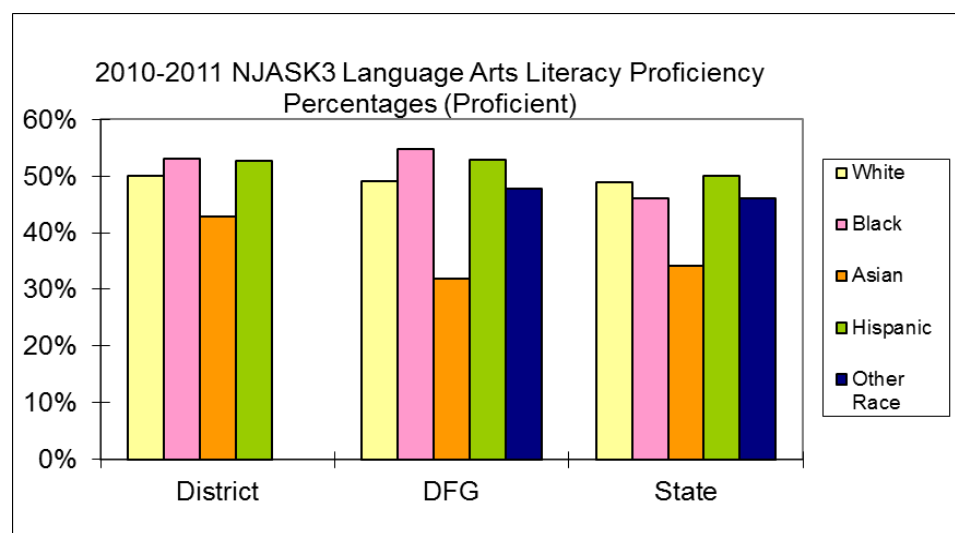


*Figure 19.* 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 3
Language Arts Literacy proficiency percentages (Proficient). No district data available
for Other Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New
Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/
nclb10/reports
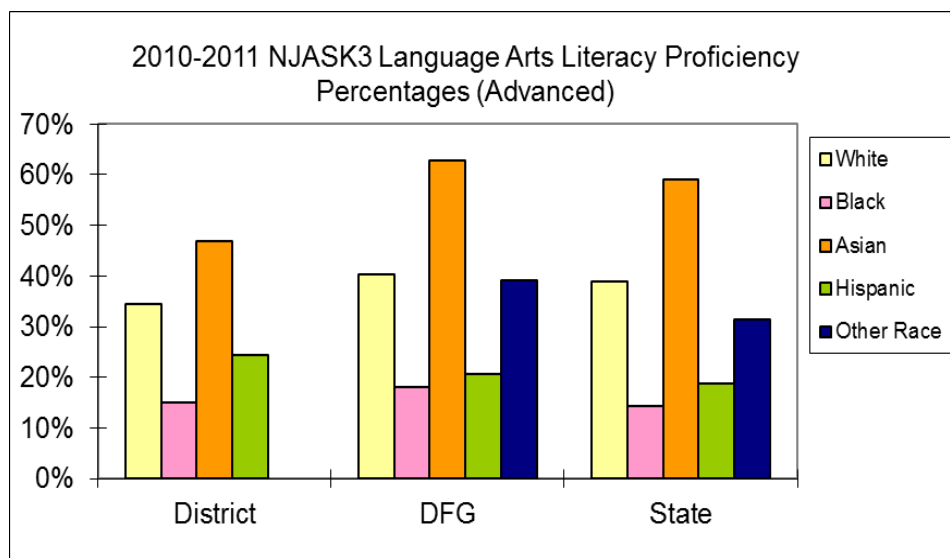
*Figure 20.* 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 3 Language Arts Literacy proficiency percentages (Advanced). No district data available for Other Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/ rc/nclb10/reports
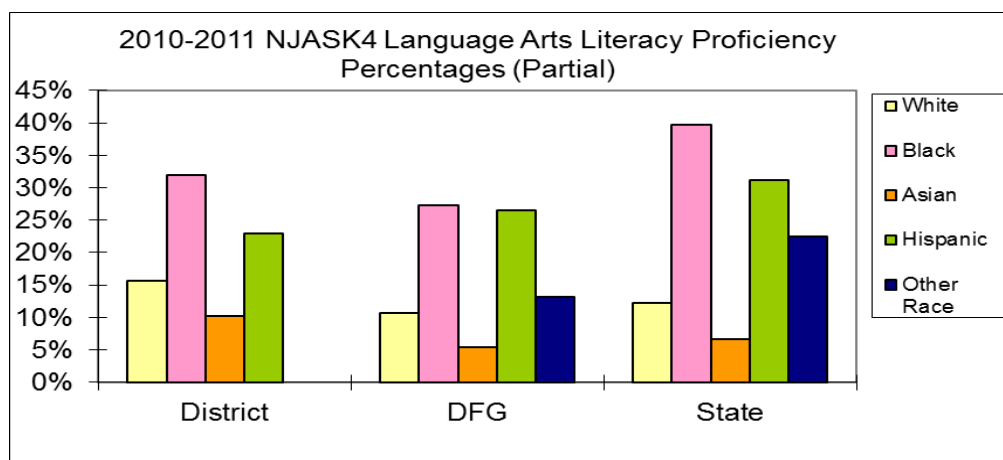


*Figure 21.* 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 4 Language Arts Literacy proficiency percentages (Partial). No district data available for Other Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/ reports
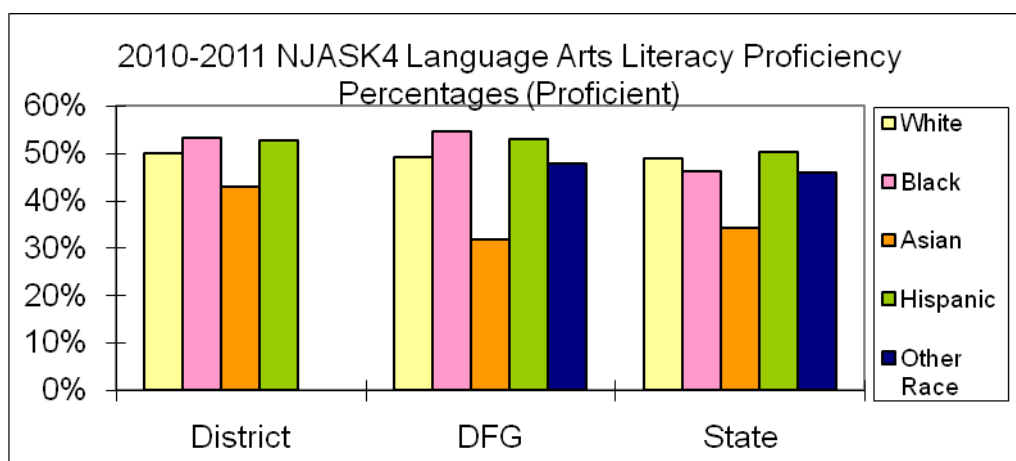
*Figure 22.* 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 4
Language Arts Literacy proficiency percentages (Proficient). No district data available
for Other Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New
Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/
nclb10/
reports
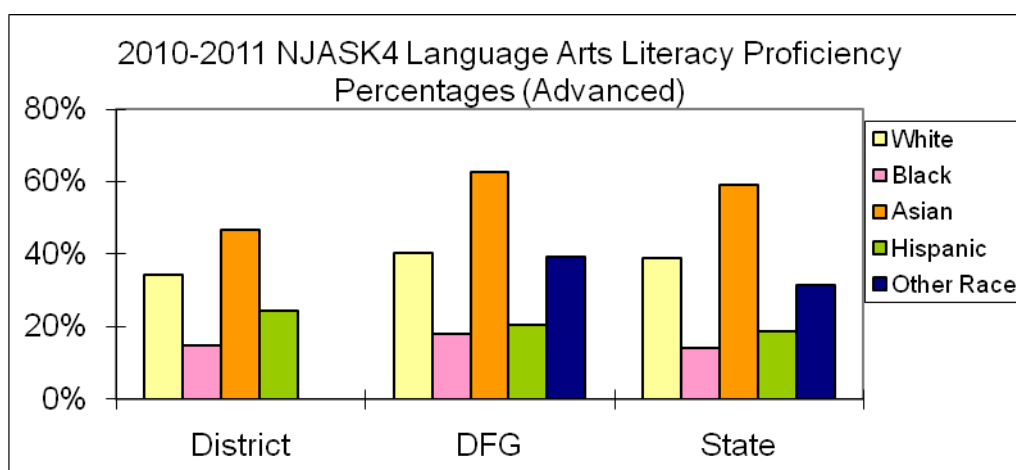


*Figure 23.* 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 4
Language Arts Literacy proficiency percentages (Advanced). No district data available
for Other Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New
Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/
nclb10/reports
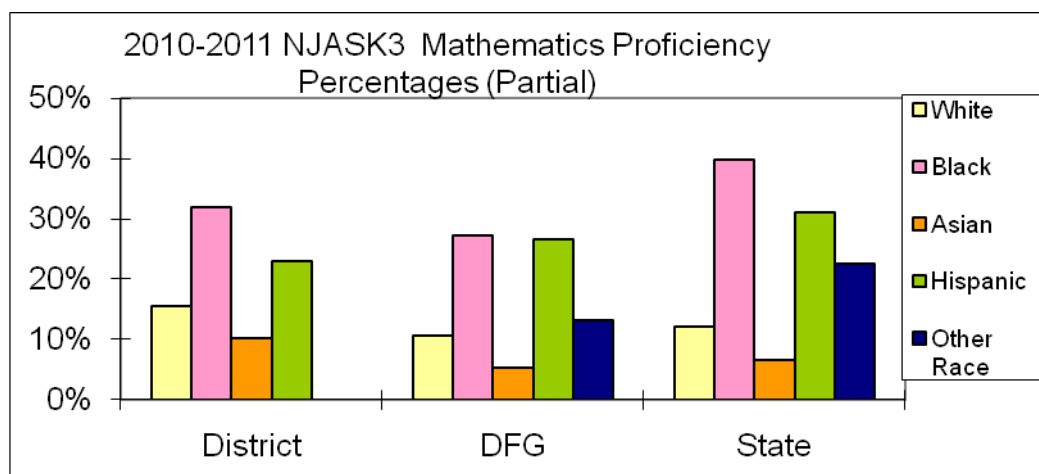
*Figure 24*. 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 3
Mathematics proficiency percentages (Partial). No district data available for Other Race.
Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey Department
of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/reports
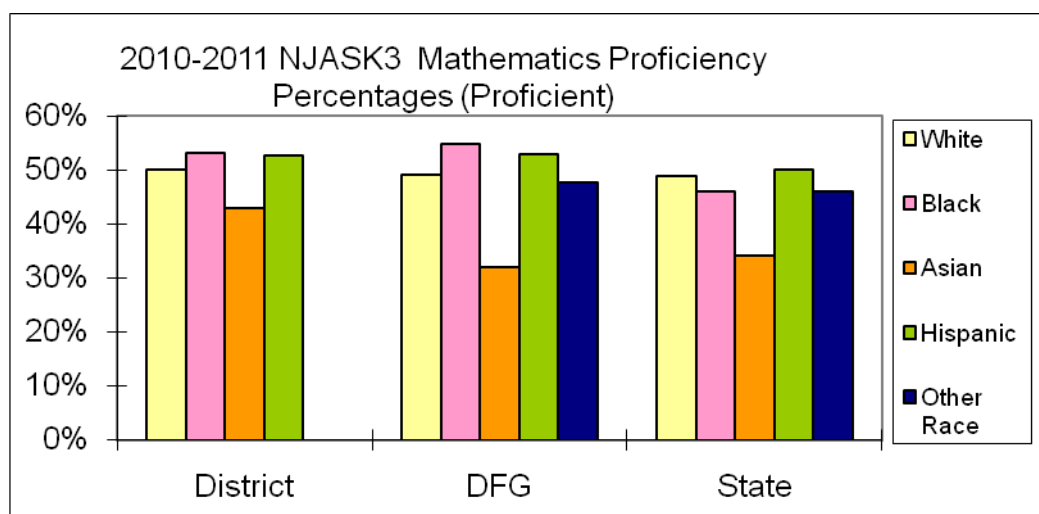


*Figure 25*. 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 3
Mathematics proficiency percentages (Proficient). No district data available for Other
Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey
Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/
reports
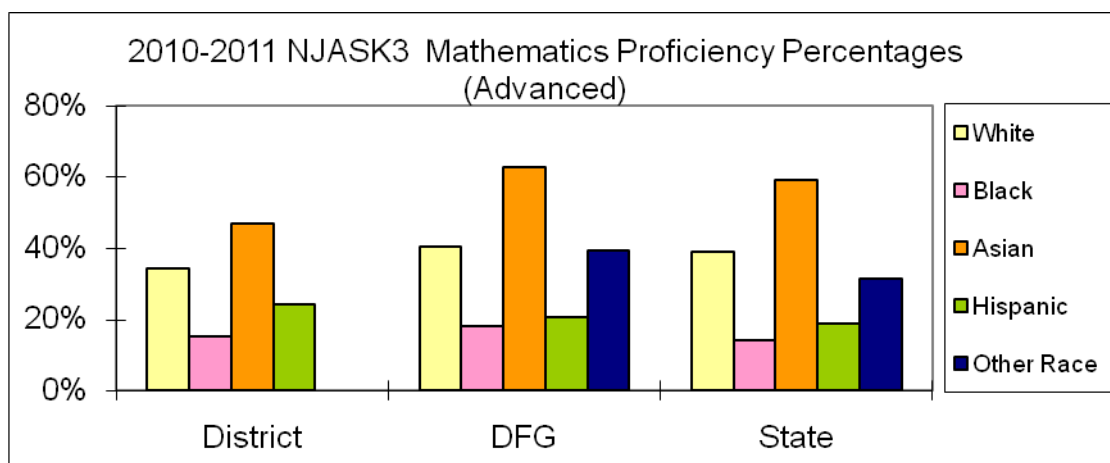
*Figure 26*. 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 3 Mathematics proficiency percentages (Advanced). No District data available for Other Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/ reports
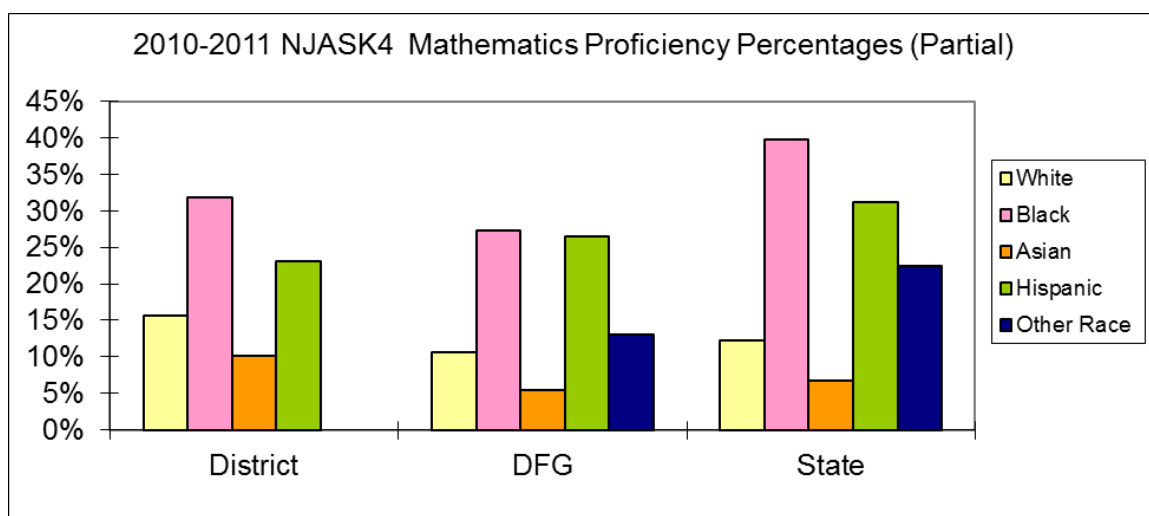


*Figure 27*. 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 4 Mathematics proficiency percentages (Partial). No district data available for Other Race Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/reports
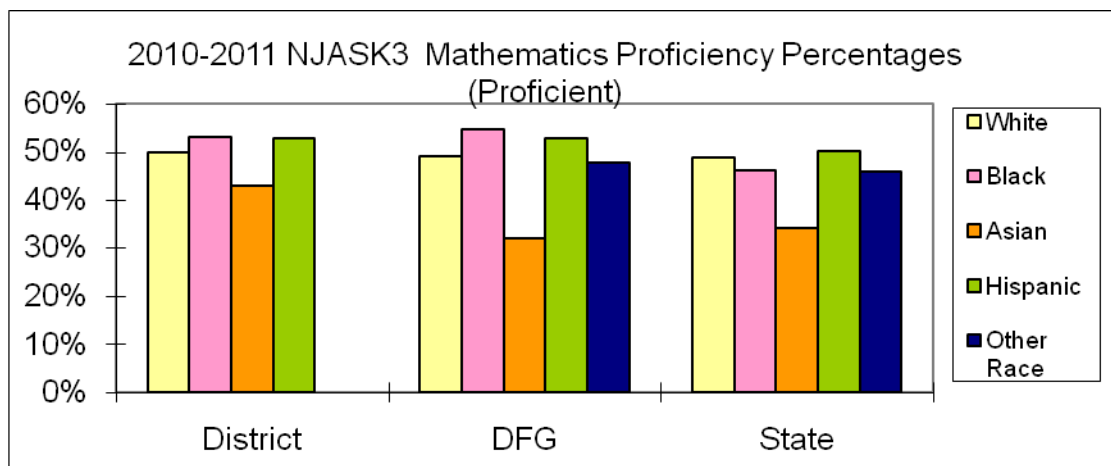
*Figure 28*. 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 4
Mathematics proficiency percentages (Proficient). No district data available for Other
Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey
Department of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/
reports
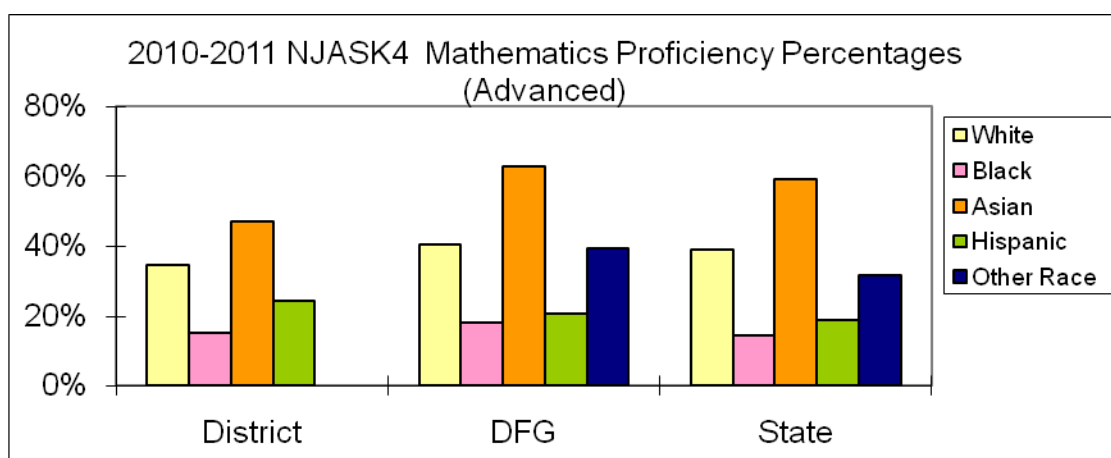


*Figure 29*. 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 4
Mathematics proficiency percentages (Advanced). No district data available for Other
Race. Source: *New Jersey Department of Education Report Card,* by New Jersey Depart-
ment of Education, 2010, retrieved from http://education.state.nj.us/rc/nclb10/reports

The persistent academic disparities in Oakwood's diverse student population call for a reevaluation of pedagogy, curriculum, and policies in the Oakwood Public School District. Along the same vein, the increase in ELLs and free and reduced-price lunch students requires teachers and administrators to rethink their approach to teaching this diverse student body. The district needs to strive to increase not only the number of students who are Proficient on the NJASK but also the number of students who score in the Advanced Proficient category, as is the case with schools within the same DFG grouping.

There is a critical need to make reading instruction in Grades K–4 a priority. Early intervention for all students who are reading below grade level needs to be addressed with a sense of urgency. The district cannot continue to hide behind the perceived suburban landscape and deny that its student population is racially, ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse, with social and educational needs that are different from the student population of 20 years ago. It is the responsibility of teachers and administrators to collaborate, enter into partnerships with families, engage in ongoing dialogue, and, most of all, take action to ensure that all students leave their learning environment with the skills to succeed as lifelong learners who feel valued and confident.

**Chapter 5: Listening to Teachers**

*During the focus group sessions and individual interviews, teacher participants*

*talk about how they approach the teaching of reading in a diverse suburban public*

*school setting, their decision to seek employment in Oakwood, and their experience with*

*teaching in the school district. To demonstrate the value of the participants' words and*

*bring vividness and immediacy to their experiences, I use exact quotations from the*

*transcripts. In some instances, I combine similar statements made by multiple*

*participants. I use italicized type to distinguish my analytical-interpretive auto-*

*ethnographic narratives from the participant quotations. A series of verbatim quotations*

*is used at times to illustrate various participants' views on an issue (Corden &*

*Sainsbury, 2006).*

*Consistent with the practice of qualitative researchers, the participant's*

*pseudonym is included in parentheses below the verbatim quotation. I use the label*

*"collective voice" to represent quotations in which similar responses made by more than*

*one participant are woven together. Moreover, like the verbatim quotations included in*

*this study, my voice is used for a number of reasons and in different ways. At times, I use*

*my voice to summarize, support, add to, and or critique statements made by the*

*participants.*

**Then and Now . . . Choosing and Working in Oakwood**

*When I ask what led to their decision to work for the Oakwood Public School*

*District and what it is like when they first start working in Oakwood, one teacher*

*comments,*

> I moved to Oakwood from New York in 1989 because I was looking for a good
> school system for my daughter. At that time Oakwood Schools had a good

reputation. After leaving corporate in 2003, I decided to pursue teaching; it was something that I always wanted to do and now had the opportunity to do so. I became certified and looked to student teach in Oakwood. The decision was based on the fact that I had positive experiences with the school system while my daughter attended grades 4-12. I wanted to work in a diverse school system, one that had children coming from different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. The fact that I lived in Oakwood was also a major deciding factor. (Jacqueline)

*Another teacher comments,*

I did not purposefully seek employment in Oakwood; rather, it was the town in which I resided and was familiar with as a parent and substitute teacher. It was the school system my children attended. I felt that there were many initiatives undertaken to enhance learning, and I felt support and encouragement when I first started. (Izzie)

*Other teachers explain as follows.*

It was more of a happy accident than anything else. I had been interviewing in all these different places and ended up in my backyard. I grew up half my life in Reading County and the other half in Brooklyn, so it was great. (Johnathan)

When I came to Oakwood from a private school setting, an administrator said to me, "You know, we're very interested in you because of your private school background because this is the closest thing to private school you'll ever find in a public setting." They wouldn't put me in an open classroom right away because the Open Parents Association was so powerful they had to see me work before I got an open classroom position. The principal consulted with the Open Ed Parent Association when I was hired. (Mia)

*As teachers reflect on their decision to seek employment in Oakwood, it becomes apparent that many of them stumbled on a hidden gem of a community that embraced diversity. It is also evident that it was not always a conscious, deliberate choice to teach in Oakwood; rather, some of the teachers are either familiar with the district as residents or are frustrated teaching in school districts such as Oakhill or East River and a friend teaching in Oakwood says, "Why don't you check out Oakwood, you know, there are kids of color here, too?" As one teacher phrases it,*

I was driven out of an urban district because of being "too White" for a Black woman, of coming "down here from up there." I wasn't embraced and was told

that my concern wasn't enough, that I didn't belong and would never understand, even though I went in early, stayed late, tutored, made home visits, and more. It was a matter of self-preservation. I had to go. I am still in Oakwood because it was a good fit. (Bernadette)

## The Changing Face of a Suburban Public School District

*When asked about his perception of Oakwood, a teacher who lives in a*

*neighboring town in Reading County responds,*

I have friends who grew up here. I wish I grew up here. I've been here the last 14 years I've grown to know it pretty well. When I first came, I knew it was diverse. I knew it was different than other towns in Reading County, but at the same time it looks like most other towns in Reading County, but the diversity is different. It was such a culture shock moving from Brooklyn to Reading County. Some of the attitudes that some people in parts of Reading County have about Oakwood are baffling. It's almost viewed as an urban district. (Johnathan)

*Another teacher who moved to Oakwood from New York City during the 1980s*

*describes the town as being racially, economically, and religiously diverse and divided.*

For the most part its infrastructure is well kept and the landscape is dominated by private homes. The neighborhoods south of Route 41 tend to feel more suburban. The stretch of Oakwood Road before Route 41 looks and feels different. It is quite obvious that certain stores or businesses are not allowed there. North of Route 41, there are many privately owned well-kept homes, but the big difference is the type of businesses allowed to operate in the north section, giving it a more of an urban city feel. There are two 24-hour laundromats, a couple of liquor stores, discount stores, several hair salons, a Popeye's fast-food restaurant, a bodega, and small eateries that have huge turnovers. You can see these differences right along Oakwood Road. I guess I can say that North of Route 41, if you move away from Oakwood Road, it feels just as suburban as any suburban neighborhood, but if you only travel along Oakwood Road, you'd never know it. (Jacqueline)

*Like many suburban public school districts in the nation, the student population*

*at the Oakwood Public School is increasingly diverse—ethnically, racially,*

*socioeconomically, and linguistically.*

When I arrived 20 years ago, it was 1992. I was at Longfellow Elementary School and I had a class of about 24 children, predominantly White, mostly Jewish. We used to have 24/25 students, that was typical, but there's much more diversity in the class now than 20-something years ago. We didn't have many Hispanic, and we had fewer African-American students and very, very, few Asian students. It's

been a mass exodus of a White student population, even though the town still has a large White population. (Avril)

I believe the feeling from the White population is that they really didn't want their children mingling with these new residents, and so they opted to pay those private school dollars. But even within the African American community there's a lot of flight, a lot of flight of the "middle class." Now what we're seeing is this large growth of the lower socio-economic population. (Beatrice)

We have a very migrant population. I feel like I have a revolving door in my classroom. We've got kids coming in and out. It's just one in, one out. That's been the trend the last 6, 7 years. I think that might be reflective of an economic situation where people are moving in with families because they are not working, and then when they start working again, they're gone or they have to move.

There are a lot of kids getting off that bus on Oakwood Road who might not have been here at the start of their elementary years. You look at some of the other problems that we've got going on now, and it's not because the kids are from Oakwood. You can see sometimes the kids are getting ready to slip and say something that they "shouldn't." Like one of my kids almost slipped today, and it's like OK! I have this little girl and she brings out her lunch one day and she has a Checkers burger with everything on it. I said "Checkers? Khadija, where did you get Checkers from?" She's like, "Oh, it's down the street from my house." OK, there ain't no Checkers here in Oakwood! I mean that's one of the problems, and we've got charter schools coming to take money from the pot. There's the possibility of another charter school coming to take more money from the pot. And as much as we would love to help everybody, we have to help the kids who live here. This is a public school paid for by the tax dollars of the Oakwood Public School parents. It's not fair! (Beatrice)

*As I reflect on the conversations with my colleagues, it occurs to me that, although some teachers may believe that it is not fair for out-of-district students to "sneak" into the Oakwood public school system, in reality it is the system that is not fair. The system creates the need for families to behave in this way. The system forces families to go to such lengths as using a family member's address in town or waking the child at 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning to get to the zoned school bus stop on time. A system where quality affordable housing and high quality schools are not available for all citizens throughout the nation is not fair.*

*One year our school nurse realizes that one of my students no longer lives in town and reports him. It is the end of the school year; we have 3 weeks left on the school calendar. The parents are offered the option of paying tuition, but of course it is not an affordable option. So with 3 weeks left, the child is not allowed to complete the year in my class; the child has to transfer to a new school. Is that fair?*

*As Marian Wright Edelman says, "The future which we hold in trust for our own children will be shaped by our fairness to other people's children" (as cited in Stolley, 1995, para. 1). Even before I am blessed with my daughter, Kioja, I teach and enter the world of teaching and learning as if my own children are in the classroom. The quality of education that I provide, the level of expectation that I have for my students, the love and respect that I give come from the space of seeing and treating other people's children as my own, not as distant and separate from me. This is not to say that I do not make mistakes and that there have not been times when the loving, caring, and respectful teacher that I strive to be daily stumbles. I have, and perhaps will again in the future, but I am mindful about teaching and interacting with my students as if they are Kioja.*

*Some of the teachers indicate that, because the demographics of the student population in Oakwood have changed and due to past allegations of institutional racism, district administrators have shifted their focus regarding how they approach teaching and learning. As a result, they believe that district administrators hesitate to make certain policy and curriculum decisions. Some of the teachers say that there is an urgent need for honest dialogue among stakeholders in Oakwood, even if it means addressing inflammatory and incendiary topics. During my conversation with the teachers, it is quite evident that, without honest dialogue, the disparities will continue, with very little chance*

*of making strides toward closing the achievement gap and providing a high-quality*

*educational experience for all children. Many of the teachers report that, when they first*

*came to Oakwood, it was a time of much more progressive education, portfolio*

*assessment, performance assessment, emphasis on naturalistic learning, and*

*multicultural education.*

> I was talking with my student teacher about that just yesterday. I was telling her how my classroom used to be set up 20 years ago. I had a section that looked like a living room. I had a full couch, an easy chair, a coffee table with lamps, throw pillows, and stuffed animals. We had to replicate a living room or a family room, a space where people read with their families. At that time children read at the same time their parents were reading. (Bernadette)

> Now parents are working late, if they are seeing their children at all. Some children have extended family watching them or they're at after-school programs, and they're coming home and they're parents who are not reading. Parents are lucky if they have the energy to cook dinner, and then everybody has to bathe. Children don't get their homework checked, and then everyone is off to bed because the parents are exhausted. The children are not seeing the modeling at home of the parent reading. They're not getting that conversation time. That home model that I tried to have in my classroom is foreign to them, and I am unable to do things in the same way as I did in the past. (collective voice)

> Now I have a chair in the corner where I read to the kids during a Read Aloud period. I'm finding that having the students at that half-circle kidney table teaching my guided reading groups or pulling small groups, trying to get them to the rug doing the whole class shared reading, that's unnatural. Before it was all about recreating that home environment and making school seem more like home than school. That was fun and natural! I loved that there was the opportunity to look at things holistically and allow children to make connections. (Bernadette)

> Then as the district began to get browner and browner, the couches were taken away. We were told that we no longer needed to resemble the home. Now we're giving them such narrow vision, but we're asking them to make connections, to connect, and to infer, and to do this and that. But they're never given a whole view of much of anything. I think it's very sad because when and where else are they going to get it if they don't get it in the classroom? This country has been built on creativity, and we are slowly destroying the creativity from a large group of children. It's still happening in some of the private schools, and they're given opportunities to create. But in the public school system, in Oakwood, we're basically just creating workers, and that's a problem. (collective voice)

The district's focus is on the acquisition of skills. Whatever tools you use to have the kids acquire those skills is what's important. There's no focus on content. There's really no focus on the literary elements. The focus is on skill development around comprehension, and that's basically it. My philosophy is that skills are important, but if a child does not understand how stories are made and the elements of a story, then even if you understand how to ask questions, you're not going to understand how to ask the correct questions. It's not just even about asking the correct questions, but also how to expand your questions to cut along character or theme. If you're not spending any time with that, how will the students learn those skills? The only way to spend time with that is to read books, and to read whole books. That is not a focus of the district, and so for me, I try to infuse that in. (Antoinette)

The district's focus is on the acquisition of skills because it's easier to track. Their focus has changed because the demographics have changed. A lot of schools that teach predominantly children of color tend to be acquisition-driven schools. They also tend to be data-driven schools. Everything is very cut and dried. Everybody's on the same page. Everyone's doing the same thing. That's basically where Oakwood is at this point. It's boring to read scripts, but that's what we're doing; it's boring. It's not exciting, and it doesn't require any thought. You literally could bring in anybody, and they can read the script. That's actually been the conversation with a lot of us as teachers; it's so extreme. (Antoinette)

So why are they doing it? Because they're Black children, because they're Hispanic children, because they need the numbers to say that there's growth. I think that really is it, because the numbers are driving everything. But that's not what's most important. I think that's our biggest problem, it's not about the kids anymore. It's about the data, the scores, and the money. Kids are secondary. No one's thinking about the kids. (collective voice)

To be more blunt about that, sometimes I feel that they feel they can get away with that more easily because of the change in population. No one's looking. They don't feel like they have to be accountable because the parents aren't coming to check up on their kids, and they're not checking up on me either, so I can go this route. Where they [administrators] knew that they had a group of parents in the past who were more proactive, who had their feet up their behind, they would be more about the kids. But right now it's more about them, and we're all going to suffer for that. They're going to put the pressure on us to make them look good. (Jacqueline)

It's worrisome because I think in this town the fear of being called racist and the fear of getting tangled up in allegations of racism have a lot of people running scared and making some pretty stupid decisions in order to cover themselves. It's such a shame because I think a lot more good could be done if people would just say, "Hey, wait a second, here's what's out there, here are the possible allegations." (Colbert)

When Pedro Noguera came in to research cultural biases, beliefs, and practices, I thought, "Thank heavens, finally we're going to get someone who speaks to what he sees and really is analytical with it and very plain speaking about what's going on." He started out that way, but like so much else in this town, it sort of vaporized: it just kind of disappeared. We needed him to start a dialogue among the stakeholders. All of us are stakeholders, not just teachers, but also anyone who lives in the town. We needed him to get us to be less fearful of what it is that so many of us are so fearful of, the racism, the allegations of racism, being labeled as a racist. I want very clearly to say that certain allegations of racism are right on the mark and belong there, but I think that the fear of being labeled as a racist has people making some very wrong decisions because it's more expedient. It means they won't get people bothering them; they'll be left alone. (Colbert)

## Parental Involvement Then and Now

*During our conversations Oakwood teachers talk at length about the difference*

*between the parent population in Oakwood 20 years ago and now. Cognizant of how the*

*ethnic and socioeconomic composition of Oakwood is changing, they recognize the fact*

*that experiences of children years ago are not comparable to those of today.*

*For example, the level of conversation and outdoor experiences that parents once*

*gave their children is not always possible now because of language barriers and work*

*schedules. Because of these limitations on the amount of conversational home*

*experiences of children, teachers must be more explicit about how they teach reading,*

*scaffold children's thinking, and train them to make connections while they are reading.*

*Teachers must provide more language opportunities in the classroom. Some teachers*

*suggest providing opportunities in school for parents to attend and participate in their*

*children's learning. Another suggestion is to have more teachers make an effort beyond*

*contractual hours to connect with parents. Some teachers lament over the lack of*

*parental involvement:*

The parental support is not there, it used to be. It has changed dramatically, a huge dramatic change! I remember being so shocked that first year. Parents were always in my room and in the building. I was like, "What the hell is this, don't you have a job? Why are you in my face?" Parents were just so into it. I was like

"get out," but now it's like, "Oh, my God, come back, where is everyone?" I'm so missing it. (Avril)

The socioeconomics in Oakwood have changed. Most parents work and they can't just pop into school. They might be working the night shift, the overnight shift jobs, or two jobs. A lot of the kids are not seeing their parents. And that's why they're living with extended families. The families have to band together to take care of the kids. You can even see it when you're asking for certain donations, or when money does come in, you're not even seeing dollars where before you would. Now it might be lots of coins. I've also noticed for a bunch of my children, they do the homework by themselves. I even had a little boy tell me, "My mommy hasn't been able to come meet with you yet because she has no time to come in to see you." (collective voice)

*Some teachers point out:*

We as a town and as a nation are a little afraid to exhort ourselves too forcefully on parents who are in my view really messing up, really missing what they need to do to make their child feel successful and be successful. Parents need to be held more accountable in some way. (Colbert)

When we bring up the lack of parental involvement at a staff meeting and how it's affecting the kids' performance, the first thing they [administrators] say is, "Don't worry about the parents." But how the hell can you tell me not to worry about the parents if this child is going to bed late at night, is eating junk food, or no food? Then the kids come in tired and hungry. They know their parents are not checking anything. They don't care about their homework. Then the kids are, like, the teacher's going to be upset, big deal. So if that's all that's going to happen, how am I supposed to overcome that? (Jacqueline)

*Another teacher says,*

Even if parents lack the skills or means to provide a certain level of support, they can at least set the expectation that you are going to succeed. When you come home from school, you read, complete your homework, and then you go out to play or watch TV or what have you. This may sound like we're imposing middle-class values upon these parents or that we are holier than thou, but come on, something has got to be done. You can be poor, illiterate, or overworked and still be able to communicate to your children the value and importance of learning and doing well in school. Enough already! We have to stop making excuses for parents who are overworked or lack the skills to help their kids at home. It doesn't take much to make your child sit down and read! (Cheryl)

*As I read the statements that some of the teachers make about schools needing to*

*stop making excuses for parents, I cannot help but wonder about the barriers that prevent*

*parents from participating actively in their children's education at the school level. There*

*are parents who do not feel welcome at their children's school; therefore, they stay away*

*and remain silent. I also wonder about the additional demands that schools place on the*

*already stressed, unemployed parent or parents like mine, who work two or three jobs to*

*provide for their family. There are many families who care about their child's*

*educational well-being but are also preoccupied with basic necessities, such as paying*

*bills, keeping the lights on, feeding and clothing their children. I ask, "To what extent*

*can schools lessen the burden?" Then again, Anyon (2005) says that it is not schools that*

*need to lessen the burden; rather, the economic system needs to be changed.*

*Anyon (2005) argues that past policies relating to education have not addressed*

*the unemployment and joblessness of families. In the same vein, Berliner (2012) writes*

*that "the achievement gaps between Blacks and Whites, Hispanics and Anglos, the poor*

*and the rich, are hard to erase because the gaps have only a little to do with what goes*

*on in schools, and a lot to do with social and cultural factors that affect student*

*performance" (p. 2.). Similarly, Delgado and Stefanic (2012) argue that the effect of the*

*socioeconomic status of children of color on their performance in school is often viewed*

*as the students' fault rather than recognized as another barrier resulting from the racism*

*and inequalities that they and their families face. Educators must ask themselves, how*

*does a parent begin to sit and read with the child if the parent is struggling to feed,*

*shelter, and clothe that child? It is not as simple as saying "no excuses." Schools and*

*policy makers must take home life, community structure, health, and environmental*

*factors into consideration when making demands on parents (Anyon, 2005; Berliner,*

*2009; Comer et al., 1996; Epstein, 2001; Ferguson, 2007).*

*The issue of parental accountability is an ongoing debate and struggle for teachers. There are two primary schools of thought on the matter. There is the institutional belief that, for children to succeed in school, it is imperative that parents be actively supportive of their children's educational experience. On the other hand, there are educators and policy makers who take the position that children can succeed in spite of the lack of parental involvement in their schooling experience.*

*It is well documented and argued that parental involvement not only contributes to a child's success but also improves social skills and likelihood of pursuing a college education (Epstein, 2001; Ferguson, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Ferguson (2007) reports that students' learning improves with parental participation and that this is true regardless of grade level, regardless of whether the family is rich or poor, and regardless of whether or not the parents finished high school.*

*There is a need for schools and educators to move away from expressing their frustrations about the lack of parental involvement in terms of a deficit model. Rather than blaming parents who are often overworked and may  lack the knowledge to advocate effectively on behalf of their children, schools need to recognize their role in determining the levels of parental involvement (Epstein, 2001). Finders and Lewis (1994) argue that, instead of assuming that parental absence means noncaring families, educators need to understand the barriers that hinder some families from participating in their children's education. There is also a need to recognize and understand the various forms and levels of parental involvement. Parents can be supportive of their children as learners but may not be actively involved in their learning by helping them to complete homework assignments or even attending parent-teacher conferences.*

*We need to re-envision parental involvement. Rather than hosting class celebrations during the day, when most families are unable to attend, schools need to schedule functions during the evening to maximize attendance by families. This is a practice that runs counter to the contractual hours mandated by bargaining agreements; however, it is a gesture that can reap many benefits and contribute to improved parental participation and perhaps student behavior in class. Research indicates that, when children become aware of their parents' participation in their learning, they may be more apt to do what their teachers ask them to do (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research also indicates a need to be specific about the type of parental involvement that is desired in school and at home (Epstein, 2001; Ferguson, 2007).*

*Parents need to begin to see themselves as teachers, too, regardless of the level of their own education or expertise with the English language. They are and still can be teachers at home. The role of parent as teacher is something with which I struggle. I do not always get it right. I often come home exhausted from work, wanting to just wash up and get in bed, but I know too well the consequences of not reading to my child daily. Besides, Kioja will not have it any other way. She will say, "So, no reading tonight?!" Hearing that and seeing the look of disappointment on her face, the only choice is to muster energy and read.*

*As a parent, and as a child of immigrant parents who both work two jobs while I am in school, I understand that families may not have the means to purchase certain resources or enroll their children in after-school enrichment programs such as Kumon. But I want parents to know that they can outfit their children to be scholars without purchasing those outside resources. I often suggest to families that they find at least 30*

*minutes a week to go to the public library to borrow books to read together at home. The public library also has other resources that families may find interesting and useful, such as board games.*

*In my welcome letter to incoming students, as well as my end-of-year letter to families, I remind families to consider carefully the influence of electronic media. I strongly suggest that they limit television viewing, computer use, and video games for many reasons. Research demonstrates that the highest-achieving students in classrooms watch the least amount of television and that over involvement with electronic media fosters passivity and inhibits social and language growth (Routman, 1996). Research also indicates that, without extended quiet time, children lose the ability to imagine and make up stories (Routman, 1996). Unlike books, which require readers to ponder, imagine, analyze, and question, television programs invite no active response, often rendering questions and answers superficial, requiring little reflection (Routman, 1996).*

*A habit of inquiry is nurtured when the child is encouraged to read nonfiction, as well as fiction. Since the rules of video games are predetermined, they restrict a child's ability to make up rules and to develop the important social skills of compromise and negotiation (Routman, 1996). We need to recognize and understand the misconception that parents are not interested or invested in their children's education. The reality is that many of them cannot afford the resources that other families are able to obtain. In today's economy, it is becoming increasingly difficult for families to provide for even the basic needs of their children, much less "extras" that children request or even need. The poverty rate is increasing, not only in urban areas but also in the suburbs. However, library summer programs often provide incentives for reading, which is an effective way*

*to encourage children and their families to participate and take advantage of this free*

*and valuable resource.*

## Parents as Models and School Culture

You can't give a kid better motivation than that feeling of success, that, "Oh, my God, I did it! . . . See, Sandy I think that's one of the things, as we're talking about Kioja, she has an internal drive to do it. She will meet a benchmark because she has foundational skills. She's had experiences. She has parents who talk with her and read to her. (Izzie)

*It goes back to parents. Even in my home we disagree on how to read with Kioja. My husband wants her to just sit and listen while he reads the entire book, no interruptions. But she makes comments and responds to the text. I'll say, "Did you hear her? She said something, you have to respond and interact with her." He'll disagree and say she's supposed to sit and listen. I try to explain to him that reading is interactive. It's a conversation—you listen, you talk to her, she's observing something, she's thinking and sharing her observations with you. It's important to respond to her and help her think through what's happening in the book. At times when we're reading, something will come up and she'll say "Mommy, that's like the other book!" And she'll get up and go look for that other book, and he'll get mad, asking, "Where are you going?"*

*For us as teachers to expect parents to do these things without having the training that we have is unfair and unrealistic. In my home, I approach reading with Kioja from a teacher's perspective, while my husband's perspective is based on his schooling experience and profession as an engineer. Our perspectives are different. There are many parents like my husband, who are educated, care, and want the best for their children, but who are tired after a long day at work. Like my husband, they just want to get through the book. "OK, I read with my child, I'm done!" No, there's more to it than that. You have to talk to your child while you're reading the book, and after you've finished the book, give them time to process it, to make those connections, and if they get up to go look for the other book, honor it, be proud of them!*

*We have arguments, and I have to explain to my husband how today's schooling experience is much different from what he experienced in school. I tell him what she needs. This is what I do. I teach reading and I know what teachers expect of her so we have to prepare her to do the things the school expects. They don't expect her to just sit there. They expect her to participate and have something to say, and if she has nothing to say, they're going to look at her and write us and say, "Your child doesn't participate, your child is not an active reader, and we don't want that."*

*Oh, my gosh, Izzie, I'm helping my husband to be more interactive with her when we read together. It hasn't been easy, but he's starting to see value in the way I read and interact with her. At first he will just get up and leave the room. Now he stays, he does not get as frustrated. He is slowly coming around and letting her interrupt more during reading. I really understand the challenges that families face, because I see it in my own*

*home. Every night Kioja wants both Mom and Dad to read to her. This nightly process is long because what happens is she first reads the books she selects, and after she reads, then we take turns reading. We all have to read. She reads to us, we read to her; if it takes 40 minutes, then so be it. That's why we have to start our routine early. But to him it's like, let's go in there, let's read, that's it!*

To me your husband is like the administration, except that the administration also has the book cover with the blurbs on it. They know what might be inside, but they don't open the book. So they know that readers need to be interactive. Readers need to make connections. We need to expose children to all kinds of literature. But it takes time; you can't do it all in 40 minutes to do it effectively. You have to give the kids time to think, to process, to get up and say, "Oh Mrs. Duff, remember that book? Go get the book and show me." But leave it to administration to decide how we should teach reading. It's "NO! Get through the book, move on to the next lesson, do not linger. Follow your schedule, and make sure that they come out as critical readers." (Izzie)

They need to be critical readers so that we can close the achievement gap. We're given the book cover. There's no meat in our book; there are no pages in the book, only the cover. We don't have a vision that we would find in the book. We don't have a curriculum that we would find in the book. We don't have materials that we would find in the book, unless you are the teacher who is willing to go seek them out and buy them. But that's not effective teaching. It's just not effective because you're depending on someone to do the job without the tools. You wouldn't expect people on an assembly line to put together the car without that rivet gun. I'm becoming more and more distressed with ever-increasing amounts of data. Yes, it informs instruction, when you have time to instruct, and when you have time to reflect on your teaching to instruct more efficiently and effectively. (Izzie)

We have 18, 19, 20 students and we're alone. There is a limit to what you can do. You have diversity in academic levels, even in social skills, and then to expect that it's just going to happen because you have the almighty standard, it doesn't work! There isn't anything in the standards that addresses a child's ability as a learner. The administration does not want to hear it. They don't want to know that, some students aren't going to meet the benchmarks. (Izzie)

*School administrators, policy makers, parents, and teachers are all responsible*

*for the success and failure of schools and children. All of these stakeholders are*

*responsible for the disparities and opportunities that exist in schools; it is not the sole*

*responsibility of teachers. When asked what suggestions teachers have for parents in*

*working with their children at home, given the limitations that some families face, the*

*teachers suggest that the best way for parents to help their children to succeed and*

*develop into proficient readers is to read with them. They posit that the first thing parents*

*can do is read with their children.*

> That's 98% of what I would suggest. And when they're done with that, they should READ with their child, and READ more with their child, and they should discuss what was read. The parent may have limited English ability, but this is where the child can be the teacher, can read to them from a book. The parent is listening and watching when they read, the child can explain, summarize, recap what has happened. I think if parents did only that, we'd see scores on tests increase radically. And I don't mean do it only until they get to fourth grade. It should start when the child is young and keep on going to be lifelong readers. This is something that can happen even if you're a working mom and dad. (Colbert)

> Secondly, just have quiet time; quiet time for them to play, and use some of those other sensory skills, quiet time for them to take some books and read, quiet time for them to write. I think that cutting off the television, the computer, and video games is crucial because what I see in the classroom is that as a whole, it's getting harder and harder for kids to be able to sustain listening to a story or to sustain reading for a period of time. I think the electronics have a lot to do with it, so that would be one thing that would help. (Meredith)

> The third thing is, go to the library and get books on tape. Going to the library and even spending some time there just reading so that you're creating an atmosphere for reading. You're creating it even if you're not able to sit down and read it with them. You can sit down and have your own book and read with them or just listen to them read. Read books that are in Spanish, if you're a Spanish speaker. There's nothing to say that you can't, or that reading is only limited to English. It's harder to do when you don't have a lot of time, but if you rely on other parents to help you pick up your children and all of that, maybe you and that parent can have a conversation to create a little quiet book time and things like that. So, just creating the atmosphere is really important, and that can be done with very little money. (collective voice)

> A fourth thing that can be done is when friends and family members give gifts, suggest that those gifts be books. I try to give books as gifts myself. It doesn't cost a thing to converse and discuss things with your child. Oral language skills are important; and so are listening skills; you know, listen to them. (Antoinette)

> *Some teachers recognize that some families have limitations that make it more*

*difficult for them to help their children at home. Some families work at two or three jobs.*

*Some families work the night shift and are not there when their children get home. Some*

*families do not speak English, or a parent may have trouble reading. However busy*

*parents are, some adult in the child's life need to be doing that. If not the parent, then it can be the grandmother whose house they go to, or the aunt. Families need to take that responsibility to ensure the child's success. Peters and Mullis (1997) report, "When a variety of reading materials are available in the home, student scores increased by more than four points, schooling increased by more than one third of a year, wages increased by 4%, and labor market experience for women increased by 0.2 years" (as cited in Lacour & Tissington, 2011, p. 525).*

*Children are dream makers who dare to dream the world with no hesitation. It is up to the adults to be the keepers of their dreams, challenge them, respect, and honor them. Parents of these dream makers need to work with their children at home, or even while they are driving or in the laundromat. Parents who lack the skills and knowledge to work with the child at home can take time to talk with the child and listen to the child read. Children need to be outfitted to be scholars in the same way that they are outfitted to be great soccer or football players. They need love and scholarly materials to continue to grow and dream so all can celebrate the learning that takes place in the classroom.*

**Partnerships With Families**

*The gap between home and school culture needs to be addressed by the district and included in their initiative to improve reading instruction. The teachers recognize the limitations on a parent's ability to support the child at home and to help the child to become a good reader. Partnerships need to be created among various community organizations, other than the schools that the children attend, to create and implement effective programs for helping parents to become and remain involved in the educational lives of their children. Too often, parents stop being involved once their children reach a*

*certain level of independence or what they may deem to be competence, usually about the*

*fourth grade. It is important for parents to realize that their children still need them and*

*that they cannot and should not leave the educational well-being of their children to*

*strangers, people who are molding and shaping the minds of their children and their*

*sense of self, at times to their detriment. However old or tall or big the children may be,*

*parents need to realize the importance of their involvement throughout the educational*

*career of their children.*

> Literacy starts from infancy. When you sit with a child in your lap and hold a book, then you read and read and read, and you're building a love of reading very early on. But don't stop there! It's never been more important for our students to be successful. The demands of this society, this global economy, are really survival of the fittest. To have our children succeed, they need to be more skilled than ever before. So please spend the time with them. It can be as simple as sitting and sharing a book at night. It can be as simple as taking them on a walk in the park, and talking your head off. Talk about what you observe, what you hear, things that you wonder about. Talk to develop their vocabulary and stimulate their mind. (Claudette)

*Some teachers express the urgency of engaging parents in the work of their*

*children as follows:*

> This is something that I really feel strongly about and wish was part of our Oakwood philosophy: parent engagement in the work of the children. I'm not talking about PTO, where you're just doing bake sales or whatever, but getting parents in the school to see the work of the kids. I think. They don't know. Maybe they don't have the language, but they can have the joy. (Sharon)

> We have to take the responsibility to put the books in their hands. I know a lot of my students' parents work at night, and they're home with Grandma. Grandma's not reading to them because Grandma's doing what Grandma wants to do. It's not really for her to sit and teach the kids how to read. But I think if we give them the books we know are right for them and we put a sticky on it saying, "Please help your child read this," then they may be more likely to read with their child at home. When we're dealing with some cultures that are going to accept that the teacher tells you to do this, do it! That might help bridge between what the parents think they should be doing and what we know they should be doing. That is something we *can* do. (Annette)

Sometimes even after we've taken the responsibility of sending home books to be read, parents often disagree with us about what their child should be reading. They often do not understand what it takes to become an independent reader who can think critically. Some parents often think otherwise, that their child needs to read books based on their grade level and age. This is so common, they often say, "I want my child to read challenging books because if my child is reading challenging books, he or she will really improve and really become a good reader." I think this is one of the areas where we're constantly hitting a brick wall because we're saying, "No, no, no, no, that's not what we understand, those of us who are studying reading, that's not going to make it." (Claudette)

*Many teachers seek ways to help parents facilitate learning at home, and I agree*

*with them. I provide my students with a book baggie that travels back and forth between*

*home and school. In doing so, I am communicating to them and their families the*

*importance of reading. I am also communicating to families that reading takes place at*

*home, as well as in school.*

*Another way that I build a connection between literacy at home and in school is*

*by having a daily reading log that a family member signs to indicate that the child read*

*at home for 30 minutes. It can be disheartening when a student returns the reading log*

*and no one has signed it. It makes me wonder whether they are reading at home. Is*

*someone paying attention? When I notice that the reading log is not signed, the first thing*

*I do is give the family a gentle reminder. I highlight the section of the reading log that*

*states, "Please make sure that your child reads at home and discusses their reading with*

*you every day for at least 30 minutes. The only way that your child will become a better*

*reader is by reading. Please continue to take some time to talk to your child about what*

*they are reading." If the log continues to come back unsigned, then I call home to follow*

*up. Usually, those two intervention methods are successful and I discover that the child*

*did read but a family member did not get around to signing the log. This is a habit and*

*discipline that may be new to the families, and for many of them it may be a first,*

*something that they are being introduced to rather than continuing from the previous*

*school year.*

**Rethinking the Teaching of Reading**

*The teachers discuss the role that the district's ethnic and racial transformation*

*plays in how they approach the teaching of reading. The experiences that children bring*

*to school demand that teachers rethink their approach to teaching reading to meet the*

*needs of their diverse student population.*

> We have more children today whose parents were born in another country, and they're speaking another language at home. This vastly affects their background knowledge. The heavy cultural experiences completely change what they come to the table with as far as getting ready for reading. It's very different. Cultural and ethnic diversity should be respected, appreciated, and celebrated as our world continues to become a melting pot of cultures. We have this dilemma, where the children come to school and they don't have experiences. We have to give them experiences, like taking them on field trips, engaging in conversation with them about their home life, preparing meals from scratch in the classroom, or using the school grounds as an outdoor learning center. (collective voice)

> Language is very complex. When you have an influx of children who don't speak English, it becomes even more compounded because academic language is difficult at best. At the same time, we're being expected to get children to read, write, and be ready for the next grade. The reading and the writing, it comes very naturally to some of the children, but it doesn't come naturally to all. It's not just the ELL population. It's also a lot of the children who are born here. We have varying degrees of familiarity with language and with books. (Izzie)

> It's completely a different world. We can't go back to where we were. You have to think about where we are in history; things are changing. It's changed. Students have to know so much more information now and there's so much going on in the world. So we do have to evolve. Education must advance because we are constantly changing and growing as a culture and a society, in the world and technology. We do have to do things like you were saying, where you put things on a screen or whatever. We have to evolve, too, and sometimes we dig our heels in because we know it felt gooooood. We know what we enjoyed doing and what we individually like to do. It's hard for us to make that shift to move forward. (Claudette)

*It is often difficult for teachers, or individuals for that matter, to embrace change*

*and let go of the familiar. However, some teachers are realizing that they can no longer*

*hold on to the crutch of comfort and familiarity. It is becoming imperative to children's*

*success and the management of classrooms to adapt and our shift focus and ways of*

*thinking about teaching, and learning to meet the educational needs of students. It is no*

*longer acceptable to say, "I've been doing it this way for too long" or "I've invested too*

*many years into this to give it up." In clinging to the past, we are failing to convey to*

*students and their families that learning is dynamic, respected, and valued. We need to*

*purge outdated materials from classrooms that no longer meet the needs of today's*

*student population. While there is value in old materials and many "tricks of the trade"*

*can and perhaps need to remain, educators need to find a balance between old ways of*

*teaching and new ways of responding to the needs of the current student population.*

**Breaking the Reading Code**

*My colleagues and I believe in immersing children in literature and engaging in*

*conversation with them. We believe that the more they read, the more they grow as*

*readers. The more conversations we have with students, the richer their vocabulary will*

*be, which is why my students are constantly reading. I read aloud to them daily to model*

*what reading needs to sound like. I model what readers do while they're reading, how to*

*think, react, and ask questions while they are reading. My students often say that, when I*

*read to them, it sounds like the characters are the ones talking, and it sounds cool! I*

*intentionally bring the text to life, whether fiction or nonfiction, to gain their attention*

*and engage them in the material. I often use poetry, songs, and plays as text to meet the*

*various learning styles of my students.*

*They are reading a variety of materials by a variety of authors. They are reading*

*fiction and nonfiction on a daily basis. My daily reading workshop lasts about 1.5 hours.*

*The reading workshop begins with a mini lesson wherein a particular skill or strategy is presented and discussed. After the mini lesson I send them off to find a nice quiet, cozy spot to read independently for at least 30 minutes every day. Students build fluency and stamina by reading books that are at their level, not by going to a center and working on activities. Therefore, each student in my learning environment has a personal book baggie from which they read. I confer with them and we discuss what they are reading, thoughts they have, and questions they need help in answering while they are reading. We are actively engaged in the book, whether I am conferring with them or they are meeting with a reading buddy or group.*

*Once I have assessed and determined a student's independent reading level, I help the student select four books from the leveled section of the classroom library to place in the book baggie: (a) one "easy" book, a nice breather that they can get through with no problems—they know all the words, and there's no frustration; (b) two "just right" books at their level, in which they know most of the words and understand most of what is happening, even though they might need help with some words but for the most part can read easily on their own; and (c) a challenging book that will help them to move to the next level. This last book reminds them that there's more to learn, that they can grow into being a better reader. They know some of the words and understand most of the text but need guidance from me to develop strategies to improve their skills as a reader while reading that challenging book.*

*In addition to the change in demographics and parental involvement, participants talk about their philosophy of teaching reading, what they believe works, and what their students need to develop the skills they need to be fluent readers.*

Reading to me is breaking a code. The symbols say something, yes, but then embedded in each one of the words are meaning and understanding—meaning that is implicitly and explicitly stated in the words, in the symbols. I believe that the teaching of reading is one of the great mysteries of life because it incorporates so many things. My feeling has always been that, even before children see the printed word, they talk your head off. Have them hear the language. Have them *sing* the language. Give them all kinds of experiences, and as you provide the experiences, use the words that go with the experience. Help them to learn words that help them to express themselves and what they see and hear and experience in the world around them, and then what those symbols are has more meaning to them because there is lots of background knowledge and lots of experience to support their being able to break that code and get the meaning. (Mia)

*Some of the teachers use the language experience approach to help readers to*

*learn the codes and symbols of reading.*

It begins by having a shared experience as a class, talking about that experience, taking time to think about the experience, helping them to remember what they did. Then you use the language experience chart, and write their words. "What did you see yesterday?" You write those words, and then you show how what they said was now represented in text, in words on the page. Then together you and the class reread the words, pointing them out, looking for the features of each word, beginning sounds, ending sounds, vowel sounds, all those different kinds of things. A lot of words become sight words kind of quickly because there are meanings and because the kids have used the words. They have talked the words. They have seen the words with their names on them, so they have great meaning to them. Really just taking that type of approach and using more approaches like this, when you present a book with these same words in it, and ask, "Do you see some words that you remember from before?" then they know them. The words become *their* words. (Sharon)

I've always believed that reading is an eclectic approach, that you have to use anything and everything because no one program ever completely does the job for all children. Luckily for me, having a very long career and 37 years of teaching experience, I think I have seen and done almost every program that there is. First of all, I've really tried to use my own philosophy of what the teaching of reading means and then secondly trying to pull from a smorgasbord, just trying to pull whatever strategies I think will help move kids toward mastery of those needed skills. (Mia)

*In response to a question about the philosophy of teaching reading and what they*

*believe works in developing great readers, teachers speak to the need to confer with*

*children while they are reading in order to push them forward, set goals with them, and*

*monitor where they are as readers, thereby teaching them along the way. Teachers also*

*note ways that technology influences how they approach the teaching of reading in their*

*classrooms, because they are finding that children today lack the stamina to maintain*

*attention while they are reading. In addition, the teachers believe that one of the most*

*important ways to get children to read is to expose them to language through*

*conversation. They describe the teaching of reading as*

> a way to get you to think and open up your world. It's a way to connect to ideas not necessarily your own but to the world. It's a way to connect to other people. You get to learn about different things, expose yourself to different ideas and gain experiences that you might not have otherwise, and explore a way of finding information you need. We have to express how much we enjoy reading through everything that we do that actually will then manifest in the kids. (Jacqueline)

> We know that, from the early level, they need a structure. They need to be taught the basics, which I don't know we're doing as well as we used to. They need to know how to break words apart. They need to know how to "chunk" words. We don't have a lot of that anymore. I think that we oftentimes skip over the whole idea of the phonemic awareness piece. Because a child comes in and they know 20 words, we think that we don't have to understand if they understand rhyming, or can hear how many syllables there are. But later on that's going to translate into "a syllable usually has a vowel, and that's going to help me when I'm reading, it's going to help me when I'm writing." (Beatrice)

> We've travelled so far away from foundational pieces that sometimes we get to the point where we have children who are reading at transitional levels, and they fall apart. When they get to Grade 3 and Grade 4, that's when reading becomes reading to really learn. Up until that point many of them have just been reading for reading, which has a point, which has a premise, but reading is so much more. (collective voice)

> *Phonics* had become a dirty word. Now we're starting to see it come back, but I kind of feel like it is so late for some of these kids. When we had our first-grade initiative those many years ago, we were told not to worry about comprehension, just teach them how to read the words. Then they could read till the cows came home, but they had no earthly idea what they were reading. You asked a question and they were like, "Huh?" We found out 4 years later on the test scores they could not comprehend anything, but they were able to tell you what the words were, identify words and stuff like that, but no meaning whatsoever. They can read the words, but then when you want to have that discussion, it's really hard. They really need a lot of modeling on how you approach a book, how you attack words, how you take apart a book and how you think behind the book. (Beatrice)

The way kids are so wired today because of technology, no matter their socioeconomic level, they really have to be engaged with the book, with books. You have to select texts that really match the readers, not only their levels, but [also] their interests, or you just can't keep them because their attention doesn't stay. We're still a very "me, me, me, me" world. They want something that they can connect to, whether the book is about them or someone like them—that's important. Even if it's historical, they need some way, some thing, to bring it back to them. (Meredith)

Through our assessments and our analysis of where our students are, they have to read a lot, a lot, a lot! Each teacher has an enormous responsibility to understand the development of students and their uniqueness, content, and the learning process. A teacher must possess an extensive knowledge and repertoire of skills and strategies to reach every learner, as well as a firm grasp of standards, research, purposeful planning, and personal communication skills. The power of reflection enables an educator to objectively and critically examine the curriculum and its purposes, as well as students' needs and strengths, all in a diverse community that meets the needs of individual students. (Claudette)

Immersing them in literature, in language, in activities that encourage dialogue is crucial. A lot of it is not written; a lot of it is verbal and aural. When you ask, how you get them to do what you want them to do, it's a lot of practice. It's trying to integrate the frivolities—so we might be looking at something on the computer and then talking about it, stopping and discussing, "What did you see? What did you think? How did you feel about that? What do you understand? Can you write it? Can you draw it?" (Izzie)

*Many of the teachers emphasize the use of the language experience approach to teaching reading and making it meaningful for their students. Through the use of the language experience approach, some of the teachers believe the following:*

Students can have the power that their lives are interesting and that their small details, their personal narratives, their small moments are really something that somebody else wants to read and finds interesting; that is what gets them. If they can write their experiences, if they can write about that, write a book and do an author's party, and show that they're an author, that's what makes them interested in reading and writing. (Sharon)

*Scholars such as Lisa Delpit criticize the language experience approach to teaching reading for not addressing the needs of African American students, much in the same way that they criticize the Whole Language approach. Delpit (1997) argues that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds benefit more from the phonics approach*

*because their experiences at home are not comparable to those of middle-class White*

*children. Delpit further argues that "children who do not come to school with knowledge*

*about letters, sounds, and symbols need to experience explicit instruction in these areas*

*in order to become independent readers" (p. 4).*

*Many teachers say that there is a need for both phonics and language experience*

*in teaching this student population. They believe that there is not a one-size-fits-all*

*approach to teaching reading. They have to be flexible and willing to provide children*

*with the tools that they need to succeed as readers. Teachers view providing children*

*with experiences as part of their pedagogy, not as an obstacle that cannot be managed in*

*school. Although they prefer parents to be the ones who primarily provide their children*

*with such experiences as engaging in conversation, going to museums, parks, zoos, and*

*exploring the backyard, this does not diminish their commitment to providing children*

*with the educational experiences that they need to formulate background knowledge and*

*actively engage in a particular lesson.*

*Some teachers even advocate against the use of the one-size-fits-all approach to*

*learning how to read.*

> I'm looking for ways to make it more fun. To bring it back to the way it used to be when it was just natural, when it was developmental. Not all kids will get it here at this grade level. It may take some children more time. I think the whole sense of reading being developmental has been lost. To say that when a child is this age, they should be here at this level, it's really not true, it's just not true. Some people have made decisions when a child is in fourth grade that they should be here at this level. They might not always be there. We should not lower our expectations, but we do need to be more flexible and aware of what is developmentally reasonable for our readers. (Bernadette)

*Oakwood teachers seem to be on common ground in their beliefs about using the*

*components of a Balanced Literacy approach. As part of the Balanced Literacy*

*approach, teachers make use of shared reading, guided reading, interactive reading,*

*phonics, and conferences. Through these approaches children are explicitly taught to make sense of words, decode words, learn word patterns, make predictions, and to ask questions before they start reading, while they are reading, and when they are finished reading. They are taught to make connections and use the text to confirm or disprove thoughts that they have about what they are reading. They are being taught to make meaning out of the material that they are reading, to share their thoughts and write about them. One teacher says she has*

> a holistic view of reading and believe there needs to be a balance between looking at yourself, looking at the phonetic-based philosophy of reading and also taking what's great about just looking at reading from a holistic viewpoint. My goal always is to develop lifelong readers. For some children the approach of looking at books as a whole is so key. That's what's going to grab them. And then for other children, it is really looking at what their weaknesses are, looking at words, and looking at how we're breaking words up and down. Having a little bit of both is important. Also teaching the strategies is key, as well, because it just helps them understand reading and enjoy it even more. My philosophy ultimately is to develop lifelong readers, and whatever tools they need to use in order to get to that goal by the end of the year—that's what I do. (Antoinette)

**The Importance of Honoring the Children**

*Some teachers talk about not only the need to meet children where they are but also the need to infuse literacy into the other subject areas, such as social studies and science, because it fascinates students. Children spend a lot of time looking at the world around them and trying to figure out what is happening and why things are happening. Their world is all about words; it is all about language.*

*Many of the teachers emphasize the need to show interest in students' work in order to empower them and motivate them to do more and better. They say they teachers need to nourish children's interests and validate their experiences as individuals and learners. Keeping diversity in mind, the teachers note that teachers need to spend time choosing books that will gain students' attention and meet their needs as individuals.*

Being a culturally responsible teacher actually helps children from all backgrounds because then you are always thinking about where they're coming from. You're trying to build their self-esteem and their pride in who they are, and you're trying to expose them to other cultures. If you're not culturally sensitive, you'll probably limit yourself to just thinking one way, and your approach is one way. (Antoinette)

It's important to have books that relate to children. They should see children that look like themselves in books, whenever possible books about their homeland, books about their interests. I mean, kids are kids all around the world, and kids in all different countries like animals, kids like sports, things like that. It's kind of a universal thing, I've really tried to have books in my classroom library that match the backgrounds, the interests, the traditions, and the cultures that are represented in our district. When we haven't had books, published books, we've written our own books. We've asked the students, "Tell me how your family celebrates this holiday," and we've written it down and then say, "Look everybody, we have a new book by one of our own authors!" (Sharon)

I try to make sure that my personal library and the books I buy are culturally diverse. I make sure the kids are seeing more kids who look like them. It's not always easy to do with your own money, but we need to expose them to different genres, as well as different cultures. I've been trying to get what boys like or what girls like. I've been trying to bring in some more from my own house because my boys have read them and no longer need them. I try to get the kids to borrow books from the classroom when I bring them in; this way, they take home books to read that are of interest to them. (Jacqueline)

The kids need to feel valued. They shouldn't feel that their culture is not important or that I don't understand them in some sort of way or think "you look at me with your eyebrows raised because I might have used a certain slang." Although I guess I don't think I do it wrong, but I guess it's just, when they come and speak a certain way, I say it's incorrect. They probably say it is slang. They say things like, "We was going to the store." I'm like, "No, it's 'we were.'" I know that some people probably say to me, "No, no, no," but to me it's that you're speaking incorrectly. So it's my job as your teacher to model the proper way to speak. (Avril)

That's a never-ending debate. There's a proper way to speak. When you go to a job interview and you speak that way, you're not getting that job. Kids need to know when it's appropriate and when it's not appropriate. I'm not saying, "Don't do it," but "Don't do it *here*." I think that's changed, too, because I've lived in New York City and I remember that it was really important for them to teach you how to speak, especially by the time you got to high school. They even taught you how you should carry yourself, read a newspaper, how you should do certain things, and your slang wasn't embraced. And now, there was a problem because there were people in charge who tried to make the kids feel like they were stupid for speaking that way. That was wrong. But it still is important. They go to get a

job, and if they speak a slang way, they're not going to get the job. They could be the most intelligent person. They need to know that, so we still have to model those things for them and just be aware that we're not putting them down. Find that balance. (Jacqueline)

*Wheeler (2008) writes that, when teachers put away the red pen and provide explicit structured instruction in code switching, they can help students to use language more effectively. Research documents a correlation between lower academic achievement and teachers' negative attitudes toward students who speak a particular dialect that is not considered a standard form of English (Wheeler, 2008). Delpit (1997) reports that, by the ages of 8 or 9, children are aware of their group membership and its importance to their well-being. This realization becomes reflected in the language that they use at school. Delpit posits that the dialect that children use at school should be recognized as a form of language that is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity. Similarly, Wheeler (2008) argues that a linguistically informed teacher understands that the grammar patterns of a child's community are not errors, but rather a way of speaking that is familiar to the child.*

*As I reread statements that my colleagues make and my reflections through the lens of CRT, I can see that there are different ways to speak, and teachers are struggling with this issue. As a parent, as an older sibling, I struggle with this within my family. For instance, I recall role playing with my little brother Alexander when he turned 16 and was getting ready for a job interview. As we role play, I say to him "OK, give me your best White boy voice," knowing that this is the recognized and valued way of speaking in this society. I need to make sure that he knows how to switch back and forth from the way he addresses his friends while hanging out and what is expected at the workplace. Satisfied with his response and tone of voice, I say, "OK, you're good to go."*

*The ability to code-switch works both ways; not only can you speak the language of the workplace, the college classroom, and certain social arenas, but can you speak the language of your "hood," your neighborhood, the city, the street where you grew up. As college-educated individuals from the African American community, immigrant community, in my family, we often check each other to see if African American vernacular English (AAVE) is still part of our language repertoire. Although we role play and check one another, neither of us are left feeling as if AAVE is improper or that we have to pretend to be someone other than ourselves. We understand what is expected of us when we enter the workplace and certain social settings.*

*My 5-year-old recognizes the difference between the two. Last summer, as we are driving through the streets of downtown Elizabeth, the back windows of the car are down. As we are driving past a couple engaging in conversation, my daughter asks, "Mommy, what language are they speaking?" Unfortunately because their AAVE conversation is partially filled with MF this and MF that; N this and N that, instantly, without thinking, I reply "hood!" My dear innocent child whom her mommy makes a point of traveling with often, exposing her to various cultures and languages, then says "Can we visit there?" And again, without thinking, I say, "No honey, we ain't ever goin to the hood!"*

*Even as I reflect on these moments, there is an internal conflict taking place in my mind about which words to use and how to phrase them. Do I use AAVE or conventional academic language that is expected of someone writing a dissertation? My response to my daughter was in AAVE. I know many professionals, PhDs, MDs, whose AAVE conversations include those very same words that the couple used, but because they have a degree, they are not perceived as "hood" but as respectable academics who can code-*

*switch. Reflecting on these moments, I also see that the participants of this study use words that are code for race when speaking of their experiences: words like "urban, migrant, immigrant, these people, culture, parental involvement, poverty, diverse student population, budget cuts, Title 1 funding, free, reduced lunch, test scores, remediation, basic skills." They are all code words that are primarily associated with children of color and school districts that are primarily populated with children of color.*

*CRT scholars urge the development of schools that value all children, recognize and acknowledge the strengths that the cultural backgrounds of these children contribute to their classroom experience. Yosso (2005) writes that CRT "refutes dominant ideology and White privilege while validating and focusing on the experiences of people of color" (p. 69). Likewise, proponents of AAVE argue that the form of American English that is taught in schools is viewed as "prestigious" and one that conforms to grammatical structure, idiomatic usage, and pronunciation (Ball & Farr, 2003; Delpit, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Meanwhile, other forms of English, such as AAVE or Spanglish, which do not conform to these general characteristics, are regarded as low-status or non-standard forms of English. Along the same vein, Ladson-Billings (2001) argues that*

> the clash between school culture and home culture becomes evident in judgments and labels that teachers place on students with non-mainstream speech and styles of discourse and through teacher's use of instructional practices and classroom management strategies that are at odds with community norms. (p. 167)

*Ball and Farr (2003) write that within each community exists a variety of languages that can vary from one cultural group to another. They advocate for teachers to practice "ethnosensitivity" when teaching and assessing the literacy skills of students. They argue for teachers to place an emphasis on understanding and building on the cultural values of diverse student populations rather than view a child's way of speaking*

*as wrong or needing to be corrected. They posit that, when attitudes concerning the rich*

*linguistic resources that children bring with them from home and their communities are*

*aligned, these language varieties will no longer be viewed as low status.*

*It is evident that Oakwood teachers are aware of the student demographic change*

*in the district and concerned about the needs of their students. Some teachers recognize*

*and understand the importance of providing their students with access to the politically*

*popular dialect form and what it means to their economic success (Delpit, 1997). Some*

*teachers report going to the library and seeking outside resources that they typically do*

*not have within the school. They listen and seek to remain aware of what their students*

*are involved in and make conscious attempts to make the children feel valued. They speak*

*of the need for additional professional development training to strengthen their*

*knowledge and understanding of the various cultural backgrounds represented in*

*Oakwood's student population.*

*On the other hand, some teachers believe that it is not important for teachers to*

*be culturally responsive and find it to be unrealistic to expect teachers to incorporate*

*their students' cultures into their practices.*

> I don't think it's realistic to expect that we can tailor our reading program to match the home culture of the student, nor do I think that would be advisable. Really, there is an assimilation world that's going on, and as much as that is the "A" word to some educators, I actually think that it's an important thing. We want to make people successful in the culture that they've chosen to live in, and I think that they may need to learn more about that culture in order to be successful in it. I wouldn't shy away from working with what some might consider to be traditional, and to be honest with you, I really don't see color in my classroom. I just see children. So there's no need for me to go out of my way to incorporate their culture in my teaching. (Colbert)

*It is important for teachers to recognize that a shift is taking place in the way that*

*immigrants perceive and respond to their migration. Over the past several decades the*

*choice is not whether to assimilate into American culture or be lumped into a "melting*

*pot," but rather how they, as immigrants, will actively navigate between their host*

*country and their homeland. Also, there are negative connotations associated with the*

*terms assimilation and melting pot. Assimilation implies that one is giving up something*

*in order to become a part of a new environment and home. To assimilate implies that*

*one's current culture is inadequate and needs to be replaced. It also implies that one has*

*to forgo loyalty and allegiance to one's country of birth. Melting pot implies that every*

*group inside the "pot" is equal, when in fact there are varying degrees of political*

*power, educational experiences, socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities, religious views, and*

*cultural heritages to be considered when referring to individuals or a group.*

*Many immigrants do not willingly embrace the pressure to assimilate, to become*

*an American, for they do not want to give up their culture. Levitt (2001) argues that many*

*Americans expect migrants to sever their ties to their homeland as they become*

*assimilated into American culture, assuming that migrants will eventually transfer their*

*loyalty and community membership from their homeland to their host country. However,*

*she states that an increasing number of migrants continue to participate in the political,*

*social, and economic affairs of their native country even as they are incorporated into*

*their host societies. Instead of loosening their connections and trading one membership*

*for another, some individuals are keeping feet in both worlds (Levitt, 2001).*

*Similarly, Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters (2008) report that today's immigrant*

*children and their parents remain active in social networks that make it possible for them*

*to live and attend school in more than one society at a time, perhaps never fully*

*committing to either. Some families engage in online home-schooling activities so their*

*children can learn about their native country or even obtain a high school degree in their native language (Kasinitz et al., 2008). Children of immigrants are raised in households where they live in thick, dense, cross-border field relationships that encompass people, goods, places, and values that are from around the world so that their lives are profoundly influenced by forces thousands of miles away (Levitt, 2001).*

*Some of the statements made by the teachers reveal that children of color face the possibility of feeling alienated and pressured to conform, rather than embrace their cultural differences. Teachers do a disservice to students when they deny the students' culture and the reality of their experiences at home by insisting that they assimilate or become part of the "melting pot," or when they profess to be color blind. Teachers who fail to incorporate the culture of their students into the curriculum and profess to be color blind and lump people of color into one category are reproducing a hierarchy in which White culture dominates over other cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2003). This view of color blindness also influences a teacher's expectations and assumptions about home.*

*Ladson-Billings (2009) states that these reluctant attempts by teachers and administrators to acknowledge racial differences or grapple with these differences "mask a dysconscious racism, an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p. 35). Teachers may not be conscious of their assumptions and racist practices, but racism (whether or not color blind) will manifest in attitudes and daily interactions with students. Ladson-Billings encourages teachers and administrators to engage in culturally responsive teaching practices in an effort to help students to achieve academic success and to develop and maintain pride in their cultural heritage*

*I, too, believe in the importance of being a culturally responsive teacher. I also believe that, if teachers insist that their students sever their ties to their native country and do not find ways to incorporate the students' culture into the reading curriculum, they are creating an environment in which the children become invisible. Moreover, when teachers profess that they do not see color, as some CRT scholars argue, they are erasing the racial and ethnic identity of their students, as well as the contributions that they make as individuals and members of their race. Lewis (2008) writes that this kind of color-blind ideology is detrimental in various ways and that teachers in their practices, everyday beliefs, attitudes, and understandings, indicate that race does matter at school.*

*I contend that a Balanced Literacy approach facilitated by a culturally responsive teacher best meets the needs of an increasingly growing diverse student population. Teachers and administrators need to take the developmental needs of the individual child into consideration rather than opt for a one-size-fits-all approach. Teachers need to meet children where they are and provide developmentally appropriate instruction to help them to become fluent, independent, critical, lifelong readers.*

*Similarly, as part of the reading instruction, teachers need to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students. Teachers need to be aware of their own cultural backgrounds and use them as resources to connect with students and help them to excel as readers (Gunderson, 2011; Routman, 2003). It is also important for district administrators to be aware of the ways in which a teacher's pedagogy influences the lives of the children whom they are responsible to teach. District administrators need to take culture into consideration and make appropriate professional development opportunities available for teachers to gain a better understanding of their students' cultural heritage.*

*When teachers take responsibility for their students' achievement, take the time to get to know their students' cultural backgrounds, and draw on knowledge of their students' cultures to help them to develop critical thinking skills, the students may experience a higher degree of academic success and develop cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lazar, 2011). Like Lazar, I believe that being a culturally responsive teacher is a mindset that grounds one's teaching. There are no short cuts. It takes commitment and hard work to plan and implement a curriculum that is culturally responsive. According to Lazar (2011), culturally responsive teaching is "a set of working and flexible practices, and a way of being, doing, and thinking. It is not just what we do and how we do it, but why we do it. It is highly individual, informed by one's own social realities and school circumstances" (p. 8).*

*Au (2010) writes that the purpose of culturally responsive teaching is "to improve students' opportunities for academic success by letting their existing strengths and interests serve as a bridge to the new learning offered by the school" (p. 1). Similarly, Gay (2004) defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 1). By embracing a student's culture, school personnel may avoid a tendency to blame students and their families for poor performance in school and lack of parental involvement. Acknowledging a cultural perspective in a classroom also improves the academic achievement of students who are ethnically, racially, linguistically, and economically diverse because it recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references and the ways in which they perceive information*

*through their own experiential and cultural filters (Au, 2009; Gay, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Schmidt & Lazar, 2011).*

*Being a culturally responsive reflective literacy teacher comes naturally to some, but others need to work consciously to incorporate it in their daily planning and the delivery of their literacy lessons. Still others may not believe that being or becoming a culturally responsive reflective literacy teacher is a crucial way of thinking and practicing to influence the learning outcome of their students. Students need teachers who are not only gifted in the art of teaching literacy but also able to recognize their students' potential, have high expectations, and nurture the children in ways that enable them to become lifelong critical thinkers and readers. The goal is to prepare children to be fluent, independent readers who can think critically, but ultimately we are creating memories and contributing to a child's sense of self. That experience needs to be one in which the child leaves the learning environment feeling that he or she matters and is not invisible.*

**The Need for Cohesiveness and a Reading Curriculum**

*While most teachers have a clear philosophy for teaching reading, the philosophy of the Oakwood Public School District is not as transparent to the teachers. Teachers echo agreement with each other and note that the materials are in pieces, "in a binder somewhere." They also report that the Oakwood Public School District does not have a common philosophy nor a curriculum for teaching reading. They say that the administrators are not on common ground and that the teachers are receiving mixed messages from administrators in the Central Office and from their building principals.*

*This lack of common philosophy and reading curriculum is problematic for the teachers*

*and hinders student progress.*

> When you really think about it, we don't really have a philosophy. We have programs. We have this program and that program, but where's the meat of it? Where's the philosophy? The administration and supervisors, I don't think they understand what their goal and their mission are. It's just, did we meet the standards or not? There's a benchmark—did we reach it? They're not really telling us how to reach it. They're just saying, "This is what we need to do." (collective voice)

> If everybody isn't on board with a common philosophy, how can you as a district move the students forward in a cohesive way? It's impossible. Schools should have a vision and mission that reflects the goals of teachers and parents. Since it takes a village to raise a child, I believe it is the school's responsibility to foster a sense of common goals among all stakeholders—students, teachers, parents, and the community. So, hopefully, as things move along we might get a philosophy, and maybe if we have a real core philosophy, perhaps we need to look at the way we're teaching reading as opposed to looking at how each specific teacher is teaching reading and figure out what we can do differently so that our students are reading. (Claudette)

> *The teachers attribute the lack of district philosophy partially to inconsistency in*

*vision and a high turnover rate of literacy supervisors. They report that, with each new*

*supervisor, there is a shift in beliefs and practices. In addition to the high turnover rate of*

*literacy supervisors, the teachers say that a principal's lack of knowledge and*

*understanding of how to teach reading is part of the reason the district schools do not*

*have a cohesive philosophy for teaching reading.*

> I've been here 14 years now. We've had six literacy supervisors and six math supervisors. So anything that had been implemented, any small little training that we received, is done away with. (Beatrice)

> There hasn't been a continuous line of thought. The focus will be on this for a while, as Anna Berry said, this is the district that has never gone to the fifth year of five-year plans. That is so true. We try. We set it all up. It's all there, but we're always walking around looking at something else. A lot of it has to do with the high turnover of administrators in Central Office. People have a vision, and then they kind of realize that it's not going to work as they'd hoped it would, and then they quietly look for another job somewhere else. That's been awful. We had a bunch of people who had a lot of promise in here for a while, a lot of promise, but

they didn't see the whole thing as moving in the direction they wanted. I don't know if maybe the Superintendents weren't supporting them in the direction they saw that they needed to go in, so they left. (Colbert)

We have such a diverse group of principals, and each principal comes with a different set of understandings and knowledge base. There's too much autonomy within each school. So when there is mismanagement or misdirection, there's a lot of disjointed nonsense going on. The training of principals is also a major problem. I want to know, "Where did you go to school, and what did you study?" because if you don't understand how to teach reading, you have no business being a principal. You should not be an elementary school teacher or principal. (Claudette)

*In light of their frustration with high turnover rates and policy implementations,*

*the teachers recognize the limitations of district administrators.*

Our administrators are overwhelmed because they're dealing with Pre-K to 12. Before they broke it up, K–5 and 6–12; then all of the sudden it was just up to one person to do it all, all that, but how? How? (collective voice)

## District Initiatives

*In 2009, the Oakwood Public School District begins to implement the Good*

*Habits Good Readers (GHGR) program in the elementary grades, starting with Grades 3*

*and 4. In 2011 the same program is implemented in Grades 2 and 5. In addition to*

*providing professional development for second-grade teachers, the district is providing a*

*refresher training on the GHGR programs for third- and fourth-grade teachers*

*throughout the district.*

*Some teachers report that they encounter a conflict when implementing GHGR*

*because other reading materials—such as Junior Great Books and literature-based*

*teaching—are not subtracted from their list of "reading programs" to use. Other*

*teachers express their satisfaction with the new reading program.*

I don't mind the structure of Good Habits Great Readers. It's the structure I've been looking for. It's the strategies I've been looking for. I would have appreciated some training at the beginning. It came later, but it did come, and you know, so far, I've been fairly happy with it. I'm a little overwhelmed by our guided

reading materials. It's a little too much! It's way too much information for one book! (Meredith)

I've been picking and choosing, abbreviating, and in some cases not getting to certain things because there was no ready introduction or segue into certain areas, so some of those areas just get left aside because there are many pressing issues that you want to cover over the course of the year. There's a lot that you're not going to cover. And you know, by following GHGR to the letter, there's even more that you won't cover, but stuff does get left out as a result of customizing it. (Jacqueline)

I like the length of those books of the GHGR program. It is concise, just enough, because some students just can't do a big book, they lose it. This way they get through it. They get through the exercises, and they've accomplished something and can move on to something else. It's individualized. You will have the student who will go through the Harry Potter books and the whole series and be a voracious reader. But with the average child, I think you really have to gear it toward his or her own interest and keep it very simple, keep it very basic. (Meredith)

*However, some teachers express dissatisfaction with GHGR. According to some*

*of the teachers, the district does not explicitly communicate to them that GHGR is the*

*sole program to be used when teaching reading, although that appears to be the case.*

The district says that the product we're using is not our "Bible," we don't have to use it. That is said, but that's really not the way it is. We are given strict unit plans to follow that program. The autonomy that I would like to have as a teacher to sort of deviate from that, select books of my choice that I'm comfortable with, that I think teach the skills that they want me to teach, is not there. As a teacher, once I know the needs of my students, I should be able to select the lessons that I think they need, as opposed to being told, "You're going to teach Week 1 in its entirety, Week 2 in its entirety." (Bernadette)

One of the things about Oakwood's diversity is you get a lot of academic diversity in addition to the racial and socioeconomic diversity. I have kids who don't have a lot of background knowledge, and I work with them to fill that gap. For some kids it's vocabulary, so I spend a lot of time on that. In that global sense, I try to give them experiences, time to read, time to experience the enjoyment of reading. You have to look at them as individual readers. That's why a lot of these one-size-fits-all programs don't meet the needs of our students. (Miranda)

We're often told that GHGR is an excellent tool for teachers, especially for new teachers. But I have to say, since the implementation of GHGR, I've had 11 student teachers. I usually start them with reading because it's one of the most nebulous things to learn. I give them GHGR and it never fails, they use it for a

couple of weeks and they start to dislike it because they don't like the quality of the books that come with the program. And so I tell them, "That's where you have to choose the books." Some of the strategies are pretty good, but I tell them, "If you want to change the books to teach the skill, please do so." In Oakwood we are bombarded with binders and programs. As I like to say, Oakwood has a very difficult problem in not cleaning out the closet. They put a lot of stuff in the closet, but they don't take stuff out. So, in your own head, you have to de-clutter what's in there. (Johnathan)

I'm not a big fan of GHGR. Some of the lessons are repetitive and redundant. That's a big issue that I found while implementing the program. There's a tendency with GHGR to beat a dead horse. To take a point, a valid and useful point, and turn it into something that has everybody running for the bathrooms. It was just, "STOP!" and "Enough, already." That can be a real problem when you want the kids to trust that what you're teaching them is something useful and that it's something that will be engaging. We kind of betray that trust a lot of the time by doing the lessons faithfully. The children already know the skills, so it's boring. I'd like a little more autonomy. As veteran teachers, to be able to use different resources and teach with some creativity, that would be ideal. (Colbert)

*As part of the district's initiative to raise student achievement and develop critical thinkers, a new method of assessment that is aligned with GHGR has been introduced this year and is being used by teachers in Grades K–4: the DRA2. Prior to this year, the district used the DRA1 to assess students in reading. The teachers comment on how much they are enjoying the structure, flexibility, and method of the DRA2. They like the idea of "getting messy in the strategy group" and picking what they want and matching an interesting book to a reader. They are finding the program to be a valuable resource for assessing their students.*

*Although the teachers have a new way to assess and analyze students' reading abilities and plan their instruction, they do not have all of the supplies and resources that they need to adequately implement reading instruction and move the students forward, nor are they trained prior to administering the assessment at the beginning of the school year. Teachers express their disapproval with how the new DRA2 and GHGR is introduced and implemented.*

It's unacceptable that teachers were giving the DRA2 without having been trained. It's unacceptable. Professional development that you receive after the fact, or boxes that you find dumped in the middle of your room when you come in after you've been told you shouldn't have been doing this, you shouldn't have been doing that, is unacceptable! Or the webinar with no materials, no visuals, no sound, that's unacceptable! (collective voice)

During our first GHGR professional development session, the trainer was like, "Take out your manual, look on page __." We all didn't have the manual, and then it was like cricket, cricket. There was no voice! It was so low. We were supposed to all huddle around one computer. So yeah, if they didn't want to spend the money to bring a trainer in, they should have had us in a conference room. It should have been projected up. What happens when teachers are not effectively trained is that you attempt to use it for about a week. No, I'll give it a good month. Then you'll see what book you can use out of the program. It makes it difficult to remain faithful to the program. It was poor training with no follow-through. If you're going to implement something, train us, support us, check back with us, bring us back together to have a conversation about how it's going, what's working, what's not working. (Jacqueline)

We eventually did receive two good, long training sessions. I felt, though, that the questions and issues raised by the teachers were pretty much put in the parking lot. It seemed as though the trainers who were giving us that PD had agenda points and were going to cover all of those agenda points, and the other issues that came up that related to the actual implementation of the program were glossed over. Frankly, I was actually appalled at just how much they were assuming that this was all going to work given the unique characteristic of our district. (Colbert)

GHGR really does assume that the kids are all more or less on the same reading level. That's a pretty big issue to just gloss over and push aside. The mechanics of getting around that are much more involved then I think any of these staff developers were giving us credit for or were giving us solutions for. We all left scratching our heads and trying in good faith to follow the program. Our good faith was being squandered by the lack of receptiveness of those who were presenting. I can't believe that they think this is just something that you can wish away or make go away by just sheer force. (Jacqueline)

It's not effective in the way it's timed. If you're going to give us all this stuff, then those two days in June should be training days. Then we can take a look at our materials and take them with us, and when we come back in September, give us more training so that we're all on the same page. You should check in once a month. So we're all feeling overwhelmed. Then it all becomes a big pile that you can't get to. You're so overwhelmed. You're already feeling like you're behind the 8 ball, and it's only September. That's like the worst feeling to have. That's how I felt all year long between the DRA, GHGR, social studies, everything we had to implement this year. I feel like I've been running a marathon. (Avril)

*Throughout the nation, in many urban school districts and school districts with large ethnically diverse student populations, various school reform models are being implemented. Many are one-size-fits-all models. Too often, students are not provided opportunities to engage in independent projects, cooperative learning, and critical thinking. Instead, they are being spoon fed as teachers are relegated to scripted curricula, teaching to the test, and stressing to meet guidelines and deadlines. Children need more from schools. They need to learn and be prepared for various opportunities in life, not learn how to be submissive. They should all be encouraged to dream, solve problems, think, and be prepared to realize their dreams. There is a consensus among the teachers that students need more than just rote, mechanical styles of teaching and learning.*

> Critical thinking skills are far superior to the perfect score on a standardized test, which primarily measures rote learning. While it may be required to know specifics in any given discipline, it also should be essential to have the ability to apply problem-solving strategies, and to synthesize and apply those facts and principles in other situations. (Sharon)

> The biggest problem in this district, across the board, and it fits in every subject area, but since we're talking about reading, it's that now it's an ST [Mastery Learning]-driven district and they have forgotten that all the other quadrants are key. I think that might be why they might be losing some of the kids, because all of our children are not ST children. They're being asked to be focused, quiet, and we're not given any opportunities to bring in any creativity. We do a little of SF [Intuitive Learning], but not the intuitive things that they need. The students need to take a story and be able to think outside the box, to make connections, see things, and try new things. (Antoinette)

> Learning styles was important for Oakwood because it was combined with multiculturalism, and I think the two things are actually very powerful. I don't think learning styles are emphasized in the schools by the principals. Is it no longer emphasized in the curriculum as they once did. Everybody is so worried about getting ready for the test, and that automatically becomes an ST kind of thing, and that's a problem. We have to look at what we're assessing. I think that with this emphasis on the high-stakes testing, nothing will change until we change what we're assessing. We have to figure out what we want for the kids. What is going to best prepare them for life? And so, we can ask ourselves those essential

questions and make our own assessments to measure whether we're doing that for children. When you have to do those kinds of assessments, you automatically go into learning styles. (Sharon)

The ultimate goal is to get them to think, to be creative, to be able to think through problems, and look at things at different levels. You don't do that with worksheets. You do that by having them read independently, meeting with them, using Literature Circles and Junior Great Books, those kinds of things get them to think about what they're reading. I fear that we're going in a direction where we're getting kids ready for a world that's not really out there. They need to be more technologically savvy. They need to be more creative. They need to be more innovative. The work place is a hard place. It's creative and innovative, not driven by worksheets. (Antoinette)

**The Energy to Teach**

*Teachers face many challenges within the school walls and in public. They are*

*not immune to what the media reports, the negative advertisements, the community blog*

*discussions, and the Op Ed commentaries. Today's political climate has the public*

*thinking and believing that the root of school failure lies with teachers. Teachers are*

*under fire, and there appear to be very few allies defending their integrity. When one of*

*the participants says, "Teachers are human, too," he confirms what I already know: We*

*are each other's allies.*

Teachers are human, too, and humans have limitations. As much as the movies would like us to believe in this great almighty super teacher that would be there if we had Teach for America staffing our schools, that super teacher doesn't exist; or if it does, it's a super teacher who burns out rather quickly and goes back to Wall Street, where they would've gone had they not gotten this Teach for America grant. It's just not a realistic formula. You can't place that much emphasis on the teacher's Herculean effort. There has to be a little more reality to it, and I think this is why American schools are failing right now. It's all coming down to one thing: the teacher. If the teacher's not doing it, it's not going to happen. Oh, there are horrible teachers out there. There are great teachers out there. I don't believe even the great teachers are able to handle what our system implies that we can do. (Colbert)

*The Herculean perspective and negative attitudes toward teachers drain our*

*energy. But we persevere. We march on. We walk through our school doors daily,*

*arriving early and leaving long past the end of the contractual school day. We go in and*

*give it our all, day to day. Why? As teachers put it, it comes back to*

> that core inside of me that still gets a rush when my students get it. That smile on my face when a child says, "Oh, that was fun!" They want to show up. They want to come to school. I want to see them excel. That's what keeps me going. If I leave, what's going to happen? I even shared with my students that I was thinking of retiring, and some of my students said, "Wait, you have to have my little sister." Just to hear them say that means that I am effective, I'm reaching them, and they want me to be here for their sibling. That's what keeps me going. That's what keeps me present, keeps me showing up. (Bernadette)

> I absolutely love the kids! I love their sense of humor, their eagerness, and granted I'm not talking about every child when I say eagerness, because there are many where I find myself incredibly frustrated at their lack of interest and their passivity, but I get that by focusing on those kids who are there, who are part of the landscape, the game, the whole process. The child who is curious about the topic at hand and where that leads to—what does that mean for something beyond which we were talking about? The child who sees humor within the bounds of what's acceptable in a classroom to various aspects of what's going on. The child who can be playful. The child who can take compositional risks in the way they deal with the classroom, the way they deal in discussions. The kids who have an enthusiasm for what they're doing. That's what keeps me coming back. Yeah, it's the kids. It is the kids. (Colbert)

*Some teachers say that their energy to teach also comes from working with a*

*diverse student population, their colleagues, and professional materials that they read.*

> I continuously look back in my journals, through my own children, through just trying to absorb myself in the kids. I want to make sure that they have the best experience possible. My goals are what keep my focus. Being lifelong readers, lifelong writers, lifelong mathematicians. Continuously re-reading the people that I love—that encourages me to be more than just the ST data driven. My Regies, the Shelly Harwaynes, just continuously looking in—re-reading, re-reading, re-reading. (Antoinette)

> I've grown as a reader, as a professional, as an individual. You get exposed to all these cultures, all of their interests, and you grow as a person. You benefit from all of these experiences. I think that's one of the most positive things about this community. You've got all of these different people together, and they're really learning from each other. Where I grew up, it was Italian and Irish. Everybody was White. Everybody was Catholic. I knew one Black kid. We had some Japanese businessmen move in. We had some Indians, but that's all we had. Everybody looked like me. Everybody went to the same church as me, and in fact I was related to half of the town. (Beatrice)

Our staff also gives us the energy to teach. We wouldn't stay here and deal with the stresses that we deal with if it wasn't for the people that we work with. You learn from each other. You bitch to each other, share. I would have left a long time ago if it wasn't for the people that I work with. When I first got here, everybody was cool and nice, and there wasn't some of the divisive crap that was going on in a previous building. That made it better, and you got good ideas from people. I think that's one of the strengths here, in particular. (Collective Voice)

We've never had a strong leader, so we've had to depend on each other. I think that comes through in every area of the curriculum. I honestly think here, more than the other schools, we have more vertical articulation because we are a close-knit group. We might not be talking about school work all the time, but it does come up, and you do find out things from other people. We are willing to sit together and discuss these things in a very productive manner. We make things work for ourselves. For the benefit of the kids, we do what we need to do for the kids. (Beatrice)

*As much as we draw energy from our students, colleagues, families, and professional development materials, our energy to teach can also often be affected by lack of resources and inadequate professional development. The teachers share their frustrations with each other and how exhausting it is to not have needed resources readily available to teach reading effectively and utilize the programs that are provided to teachers. The challenge of working in an environment that lacks materials that are readily available in the classroom is exacerbated by the lack of time to plan one's day and lessons carefully and thoughtfully. Although we make use of our prep time, our lunch period, and additional hours before and after school, we still find it difficult to find the time to locate materials and prepare our lessons.*

What takes energy from me is all of the paperwork that is draining us, and I say that because this district is very much an ST [Mastery Style] district. All about ST, and anyone who's not an ST person is not successful. That's not how the district used to be. I think that they've moved to ST because, as the school district has gotten darker, it's been moved more towards ST. The district used to be very diverse in their teaching methods 20 years ago. Administrators believed in the importance of having teachers that fit all four quadrants, who were STs and SFs [Interpersonal Style], NTs [Understanding Style], and NFs [Self-expressive Style]. They encouraged us to find out what learning styles our students were, to make sure that we taught in the various quadrants. Now, we're only teaching in

ST. I don't even think that the district realizes that. As a teacher who is an NT/NF, I am suffocating! So my energy is tapped because everything is ST. (Antoinette)

Time away from teaching and planning also drains my energy. OK, they gave me resources, but they're not all at the level my children are reading. I have to go to another teacher and borrow their books; we share. People aren't equipped in their classrooms! That's just the bottom line. I'm shocked by what I don't have. I'm shocked by what I'm given to teach, and I'm shocked at the bits and pieces that I have to put together in order to make it complete. That's what I'm shocked about, the bits and pieces. Teachers shouldn't be spending as much time searching for materials as implementing lessons, that's a big problem. It is a waste of time. I want to move the children forward. You know, I'm doing this now, and I'm going to do it again tomorrow, or next week, I'm going to do it how many times? And it's a constant drain on my time. (Niles)

### Meeting Challenges

*During our conversations, teachers discuss how they go about meeting the*

*challenges that they encounter.*

Some of the other challenges I encounter are finding various ways to help my students grow as readers, especially my boys. How can I get them excited, especially the reluctant readers, or the ones that are coming in and they are just not where they need to be? How can I help them move to another level? Also, helping those who are struggling, helping those who are reluctant—and also the ones that are ahead of the game—just helping to get them move them on. I don't want them to get stagnant, those high-level readers. How can I keep them excited, move them on? It's challenging to find ways to present the information in an interesting way so that they get it and remain interested. (Antoinette)

The lack of attention span is a challenge because this is the techno-video game age. The kids really don't have the same attention span I saw 20 years ago. They can't sit still. Those are my biggest challenges. (Collective Voice)

*Like many of my colleagues, I struggle with finding ways to get and keep my*

*students excited. One of the tools that I use to achieve this goal is Reader's Theatre. I am*

*not just battling learning deficiencies, English language deficiencies, or empty stomachs,*

*but also technology. Reader's Theatre is a wonderful way to include students of all*

*reading and speaking levels, as well as learning styles. It allows students to move, to act*

*out the words, and have fun while learning new words and ways of expressing*

*themselves.*

## We're Triaging. We're Not Teaching Reading

*In January of 2002 the federal government enacted the No Child Left Behind Act*

*(NCLB). The law requires states to develop standardized assessments to be administered*

*to all students on an annual basis and make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in test*

*scores in order to receive federal funding. O'Day (2002) argues that accountability*

*systems such as NCLB and similar policies*

> will foster improvement to the extent that they generate and focus attention on information relevant to teaching and learning, motivate individuals and schools to use that information and expend effort to improve practice, build knowledge base necessary for interpreting and applying the new information to improve practice, and allocate resources for all of the above. (O'Day, 2002, p. 2)

*Some of the teachers discuss this challenge.*

> We're not spending the time, and I also feel that right now we're so worried about scores that we're not preparing the kids for the real world. You could collect data forever and you could manipulate data as much as you want, but what do you do with it? How is it informing us? How is our assessment informing us? How is it informing our instruction? How is it changing what we're doing? I don't think it really is. We can try at the classroom level and do as much as we possibly can, but systemically the way we are told to teach is not going to change. We're only one person. (Beatrice)

> NCLB is having a huge influence! It's stressful. You're catching up, you start to feel comfortable, and all of the sudden something else comes along and you have to do that. Trying to fit everything in is very stressful and overwhelming. Then, when you have the NJASK, it's like, at this point you're almost ready to teach for the test. You're going to teach them to be good test takers. I start earlier than I would normally do, and I know that in my heart of hearts, I feel that's the wrong way, especially if you give me so many kids who are very low. I feel the pressure because administrators are looking at my numbers, and looking at me as a teacher based on those numbers. (collective voice)

> Well, you know what? You know the real problem is you have to teach to the test. The real problem is we don't have a curriculum that supports the instructions, you shouldn't have to be teaching to the test this early; the district should be providing us with the framework to help our kids pass the test from the beginning until they

take that test, that's the real issue. And you can't fix everything in fourth grade. They can't fix everything in third grade. We're not going to fix these kids. We're triaging! We're not teaching reading. (Jacqueline)

What would be natural would be to go back to what people do when they read. To treat it more like a book club than a direct strategy lesson. "I'm teaching you this skill because when you sit down to read on your own, you won't get it." The goal is to make them lifelong readers, to be able to enjoy a book, to have a desire to pick up a book of any genre, and want to actually dig in and glean something from it. It's unnatural to say, "Oh, today I'm looking for point of view and then fill out a graphic organizer." It is unnatural to me to put a sticky note on every page in the book each time I sit down to read during Reading Workshop. As an adult, I may take notes in the margins of books—we all do it. But it's unnatural that on every page I must produce a sticky note or fill out a graphic organizer at the end. That's not what we do when we read! (Bernadette)

*I agree with my colleagues and believe that children should not be required to complete a graphic organizer or place a post-it note on each and every page of the book each time they sit down to read in class. Reading should not be treated as if it is a chore, a burden, a task to be completed, but as a natural occurrence throughout our lives. It needs to be seen and treated as something that we enjoy doing. Teachers need not dictate completely how and what children read each and every time. We need to allow readers the freedom to select books that appeal to them and gently guide them to learn how to make the appropriate book choices based not only on their reading level but also on their interest. Research reports that children improve their reading skills much more rapidly when they are reading books that are at their independent level and not books that are challenging (Calkins, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 2002; Routman, 2003; Strickland, 2010). There needs to be a balance between what is mandated, what we believe works, what we believe readers need, and what readers have a desire to read in spite of their reading level.*

### *Underground Teaching*

> *When the environment that we work in does not facilitate*
> *expression or support teachers as leaders,*
> *many of us have had to find other outlets for meeting our*
> *professional needs, while imposing a self-silencing at work.*
> *When teachers close their doors, extend learning time,*
> *supplement with creative materials*
> *They become trouble-makers*
> *They are made to transfer or retire.*
> *But I like to think of those of us*
> *Who go against the grain, engage in underground teaching,*
> *Who close our doors and do what's right for our children,*
> *As underground conductors of freedom.*
> *Freedom to learn.*
> *Freedom to be creative.*
> *Freedom to take risks,*
> *Freedom to break free from the madness.*

*Tyack and Cuban (1995) report that, when educators view demands as inappropriate and in violation of their professional training, they are skilled in finding ways to temper or evade their effects and to resist such reform efforts. Teachers choose to reject or only reluctantly accept the reform mandates of NCLB because the act narrowed the curriculum, restricted their teaching techniques to rote drill, and changed the motivation of students (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). During the focus group discussion the teachers describe their ideal teaching environment, schedule, and models. They express their concerns about what teaching and learning is like without the enactment of NCLB.*

> I try to imagine sometimes if we had not had this legislation, No Child Left Behind, which is driving all this crazy package stuff. Let's try this, let's try that, let's see about this one. We have this legislation that's just hounding us, you know. We are being hounded by this thing that we have to keep chasing around, and we don't know exactly what it is because it's a big mystery, and it's a secret task, and yet we still have to bow to it, and we have to work. It's, like, making us crazy. I think that with NCLB, wherever that may be, it was an unrealistic expectation that every child would be reading on grade level. Every adult doesn't work at the same level. I mean, yes, we want the best for every single child. We try our hardest to get that child there, but it's unrealistic. Not everybody's going to do what everybody else does. You can't get 100% of the population to roller skate and not fall and break their bones! (Sharon)

Part of the problem with policy is you have people making these decisions, and they have no idea. They have no idea about what education or teaching children really is all about. It's about looking at the child and bringing that child to their potential, moving him forward, moving her forward according to their strengths and addressing their specific needs. It's not one-child-fits-all. (collective voice)

Another problem is that the policy is centered on a business model. The whole thing is that they're really trying to get rid of public education, period! And so they make it seem like we don't know what we're doing, and that's just because the people that pillaged the country through the mortgage loans, they saw another way to get in. They saw another means to fill their pockets. They're the only ones with any money, so it's got to be coming from them. They're the ones backing this. So sometimes I don't think it's the kids that they really have in mind—it's the dollars. (Jacqueline)

Honestly, I'm getting to the point where I think we have to do civil disobedience with this standardized testing stuff and say, "No!" We are just compartmentalizing ourselves into nothingness. It's like dribbling into nothingness, and it's being forced on us by this law that needs to be changed. We, as parents, need to say, "Does this really get my kid ready for college?" If the answer to that is no, then I want to look at college and the workplace and work backwards. We need to stand up, like we had the courage to do in the '60s. We need to have the courage to stand up and say, "These children do not belong to [New Jersey Governor Chris] Christie. They don't belong to anybody but us. Our children! Get them ready for life." (Sharon)

## Chapter 6: Listening to Administrators

*As I engage in and reflect on conversations with teachers for the study, it becomes apparent that the voices and perspectives of all district administrators responsible for Oakwood students' learning outcomes, not only the teachers and building principals, need to be included. Therefore, I invite the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and literacy supervisor to share their experiences as leaders in the Oakwood Public School District.*

*With one exception, all of the administrators who participate in the study are in their position in the Oakwood Public Schools for at least 7 years. Out of the seven, five report having 7 or more years of administrative experience as a principal; one has 1 year of experience as a principal, and one is working in the capacity of a subject supervisor for the first time. All of the participants report having at least 3 years of classroom teaching experience prior to becoming an administrator; their experiences include teaching third grade, fourth grade, or technology, and working as a literacy coach in another public school district.*

*Our conversations reveal their love for the children of Oakwood and their confidence in the teaching staff of Oakwood. They speak about what sets Oakwood Public Schools apart from other Reading County Public Schools and how they are negotiating the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic transformation that the Oakwood Public School District is experiencing. The same protocol afforded the teacher participants is extended to the administrators to honor, respect, and safeguard their identities. Consequently, whenever possible, similar responses made by two or more participants are combined to illuminate their experiences and point of view.*

*During our conversations about the student population in Oakwood and the*

*teaching staff, administrators express the following:*

> We have a really skilled teaching staff. We have teachers who are creative and innovative and who really have the best interest of students at heart. I have seen a tremendous amount of classroom respect, rapport, and enthusiasm for the teaching of reading, in the way our teachers address our students as readers and writers, intelligent students. I've seen that classroom genuine heartfelt love of teaching. I see wonderful management of student behaviors and classroom procedures that enable very little downtime in terms of instruction. (collective voice)

> I find our kids sophisticated, smart, great kids, who deserve the world. I think they're really special. Probably everybody says that about the kids in their districts, but I really think our kids are unique and special. Every time they represent us somewhere, we get calls and kudos. I'm not so sure of the motives sometimes of people, if they had expectations and then found their expectations were not fulfilled, and I always kind of worry about that because of our diversity. I just think they're amazing. (Morgan)

### Shared Commonalities and Differences

*When comparing the schooling experiences of Oakwood students to those of other*

*Reading County students, district administrators explain that*

> the experiences of the children in Oakwood don't vary as much as we may think. I think that some commonalities that we see are family structures. Whether your parent is working too much because you're a working-class person or your parent is working too much because they work on Wall Street, there's still neglect. If children in Oakwood are performing low academically, in Pinehill, they struggle with peer concerns about it. Parents still struggle with resources, whether you're in Pinehill or you're in Oakwood or Ashland. (Jamie)

> There are more commonalities than differences. I find that the experiences of children of Oakwood and others are more similar because there are very specific things that children at the elementary level deal with. I think those concerns that arise in school-age children run across the board. (Robin)

> *Administrators speak in detail about the academic experiences of students in*

*Oakwood compared to those of its neighboring Reading County Public School districts.*

*They maintain that students in Oakwood receive a better education.*

> We have after-school programs that are free, at no cost to parents. We have opportunities within the schools themselves, like the knitting club. We have office

helpers. So these kinds of programs are available to students here in Oakwood at the elementary level that I don't see in my own neighboring school district. I think that we have so much to offer above and beyond what other districts typically have. (Robin)

We have the best comprehensive high school around, despite the fact that we're really lagging in the technology because of the budget defeats that we've had to take. I think that they're better than many other places because of our size. We're bigger than many of the Reading county districts, and as a result of our size we're able to offer so many more experiences to students. (Morgan)

Oakwood seems to have more offerings for students on the school level. By offerings, I mean course availability at the high school level. The course offerings at the high school outshine any other high school in Reading County. It's just such a diverse offering of courses in such interesting areas. We have an amazing arts program at the high school. And I just want to tell the kids who don't take advantage of that, and their parents, to wake up! Look at what you've got! You've got these incredible courses, AP to beat the band. Some districts in the county have four AP courses at the high school. We have AP course in the 20s, and we're looking to add. (collective voice)

## Criticisms and Response

*Although most school administrators say that Oakwood students get a great education, families and members of the community often criticize the district for not preparing its students adequately. When asked about those criticisms, Oakwood administrators acknowledge and elaborate on the criticisms.*

The low-hanging fruit for criticism, whether people mean it or not or really care, is the achievement. The published scores in the paper are low for Reading County. And so we get targeted and it's an easy, cheap shot, but what are you going to do? People say, "Look at how they're performing, and look at the per-pupil cost." So we get targeted for the per-pupil cost compared to how the kids are performing. (Morgan)

*The achievement gap among Oakwood's students and those within the same DFG category is narrower in Language Arts Literacy for both third and fourth graders than in neighboring school districts. However, the achievement gap in Oakwood compared to public schools within the same DFG is more prominent in the area of mathematics for both third and fourth grades. In third grade the gap in language arts is much higher than*

*that in fourth grade. Among Black students, 40.8% perform at the Partially Proficient*

*level, compared to 28.6% of White students, on the third-grade Language Arts Literacy*

*assessment. Figures 18, 19, and 20 illustrate this achievement gap.*

*In fourth grade, the Language Arts Literacy gap is narrower. Of Black students,*

*38.1% perform at the Partially Proficient level, compared to 31.3% of White students.*

*Figures 21, 22, and 23 illustrate this disparity. These figures also illustrate how African*

*American and Hispanic students compare to Asian and White students.*

*On the fourth grade NJASK mathematics examination, 15.6% of Oakwood's*

*White students perform at the Partially Proficient level, 50% perform at the Proficient*

*level, and 34.4% perform at the Advanced Proficient level. In contrast, 31.9% of*

*Oakwood's Black students perform at the Partially Proficient level, 53.1% perform at the*

*Proficient level, and 15% perform at the Advanced Proficient level. Figures 27, 28, and*

*29 illustrate this disparity.*

*Another area of criticism is the per-pupil cost. The per-pupil cost in Oakwood is*

*$22,942, among the highest in the state of New Jersey. District administrators offer the*

*following explanation:*

> We spend more than seven million dollars on out-of-district placements, and they're not primarily out-of-district placements for kids who are going to the public schools or who would go to the public schools. We spend six million dollars on busing. The primary busing costs are nonpublic because, in the state of New Jersey, if you bus public school kids, you are mandated to bus nonpublic school students. It's big bucks in busing. So the very integration that we wanted to create in Oakwood, now, X number of years later—because we closed neighborhood schools—created the busing problem.

> We also spend well over five million dollars for the charter schools. We spend about five million dollars for the community charter school for 300 kids. We could educate those 300 kids— assimilate them into the district. It might cost us a couple of hundred thousand. We have high special education cost in our own district. So when you take out those factors, we might be spending $14,000 per

child. And let's remember, some districts don't have high schools. You always spend more on high schools.

I know our teachers cost money. We read the newspaper articles on the average teacher salary; it is the number one expenditure, but this is a service. It's about people. And kids are about people. It's about the people you put with the kids. Again, what would you expect? Anyways that's the criticism and the answer to the criticism. (Morgan)

### Negotiating Demographic Changes

*What's Going on in Oakwood?*
*We haven't set a consistent model*
*We don't have a clearly articulated model*
*A conceptual framework for reading instruction*
*Our philosophy hasn't been clearly articulated*
*The materials have become the curriculum, there's all this unevenness*
*What's happening?*
*What is it that we could do differently?*
*It's hard to understand.*
*Is it developmental or just happenstance?*
*We need to do a better job*
*Differentiating*
*Engaging*
*Understanding*
*Tightening up*
*Tweaking*
*Developing*
*Monitoring*
*Practicing*
*Stretching*
*Building fluency, stamina, comprehension, and critical thinking skills*
*We need to provide, immediate, targeted, explicit instruction and*
*intervention*
*Regardless of subgroups,*
*Everybody is a teacher of literacy.*

*The administrators discuss the demographic changes in the school district over the past 20 years and report an increase in English as a Second Language (ESL), poverty-level, and homeless children in the district. In comparison to its neighboring districts, the Oakwood Public School District is not only more diverse ethnically and racially; it also has a higher percentage of students and families living below the poverty*

*level, based on the federal government's guidelines. As shown in Figure 17, 31% of*

*Oakwood's student population and their families are living below the poverty threshold,*

*as indicated by the number of students who are receiving free or reduced-price lunch. In*

*contrast, 8% or less of Oakwood's neighboring public school districts are living below*

*the poverty level.*

> *Oakwood administrators explain that the district's socioeconomic shift is*

*indicative of the economy. They speak about how the district is managing this socioeco-*

*nomic shift to meet educational and some social needs of its students. They report an*

*increase in the number of students who need free or reduced-price lunches.*

> The poverty level is more severe than it used to be. We also have a growing number of students who are homeless. There are varying degrees of poverty in the district. I know there's a lot of research about poverty, and they say poverty is the number-one indicator of students' success in school, I believe that's probably true. (collective voice)

> We don't target those families necessarily for anything; obviously, they get funding for lunch. We think it's important to have a good lunch. A lot our Title I money is designated first for Free and Reduced Lunch kids who are at risk. We look at the kids' needs and strengths as we would look at anybody. The administrators in the schools support the kids in going to social occasions, buying prom dresses and doing things like that. And, frankly, they're not a member of what the government says is a low socioeconomic group; they're threaded into all of our groups, their gender, their ethnicity, their special education, so we really haven't targeted that at all. (Morgan)

> *Research indicates that poverty adversely affects children and families (Anyon,*

*2005; Berliner, 2012; Bradley, Cowyn, McAdoo, & Coll, 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan,*

*1997; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Lareau, 2003). Cunningham and Stanovich*

*(2001) report that future reading and cognitive development skills are adversely affected*

*by insufficient reading ability and the amount of reading that a child is exposed to at*

*home. Researchers also argue that the level of conversation and number of books in a*

*child's home environment contribute to reading and language development (Bradley et*

*al., 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Ferguson, 2007; Lareau, 2003). In their study on poverty and learning outcomes, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) find that children living in poverty not only perform at a lower level than others, but they are also more prone to developmental delays and being identified with a learning disability at school.*

*The socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and linguistic transformation of the Oakwood Public School District creates a challenge for how district administrators and teachers approach teaching and learning. Specifically, in the area of reading, the district has been focusing on ways to improve students' performance on standardized testing at all grade levels. However, some administrators comment that they are not sure that the district's philosophy has been clearly articulated. Administrators clarify the district's stance by stating that, although there may be some confusion as to what the philosophy is, the district's philosophy of teaching reading is a Balanced Literacy approach.*

*Administrators report*

> The district adopted the Balanced Literacy model around 1999. As part of this approach, students are assessed at their particular reading level, and there is a gradual release of responsibility. There's obviously some piece of direct instruction, which would be a shared reading, there would be a read aloud for enjoyment of reading, and then there would be more direct guided reading, which really hooked into the child's own independent level. (Robin)

> Our philosophy is that there isn't one particular aspect of reading where you should focus. It means that there should be opportunities for students to engage in phonics work, to practice fluency, and also to build their comprehension skills through guided reading, through shared reading, through writing, all of those activities. It means teaching reading is teaching kids on a continuum. (Jamie)

> The importance of teacher-guided opportunities in order to teach those strategic skills, is that secondary piece. The marriage of the instruction or the explicit instruction and the skills you need to be a good reader is the basis of the philosophy for teaching reading here in Oakwood. (collective voice)

There is another piece that we believe, and I think we're coming to believe, [which is] that everybody is a teacher of literacy. I think our administrators believe it; I know they talk [about] it. (Morgan)

*When asked about the district's curriculum for teaching reading, administrators*

*respond,*

I would say, "Try and find it." It's a concern of mine and it's been a concern, but I haven't been able to do anything about it, but I really would like to see one. The materials have become the curriculum. Oakwood prides itself, fortunately and unfortunately, for not having a very straightforward curriculum, and I think it's endemic of the students that we teach, where students come in at varying levels. We have Good Habits Great Readers, which isn't really a curriculum. It's a curriculum material. It's tough because we don't have a real reading curriculum. (collective voice)

We're using lots of leveled readers, and so through the teachers, assessments administered using the DRA2, the curriculum is implemented. The teachers are then able to have students work in groups and use leveled readers that are at the right level or maybe just stretch them a little bit to move to the next level. And starting in second grade they are using something called Good Habits Great Readers, which is a guide. It models out guided reading and provides the teacher with additional leveled readers and also focuses on skill instruction. And for lack of a better way to describe it, it's probably balanced literacy in a box. (Robin)

*There appears to be a disconnect between teachers and administrators regarding*

*the district's philosophy for teaching reading, as well as the district curriculum for*

*teaching reading. While most teachers have a clear philosophy for teaching reading, the*

*philosophy of the Oakwood Public School District is not transparent to the teachers. The*

*perspective of the teachers is that the Oakwood Public School District does not have a*

*common philosophy or a curriculum for teaching reading. This lack of common*

*philosophy and reading curriculum is problematic for them because they believe it*

*hinders student progress.*

*Teachers attribute the lack of philosophy in the district in part to inconsistency in*

*vision and a high turnover rate of literacy supervisors. With each new supervisor, there is*

*a shift in beliefs and practices. In addition to the high turnover rate of literacy*

*supervisors, a principal's lack of knowledge and understanding of how to teach reading may be part of the reason the district and schools do not have a cohesive philosophy for teaching reading.*

*The lack of a reading curriculum places instructional decisions in the teachers' hands, and they are free to decide which aspects of reading instruction will be taught. Although a lack of reading curriculum provides freedom to be creative and autonomous, it makes the teaching of reading much more difficult to plan and implement. We often spend much of our time tracking down resources, rather than planning instruction and reflecting on our craft. We also often spend our own money to make sure that the learning environment is equipped with the developmentally appropriate reading materials that students need. Having a clearly identified and agreed upon reading curriculum would allow teachers to dedicate more time to planning, reflecting, collaborating with colleagues, and analyzing students' work. It would also provide a cohesive framework for all.*

*In light of the frustration with high turnover rates and policy implementations, the limitations of district administrators are recognized: They are overwhelmed because they are dealing with Pre-K to 12, where it is once broken up, K–5 and 6–12. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. It is a difficult and demanding job for just one person (the literacy supervisor) and we urge district administrators to rethink their supervisory hiring practices.*

*There also appears to be a lack of understanding about what constitutes a curriculum. Does a boxed, scripted program constitute a curriculum, or is a curriculum*

*something that is grounded in a philosophy and encompasses planned, explicit, as well as hidden forms of learning experiences for children in various content areas?*

*District administrators are not alone in their varying degrees of defining and interpreting what constitutes a curriculum. In my journey to define the term curriculum, I come across an abundance of definitions by curriculum theorists. The number of definitions for the term has increased considerably as a result of recent efforts by federal, state, and local government officials to reform public schools. Similarly, educators, education scholars, parents, and textbook publishers who aim to provide schools with quick, easy access to teaching materials all play a role in defining the term curriculum.*

*Educational scholars define the term curriculum narrowly and broadly. In 1902 Dewey describes the curriculum as "a continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies" (pp. 11-12). Similarly, Bobbit (1918) views curriculum as "that series of things which children and youth must do and experience by way of developing abilities to do the things well that make up the affairs of adult life; and to be in all respects what adults should be" (p. 42). On the other hand, Caswell and Campbell (1935) provide a narrow definition of the term: "composed of all of the experiences children have under the guidance of the teacher" (p. 66). A much broader definition of curriculum is provided by Hass, who defines curriculum as "all of the experiences that individual learners have in a program of education whose purpose is to achieve broad goals and related specific objectives, which is planned in terms of a framework of theory and research or past and present professional practice" (p. 5).*

*Some educational scholars, such as Bowles and Gintis, Giroux, and Ladson-Billings, provide a cultural and political context for defining curriculum and its role in schooling by applying a CRT or Marxist conceptual framework. Ladson-Billings (2009) defines curriculum as "a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" (p. 29). Likewise, Bowles and Gintis (1976) view the school curriculum as something over which students have very little control and influence but which is used to prepare students for their roles as workers under capitalism. Giroux (1988) argues that the quest by school administrators to provide consistency across school buildings and textbook publishers to create and supply schools with one-size-fits-all packaged materials reduces teachers to the "status of specialized technicians within the school bureaucracy, whose function then becomes one of managing and implementing curricular programs rather than developing or critically appropriating curricula to fit specific pedagogical concerns" (p. 33).*

*Consequently, Giroux (1988) urges teachers and all stakeholders who are responsible for teaching and learning in schools to create a curriculum that provides "a critical understanding of the language, modes of experience, and cultural forms of the students with whom they work [that] must be historically situated and politically analyzed in connection with wider economic and social determinants" (p. 30).*

*The research reveals no one way to approach teaching; rather, there is a need to develop curricula that provide teachers with opportunities to be creative and operate as intellectuals and seasoned practitioners. There is also a need for developing and implementing curricula that provide students with experiences that will serve their interests rather than reproduce social injustice. Certainly, educators must share common*

*ground when creating and implementing educational policy; however, this vision of*

*consistency need not be one that leads to disparities, confusion, and injustice.*

## Different Students Need Different Things

*This lack of a reading curriculum in the school district prompts me to ask district*

*administrators to talk about the strengths and weaknesses that they observe when visiting*

*classrooms during the periods when reading is being taught. Administrators express the*

*need for teachers themselves to develop the love of reading.*

> As a principal, I've noticed that guided reading meant a lot of different things to people, and from room to room there was great disparity in what was happening. The biggest disparity is how teachers understand guided reading. I think that guided reading has a specific structure to it. I've seen that structure looking very different in a lot of rooms. There doesn't seem to be an agreed-upon definition of guided reading. (Kepler)

> As a principal, I'm certainly less knowledgeable than my teachers, but I'm also in a real quandary because if I want to say to you, "That didn't look to me like a guided reading," you may have a different explanation for what guided reading is supposed to look like. And I can't be in your room all the time to know that you're doing it correctly. I've noticed that some teachers spend more time teaching reading and giving their students time to practice those skills than others. I think that is critical because the more you read, the better you get. I'm always worried when teachers say, "But if I teach reading all day, I'll never teach social studies." Well, what the heck are you reading? Do you ever read anything when you teach social studies? I mean, social studies are so much at the core of what I see elementary school and early childhood as really being about. (Kinna)

> Anytime you're working with a staff in education, there are going to be people that are high flyers in terms of their level of comfort. I think that there is an underlying belief that some people are natural teachers and some people have to work harder at it. I think that the disparities of things I might have seen in the past have lessened as we have become more focused as a school and as a district. I see different levels of enthusiasm. In terms of a level of comfortableness with the content, whether it be a piece of text or subject that they don't know, I think that with anything that you do, the more preparation that you do makes for a better teaching instruction and learning in the classroom. It's not so much that there's a stronger teacher and a weaker teacher; I think that there are just some teachers who prepare better and some teachers who prepare less. (Jamie)

*Administrators also stress the need to focus instruction on reading and minimize the time that teachers spend in managing classroom procedures and behavior. They emphasize the importance of students actively engaging, practicing the skills and strategies that they are being taught as readers. Administrators recognize and acknowledge the difficulties of teaching reading but they note that this task is made more difficult if teachers themselves do not like to read.*

> One of the things that I specifically requested this year was that not every single guided-reading lesson needs to end with the completion of a graphic organizer, or fill in this paper, or do this activity. Not every single lesson needs to be followed up by an activity because I think that's kind of like the breakdown. Because then kids begin to see that every time they read, there is an activity connected to it. The teacher should be conferencing with the child to find out what they're reading, and there's no real written explanation necessary. I think that sometimes we're giving kids too many rules, and they're the wrong rules. (Robin)

> *Like the teachers, some administrators talk about the need to honor the diversity of children, embrace students' cultural heritage, and provide reading instruction that is culturally responsive. Administrators also discuss the need to rethink the way that we teach reading, considering our large immigrant population and their needs as ELLs.*

> Kids are different today. Lisa Delpit was arguing at one point that African American children needed to be taught differently. I don't disagree with her perspective. I disagree with the way that her message has been to some extent bastardized. Children from various cultures need to be taught differently. We've become a little bit homogenized. We're not looking at some of the great strengths of being in a diverse cultural situation, and we're not looking at what are some of the great sort of linguistic gifts of our time. (Kinna)

**Honor the Diversity of Children**

> *Motivate*
> *encourage*
> *promote*
> *market reading.*
> *Share your enthusiasm for books, give the gift of books.*
> *Let them take the books home.*
> *So what if they don't come back!*
> *Identify with gender,*
> *Culture,*
> *Interest,*
> *preferences,*
> *honor the diversity of children,*
> *their community,*
> *how they speak,*
> *how they act.*
> *Understand your own bias.*
> *Make conscious choices about books.*
> *Be aware of what a good book is.*
> *Find and make those connections.*
> *Honor the diversity of children.*

*Administrators comment as follows:*

Learning to read is not the same for English Language Learners. Their developmental parameters are different and are paced differently. We are putting in place artificial benchmarks and parameters that aren't really helping anyone, that are taking us back to an earlier point when we looked at training rather than educating. Teachers need to be flexible. Get to know the students as individuals and readers. What do they like, dislike? What do they already know? What's their cultural background? What are their strengths? What do they need to work on? Don't make them sit there and read the Good Habits Great Readers version of Robin Hood when they've read the real version. (Kinna)

Teachers need to use books to bond with their students. There needs to be that bridge so that children come home and they're enthusiastic about the text that they just read, even if you send a piece of the text home and say you should go home and show this to your parent. I believe in the gift of voice, the gift of storytelling, and often the gift of students, our job is to find that and build on it. To really be effective, everybody needs someone who will value you for who you are. (Jamie)

Unfortunately, a lot of teachers don't send books home with their students, because it's their book. "I bought it in Barnes & Noble; you can't take it home because it's not going to come back." I've heard this before. I don't expect teachers to go out and buy 25 books for every child, but you're giving such a gift,

so what if they lose it or it gets lost? You know, I would be tickled to go before the Board of Ed and say, "My children read so much and their scores improved to such a great degree that I have no library books left because they're all worn thin from them turning the pages. Can you help me?" How else do teachers expect kids to get better at reading if they are not making books available to them? (collective voice)

Another factor that influences how we teach reading: gender. We always talk about boys not reading on grade level or meeting the benchmark. Boys tend to read later; boys tend to need more direct overt instruction. That may be one of the pieces that is a real barrier. Different students need different things. We need to start paying more attention to our boys. (Kinna)

## Bridging the Gap Between Home and School

*When I ask what families can do at home to help their children to succeed as*

*readers, administrators emphasize that we can do more in bridging the gap between*

*home and school.*

Parents can read. That's the simplest thing. They can privilege literacy, make it important. (collective voice)

In my house we have books, and magazines, everything and iPads all over. Everybody is always talking, debating, and Googling. It's sort of what's been considered in a sense middle-class privilege, children asking questions, children asking questions in a way out of turn. That's a privilege everyone should be entitled to. I think that's a good thing. I don't think that's a question of disrespect. I think we misinterpret that. I think what we should be looking at is intellectual interest and curiosity. What is it that kids like to read? (Kinna)

*District administrators also emphasize the need for variety in the ways the school*

*district interacts and communicates with families. In addition to making books available*

*for children to take home, administrators believe that the use of technology is crucial to*

*bridging the gap between school and home.*

There's a sense of urgency in Oakwood from my perspective because I don't know about you, but parents are on their Blackberries and they're on their iPhones. If they're working, they're on their desktop and that's what they have access to. So why not put things at their fingertips because that's where they're at. You can say we're a poor community, but everyone has a Blackberry. They've got something. Somebody's got something, and—trust me—the ones who don't, we can work with them. And that's just a handful. If we survey the kids and I

think we have, it's just a handful of kids who don't have access. Blackberry, Twitter, Facebook, that's where parents are at, and you have to reach them where they're at. You have to kind of meet them halfway. (Jamie)

When the schools work well, I guess what you really hope for is that people will come in and share family stories, share cultural artifacts, that you'll have parents participating here, and it never got off the ground. I tried to do something where I had parents come in, I wanted parents to come in, have teachers set aside an hour every Friday and speak a language other than Spanish. Speak Urdu, speak Tagalog. (Jeannette)

The schools have to do a better job in supporting initiatives that celebrate the teaching of reading instruction and accomplishment of reading. (Jamie)

## It's Not That I Can't Do It

*The Energy to Lead*
*It definitely comes from the children*
*My love for this district, my work with the kids and the adults.*
*I love our parents.*
*I get some of my best ideas from the parents.*
*They are pains.*
*Sometimes I don't want to hear it, but they tend to get it.*
*Even if I had a bad day*
*I don't want to come to school*
*Because they got on my nerves yesterday*
*I tell myself I'm going to stay in my office.*
*Then I would get to school and it would just be like Hi, Ms. Noble!*
*I thought I was going to be mean today?*
*I thought I was just going to be serious?*
*They got on my nerves yesterday!*
*It's amazing how the children turn things around.*
*It makes me want to learn more about them.*
*I want to best support them.*
*I want to put them on the path where education is a great equator,*
*Even if they don't become students that are high academic achievers.*
*At least*
*They walk away with the confidence*
*That they can do anything and*
*Be anything.*
*When they leave*
*They can say*
*I had a great time.*
*It was tough, it was not easy*
*But I really enjoyed my time in Oakwood.*
*The people cared.*
*The teachers cared.*

*The principal cared.*
*They knew who I was.*
*They knew my family.*
*They knew my name.*
*That's where it is.*

*Like teachers, building principals share their frustration with how much they are asked to do, given the time constraints and limited personnel. Principals talk about the challenges that they encounter while working with teachers to create a successful, enjoyable, comfortable learning environment. They express the following sentiments as building leaders.*

> We probably have about 40% of our population that is not reading where they should be. When we get the NJASK back we might discover it's 80%; 40% was depressing enough. That would mean if we truly decide to provide support services to every child who is reading below grade level, we would be expecting two teachers to intervene and remediate 100 to160 kids. That's not really realistic. And to flip to a coaching model like the district is considering, it's a really nice idea, but once again you have two teachers to go in and coach 22 teachers. I just find that it's endemic of society. We just have to do more with less. But we don't tell students, "Do more with less; don't accomplish more." We tell them to work smarter and set goals and be thoughtful about their approaches. (Kinna)

> You have to know what's going on with reading instruction, and all of that takes a lot of management skills. Principals are managing curriculum instruction, but they are managing personnel, they're managing fiscal responsibility, they're managing human relations, they're managing their actual physical plants and capital projects. Principals need help in how to manage and prioritize the things that are important for their vision of their school. It's difficult, and we need another person, we do need a vice principal. You do need a reading supervisor. (Jamie)

> I would love if the supervisors had offices in the school. It's like, "Why are you over there? You need to be in the school, have an office here, see what's going on; see what the teachers are working on and what they're struggling with and then you can best help instead of sending over a binder that really is not going to give them the tools that they need." There's nothing more important than being in the classroom and being with the kids and teaching a lesson yourself as building principal or literacy supervisor, modeling reading lessons for the teacher. (collective voice)

## Professional Learning Communities

*Repeatedly during our conversations teachers say they would like more time for meaningful collaboration with their colleagues. Teachers report that they would like more time to reflect, engage in dialogue, plan, and learn from one another. Staff meetings, common prep periods, and district grade level meetings are often used and viewed as the vehicles to provide of teachers with the time to engage in dialogue and collaborate with colleagues. However, these meetings are often preplanned with a prepared agenda by the administrator in charge. Teachers are not encouraged to discuss issues in depth, time is typically limited, and unfortunately, once the meeting is over, the conversations and collaboration rarely continue during any of the following meetings. Teacher and administrator participants in this study also emphasize the need for job embedded professional development opportunities.*

*As I reread the transcripts and reflect on our responses, it occurs to me that the issue of time is related to the self-silencing that some teachers impose on themselves. As teachers, we silence our voices for a variety of reasons. We may decide to withhold suggestions because in the past when administrators ask us for our input, it occurs to us that our suggestions have not become part of the agenda. Or it could be that administrators ask us to complete a survey of our professional development needs but then schedule professional development sessions that do not reflect or address our needs. As a result, some teachers participate minimally, just enough to be viewed as a team player. This experience varies from teacher to teacher and building to building, and the extent of self-silencing differs depending on the individual, his or her experiences, and the culture of the school.*

*To move forward as a district we need to stop working in isolation. We need to stop silencing ourselves and be fully engaged. If we think that our suggestions are not being taken seriously, we need to ask about it. There may be more going on and we need to ask.*

*Some administrators advocate and encourage teachers to be leaders. Some administrators have introduced the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs), but have not followed through with this initiative effectively. The level of understanding of PLCs also varies among administrators and teachers. Some administrators provide common prep time for teachers to meet and collaborate, but unfortunately because this practice has not been a part of the existing school's culture, teachers may not take advantage of those times when they are provided.*

*The conversations with teachers and administrators reveal that this issue of time is about more than just being provided time to collaborate with colleagues; this is about changing and creating a culture where teachers view PLCs as a valuable practice for improving their craft and gaining and strengthening their knowledge of a particular subject. This is about teachers and administrators making the commitment to participate in a PLC in order to identify and address the strengths and weaknesses of students in a timely fashion (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Eaker & Keating, 2008; Fullan, 2005). DuFour (2004) argues that educational leaders have an obligation to align the practices of their schools and districts with what they know to be the most effective strategies to achieve the fundamental purpose of their profession — high levels of learning for all students. LaFee (2003) writes that the development of PLCs is "an idea that goes beyond raising achievement standards or test scores…allowing greater*

*freedom to explore and pursue new ideas for educating students without threat from the usual villains of bureaucratic inertia, self-interest and the status quo" (p. 1). Hence, a staff meeting or professional development session about student test scores and analyzing student data does not constitute a PLC. Watching a video or reading an educational article with little to no dialogue following the reading does not advance a teacher professionally. Such inquiry while crucial, need to be addressed in an ongoing and collaborative manner.*

*Successful PLCs are a collaborative effort on the part of both teachers and administrator to engage in in-depth, on-going, systemic conversations about teaching and learning (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2005; Fullan, 2005; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). Education researchers argue that schools with strong PLCs experience positive cultural changes, such as, reduced teacher isolation, increased peer learning, increased content knowledge, increased student achievement, increased knowledge of effective teaching strategies, greater job satisfaction, higher morale, and higher teacher retention rates (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2005; Eaker & Keating, 2008; Fullan, 2005; LaFee, 2003; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). Administrators have an obligation to make extensive efforts to improve the teaching and learning experiences of their schools. DuFour (2004) posits that school leaders who align the workings of their schools and classrooms with the knowledge base regarding effective practices enhance their profession, and thereby improve student learning outcomes. Allowing misalignment and ineffective teaching practices to go unaddressed diminishes the profession and works against the interest of students (DuFour, 2004, DuFour et al., 2005).*

*During the 1960s Oakwood's school leaders and Board of Education recognized the importance of providing quality education to all students. Despite the challenges that existed in the 1960s, school leaders and the community worked collaboratively to develop policies and implement a curriculum that would optimize learning for all students. In the 1960s there was a sense of urgency to provide high-quality education to all students that seems to be missing today. We must create a serious sense of urgency, a sense of collaborative will to stand up for our children  and promote an environment that not only embraces diversity, but one that work relentlessly to optimize learning for all students.*

*Along the same vein, we teachers cannot continue to wait for administrators to provide the answers to our professional needs. Yes, some of us pursue educational opportunities outside of the school district. However, as a school community, many of us continue to work in isolation and do not make the time to create our learning opportunities within the school walls. We teachers can decide to create a PLC without waiting for administrators to make time available during the school day.  This may mean that we decide to commit 1 hour per week outside of the contractual hours to pursue our professional needs. I know that this is a controversial subject, but it is a professional practice that as professionals we need to reconsider. While this proactive effort would serve the need of the district and the parents, it is for the sake of our professional survival. We need to empower ourselves and find ways to make our profession enjoyable and rewarding again, beyond the satisfaction we receive from working with our students. We need to find ways to regain and maintain our energy to teach and be successful teachers, not because teacher evaluation models say so, but because we choose to energize ourselves and remain abreast with current educational research. We, as*

*teachers, have to stand up for our profession and stop waiting for others to speak and*

*stand up for us.*

### Their Plates Are Overflowing

*Administrators discuss the ways they can assist K–4 teachers in their learning,*

*planning, and implementation of high-quality reading instruction.*

District administration has to support teachers and provide professional development that's meaningful, that's job-embedded, and just taking what you learn, what you know about best practices in professional development, on site. Timely, consistent, supportive PD in the classroom as opposed to a disconnect. I've seen a shift in that over the years, as well. Moving from kind of just topics to more embedded classroom lab sites type of PD and continuing to support those types of PD for teachers where they can say, "This is what I'm struggling with, I'm finding that I'm trying to do this, or I'm having difficulty managing this." I think time for those conversations is essential. I think more opportunities for meaningful collaboration should be provided. (collective voice)

District administrators have to provide consistency in the PD that they make available to teachers. One of the things that I find confusing is we'll have four different consultants come in and talk about the same topic, and they use the same terminology but mean vastly different things and have vastly different beliefs about what you need to do, and it may not matter so much what you do first, as long as you're consistent. A lot of our problems are due to inconsistencies, and sometimes we just drive kids nuts. It's a very sophisticated, complicated program that people need ongoing training and support with, and I'm not quite sure it's being implemented as it was intended to be. (Kinna)

District administrators also need to support teachers as leaders. In terms of motivating teachers, wanting to go the extra mile, not making them feel inundated with so much stuff, but that they're supported and they can manage all of these components that we're asking them to do. Sometimes I get overwhelmed in what I'm asking you. I'm like, oh my God, I have to ask her this, and I know I should not be that way, but I am not so far removed from my classroom experiences. I don't understand the things, the daily things, that are on the plates of teachers. So I think that just an awareness of that in terms of district administration is very important. I think, you know, a culture of learning is important. A culture of communication, where we're not hoarding secrets on teaching, where we share with each other, we have collaborative approaches to teaching reading instruction, and the district administration supports those ideas and supports critical feedback from teachers on what's successful or not. (Jamie)

*Through the use of CRT as a theoretical framework, this chapter is written to understand how the administrators of Oakwood Public Schools make policy and curriculum decisions as the district continues to experience a growth in children of color and a high level of students living in poverty. Teacher participants in this study speak willingly and candidly about race and educational inequalities between students of color and White students. However, there is an absence of conversation about race and educational inequalities when administrators are interviewed.*

*Although district administrators talk about ELLs, cultural diversity, and poverty, the extent to which these factors influence student performance is limited during the conversations. Viewed through the lens of CRT and culturally responsive teaching, Oakwood administrators say that they value diversity of the district, but they do not talk about being focused on leading the discussion of the complexities of why the achievement gap exist. The achievement gap will persist without administrators leading our collective exploration of it, asking how do we understand it? How do we work with the students and partner with their parents? District administrators began the conversation on racial inequalities several years ago when Pedro Noguera was hired to examine the achievement gap; however, the conversation has yet to continue among all stakeholders (students, parents, community members, teachers, and administrators). On a smaller scale, the Superintendent hosts monthly meetings with families and the Oakwood community. Sundays With the Superintendent provide the Superintendent an opportunity to engage in dialogue with the stakeholders of the Oakwood Public School community. Stakeholders have a forum in which to reflect, raise concerns, and create plans of action regarding the state of education in Oakwood.*

*These Sunday meetings are held from 2 to 4 o'clock in a small conference room in the central office, and they are often attended by only a small core group. This venue has the potential to make stakeholders feel unwelcome, which does not seem to be the intent behind the meetings. Limiting the physical space, thereby limiting stakeholder involvement, may suggest to the community, "Your presence is not necessary. Your voice as a concerned community member is not welcomed. It is OK if you cannot attend the meeting because there is no room for you at this table."*

*Sundays With the Superintendent could be enhanced by publicizing it via the districtwide telephone system as a backup method to remind the community of the meeting. Notices can also be sent home with students. Perhaps, extensive efforts can be made to have the community present at these meetings. In addition to making use of the telephone blast system, perhaps a lunch or light refreshments could be served to attract more people. Scheduling the meeting in a larger room, such as the media center at one of the schools, where tables can be rearranged to create a more intimate setting and promote dialogue among a larger number of participants, is another way to communicate the significance of these Sunday meetings. Likewise, given that 28% of Oakwood's student population is of Hispanic background, the use of a Spanish translator at the meetings would encourage attendance by the Hispanic community and indicate the importance of listening to their perspectives.*

*The community needs to feel that a genuine effort is being made to invite them to participate in this forum. There is an urgent need for honest dialogue among stakeholders in Oakwood, even if it means addressing inflammatory and incendiary topics. If the intent of Sundays With the Superintendent is to involve stakeholders, then*

*these meetings should be held consistently each month and rescheduled within the same month when unforeseen circumstances warrant cancellation of a scheduled meeting.*

*Rereading the transcripts and narratives from the perspective of CRT, is it possible that this conversation about race is not happening elsewhere in the nation, as well? Racism creates an environment in which conversations about race are viewed by many as dangerous, uncomfortable, and to be avoided. CRT scholars argue that, whether or not administrators agree, issues of race and educational inequality must be addressed by school and community stakeholders in order to close the achievement gap and improve the learning outcomes of all students, especially Black and Hispanic students (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Kumasi, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Noguera, 2008; Yosso, 2005).*

*During this research conversation it is evident that without honest, uncomfortable, in-depth dialogue, the educational disparities will continue, with very little chance of making strides toward closing the achievement gap and providing a high-quality educational experience for all children. However uncomfortable one may feel when reading this work, it is my hope that opportunities for conversations among all stakeholders will improve and that extensive efforts will be made by leaders and teachers to listen to all stakeholders.*

## Chapter 7: Moving Forward: Implications for

### Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Policy

### Auto-Ethnographic Vignette

*Because I am a teacher-researcher, this inquiry process informs my practice in a number of ways. As I complete each interview and focus group session, I reflect on the process and track thoughts, questions that emerge, and reactions to the interview in my field journal. I often find myself reflecting on how I teach reading and how I've grown and transformed as a teacher of reading during my tenure. I consider whether I've become stagnant in my teaching. I question whether I am still able to invigorate children and make them want to pick up a book and not put it down, or if I, like many of my colleagues, have succumbed to the pressures of high-stakes testing and unconsciously shifted my approach to teaching reading. Much to my dismay, I discover, I have shifted my approach. I still read aloud to my students. I still immerse my students in literature, but I now realize that some of the fun, naturalistic aspect of learning how to read is absent. To counteract this, I revisit my professional mentor texts.*

*About 4 months into this study, I re-read some of my favorites by Routman, Strickland, and Calkins, to name just a few. A sense of urgency motivates me to revisit, reconnect, and find my way back to being the innovative reading teacher that I once was. I am inspired and energized by my colleagues. As I focus more and more on the essentials of teaching reading and not simply preparing my students for the third grade NJASK, I begin to enjoy my profession once again. I find myself bonding with my students on a deeper level, rather than in quick, superficial ways. I am becoming the teacher that I used to be when I first left Teachers College. My students have always mattered to me, but I had stopped taking the time to truly bond with them. As I take the time to reconnect with my students, they, too, begin to enjoy their school days. I am no longer rushing from one content area to the next with the primary goal of getting them ready for third grade, for the NJASK. We now begin our school days reading a variety of genres, either alone or with a buddy instead of a worksheet. When we return from lunch, we regroup by reading with a buddy. We engage in these rituals, as well as an hour-long reading workshop where we focus on a particular skill or strategy and practice reading independently to build fluency and stamina and to increase comprehension skills.*

*I have become more conscious of my interactions with colleagues, questioning my tendency to teach in a silo and reevaluating the self-silencing that I had imposed upon myself. I am beginning to see some of my colleagues in a different light. I no longer hold misconceptions that because they are White and are working with children of color, they don't care. I often thought that because my colleagues could simply go home and forget, all some of them did was get through the day. Boy, was I wrong! It is quite humbling for me to experience how passionate and committed my colleagues are to all children regardless of racial or ethnic back-*

*ground. I am learning that it isn't that my colleagues do not care, but rather that the classrooms are not adequately equipped for optimal learning experiences. Many of my colleagues exude a love of learning, teaching, and the children that they hold dear to their hearts.*

*I have become rededicated to literacy in the district, and I want to give building community another try. I am realizing how wounded I am by the district's approach to professional development and staffing decisions. There are times when district administrators will hire a consultant or a literacy enrichment teacher who is less knowledgeable than many of the current teachers on staff. The lack of appreciation for teachers who are well trained in the craft of literacy instruction and the tendency to view teacher advocates as non-team players have led many of my colleagues and me to self-silence. These practices wound us. Through this process, I am learning that although my experiences may seem unique to me, they are not uncommon. The colleagues that I engage in conversations have also been wounded or have experiences that leave a "bad taste in their mouth."*

### Discussion

Many suburban towns in the United States are experiencing demographic changes. Oakwood is one of those towns transforming from a White, middle-class suburban town. Unlike suburban towns in the county that surround it, Oakwood does not conform to the stereotype of homogeneity, affluence, and high achievement. Oakwood's current landscape reflects cities more than it does its neighboring suburban towns. It continues to experience an increase in poverty, social and political marginalization, immigration, and educational disparities between White students and students of color. Suburban areas such as Oakwood are now increasingly associated with developing enclaves based on race, ethnicity, religion, or interest, thus shaping the ways in which people perceive and define them (Borjas, 2002; Frankenberg, 2008, Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Mikelbank, 2004; Murphy, 2010; Orfield, 2002a; Short et al., 2007).

### Review of the Findings

Many forces shape the sense of self, among them education, nationality, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and geography (Chang, 2008). Teachers bring these forces

into the classroom, thus influencing their perception of students and their families

(Lincoln et al., 2011). Using a research paradigm that combines auto-ethnography and

action research enables me to discover the strength and advantage of teachers as

researchers. The teachers who share information candidly during focus groups and

individual interviews do so largely because I am also a teacher and share similar

experiences with them; however, they also recognize that I am making myself vulnerable

through the study process, which makes them more willing to share insights with me. Just

as CRT scholars question the usefulness of education research that is conducted about the

education of children of color but lacks the authentic voice of people of color as

researchers or participants, I question the usefulness of teacher research that lacks the

authentic voice of teachers (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The findings of this study illuminate the experiences of teachers and district

administrators. The maps and graphs that are created using GIS software illustrate and

track the transformation of Oakwood from a White, middle-class suburban town to a

diverse suburban community.

One revealing aspect of this process is that many of the district administrators

whom I interview really "get it." That is an eye opener for me, for I did not think that

administrators understood what it is like for teachers to have to deal with so many

demands while attempting to meet the needs of such a diverse group of students. But they

remember what it is like to be a classroom teacher with a plate full of demands. Some

administrators realize that students face great social, emotional, economic, and

educational challenges. They are struggling to find ways to provide teachers with the

support and guidance that they need. The administrators also face challenges in trying to

balance the political, racial, educational, and socioeconomic aspects of educating children in a diverse suburban school district. During my conversations with district administrators, I learn that they feel the pressure of being leaders and have themselves been wounded by some of their experiences within the Oakwood community.

The focus group and the individual interview conversations indicate that most of the teachers in the Oakwood Public School District are knowledgeable about their craft. They are aware of the needs of their diverse student population and their families. Some acknowledge their lack of training and understanding of teaching reading. They are not comfortable in teaching children with various degrees of reading levels. They express a level of discomfort when they are asked to switch grade levels and teach a grade level that they have not previously taught. They find it difficult to "switch gears" and apply their knowledge of teaching reading from one grade level to another. This difficulty in transferring teaching skills points to a need for a cohesive reading curriculum and additional training in the area of reading instruction, as well as differentiated instruction. If a teacher is used to differentiating instruction and meeting children where they are, as opposed to where mandates dictate, a knowledge bank of teaching reading to children at various levels already exists—but perhaps it needs to be expanded or strengthened.

During my conversations with the teachers it is apparent that we believe that, if children are to succeed as readers, adjustments need to be made in the way we approach the teaching of reading today because of changing demographics, the role of technology, and the limitations that some families experience. Many teachers continuously seek ways to incorporate the culture of students into the reading curriculum as best as we can, despite the lack of guidance and resources provided by the district. While some materials

are available in the classrooms and various school buildings, individual classrooms are not properly equipped to plan and implement efficient and effective reading instruction for the district's diverse student population.

We need a reading curriculum that not only addresses the demands of the common core curriculum standards but also takes into consideration the diverse needs of Oakwood's student population. Our classrooms need to have books that incorporate a variety of reading levels and genres. The district needs to provide this leveled classroom library to achieve consistency in the skills that we teach and the reading habits that we want students to develop. If each classroom has a reading library, teachers may find it easier to release control of the books and allow students to borrow the books and take home developmentally appropriate materials to read and share with their families. The district needs to assess and replenish this leveled reading library.

Teachers need consistent ongoing conversations with colleagues and administrators about the teaching of reading. The district needs to provide time during staff meetings or professional development days for these conversations to take place, for teachers to plan and implement the curriculum effectively. Time needs to be provided for teachers to attend professional development sessions that will contribute to growth as literacy teachers in a diverse suburban public school district. They also need release time to visit other classrooms and other school buildings in the district to observe colleagues who may have strengths in areas where they may need to improve.

Reading instruction in the elementary grades needs to become a priority. In the same manner that safety issues are addressed with a sense of urgency, so must the district address the need to provide all students who are reading below grade level with the

support and services that they need to meet grade-level benchmarks in reading. Currently, district remediation support services for students who are reading below grade level are not available to all students; only students in the lowest percentile of those reading below grade level receive additional reading support. Whereas, at one time the number of students below grade level could be addressed through two literacy enrichment teachers per building, the current need for literacy remediation far exceeds the available services. As a result, many students who are reading below grade level have no access to additional support services beyond the classroom. The district still relies on two literacy enrichment teachers per school building to provide these remediation services. Consequently, many students continue to struggle and fail to meet grade-level benchmarks. This raises the question: Why does the district not reassess this structure, in light of the increase in students with diverse linguistic backgrounds and literacy needs? It also raises a question about the viability of the district's expectation that teachers meet these diverse needs in the classroom without additional support.

Teachers who participate in this study advocate for a district philosophy on the teaching of reading that is created by all stakeholders rather than taking the top-down approach to reform. We have identified the stakeholders to be parents, teachers, and administrators who understand the significance of culturally responsive teaching and the contributions that such practice make in optimizing the learning outcomes of a diverse student population. We recognize that the student demographics of the Oakwood Public School District have changed over the past 20 years. The findings of this research indicate that most teachers approach the teaching of reading with the common core standards and cultural needs of Oakwood's student population in mind, even without a

district wide reading curriculum. The shift in demographics in the suburbs makes it imperative to implement a literacy curriculum and policy that are culturally responsive to meet the needs of students and their families. It also means that we have to educate parents on the "culture of school," with which they may not be familiar. They also may have a different perspective of the role of parents within schools in the United States, and this needs to be addressed.

This transformation in student population that school districts such as Oakwood are experiencing also requires teachers to shift the way in which they think about and view students and their families. My conversations with the teachers reveal that we make assumptions about a child's life at home based on the students' low test scores, reading levels, or a parent's inability to attend parent-teacher conferences or Back-to-School Night. Some teachers assume that students are performing at a low level in school because their parents are not supportive, not reading to them, speaking to them, or taking them to places such as the zoo or the museum. Some teachers also assume that, because the student population in the Oakwood school district is changing, the students in Oakwood lack consistency in their lives and need to be "fixed."

When we make assumptions about students' lives, those assumptions guide our attitudes and expectations for the students. Teachers need to be careful about making such assumptions and instead find ways to learn about the students and their families. Parents may very well be reading to their children. They may very well engage in conversation with their children and take them on outings. It is difficult for teachers to know what is happening in the home. When we make these assumptions, we are taking the position that families are at fault for a child's low academic performance and that the

child's educational experience at school does not play a determining role in his or her academic success. CRT scholars argue that this kind of deficit thinking is one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in American schools (Yosso, 2005). According to Yosso, deficit thinking also assumes that it is the students, their parents, families, and communities that should change and conform, not the schools.

The deficit paradigm affects the curriculum that schools value and implement. It also dictates which curriculum is left out, leaving some children feeling unworthy and academically cheated. The assumptions that teachers make speak to the need for teachers to engage in culturally responsive teaching. By adopting a culturally responsive perspective, teachers question their own biases and may avoid making dangerous assumptions about students, their families, and their homes (Ladson-Billings, 2009). We need to begin to rethink the way we view students and their families. Just as we are not solely responsible for the academic success or failure of students, similarly their families are not wholly responsible. As Ladson-Billings (2009) says, teachers are not "bad" educators purely because of the way they view African American children or other children of color. She posits that these very same teachers decry racism and believe in equal opportunity; however, they do not understand that their assumptions about their students interfere with their ability to be effective teachers for them.

Another critical theme that emerges from the focus group discussion is the role that federal, state, and district mandates play in the day-to-day teaching of and learning by students. One of the limitations of policies such as NCLB is that much is being demanded of districts but the resources and funding required to implement the law are not available. Thus, schools are asked to do more and are held accountable for much more

while receiving very little funding from the state department of education to assist in the process. These reform policies take the position that the problems with public schools, failing schools, and poor children are confined within the schools (Akom, 2008; Anyon, 1997; Belfield & Levin, 2007; Berliner, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noguera, 2002; Yosso, 2005). The policies fail to acknowledge and address the additional factors that affect student achievement and the ability of schools to engage effectively in the business of teaching and learning. There are many challenges to be overcome by students, families, teachers, and school administrators. Those challenges will continue to exist if stakeholders do not work together to address each issue, create a plan of action, implement said plan, and see it through. It is acceptable to regroup and refine one's plan, but the plan needs to be created and executed first.

When I ask how district administrators can support elementary teachers in implementing the reading curriculum to improve students' learning outcomes, teachers and administrators make the following suggestions.

Teachers say they want their voices to be heard. "Listen, listen to us, really listen to what we're saying, what works, what doesn't work, what we need, the problems we're facing." They say, "Get answers for us; give us the training that we need. If we are going to implement these things, the district needs to know what the program is about, and administrators need to be educated about it." According to teachers, administrators should be educated about the target population and be honest about the demographics of the student population, rather than approaching decision making as if the students are primarily White middle-class children. "These are not the kids of 17 years ago. You've got to respond to what's in front of you."

The teachers make the following suggestions:

1. Develop a common district philosophy for teaching reading that has an enduring quality. A philosophy is different from a program, from the box that is dumped in the teacher's room, presuming that the teacher can "figure it out." A philosophy is a vision statement that one invests in, develops, and crafts carefully to guide practices. The school community needs to do the hard work of crafting a vision to share with the families of the students and the community.

2. Develop a curriculum that empowers students, encourages them to be excited about learning, develops their creativity and critical thinking skills, and most of all, instills an appreciation for books and creates lifelong learners.

3. Provide support for the elementary school principals. They cannot do two jobs at once effectively, both as building manager and instructional leader. Create the position of assistant principal or dean to facilitate teaching and learning in the elementary schools, making it possible for principals to be effective instructional leaders who spend more time in the classroom or function as building managers, but not both.

4. Reinstate the teacher liaison position to improve communication and relationships between central office administrators and teachers.

5. Separate the responsibilities of the literacy enrichment teachers. They need to either be coaches or reading teachers, not both, because they do not have time to do both jobs well. Additional staff needs to be provided to assist in small group work at the kindergarten level.

6. Allow each subject supervisor to spend at least 12 days a year as a substitute teacher in the subject area that he or she has been assigned to supervise, to gain a first-hand experience of what teachers experience daily.

7. Hold people accountable to do what they are supposed to do at all levels in the system and make ongoing accountability a focal point of teaching reading. There needs to be a balance among meeting mandates, data collection, data analysis, and conversations among teachers and administrators. The responsibility and challenge of helping students to move from one reading level to the next needs to be shared by teachers and administrators.

8. Provide more books on CDs to support the fluency needs of ELLs. This will provide models of reading expressively available at home. This will also lesson the burden of parents who may not be available to read aloud to their child.

9. Provide each classroom teacher with sets of books on topics of interest, topics about the students, more cultural books, books that are of different genres and levels. This will communicate to students that we are aware of their interests, we value them, and we respect their cultural background.

10. Provide professional development that is immediately usable and valuable so teachers can take any book and extract from it the things that students need to know and need to be able to do. Provide ongoing job-embedded professional development opportunities that meet the needs of both novice and veteran teachers. Customize the professional development sessions based on teachers' needs, years of experience, and level of training.

11. Create a professional teacher center to collect a library of professional materials for teachers, where teachers from all schools can coordinate, meet, collaborate, and brainstorm.

12. Provide professional development about the changing student population, including cultural practices and beliefs of children from Pakistan, the Philippines, and various parts of Africa who are part of the student population. We have not had training on their cultural backgrounds to understand fully the ramifications of our practices and interactions with students and their families.

13. Reinstate monthly grade-level meetings to improve articulation across the district and collegiality among staff members. These meetings will allow teachers to reflect and evaluate their teaching practices so they are not islands in their classrooms. Providing teachers with time to participate in a learning community and collaborate with colleagues allows them to share experiences and challenges and collaboratively develop instructions plans of action that will benefit and meet the needs of students.

14. Make use of alternative assessments that can inform and drive instruction. Teachers want to see students thrive, to "light up." They look forward to witnessing the moment when students realize that they are reading fluently with expression, understanding what they read, and engaging in conversations about what they read. Teachers anticipate students saying, "I'm doing it," "I get it now," "I can do this!," We want to assess students' learning not to collect data for the sake of collecting data, but to reflect and create an instructional plan that will help students to move to the next level and continue to grow as learners.

15. Acknowledge and show appreciation for the work that teachers do.

16. Engage in meaningful dialogue with teachers and ask them about what they see as impediments to their reasons for teacher, making learning more successful for students.

17. Check with teachers to see how new programs/curriculums are being implemented. Follow through on plans with materials, support, and professional development.

Building-level administrators make the following suggestions for their colleagues and central office administrators:

1. Provide professional development that is meaningful, job embedded, and differentiated for novice and veteran teachers.

2. Provide consistency in professional development opportunities for teachers. The information that is shared by content area consultants cannot vary from teacher to teacher or from school to school.

3. Support teachers as leaders by rewarding them when they go the extra mile of helping to streamline district initiatives. Support teachers' interest in being leaders by providing opportunities to demonstrate expertise in a particular content area. Instead of hiring outside consultants to provide professional development, survey the current teaching staff for teachers who remain abreast of current research and demonstrate their strength in a particular content area.

4. Create a culture of learning and a culture of communication in which administrators are eager to share information and materials. Opportunities for building principals to collaborate and discuss the needs of their schools and share ideas need to be increased.

5. Provide content supervisors with an office space in each of the schools so they have an ongoing physical presence in the building, allowing them to interact with teachers, visit classrooms, and immediately address the concerns of teachers and the building principal.

6. Provide assistance to elementary school principals by creating the position of vice principal to manage and prioritize tasks that are important for their vision of their school.

7. Provide support services to every child who is reading below grade level by hiring additional literacy enrichment teachers. There is a dire need to make K–3 a priority. Early intervention is critical to assuring that students gain skills to be fluent readers who can think critically. Rather than waiting for the results of the NJASK3 to address the needs of students, identify and address weaknesses early and provide students with intensive intervention to develop and strengthen their reading skills.

8. Support initiatives that celebrate the teaching of reading instruction and celebrate student success.

9. Improve communication with families by making use of the parents' technological resources, such as iPhones, Blackberries, Facebook, and Twitter.

While most of these suggestions that teachers and administrators make can apply to all schools in any teaching situations, they would help in teaching reading to children of color and of other ethnic backgrounds. As a woman of color teaching in a district where 88% of the students are students of color, I am acutely aware of the role that my background plays as I conduct this study with colleagues who are primarily White. Some of the White participants are hyper vigilant and carefully construct their words during our

conversations. Some are more comfortable in speaking about issues of race and education off the record or wait until the digital recorder is turned off to engage the subject; others speak freely and honestly about issues of racial inequities in the school district and emphasize the need to engage in honest dialogue about race and education.

As a teacher-researcher, highlighting the experiences of teachers and administrators is a way to increase racial and cultural enlightenment by listening and discussing the inequities that exist in the school district. This study provides a forum to reflect and discuss how the assumptions that we make about children and their families symbolize the unconscious racism that is revealed during our conversations. The goal of this research is to enlighten, not to do harm. I struggle with how to present this information and keep the conversation going because the participants may feel that they are being accused or attacked and the conversation may end.

These are my colleagues, some of whom I see on a daily basis and others whom I see during district meetings. This is a careful negotiation of how to navigate this already-coded terrain of racism. Not wanting to portray the participants in a way that damages our relationship, I struggle with how to highlight our experiences and develop a capacity to discuss race and culture, as well as race and education. Given this dilemma, I want to acknowledge my colleagues for engaging in this work to improve the learning experiences and learning outcomes of the diverse student population in Oakwood.

A race-neutral or color-blind approach to education and policy making does not benefit students and we as a community need to find ways to engage in this difficult dialogue about race and its role in education. CRT scholars argue that a race-neutral approach to teaching and policy making does not empower students nor improve their

learning experiences. Teachers want to see students thrive and succeed. They want to see students and their families beam with pride. They want to see faces light up when they excel. What I want for my school district is what is missing in America: an honest open dialogue about race and education that moves participants to reflection and action.

Research indicates that reading instruction that is culturally responsive contributes to a child's success (Au, 2001; Delpit, 1996; Gay, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Schmidt & Lazar, 2011). Moreover, culturally responsive instruction that builds on the strengths of a child's background and is accompanied by reading materials that represent their interests and culture enriches and empowers students (Au, 2010; Delpit, 2009; Gay, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Schmidt & Lazar, 2011). As evident by the narratives and suggestions, both teachers and administrators speak of the need for teachers to bond with students and to be culturally responsive educators. Administrators say, "Kids are different today. . . . We've become a little homogenized. We're not looking at some of the great strengths of being in a diverse cultural situation." Teachers and administrators advocate for professional development opportunities that contribute to teachers' knowledge of diversity to improve the learning outcomes of a diverse student population. Both groups advocate for professional development that is differentiated based on a teacher's interest, needs, level of expertise, and years of teaching experience. Teachers and administrators stress the importance of family involvement and finding ways to improve communication between families and schools.

Teachers and administrators support and emphasize the need for students to develop skills as readers, to be actively engaged in their learning, and to be encouraged to think critically. However, the groups are not in agreement as to how these goals can be

achieved. When I ask administrators to speak about the teaching practices that they have witnessed while observing teachers teach reading, they talk of the clear connection between enthusiasm for reading, sharing the joys of reading, and students' engagement. Administrators comment that they often hear teachers say, "It's my book. I bought it in Barnes & Noble; you can't take it home because it's not going to come back." I have also heard this.

On the other hand, teachers view administrators as being responsible for providing teachers with the teaching resources and support to provide effective reading instruction.

> They [administration] gave me resources, but they're not all at the level my children are reading. I have to go to another teacher and borrow their books; we share. People aren't equipped in their classrooms! That's just the bottom line. I'm shocked by what I don't have. I'm shocked by what I'm given as resources to teach, and I'm shocked at the bits and pieces that I have to put together in order to make it complete. Teachers shouldn't be spending as much time searching for materials as implementing lessons, that's a big problem. It is a waste of time. I want to move the children forward. I'm doing this now, and I'm going to do it again tomorrow, or next week, I'm going to do it how many times? And it's a constant drain on my time. (Niles)

Teachers' emphasis on the need for adequate teaching materials represents a level of concern for effective reading instruction that is not seen as a primary focus by administrators. Administrators speak of the need to improve reading instruction and student outcomes. They speak of the need for teachers to bond with their students and "give the gift of literacy." However, rather than recognizing the need to provide teachers with teaching materials that allow for differentiated instruction based on students' reading needs, administrators view teachers as resourceful individuals who supplement their classroom with needed teaching materials to meet district and state mandates.

Administrators view teachers as primary providers of in-class reading instruction, as well as providers of remediation support to students who are reading below grade level. However, research indicates that intensive early intervention is key to improving students' reading skills and helping students to meet grade-level benchmarks. There is an urgent need for schools to respond to the growing body of evidence that students who are not reading at grade level by the third grade will continue to be at an educational disadvantage. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) write, "Early intervention is necessary to move the greatest majority of students into literacy easily, before they feel the weight of failure" (p. 193). They go on to say that the lowest-achieving children in the early grades need expert, high-quality, well-timed, intensive intervention beyond what the regular classroom teacher can provide (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Words such as *remediation* and *intervention* are controversial in the educational arena, especially in suburban school districts where children are expected to be high achievers. Policymakers, administrators, and researchers often advocate for high-stakes testing and placing higher demands on teachers, rather than providing extra levels of support that low-achieving students need (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Noguera, 2002). Researchers argue that, when a conscious and deliberate approach to education is evident, school districts succeed in encouraging and promoting student achievement. Researchers further argue that effective schools consistently evaluate, monitor, and modify their educational programs until there is clear evidence that the curricula and programs that they have adopted are effective and meet the needs of students. They also argue that effective schools enter into partnerships with parents and provide early intervention to low-performing students as soon as they see signs that the students are not making

academic progress (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Meier, D., 1995; Meier, K., Stewart, &

England, 1989; Noguera, 2002; Routman, 2003).

The findings from this study raise many questions about the policy and

curriculum decisions that are made in the school district. The findings reveal that many of

the concerns that parents, teachers, administrators, and members of the community speak

about are not new. In 1964 one of the primary concerns that Black residents had about

two of Oakwood's schools being predominantly Black was the possibility of the schools

becoming stigmatized. The residents argued that, when schools become predominantly

Black, they become stigmatized and "White and Negro" teachers, who do not expect

Black children to learn, tend to stop teaching (Damerell, 1968). Thirty years later, in

1994, the Oakwood School Board established three committees to investigate racial

and/or ethnic bias that contributes to or causes inequities in the education of children of

color. Later, in 2005, the Oakwood Board hired Pedro Noguera to conduct a study on the

achievement gap between minority students and White students in Oakwood Public

Schools.

The findings from this study reveal that the committee in 1994 made exactly the

same recommendations that Noguera made in 2005. The committee and Noguera

suggested that the school district address disparities in the following areas:

- General student achievement

- Academically gifted and talented/honors/advanced placement

- Remedial classes

- Special education (self-contained/resource room)

- Tracking

- Parental involvement

- Guidance/forum/at-risk programs/discipline/school environment

- Asian/Indian students' special concerns

- Extracurricular activities

- Curriculum of inclusion/multiculturalism

- Instructional staff/human resource management

An increase in immigrant students, a growth of poverty, and ELLs in the school district only serve to exacerbate these issues. One may ask how it is that the same issues that existed nearly 20 years ago continue to exist today. District administrators continue to show an interest in addressing inequities in the educational experiences of Oakwood's children; however, the findings from this study raise another question: Why have Oakwood district administrators yet to yield to the research-based recommendations that their own committees and group of researchers make to addressing racial inequities and improving the learning outcomes of children in Oakwood? In an attempt to understand the decisions that are made by administrators, I look to CRT.

The actions of Oakwood administrators are logical and predictable results of a racialized society in which race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A primary premise of CRT is that racism in American society is normal (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Delgado posits that, because racism is embedded in the fabric of American society, "it looks ordinary and natural to the persons in that culture" (1995, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 58). In a similar fashion, Noguera (2006) reports that in urban and suburban school districts failure is normalized and there is no deep concern about the fact that students of color are not achieving.

Noguera et al. (2006) further argue that, when educators become accustomed to the idea

that recent immigrants, children of immigrants, and children from impoverished families

will not achieve at the same level as privileged White students, it is very unlikely that

reform efforts and revamping the curriculum will succeed in changing learning outcomes.

Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity, educational

policy, and approaches to curriculum and teaching that administrators and teachers take

in schools (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2005). CRT

scholars argue that high levels of student achievement are possible only when educators

believe in and act on their power and responsibility to make an educational difference in

the lives of all students (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Kumasi, 2011; Ladson-Billings &

Tate, 1995; Noguera, 2002; Yosso, 2005). CRT scholars advocate for change and note

that "change requires more than words on a page—it takes perseverance, creative

ingenuity, and acts of love" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 181).

I agree with their suggestions and hope that the findings from this study will move

district administrators beyond reflection. I believe that providing ongoing, relevant

professional development, finding ways to improve the partnership between home and

school, supplying all classrooms with a wide range of reading resources, and providing

early intervention to low-achieving readers are wise investments to be made by school

districts. There is a need to increase the level of support services to the early grades. As

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) write, "The early years are our chance to alter the trajectory

of failure, make a difference in students' lives, and in turn make a difference in our

educational system" (p. 193). Success in all content areas, the early grades, and

subsequent grades is contingent on a child's ability to develop skills early on to thrive as

readers who can think critically and engage in conversation about their reading. It is the

responsibility of teachers and administrators to provide students with the instruction,

materials, and support services that they need as soon as it is determined that they are

reading below grade level. It is not acceptable to continue to provide support services

only to the lowest percentile and expect students to meet grade-level benchmarks and

perform proficiently on the NJASK. School districts are not receiving the amount of state

funding that they have in the past and tax payers are overburdened and do not wish to

have their taxes continue to increase; however, administrators need to rethink ways to

address early reading intervention at the elementary level.

## Ethical Dilemmas Encountered

As I collect data, I address challenges in my dual roles as researcher and

participant carefully. As Semel (1994) and many other researchers who have conducted

studies "in their own backyards" have found, my affiliation with the school district

provides "important access that other researchers might not have had" (p. 10). The

participants and I have a shared language and history that make it more comfortable for

them to speak about their experiences with me. I value the information and experiences

the participants share with me. Not wanting to deceive or alienate my colleagues, I

recognize that some information is shared in the context of our collegial relationships. At

other times, information is shared with me as the researcher.

Ethical issues and some conflicts of interest arise as a result of my conducting

research in my place of employment. Glesne (2006) warns participant observers to enter

their backyards with a heightened consciousness of potential difficulties. I encounter

some challenges in managing the roles of teacher and researcher, friend and researcher,

employee and researcher (Glesne, 2006; Semel, 1994). For example, there are times during staff meetings or in the teacher's lounge when colleagues discuss an issue that I hear as pertinent to this study but I refrain from using the information because I am not in the role of "researcher" at the time. There are also times during staff meetings when colleagues look my way, see my digital recorder on the table, point to it, and sit at another table.

As an employee of the district, I encounter difficulties in obtaining documents and archive information relating to the infrastructure of the Oakwood Public Schools. However, once I begin to identify myself as a graduate student researcher from Rutgers University and an employee, the information is made available to me, and my email inquiries are promptly addressed.

Despite these challenges, there are also advantages. One of the primary benefits of conducting research in my own backyard is the ease of obtaining permission to use the school district as a research site (Appendix D). Another advantage is familiarity with the participants and the environment in which we work. I have an insider's view of the context within which the realities of our experiences are constructed. As Glesne (2006) points out, "In action and teacher research, being a part of the organization is vital because the research is generally a beginning step in a longer, change-oriented process" (p. 33). During the course of the research study, I do not make promises to participants about actions that district administrators may take upon reading the narratives, but I express my intention to share the findings with all participants in the hope that their voices will be heard and their concerns will be addressed (Appendix E).

## Criteria for Judging This Auto-Ethnographic Study

Auto-ethnographers are concerned with capturing "those elements that make life conflictual, moving, and problematic" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 121). Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that auto-ethnographic studies should be judged by the usefulness of the story being shared. Lincoln et al. (2011) propose five criteria for judging the processes and outcomes of qualitative inquiries: "fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity" (p. 122).

The first criterion, fairness, is thought to be a quality of balance; "that is, all stakeholder views, perspectives, values, claims, concerns, and voices should be apparent in the text" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 122). Lincoln et al. maintain that the omission of stakeholder or participant voices reflects a form of bias and that the consideration of fairness as a criterion is a deliberate attempt to prevent marginalization. In light of this criterion, I include at least one response by each participant. Also, each participant is included when similar verbal responses by more than one participant are woven and labeled "collective voice."

> We have more children today whose parents were born in another country, and they're speaking another language at home. This vastly affects their background knowledge. The heavy cultural experiences completely change what they come to the table with as far as getting ready for reading. It's very different. Cultural and ethnic diversity should be respected, appreciated, and celebrated as our world continues to become a melting pot of cultures. We have this dilemma, where the children come to school and they don't have experiences. We have to give them experiences, like taking them on field trips, engaging in conversation with them about their home life, preparing meals from scratch in the classroom, or using the school grounds as an outdoor learning center. (collective voice)

The second and third criteria, ontological and educative authenticity, raise the level of awareness by individual research participants and those with whom they may come into contact for a social or organizational purpose (Lincoln et al., 2011). Looking at

this work in light of this criterion, the study has prompted me to reevaluate myself as a teacher and colleague.

> *About four months into this study, I re-read some of my favorites by Routman, Strickland, and Calkins, to name just a few. A sense of urgency motivates me to revisit, reconnect, and find my way back to being the innovative reading teacher that I once was. I am inspired and energized by my colleagues. As I focus more and more on the essentials of teaching reading and not simply preparing my students for the third grade NJASK, I begin to enjoy my profession once again. I find myself bonding with my students on a deeper level, rather than in quick, superficial ways. I am becoming the teacher that I used to be when I first left Teachers College. My students have always mattered to me, but I had stopped taking the time to truly bond with them. As I take the time to reconnect with my students, they, too, begin to enjoy their school days. I am no longer rushing from one content area to the next with the primary goal of getting them ready for third grade, for the NJASK. We now begin our school days reading a variety of genres, either alone or with a buddy instead of a worksheet. When we return from lunch, we regroup by reading with a buddy. We engage in these rituals, as well as an hour-long reading workshop where we focus on a particular skill or strategy and practice reading independently to build fluency and stamina and to increase comprehension skills.*
>
> *I have become more conscious of my interactions with colleagues, questioning my tendency to teach in a silo and reevaluating the self-silencing that I had imposed upon myself. I am beginning to see some of my colleagues in a different light. I no longer hold misconceptions that because they are White and are working with children of color, they don't care.*

The fourth and fifth criteria, catalytic and tactical authenticity, refer to the ability of an inquiry to prompt action on the part of the research participants and the involvement of the researcher in training the participants in social and political action, should the participants express an interest in such action (Lincoln et al., 2011). The research findings were shared with all participants. Some teachers commented that they would like the findings of this study to be shared with district administrators. Like all of the teacher participants, administrators were provided with a copy of the chapter that pertains to their participation. The superintendent has asked for the findings to be shared

with her and although I have not yet been able to meet with her in person, I have submitted a report of the findings to her office (see Appendix F).

## Limitations and Future Research

Although this auto-ethnographic study makes valuable contributions to the field of auto-ethnography, reading instruction, and educational policy, it also has limitations. First, it is limited to the twenty-four K–4 teacher population who self-selected to participate in the study. Further research is needed about the experiences of middle school and high school teachers working in a diverse suburban public school district.

Second, to keep this research project to a manageable scope, I did not include parents and students, even though I believe that, as stakeholders, they could contribute valuable insights to this study. Future research needs to include their perspectives.

Third, time constraints and scheduling conflicts limited the number of interviews and focus group sessions. Although I followed up with teachers via a questionnaire and provided all participants with a copy of the chapter that pertains to their participation, I would have liked to engage in additional dialogue with both teachers and administrators together as part of a focus group discussion. This is an area that I will explore in future research endeavors.

Although the findings from this study are not generalizable, I provide a thorough description of the teachers' and administrators' experiences as they navigate the needs of their diverse student population. These descriptions will be useful in helping teachers and administrators who work in school districts that have a culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student populations. The narratives from this study call for administrators and teachers to engage in open dialogue about the needs of the student

population in Oakwood, rather than continuing to approach policy and mandates from a top-down position. This study calls for the formation of a partnership between administrators and teachers to improve the learning outcomes of the students.

## Concluding Thoughts

The conversations indicate that district administrators are aware of the challenges that Oakwood teachers face and are attempting to implement curriculum and policy changes to support teachers. The district implements many initiatives in an attempt to improve the educational outcomes of Oakwood's student population. Both the administrators and teachers participating in this study stress the importance of providing professional development that is meaningful to teachers. Teachers and administrators alike emphasize the importance of parental involvement and the need to improve interaction and communication with families. During the focus group and individual interview conversations, the teachers and administrators emphasize the need for the district to be more proactive in educating and engaging parents in the schooling process. They posit that the district needs to do a better job of reaching out to and connecting with parents beyond the usual number of parents who attend school functions and district-sponsored events. The hard-to-reach parents, the parents who are not knowledgeable about American school systems, and the parents who are overwhelmed and lack the skills to support their children at home need to be reached.

We need to create innovative ways to allow parents to participate in their children's learning and communicate with teachers. Schools like the Oakwood Public School District, where some children come from households that lack the social, economic, and cultural capital to support their children's learning need to be more

proactive about communicating with families instead of expecting families to attend school functions during the day and communicate with teachers in middle-class ways, such as visiting the classroom, writing notes, and telephoning (Kunjufu, 2002; McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). CRT scholars argue that these types of parent-school interactions exemplify White middle-class norms and ways of interacting with schools (Chapman, 2006). They recommend appreciating the ways in which parents contribute to their child's learning experiences and success, which is often not the case (Chapman, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009). These contributions include taking care of their children's physical and emotional needs, providing their children with a space to study, helping them to complete homework, making sure that they are prepared for school, and supporting teachers when they as parents are directly asked to intervene (Chapman, 2006). Such appreciation provides a productive space for collaborating with families and fostering a partnership that will enrich the lives of students.

The findings from this study also indicate that teachers and administrators have similar concerns about what is happening in the school district and discuss what needs to occur for the learning outcomes of students to improve. Although both groups express the same desires, district administrators need to satisfy their constituents—a challenge that teachers do not encounter. The need to please numerous constituents contributes to the difficulties that administrators face when making policy and curriculum decisions, thereby making it problematic to arrive at consensus. The participants report that the Oakwood Public School District is diverse in many ways and, as Lewis (2008) found in her research of a similar school district, even though school administrators and teachers embrace and celebrate the diversity of the student body, the embedded nature of racism in

the educational institutions is such that even a conscious effort to identify and address the role that race and racism play in the educational experience of students may not be sufficient. The outcome of Lewis's research speaks to the complexities of racism and the need for teachers and administrators to not deracialize the educational experiences of students by becoming color blind.

An examination of the history of education in Oakwood since the 1960s indicates that many educational policies and curriculum decisions are made as a result of political pressure from Oakwood residents and/or legal mandates such as the *Brown* decision. There is limited conversation about race and education by the administrators, which raises the question of whether administrators are attempting to set educational policy and make curriculum decisions from a race-neutral or color-blind perspective. As some CRT scholars argue, race-neutral and color-blind views are "ahistorical" and, therefore, problematic (Akom, 2008; Kumasi, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Ladson-Billings (2009) argues that, if teachers and school administrators "pretend not to see students' racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs" (p. 10). She identifies

> a stubborn refusal in American education to recognize African Americans as a distinct cultural group. While it is recognized that African Americans make up a distinct racial group, the acknowledgement that this racial group has a distinct culture is still not recognized. It is presumed that African American children are exactly like White children but just need a little extra help. (p. 10)

Addressing Ladson-Billings' argument, I assert that the race-neutral approach is detrimental to all children of color, and indeed to all children. It is not enough to embrace and celebrate the diversity of Oakwood's student body without exploring the strengths, cultural differences, distinct perspectives, and learning needs of each student. There is an urgent need for the stakeholders in Oakwood not only to continue the conversation about

race and education, but also to take action to remedy racial and class inequities that persist in the school district.

Teachers speak of demographic changes that the school district is experiencing and how this shift is moving the district toward a mastery-style approach to teaching and learning. Some teachers maintain that this is occurring because the majority of the students in the district are children of color. Other teachers argue that this shift is occurring because of policies such as NCLB and the national common core standards. The conversations with Oakwood teachers and administrators reveal that this shift in the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic representation of the public school's student population is creating a need for suburban school districts such as Oakwood to engage in honest dialogue about the current student population and their academic and social needs.

The conversations also reveal a need for suburban public schools districts to learn how to integrate the needs of numerous immigrants, ELLs, and low-income students. While the central administrators in the Oakwood District focus on the high school, the importance of a strong literacy initiative with benchmarks in the elementary schools seems to be key to the success of students in high schools, especially in the rich offering of advance placement classes. While adding a second literacy supervisor at the elementary level is certainly a budget issue, this is worth revisiting, along with the idea of increasing the number of literacy enrichment teachers who provide support services to students who are reading below grade level. Certainly, the goals and standards across K–12 literacy need to be aligned vertically, but perhaps more emphasis and support needs to be given to Grades K–4, especially given the diversity of the children and families. This

initiative may circumvent the need to intervene and remediate students' literacy skills intensively at the middle and upper grades.

Oakwood teachers and administrators identify specific ways in which they are addressing this transformation, which will be useful to suburban school districts that are experiencing a similar trend. Likewise, this trend of income disparities, unemployment, and poverty in the suburbs speaks to the need for policy makers, suburban public school administrators, and teachers to recognize and address how "social class characteristics in a stratified society like ours may actually influence learning in schools" (Rothstein, 2004, as quoted in Berliner, 2006, pp. 8-9). The narratives from this study provide detailed accounts of the challenges that teachers and administrators encounter as they strive to implement district, state, and federal mandates.

The growing racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic transformation that suburban public school districts are experiencing demands the attention of teachers and administrators who have both the capacity and the will to ensure that each child is armed with the skills and learning tools to become critical readers. This changing demographic in Oakwood Public Schools calls for the development of a reading curriculum that not only addresses the common core standards but is culturally responsive. An effective reading curriculum that is culturally responsive benefits all students and provides the foundation to be successful life-long learners in all content areas. When teachers employ reading instruction that is culturally responsive, students thrive; they learn to appreciate differences, their cultural background, and that of their peers.

Although standardized testing is currently part of the U.S. education system, the approaches to prepare students for these tests need not stifle the creativity of students and

teachers. Additional testing demands and data-driven instruction will not optimize learning and enrich the lives of students if teachers are pressured to teach to the test. In a similar fashion, anti-teacher policies and top-down leadership will not promote collegiality nor foster a culture where teachers and administrator work as partners in education. A culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student population will be served best in an environment where teachers' voices are heard and acted upon, not just taken into consideration. It is not enough for administrators to seek teacher input simply for the sake of asking. Extensive effort needs to be made to include teachers in the decision making aspect of curriculum and policy making. Teachers have first-hand knowledge of what students need, their struggles, and directions to be taken to help them to achieve.

Likewise, the district needs to rethink ways to communicate and interact with families. There needs to be creative ways to include parents in the educational lives of their children. Many families are not visible during the school day, yet support their children and expect them to succeed. The district needs to be proactive and provide families with specific tools and strategies that they can use to support their child's reading life at home. For example, families need to be invited to share with the school community how they support their child's reading life at home. Families may be more receptive to trying strategies that are modeled by a member of their peer group, as opposed to having a teacher do the modeling. It is my hope that the conversations that took place during the focus group and individual interview sessions continue. This district embraces diversity, and if each child can learn, that child needs to be outfitted with learning tools to be life-long learners.

**A Research Conversation**

The purpose of this research is to engage the teachers and administrators of the Oakwood Public School in a conversation (a) about teaching reading in a diverse suburban public school setting; (b) about the relationship between what the school district mandates for teaching reading and the teaching methods that teachers use; and (c) about how district administrators talk about their experiences of working with teachers to implement an effective reading curriculum in a diverse suburban school district. This research conversation reveals opportunities and challenges that participants encounter while working with a racially, ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student population. The conversation also reveals larger political and social issues with which the district and nation are grappling on a daily basis.

This research conversation reveals that sometimes our efforts to address racism create situations that end up propagating racism. For instance, when a participant refers to how much easier teaching was when the student population in Oakwood was primarily White and middle class, or when I write about the time I role played an interview session with my brother and asked him to give me his best "White boy voice," we in essence reinscribe racialized thinking.

Racism is recreated in classrooms by the teaching methods that teachers use. When teachers correct students' language or refer to it as "slang" or "improper," they are teaching students a hierarchy of differences between African American vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard American English (SAE). They are privileging one language over the other and teaching students that one (SAE) is correct and the other (AAVE) is incorrect. When teachers maintain that one culture is superior, they are in

essence disempowering students and creating lasting effects on their self-perception. Based on the conversations and interactions with the participants in this study, this does not appear to be their conscious intention. Even so, we must all carefully consider the consequences of our unexamined assumptions if our ultimate goal is to educate our students effectively.

Participants in this study used code words to refer to race. Some participants are more comfortable discussing issues of racism and educational inequality in private. Participants use words such as "urban, migrant, immigrant, these people, culture, parental involvement, poverty, diverse student population, budget cuts, Title 1 funding, free, reduced lunch, test scores, remediation, basic skills"—code words that are primarily associated with children of color and school districts that are primarily populated with children of color. Our collective inability to engage authentically and talk to each other about race and racism contributes to the persistent educational disparities in the Oakwood Public School District that we say we want to address. Some participants gloss over the issue or took a race-neutral approach when speaking about their experiences in working in a diverse suburban public school district. As CRT scholars argue, a race-neutral or color-blind approach to education and policy making does not benefit students. The educational community must find ways to engage in this difficult dialogue about race and its role in education. What I want for my school district is what is missing in America: an honest open dialogue about race and education that moves participants to reflection and action. I look forward to meeting with the Superintendent and discussing the report that I have submitted to her office.

This research conversation has the potential to make some individuals feel that they are being attacked. It has the potential to make others fearful for continued decline in educational quality and property values. It has the potential to move some to reflect on their practices, teaching styles, and leadership styles. The narratives from these conversations can be a catalyst for the district to reach out to parents with an eye toward partnership. The narratives can also serve as a catalyst for empowering teachers to continue to ask for materials that are needed in the classrooms, as well as the time to collaborate with colleagues and district administrators to optimize learning for students.

These narratives can serve as a catalyst for empowering district administrators to advocate for the materials and resources that they need to carry out their responsibilities effectively and to support their staff. Education reform models and the push for standardized testing should not drive the education community to self-silence. It is imperative to find ways to engage in honest dialogue with colleagues and district administrators so the voices of all stakeholders will be heard and extensive efforts will be made to implement reasonable suggestions. This district embraces diversity and, each child should be outfitted with learning tools to be a life-long learner. Teachers must stand up for children and for the power of culturally responsive and creative teaching that prepares students to be life-long learners.

### *To Be Heard*

*Working towards obtaining a PhD is a long, arduous, and lonely process. And so after another in one of my many rounds of revisions, my chair, Carolyne asks, "What do you want?" Instantly, I say, I want to be done. She repeats the question, "What do you want?" Again, I say, to be done.*

*Here I am up as always at 3:30 in the morning answering Carolyne's question, but only 7 days later. I now realize what the question means. The question is not about getting a PhD. The question is not about being done and turning the dissertation in to the graduate school. The question is about illuminating the*

*voices of the marginalized. The question is about creating a forum for honest dialogue about student achievement, family involvement, the interplay between race and education. The question is not about me.*

*Carolyne has always been about making sure that my work is my work. She gently, but firmly probes and guides you towards excellence, to reflect and rethink your position on issues. And so to answer her question, what I want is for teachers to be heard. I want teachers to be appreciated. I want administrators to stand with teachers. I want children to have the opportunity to be creative critical thinkers. State and federal mandates, top-down approach to leadership, daily teacher bashing by policy makers, political leaders, and even families at times, drain our energy and eat away at our self-confidence. But we persist. We continue to stand for children. Why? Because we know who we are and why we choose this profession. We know that being a teacher is no easy feat. We know that research conducted by researchers who have never been a K-12 teacher or have long left the K-12 classroom does not define us. We know that unreasonable expectations and mandates by administrators do not benefit students and optimize learning. We know that the children count on us. When a child makes that Freudian slip and calls you "mom" or "dad," we know that there is nothing more precious than that moment.*

*I want teachers to be recognized as experts in teaching and learning. I want teachers to be treated like professionals with valuable contributions to be made to pedagogy, curriculum, and policy. I want teachers to be provided with opportunities to make policy and curriculum decisions, for we know what our students need. Yes, some of us do not belong in the classroom. Yes, some of us do not have high expectations for students. Yes, some of us are pay check collectors. Yes, some of us need to engage in culturally responsive teaching. Yes, some of us need to remain abreast of current research, adjust our thinking and practices. But the majority of us are highly dedicated and committed to educating children. We want to partner with families and administrators. We want to see our students thrive. We want to be there when they "get it". We want to be there when our students return years later to say thank you. We want the state of education to improve. We want the freedom to teach as if life-long learning matters, not standardized testing. We want our voices to be heard.*

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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. How long have you been a teacher in Oakwood?

2. How would you describe the student population in Oakwood?

3. Has the population in Oakwood changed during the years you've been teaching?

4. How would you describe your philosophy of teaching reading?

5. How do you approach the teaching of reading?

6. How do you manage any mismatch between what you believe works and what the district mandates?

7. What materials and models do you use to teach reading?

8. What opportunities and challenges do you face when teaching reading?

9. How have federal/state/district policies influenced the way you approach the teaching of reading?

10. Given the culturally diverse student population in the Oakwood Public Schools, what do you think about the resources available in the district to teach reading?

11. How important is it to a student's success in reading that the teacher is culturally responsive to their needs as a reader?

12. How do you incorporate the culture of your students into the reading curriculum?

13. Given the culturally diverse student population in the Oakwood Public Schools, how well prepared do you feel to teach reading to a multiracial student population?

14. What would you like to see change with regard to the ways in which the district approaches the teaching of reading?

15. How much professional development have you received in implementing the programs that you use in your classroom?

16. What indicators do you use to measure your students' success as readers?

17. How many minutes per day are your students engaged in independent, silent, sustained reading?

18. What systems do you use to help your students select books for their independent silent sustained reading time?

19. What percentage of your classroom library books is leveled?

20. Given the limitations that some families have with work schedules, perhaps limited English proficiency, and reading ability, what are some suggestions that you might have for parents to work with their children at home?

21. How can schools educate parents?

22. What services are available to you as a teacher for supporting your low-level readers?

23. What are the selection criteria for students to receive support services?

24. What can district administrators do to support elementary teachers in implementing an effective reading curriculum that meets the needs of students?

25. What teaching methods need to be adapted in order to meet the needs of students as readers?

26. What role does the approaches of the administration play e on your energy to teach?

27. Where does your energy to teach come from?

**Appendix B: Focus Group Facilitators Guide**

**So Each May Learn**
**Reading Policy and Practices in a Diverse Suburban Public School**

**FACILITATOR'S GUIDE**
**Focus Group I**

**Date:** _____

| Teachers | Number of Years Teaching | Current Grade Level |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher #1 | | |
| Teacher #2 | | |
| Teacher #3 | | |
| Teacher #4 | | |
| Teacher #5 | | |
| Teacher #6 | | |
| Teacher #7 | | |
| Teacher #8 | | |

**INTRODUCTION**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. The purpose of this

research study is to explore teacher's beliefs, perceptions, and approaches to the teaching

of reading to a culturally diverse student population. This study also will examine the

policies, curriculum resources, and professional development opportunities for teaching

reading at the elementary level in the Oakwood Public Schools.

The information that you share with me today will remain anonymous. There will

be no way to link your responses back to you. I will ask you several questions relating to

the role of teachers, the Oakwood Public School District, and parents in helping students progress and succeed as readers. There's no particular order for answering the questions. Please feel free to agree, disagree, and build on someone else's comment. Your participation in this focus group will help me gain a deeper awareness and perspective on teaching practices, curriculum resources, and district policy with regard to the teaching of reading in order to improve student learning outcomes.

Please take a moment to read over and sign the consent form that I have just distributed before we begin the discussion.

Do you have any questions? Again, thank you for taking the time to participate in this focus group session.

**TEACHERS**

1. Describe the current student population in the Oakwood Public Schools?

2. How has the student population in the Oakwood public schools changed since you began teaching in the school district?

3. How would you describe your philosophy of teaching reading? What do you believe works in developing great readers?

4. What materials and models do you use to teach reading?

5. How is your philosophy of teaching reading reflected when using the materials that are mandated by the district?

6. Given the diversity of students in the Oakwood Public Schools, describe your approach to teaching reading to a diverse student population?

7. How well does the reading program that you are currently using reflect the student population in Oakwood?

8. How do you manage to incorporate the culture of your students into the reading curriculum?

9. How do you handle possible mismatches between what you believe works and what the administration has mandated?

10. How much professional development have you received in preparing you to use the Good Habits Great Readers program?

11. What teaching methods need to be adapted in order to meet the needs of Oakwood's diverse student population?

12. What indicators do you use to measure a reader's success? What support services are available to students who are reading below grade level?

13. What are the selection criteria for providing support services to students who are performing below grade level?

14. How early should early reading intervention begin in order to ensure a reader's success in school?

15. How can district administrators support elementary teachers to implement the reading curriculum to improve students' learning outcomes?

16. What can families do at home to help their children succeed as readers? How would you describe the kinds of experiences you have with parents about reading?

17. Considering the limitations of some families due to work schedules, literacy skills, and English language skills, what can teachers do to better assist students in progressing as readers?

18. How do you think the schooling experiences of the students in Oakwood differ from those of other students in Reading County?

### DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

1. How would you describe the current student population in the Oakwood Public Schools?

2. How would you describe your philosophy of teaching reading? What do you believe works in developing great readers?

3. What materials and models are teachers currently using to teach reading?

4. How well does the reading program Good Habits Great Readers reflect the learning experience of the student population in Oakwood?

5. What professional development opportunities are available in the district for teaching reading to a diverse student population?

6. How much professional development have teachers received in preparing them to use the reading materials that are mandated by the district?

7.  What teaching methods need to be adapted in order to meet the needs of Oakwood's diverse student population?

8.  What indicators does the district use to measure a reader's success?

9.  What can families do at home to help their children succeed as readers? How would you describe the kinds of experiences you have with parents with respect to reading?

10. Considering the limitations of some families due to work schedules, literacy skills, and English language skills, what can teachers do to better assist students in progressing as readers?

11. How do you think the schooling experiences of the students in Oakwood differ from those of other Reading county public schools?

12. What support services are available to students who are reading below grade level?

13. What are the selection criteria for providing support services to students who are performing below grade level?

14. How early should early reading intervention begin in order to ensure a reader's success in school?

15. How can district administrators support elementary teachers to implement the reading curriculum to improve students' learning outcomes?

**Appendix C: Follow-Up Participant Questionnaire**

September 11, 2012

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you again for participating in a focus group and/or an individual interview. Enclosed please find a draft of the chapter that I wrote based on the interviews that I conducted. The copy is yours to keep. I would love to receive some feedback from you if you don't mind. You may mail or email your feedback to me at your convenience.

Also, I need to follow up on a few points if you don't mind. Please be as specific and detailed as possible.

What made you decide to come teach in Oakwood?

What is your perception of Oakwood as a town? Is it similar to its neighboring

suburban towns or more like neighboring urban cities?

What new perspective have you gained from this exchange during either the focus group discussion and/or the individual interview?

Comments/suggestions/changes to what I have written so far.

You can call, email, or mail your responses to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided. Again, thank you for your continued support and participation in this project.

Best,

Sandy

**Appendix D: Research Site Permission Letter**

September 19, 2011

Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to support Sandy Lizaire-Duff in her dissertation research involving the Oakwood Public Schools. I am aware that Mrs. Duff is a doctoral student at Rutgers University. Mrs. Duff is a second grade teacher at Polacco elementary school in our district.

I support Mrs. Duff's use of focus groups, interviews, and observations to collect preliminary and final data for her research study on teacher's beliefs, perceptions, and approaches to the teaching of reading in a culturally diverse district. This study will also examine the policies, curriculum resources, and professional development opportunities for teaching reading at the elementary level in the Oakwood Public Schools. Approximately 50 teachers, administrators, and parents will participate in the study. Each individual's participation will be anonymous and last approximately two hours. The study procedures include participation in a focus group and a follow up individual interview session. The focus group sessions will take approximately 1-2 hours. The follow up individual interview sessions will take approximately 1-2 hours.

I support her research that will be conducted involving qualitative data from the Oakwood Public School District. The results of this study will provide valuable information to be used to improve student learning outcomes in the area of reading.


Sincerely,

xxxxxxxxxxx

Superintendent, Oakwood Public Schools

**Appendix E: Research Invitation Letter**


Dear Colleagues and Administrators

  I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting to explore the beliefs, perceptions, and approaches to the teaching of reading to a culturally diverse student population.  I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Urban Systems Program: Educational Policy Track at Rutgers University.  The study will also examine the policies and curriculum materials of the Oakwood Public Schools with regard to the teaching of reading at the elementary level.

  If you agree to take part in the study, there will be no way to link your responses back to you. Therefore, data collection is confidential.  Confidential means that I will record no information about you that could identify you.  This means that I will not record your name, address, phone number, date of birth, etc.

  It is my hope that you will agree to participate in this study and share your invaluable knowledge and experiences in order to help our district move forward in improving the learning outcomes of our children.  Please feel free to email me at slizaire@yahoo.com or call (xxx) xxx-xxxx.  I look forward to collaborating with you on this much-needed study.  I am
very truly yours,


Sandy Lizaire-Duff

**Appendix F: Report to the Superintendent of Oakwood Public Schools:**

**A Research Conversation about Teaching Reading in a**

**Diverse Suburban Public School District**

This study explores teachers' and administrators' discourse about teaching reading to a racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student population in a K–4 suburban public school district. Reference to "discourse about teaching reading" includes the multiple ways in which teachers and administrators speak about their philosophies and approaches to teaching reading.

Three primary questions guide this research.

1. How do teachers talk about their approaches to teaching reading in a diverse suburban public school setting?

2. How do teachers talk about the relationship between what the school district mandates for teaching reading and their teaching methods?

3. How do district administrators talk about their experiences of working with teachers to implement an effective reading curriculum in a diverse suburban school district?

The study employs auto-ethnographic and action research methods within the frameworks of critical theory and critical race theory. Research methods include focus groups, semistructured topical interviews, Geographic Information Systems, document analysis, action research, and auto-ethnography. Fifty-two classroom teachers and four reading specialist teachers from the four elementary schools are invited to participate. Twenty-four teachers and seven administrators (Superintendent, Assistant

Superintendent, Literacy Supervisor, K–4 Principals) choose to participate. Each individual's participation in this study is confidential. Whenever possible, similar statements made by two or more participants are combined and labeled "collective voice". Additionally, pseudonyms are used for each participant and location of the school district.

This research illuminates their experiences in the Oakwood Public School District. Five overriding themes emerge from the focus groups sessions and individual interviews: (a) A comparison of Oakwood Public School District 20 years ago and now, (b) district initiatives in the area of reading and the need to provide sufficient grade-level appropriate materials for teaching reading, (c) the need to rethink our approaches to teaching reading, (d) the opportunities and challenges that teachers and administrators encounter in implementing an effective reading curriculum, and (e) the need to re-envision how we define family involvement and ways to improve partnership  with families. Within the following summary, my autoethnographic commentary is distinguished with italics.

### Theme 1: Oakwood Public School District Then and Now

*Like many suburban public school districts in the nation, the student population at the Oakwood Public School is increasingly diverse—ethnically, racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically. The following verbatim quotations are representative of teachers' observations about the changing student demographics.*

> When I arrived 20 years ago, it was 1992. I was at Longfellow Elementary School and I had a class of about 24 children, predominantly White, mostly Jewish. We used to have 24/25 students, that was typical, but there's much more diversity in the class now than 20-something years ago. (Claudette)

> We didn't have many Hispanic, and we had fewer African-American students and very, very, few Asian students. It's been a mass exodus of a White student

population, even though the town still has a large White population. It was like a blink of an eye. Just before 2000 we started to notice a distinct change. It was mostly African American, then Hispanic, which is still slightly growing. We have a lot of Middle Eastern Asian students now. (Avril)

We have a very migrant population. I feel like I have a revolving door in my classroom. We've got kids coming in and out. It's just one in, one out. That's been the trend the last 6, 7 years. One year I had 12 kids in and out of my classroom. I think that might be reflective of an economic situation where people are moving in with families because they are not working, and then when they start working again, they're gone or they have to move. (Beatrice)

*The administrators discuss the demographic changes in the school district over the past 20 years and report an increase in English as a Second Language (ESL), poverty-level, and homeless children in the district. In comparison to its neighboring districts, the Oakwood Public School District is not only more diverse ethnically and racially; it also has a higher percentage of students and families living below the poverty level. Thirty-one percent of Oakwood's student population and their families are living below the poverty threshold, as indicated by the number of students who are receiving free or reduced-price lunch. In contrast, 8% or less of Oakwood's neighboring public school districts are living below the poverty level.*

*Oakwood administrators explain that the district's socioeconomic shift is indicative of the economy. They speak about how the district is managing this socioeconomic shift to meet educational and some social needs of its students. They report an increase in the number of students who need free or reduced-price lunches.*

The poverty level is more severe than it used to be. And, of course, we've all read the research, and so that brings its own challenges and changes, too. There are varying degrees of poverty in the district. I know there's a lot of research about poverty, and they say poverty is the number-one indicator of students' success in school, I believe that's probably true. We don't target those families necessarily for anything; obviously, they get funding for lunch. We think it's important to have a good lunch. A lot our Title I money is designated first for Free and Reduced Lunch kids who are at risk. We look at the kids' needs and strengths as we would look at anybody. The administrators in the schools support the kids in

going to social occasions, buying prom dresses and doing things like that. And, frankly, they're not a member of what the government says is a low socioeconomic group; they're threaded into all of our groups, their gender, their ethnicity, their special education, so we really haven't targeted that at all. (Morgan)

*Research indicates that poverty adversely affects children and families (Anyon, 2005; Berliner, 2012; Bradley, Cowyn, McAdoo, & Coll, 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Lareau, 2003). Cunningham and Stanovich (2001) report that future reading and cognitive development skills are adversely affected by insufficient reading ability and the amount of reading that a child is exposed to at home. Researchers also argue that the level of conversation and number of books in a child's home environment contribute to reading and language development (Bradley et al., 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Ferguson, 2007; Lareau, 2003). In their study on poverty and learning outcomes, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) find that children living in poverty not only perform at a lower level than others, but they are also more prone to developmental delays and being identified with a learning disability at school.*

**Theme 2: District Initiatives and Approach to Teaching Reading**

*The socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and linguistic transformation of the Oakwood Public School District creates a challenge for how district administrators and teachers approach teaching and learning. Specifically, in the area of reading, the district has been focusing on ways to improve students' performance on standardized testing at all grade levels. However, some administrators comment that they are not sure that the district's philosophy has been clearly articulated. Administrators clarify the district's stance by stating that, although there may be some confusion as to what the philosophy is, the*

*district's philosophy of teaching reading is a Balanced Literacy approach.*

*Administrators report:*

> The district adopted the Balanced Literacy model around 1999. As part of this approach, students are assessed at their particular reading level, and there is a gradual release of responsibility. There's obviously some piece of direct instruction, which would be a shared reading, there would be a read aloud for enjoyment of reading, and then there would be more direct guided reading, which really hooked into the child's own independent level. (Robin)

> Our philosophy is that there isn't one particular aspect of reading where you should focus. It means that there should be opportunities for students to engage in phonics work, to practice fluency, and also to build their comprehension skills through guided reading, through shared reading, through writing, all of those activities. It means teaching reading is teaching kids on a continuum. (Jamie)

> The importance of teacher-guided opportunities in order to teach those strategic skills, is that secondary piece. The marriage of the instruction or the explicit instruction and the skills you need to be a good reader is the basis of the philosophy for teaching reading here in Oakwood. (collective voice)

*When asked about the district's curriculum for teaching reading, administrators*

*respond:*

> I would say, 'Try and find it.' It's a concern of mine and it's been a concern, but I haven't been able to do anything about it, but I really would like to see one. The materials have become the curriculum. Oakwood prides itself, fortunately and unfortunately, for not having a very straightforward curriculum, and I think it's endemic of the students that we teach, where students come in at varying levels. We have Good Habits Great Readers, which isn't really a curriculum. It's a curriculum material. It's tough because we don't have a real reading curriculum. (collective voice)

> We're using lots of leveled readers, and so through the teachers, assessments administered using the DRA2, the curriculum is implemented. The teachers are then able to have students work in groups and use leveled readers that are at the right level or maybe just stretch them a little bit to move to the next level. And starting in second grade they are using something called Good Habits Great Readers, which is a guide. It models out guided reading and provides the teacher with additional leveled readers and also focuses on skill instruction. And for lack of a better way to describe it, it's probably balanced literacy in a box. (Robin)

*In 2009, the Oakwood Public School District begins to implement the Good*

*Habits Good Readers (GHGR) program in the elementary grades, starting with Grades 3*

*and 4. In 2011 the same program is implemented in Grades 2 and 5. In addition to providing professional development for second-grade teachers, the district is providing a refresher training on the GHGR programs for third- and fourth-grade teachers throughout the district.*

*Some teachers report that they encounter a conflict when implementing GHGR because other reading materials—such as Junior Great Books and literature-based teaching—are not subtracted from their list of "reading programs" to use. Other teachers express their satisfaction with the new reading program.*

> I don't mind the structure of Good Habits Great Readers. It's the structure I've been looking for. It's the strategies I've been looking for. I would have appreciated some training at the beginning. It came later, but it did come, and you know, so far, I've been fairly happy with it. I'm a little overwhelmed by our guided reading materials. It's a little too much! It's way too much information for one book! (Meredith)

> I've been picking and choosing, abbreviating, and in some cases not getting to certain things because there was no ready introduction or segue into certain areas, so some of those areas just get left aside because there are many pressing issues that you want to cover over the course of the year. There's a lot that you're not going to cover. And you know, by following GHGR to the letter, there's even more that you won't cover, but stuff does get left out as a result of customizing it. (Jacqueline)

> I like the length of those books of the GHGR program. It is concise, just enough, because some students just can't do a big book, they lose it. This way they get through it. They get through the exercises, and they've accomplished something and can move on to something else. It's individualized. You will have the student who will go through the Harry Potter books and the whole series and be a voracious reader. But with the average child, I think you really have to gear it toward his or her own interest and keep it very simple, keep it very basic. (Meredith)

*However, some teachers express dissatisfaction with GHGR. According to some of the teachers, the district does not explicitly communicate to them that GHGR is the sole program to be used when teaching reading, although that appears to be the case.*

The district says that the product we're using is not our "Bible," we don't have to use it. That is said, but that's really not the way it is. We are given strict unit plans to follow that program. The autonomy that I would like to have as a teacher to sort of deviate from that, select books of my choice that I'm comfortable with, that I think teach the skills that they want me to teach, is not there. As a teacher, once I know the needs of my students, I should be able to select the lessons that I think they need, as opposed to being told, "You're going to teach Week 1 in its entirety, Week 2 in its entirety." (Bernadette)

We're often told that GHGR is an excellent tool for teachers, especially for new teachers. But I have to say, since the implementation of GHGR, I've had 11 student teachers. I usually start them with reading because it's one of the most nebulous things to learn. I give them GHGR and it never fails, they use it for a couple of weeks and they start to dislike it because they don't like the quality of the books that come with the program. And so I tell them, "That's where you have to choose the books." Some of the strategies are pretty good, but I tell them, "If you want to change the books to teach the skill, please do so." In Oakwood we are bombarded with binders and programs. As I like to say, Oakwood has a very difficult problem in not cleaning out the closet. They put a lot of stuff in the closet, but they don't take stuff out. So, in your own head, you have to de-clutter what's in there. (Johnathan)

I'm not a big fan of GHGR. Some of the lessons are repetitive and redundant. That's a big issue that I found while implementing the program. There's a tendency with GHGR to beat a dead horse. To take a point, a valid and useful point, and turn it into something that has everybody running for the bathrooms. It was just, "STOP!" and "Enough, already." That can be a real problem when you want the kids to trust that what you're teaching them is something useful and that it's something that will be engaging. We kind of betray that trust a lot of the time by doing the lessons faithfully. The children already know the skills, so it's boring. I'd like a little more autonomy. As veteran teachers, to be able to use different resources and teach with some creativity, that would be ideal. (Colbert)

*As part of the district's initiative to raise student achievement and develop critical thinkers, a new method of assessment that is aligned with GHGR has been introduced this year and is being used by teachers in Grades K–4: the DRA2. Prior to this year, the district used the DRA1 to assess students in reading. Teachers comment on how much they are enjoying the structure, flexibility, and method of the DRA2. They like the idea of "getting messy in the strategy group" and picking what they want and matching an*

*interesting book to a reader. They find the program to be a valuable tool and resource*

*for assessing the students' reading abilities.*

*Although the teachers have a new way to assess and analyze students' reading*

*abilities and plan their instruction, they do not have all of the supplies and resources that*

*they need to implement reading instruction adequately and move the students forward,*

*nor are they trained prior to administering the assessment at the beginning of the school*

*year. Teachers express their frustration with how the new DRA2 and GHGR is*

*introduced and implemented.*

> It's unacceptable that teachers were giving the DRA2 without having been trained. It's unacceptable. Professional development that you receive after the fact, or boxes that you find dumped in the middle of your room when you come in after you've been told you shouldn't have been doing this, you shouldn't have been doing that, is unacceptable! Or the webinar with no materials, no visuals, no sound, that's unacceptable! (collective voice)

> During our first GHGR professional development session, the trainer was like, "Take out your manual, look on page __." We all didn't have the manual, and then it was like cricket, cricket. There was no voice! It was so low. We were supposed to all huddle around one computer. So yeah, if they didn't want to spend the money to bring a trainer in, they should have had us in a conference room. It should have been projected up. (collective voice)

> What happens when teachers are not effectively trained is that you attempt to use it for about a week. No, I'll give it a good month. Then you'll see what book you can use out of the program. It makes it difficult to remain faithful to the program. It was poor training with no follow-through. If you're going to implement something, train us, support us, check back with us, bring us back together to have a conversation about how it's going, what's working, what's not working. (Jacqueline)

> We eventually did receive two good, long training sessions. I felt, though, that the questions and issues raised by the teachers were pretty much put in the parking lot. It seemed as though the trainers who were giving us that PD had agenda points and were going to cover all of those agenda points, and the other issues that came up that related to the actual implementation of the program were glossed over. Frankly, I was actually appalled at just how much they were assuming that this was all going to work given the unique characteristic of our district. (Colbert)

*Throughout the nation, in many urban school districts and school districts with large ethnically diverse student populations, various school reform models are being implemented. Many are one-size-fits-all models. Too often, students are not provided opportunities to engage in independent projects, cooperative learning, and critical thinking. Instead, they are being spoon fed as teachers are relegated to scripted curricula, teaching to the test, and stressing to meet guidelines and deadlines. Children need more from schools. They need to learn and be prepared for various opportunities in life, not to learn how to be submissive. They can all be encouraged to dream, solve problems, think, and be prepared to realize their dreams. There is a consensus among the teachers that students need more than just rote, mechanical styles of teaching and learning.*

Critical thinking skills are far superior to the perfect score on a standardized test, which primarily measures rote learning. While it may be required to know specifics in any given discipline, it also should be essential to have the ability to apply problem-solving strategies, and to synthesize and apply those facts and principles in other situations. (Sharon)

The biggest problem in this district, across the board, and it fits in every subject area, but since we're talking about reading, it's that now it's an ST [Mastery Learning]-driven district and they have forgotten that all the other quadrants are key. I think that might be why they might be losing some of the kids, because all of our children are not ST children. They're being asked to be focused, quiet, and we're not given any opportunities to bring in any creativity. We do a little of SF [Intuitive Learning], but not the intuitive things that they need. The students need to take a story and be able to think outside the box, to make connections, see things, and try new things. (Antoinette)

Learning styles was important for Oakwood because it was combined with multiculturalism, and I think the two things are actually very powerful. I don't think learning styles are emphasized in the schools by the principals. Is it no longer emphasized in the curriculum as they once did. Everybody is so worried about getting ready for the test, and that automatically becomes an ST kind of thing, and that's a problem. We have to look at what we're assessing. I think that with this emphasis on the high-stakes testing, nothing will change until we change what we're assessing. We have to figure out what we want for the kids. What is going to best prepare them for life? And so, we can ask ourselves those essential

questions and make our own assessments to measure whether we're doing that for children. When you have to do those kinds of assessments, you automatically go into learning styles. (Sharon)

*There appears to be a disconnect between teachers and administrators regarding the district's philosophy for teaching reading, as well as the district curriculum for teaching reading. While most teachers have a clear philosophy for teaching reading, the philosophy of the Oakwood Public School District is not transparent to the teachers. The perspective of the teachers is that the Oakwood Public School District does not have a common philosophy or a curriculum for teaching reading. This lack of common philosophy and reading curriculum is problematic for them because they believe it hinders student progress.*

*The teachers attribute the lack of philosophy in the district in part to inconsistency in vision and a high turnover rate of literacy supervisors. With each new supervisor, there is a shift in beliefs and practices. In addition to the high turnover rate of literacy supervisors, a principal's lack of knowledge and understanding of how to teach reading may be part of the reason the district and schools do not have a cohesive philosophy for teaching reading.*

*The lack of a reading curriculum places instructional decisions in the teachers' hands, and they are free to decide which aspects of reading instruction will be taught. Although a lack of reading curriculum provides freedom to be creative and autonomous, it makes the teaching of reading much more difficult to plan and implement. We often spend much of our time tracking down resources, rather than planning instruction and reflecting on our craft. We also often spend our own money to make sure that the learning environment is equipped with the developmentally appropriate reading materials that students need. Having a clearly identified and agreed-on reading*

*curriculum would allow teachers to dedicate more time to planning, reflecting,*

*collaborating with colleagues, and analyzing students' work. It would also provide a*

*cohesive framework for all.*

### Theme 3: The Need to Rethink Our Approaches to Teaching Reading

*Teachers discuss the role that the district's ethnic and racial transformation plays*

*in how they approach the teaching of reading. The experiences that children bring to*

*school demand that teachers rethink their approach to teaching reading to meet the*

*needs of their diverse student population.*

> We have more children today whose parents were born in another country, and they're speaking another language at home. This vastly affects their background knowledge. The heavy cultural experiences completely change what they come to the table with as far as getting ready for reading. It's very different. Cultural and ethnic diversity should be respected, appreciated, and celebrated as our world continues to become a melting pot of cultures. We have this dilemma, where the children come to school and they don't have experiences. We have to give them experiences, like taking them on field trips, engaging in conversation with them about their home life, preparing meals from scratch in the classroom, or using the school grounds as an outdoor learning center. (collective voice)

> Language is very complex. When you have an influx of children who don't speak English, it becomes even more compounded because academic language is difficult at best. At the same time, we're being expected to get children to read, write, and be ready for the next grade. The reading and the writing, it comes very naturally to some of the children, but it doesn't come naturally to all. It's not just the ELL population. It's also a lot of the children who are born here. We have varying degrees of familiarity with language and with books. (Izzie)

> It's completely a different world. We can't go back to where we were. You have to think about where we are in history; things are changing. It's changed. Students have to know so much more information now and there's so much going on in the world. So we do have to evolve. Education must advance because we are constantly changing and growing as a culture and a society, in the world and technology. We do have to do things like you were saying, where you put things on a screen or whatever. We have to evolve, too, and sometimes we dig our heels in because we know it felt gooooood. We know what we enjoyed doing and what we individually like to do. It's hard for us to make that shift to move forward. (Claudette)

*In response to a question about the philosophy of teaching reading and what they believe works in developing great readers, teachers speak to the need to confer with children while they are reading in order to push them forward, set goals for them, and monitor where they are as readers, thereby teaching them along the way. The teachers also note ways that technology influences how they approach the teaching of reading in their classrooms, because they are finding that children today lack the stamina to maintain attention while they are reading. In addition, the teachers believe that one of the most important ways to get children to read is to expose them to language through conversation. They describe the teaching of reading as*

a way to get you to think and open up your world. It's a way to connect to ideas not necessarily your own but to the world. It's a way to connect to other people. You get to learn about different things, expose yourself to different ideas and gain experiences that you might not have otherwise, and explore a way of finding information you need. We have to express how much we enjoy reading through everything that we do that actually will then manifest in the kids. (Jacqueline)

We've travelled so far away from foundational pieces that sometimes we get to the point where we have children who are reading at transitional levels, and they fall apart. When they get to Grade 3 and Grade 4, that's when reading becomes reading to really learn. Up until that point many of them have just been reading for reading, which has a point, which has a premise, but reading is so much more. (collective voice)

*Phonics* had become a dirty word. Now we're starting to see it come back, but I kind of feel like it is so late for some of these kids. When we had our first-grade initiative those many years ago, we were told not to worry about comprehension, just teach them how to read the words. Then they could read till the cows came home, but they had no earthly idea what they were reading. You asked a question and they were like, "Huh?" We found out 4 years later on the test scores they could not comprehend anything, but they were able to tell you what the words were, identify words and stuff like that, but no meaning whatsoever. They can read the words, but then when you want to have that discussion, it's really hard. They really need a lot of modeling on how you approach a book, how you attack words, how you take apart a book and how you think behind the book. (Beatrice)

The way kids are so wired today because of technology, no matter their socioeconomic level, they really have to be engaged with the book, with books. You have to select texts that really match the readers, not only their levels, but [also] their

interests, or you just can't keep them because their attention doesn't stay. We're still a very "me, me, me, me" world. They want something that they can connect to, whether the book is about them or someone like them—that's important. Even if it's historical, they need some way, some thing, to bring it back to them. (Meredith)

Through our assessments and our analysis of where our students are, they have to read a lot, a lot, a lot! Each teacher has an enormous responsibility to understand the development of students and their uniqueness, content, and the learning process. A teacher must possess an extensive knowledge and repertoire of skills and strategies to reach every learner, as well as a firm grasp of standards, research, purposeful planning, and personal communication skills. The power of reflection enables an educator to objectively and critically examine the curriculum and its purposes, as well as students' needs and strengths, all in a diverse community that meets the needs of individual students. (Claudette)

*Many of the teachers emphasize the use of the language experience approach to*

*teaching reading and making it meaningful for their students. Through the use of the*

*language experience approach, some of the teachers believe the following:*

Students can have the power that their lives are interesting and that their small details, their personal narratives, their small moments are really something that somebody else wants to read and finds interesting; that is what gets them. If they can write their experiences, if they can write about that, write a book and do an author's party, and show that they're an author, that's what makes them interested in reading and writing. (Sharon)

*Scholars such as Lisa Delpit criticize the language experience approach to*

*teaching reading for not addressing the needs of African American students, much in the*

*same way that they criticize the Whole Language approach. Delpit (1997) argues that*

*children from low socioeconomic backgrounds benefit more from the phonics approach*

*because their experiences at home are not comparable to those of middle-class White*

*children. Delpit further argues that "children who do not come to school with knowledge*

*about letters, sounds, and symbols need to experience explicit instruction in these areas*

*in order to become independent readers" (p. 4).*

*Some teachers say that there is a need for both phonics and language experience in teaching this student population. They believe that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching reading. They have to be flexible and willing to provide children with the tools that they need to succeed as readers. They view providing children with experiences as part of their pedagogy, not as an obstacle that cannot be managed in school. Although they prefer parents to be the ones who primarily provide their children with such experiences as engaging in conversation, going to museums, parks, zoos, and exploring the backyard, this does not diminish their commitment to providing children with the educational experiences that they need to formulate background knowledge and actively engage in a particular lesson.*

*Some teachers even advocate against the use of the one-size-fits-all approach to learning how to read.*

> I'm looking for ways to make it more fun. To bring it back to the way it used to be when it was just natural, when it was developmental. Not all kids will get it here at this grade level. It may take some children more time. I think the whole sense of reading being developmental has been lost. To say that when a child is this age, they should be here at this level, it's really not true, it's just not true. Some people have made decisions when a child is in fourth grade that they should be here at this level. They might not always be there. We should not lower our expectations, but we do need to be more flexible and aware of what is developmentally reasonable for our readers. (Bernadette)

> We're not spending the time, and I also feel that right now we're so worried about scores that we're not preparing the kids for the real world. You could collect data forever and you could manipulate data as much as you want, but what do you do with it? How is it informing us? How is our assessment informing us? How is it informing our instruction? How is it changing what we're doing? I don't think it really is. We can try at the classroom level and do as much as we possibly can, but systemically the way we are told to teach is not going to change. We're only one person. (collective voice)

> NCLB is having a huge influence! It's stressful. You're catching up, you start to feel comfortable, and all of the sudden something else comes along and you have to do that. Trying to fit everything in is very stressful and overwhelming. Then, when you have the NJASK, it's like, at this point you're almost ready to teach for

the test. You're going to teach them to be good test takers. I start earlier than I would normally do, and I know that in my heart of hearts, I feel that's the wrong way, especially if you give me so many kids who are very low. I feel the pressure because administrators are looking at my numbers, and looking at me as a teacher based on those numbers. Well, you know what? You know the real problem is you have to teach to the test. The real problem is we don't have a curriculum that supports the instructions, you shouldn't have to be teaching to the test this early; the district should be providing us with the framework to help our kids pass the test from the beginning until they take that test, that's the real issue. And you can't fix everything in fourth grade. They can't fix everything in third grade. We're not going to fix these kids. We're triaging! We're not teaching reading. (collective voice)

What would be natural would be to go back to what people do when they read. To treat it more like a book club than a direct strategy lesson. "I'm teaching you this skill because when you sit down to read on your own, you won't get it." The goal is to make them lifelong readers, to be able to enjoy a book, to have a desire to pick up a book of any genre, and want to actually dig in and glean something from it. It's unnatural to say, "Oh, today I'm looking for point of view and then fill out a graphic organizer." It is unnatural to me to put a sticky note on every page in the book each time I sit down to read during Reading Workshop. As an adult, I may take notes in the margins of books—we all do it. But it's unnatural that on every page I must produce a sticky note or fill out a graphic organizer at the end. That's not what we do when we read! (Bernadette)

*I agree with my colleagues and believe that children should not be required to complete a graphic organizer or place a post-it note on each and every page of the book each time they sit down to read in class. Reading should not be treated as if it is a chore, a burden, a task to be completed, but as a natural occurrence throughout our lives. It needs to be seen and treated as something that we enjoy doing. Teachers need not dictate completely how and what children read each and every time. We need to allow readers the freedom to select books that appeal to them and gently guide them to learn how to make the appropriate book choices based not only on their reading level but also on their interest. Research reports that children improve their reading skills much more rapidly when they are reading books that are at their independent level and not books that are challenging (Calkins, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Routman, 2003; Strickland, 2005).*

*There needs to be a balance between what is mandated, what we believe works, what we believe readers need, and what readers have a desire to read in spite of their reading level.*

*Most of the teachers seem to be on common ground in their beliefs about using the components of a Balanced Literacy approach. As part of the Balanced Literacy approach, teachers make use of shared reading, guided reading, interactive reading, phonics, and conferences. Through these approaches children are explicitly taught to make sense of words, decode words, learn word patterns, make predictions, and to ask questions before they start reading, while they are reading, and when they are finished reading. They are taught to make connections and use the text to confirm or disprove thoughts that they have about what they are reading. They are being taught to make meaning out of the material that they are reading, to share their thoughts and write about them.*

*Like the teachers, some administrators talk about the need to honor the diversity of children, embrace students' cultural heritage, and provide reading instruction that is culturally responsive. Administrators also discuss the need to rethink the way that we teach reading, considering our large immigrant population and their needs as ELLs. They emphasize the importance of students actively engaging, practicing the skills and strategies that they are being taught as readers. Administrators recognize and acknowledge the difficulties of teaching reading but they note that this task is made more difficult if teachers themselves do not like to read.*

> One of the things that I specifically requested this year was that not every single guided-reading lesson needs to end with the completion of a graphic organizer, or fill in this paper, or do this activity. Not every single lesson needs to be followed up by an activity because I think that's kind of like the breakdown. Because then

kids begin to see that every time they read, there is an activity connected to it. The teacher should be conferencing with the child to find out what they're reading, and there's no real written explanation necessary. I think that sometimes we're giving kids too many rules, and they're the wrong rules. (Robin)

Learning to read is not the same for English Language Learners. Their developmental parameters are different and are paced differently. We are putting in place artificial benchmarks and parameters that aren't really helping anyone, that are taking us back to an earlier point when we looked at training rather than educating. Teachers need to be flexible. Get to know the students as individuals and readers. What do they like, dislike? What do they already know? What's their cultural background? What are their strengths? What do they need to work on? Don't make them sit there and read the Good Habits Great Readers version of Robin Hood when they've read the real version. (Kinna)

Teachers need to use books to bond with their students. There needs to be that bridge so that children come home and they're enthusiastic about the text that they just read, even if you send a piece of the text home and say you should go home and show this to your parent. I believe in the gift of voice, the gift of storytelling, and often the gift of students, our job is to find that and build on it. To really be effective, everybody needs someone who will value you for who you are. Unfortunately, a lot of teachers don't send books home with their students, because it's their book. "I bought it in Barnes & Noble; you can't take it home because it's not going to come back." I've heard this before. I don't expect teachers to go out and buy 25 books for every child, but you're giving such a gift, so what if they lose it or it gets lost? (Jamie)

You know, I would be tickled to go before the Board of Ed and say, "My children read so much and their scores improved to such a great degree that I have no library books left because they're all worn thin from them turning the pages. Can you help me?" How else do teachers expect kids to get better at reading if they are not making books available to them? (Kinna)

*It is often difficult for teachers, or individuals for that matter, to embrace change and let go of the familiar. However, some teachers are realizing that they can no longer hold on to the crutch of comfort and familiarity. It is becoming imperative to children's success and the management of classrooms to adapt and shift focus and ways of thinking, teaching, and learning to meet the educational needs of students. It is no longer acceptable to say, "I've been doing it this way for too long" or "I've invested too many years into this to give it up." In clinging to the past, we are failing to convey to students*

*and their families that learning is dynamic, respected, and valued. We need to purge*

*outdated materials from classrooms that no longer meet the needs of today's student*

*population. While there is value in old materials and many "tricks of the trade" can and*

*perhaps need to remain, educators need to find a balance between old ways of teaching*

*and new ways of responding to the needs of the current student population.*

## Theme 4: Opportunities and Challenges That

## Teachers and Administrators Encounter

*Teachers face many challenges within the school walls and in public. They are*

*not immune to what the media reports, the negative advertisements, the community blog*

*discussions, and the Op Ed commentaries. Today's political climate has the public*

*thinking and believing that the root of school failure lies with teachers. Teachers are*

*under fire, and there appear to be very few allies defending their integrity. When one of*

*the participants says, "Teachers are human, too," he confirms what I already know: We*

*are each other's allies.*

> Teachers are human, too, and humans have limitations. As much as the movies would like us to believe in this great almighty super teacher that would be there if we had Teach for America staffing our schools, that super teacher doesn't exist; or if it does, it's a super teacher who burns out rather quickly and goes back to Wall Street, where they would've gone had they not gotten this Teach for America grant. It's just not a realistic formula. You can't place that much emphasis on the teacher's Herculean effort. There has to be a little more reality to it, and I think this is why American schools are failing right now. It's all coming down to one thing: the teacher. If the teacher's not doing it, it's not going to happen. Oh, there are horrible teachers out there. There are great teachers out there. I don't believe even the great teachers are able to handle what our system implies that we can do. (Colbert)

*The Herculean perspective and negative attitudes toward teachers drain our*

*energy. But we persevere. We march on. We walk through our school doors daily,*

*arriving early and leaving long past the end of the contractual school day. We go in and*

*give it our all, day to day. Why? As teachers put it, it comes back to*

> that core inside of me that still gets a rush when my students get it. That smile on my face when a child says, "Oh, that was fun!" They want to show up. They want to come to school. I want to see them excel. That's what keeps me going. If I leave, what's going to happen? I even shared with my students that I was thinking of retiring, and some of my students said, "Wait, you have to have my little sister." Just to hear them say that means that I am effective, I'm reaching them, and they want me to be here for their sibling. That's what keeps me going. That's what keeps me present, keeps me showing up. (Bernadette)

> I absolutely love the kids! I love their sense of humor, their eagerness, and granted I'm not talking about every child when I say eagerness, because there are many where I find myself incredibly frustrated at their lack of interest and their passivity, but I get that by focusing on those kids who are there, who are part of the landscape, the game, the whole process. The child who is curious about the topic at hand and where that leads to—what does that mean for something beyond which we were talking about? The child who sees humor within the bounds of what's acceptable in a classroom to various aspects of what's going on. The child who can be playful. The child who can take compositional risks in the way they deal with the classroom, the way they deal in discussions. Yeah, it's the kids. It is the kids. (Colbert)

*Some teachers say that their energy to teach also comes from working with a*

*diverse student population, their colleagues, and professional materials that they read.*

> I continuously look back in my journals, through my own children, through just trying to absorb myself in the kids. I want to make sure that they have the best experience possible. My goals are what keep my focus. Being lifelong readers, lifelong writers, lifelong mathematicians. Continuously re-reading the people that I love—that encourages me to be more than just the ST data driven. My Regies, the Shelly Harwaynes, just continuously looking in—re-reading, re-reading, re-reading. (Antoinette)

> I've grown as a reader, as a professional, as an individual. You get exposed to all these cultures, all of their interests, and you grow as a person. You benefit from all of these experiences. I think that's one of the most positive things about this community. Having a diverse student population really makes it more like America is now. (Beatrice)

> Our staff also gives us the energy to teach. We wouldn't stay here and deal with the stresses that we deal with if it wasn't for the people that we work with. You learn from each other. You bitch to each other, share. I would have left a long time ago if it wasn't for the people that I work with. When I first got here,

everybody was cool and nice, and there wasn't some of the divisive crap that was going on in a previous building. That made it better, and you got good ideas from people. I think that's one of the strengths here, in particular. (collective voice)

We've never had a strong leader, so we've had to depend on each other. I think that comes through in every area of the curriculum. I honestly think here, more than the other schools, we have more vertical articulation because we are a close-knit group. We might not be talking about school work all the time, but it does come up, and you do find out things from other people. We are willing to sit together and discuss these things in a very productive manner. We make things work for ourselves. For the benefit of the kids, we do what we need to do for the kids. (Beatrice)

*As much as we draw energy from our students, colleagues, families, and professional development materials, our energy to teach can also often be affected by lack of resources and inadequate professional development. The teachers share their frustrations with each other and how exhausting it is to not have needed resources readily available to teach reading effectively and utilize the programs that are provided to teachers. The challenge of working in an environment that lacks materials that are readily available in the classroom is exacerbated by the lack of time to plan our day and lessons carefully and thoughtfully. Although we make use of our prep time, our lunch period, and additional hours before and after school, we still find it difficult to find the time to locate materials and prepare our lessons.*

What takes energy from me is all of the paperwork that is draining us, and I say that because this district is very much an ST [Mastery Style] district. All about ST, and anyone who's not an ST person is not successful. That's not how the district used to be. I think that they've moved to ST because, as the school district has gotten darker, it's been moved more towards ST. The district used to be very diverse in their teaching methods 20 years ago. Administrators believed in the importance of having teachers that fit all four quadrants, who were STs and SFs [Interpersonal Style], NTs [Understanding Style], and NFs [Self-expressive Style]. They encouraged us to find out what learning styles our students were, to make sure that we taught in the various quadrants. Now, we're only teaching in ST. I don't even think that the district realizes that. As a teacher who is an NT/NF, I am suffocating! So my energy is tapped because everything is ST. (Antoinette)

Time away from teaching and planning also drains my energy. OK, they gave me resources, but they're not all at the level my children are reading. I have to go to another teacher and borrow their books; we share. People aren't equipped in their classrooms! That's just the bottom line. I'm shocked by what I don't have. I'm shocked by what I'm given to teach, and I'm shocked at the bits and pieces that I have to put together in order to make it complete. That's what I'm shocked about, the bits and pieces. Teachers shouldn't be spending as much time searching for materials as implementing lessons, that's a big problem. It is a waste of time. I want to move the children forward. You know, I'm doing this now, and I'm going to do it again tomorrow, or next week, I'm going to do it how many times? And it's a constant drain on my time. (Niles)

*Like teachers, building principals share their frustration with how much they are*

*asked to do, given the time constraints and limited personnel. Principals talk about the*

*challenges that they encounter while working with teachers to create a successful,*

*enjoyable, comfortable learning environment. They express the following sentiments as*

*building leaders.*

You have to know what's going on with reading instruction, and all of that takes a lot of management skills. Principals are managing curriculum instruction, but they are managing personnel, they're managing fiscal responsibility, they're managing human relations, they're managing their actual physical plants and capital projects. Principals need help in how to manage and prioritize the things that are important for their vision of their school. It's difficult, and we need another person, we do need a vice principal. You do need a reading supervisor. (Jamie)

I would love if the supervisors had offices in the school. It's like, "Why are you over there? You need to be in the school, have an office here, see what's going on; see what the teachers are working on and what they're struggling with and then you can best help instead of sending over a binder that really is not going to give them the tools that they need." There's nothing more important than being in the classroom and being with the kids and teaching a lesson yourself as building principal or literacy supervisor, modeling reading lessons for the teacher. (collective voice)

### Theme 5: Re-envisioning Family Involvement

*During our conversations Oakwood teachers talk at length about the difference*

*between the parent population in Oakwood 20 years ago and now. Cognizant of how the*

*ethnic and socioeconomic composition of Oakwood is changing, they recognize the fact*

*that experiences of children years ago are not comparable to those of today.*

*For example, the level of conversation and outdoor experiences that parents once*

*gave their children is not always possible now because of language barriers and work*

*schedules. Because of these limitations on the amount of conversational home*

*experiences of children, teachers need to be more explicit about how they teach reading,*

*scaffold children's thinking, and train them to make connections while they are reading.*

*Teachers need to provide more language opportunities in the classroom. Some teachers*

*suggest providing opportunities in school for parents to attend and participate in their*

*children's learning. Another suggestion is to have more teachers make an effort beyond*

*contractual hours to connect with parents. Some teachers lament over the lack of*

*parental involvement:*

> The parental support is not there, it used to be. It has changed dramatically, a huge dramatic change! I remember being so shocked that first year. Parents were always in my room and in the building. I was like, "What the hell is this, don't you have a job? Why are you in my face?" Parents were just so into it. I was like "get out," but now it's like, "Oh, my God, come back, where is everyone?" I'm so missing it. I feel like it's such an apathetic, passive atmosphere. Just drop the kids off. We're babysitters. It's your problem. They don't respond. They don't give you feedback. It's such a struggle. Sometimes when the kids are talking, you can tell that some of them are not even seeing their parents in the evening. (Avril)

> *Some teachers point out:*

> We as a town and as a nation are a little afraid to exhort ourselves too forcefully on parents who are in my view really messing up, really missing what they need to do to make their child feel successful and be successful. Parents need to be held more accountable in some way. (Colbert)

> When we bring up the lack of parental involvement at a staff meeting and how it's affecting the kids' performance, the first thing they [administrators] say is, "Don't worry about the parents." But how the hell can you tell me not to worry about the parents if this child is going to bed late at night, is eating junk food, or no food? Then the kids come in tired and hungry. They know their parents are not checking anything. They don't care about their homework. Then the kids are, like, the

teacher's going to be upset, big deal. So if that's all that's going to happen, how am I supposed to overcome that? (Jacqueline)

*District administrators also emphasize the need for variety in the ways the school district interacts and communicates with families. In addition to making books available for children to take home, administrators believe that the use of technology is crucial to bridging the gap between school and home.*

> There's a sense of urgency in Oakwood from my perspective because I don't know about you, but parents are on their Blackberries and they're on their iPhones. If they're working, they're on their desktop and that's what they have access to. So why not put things at their fingertips because that's where they're at. You can say we're a poor community, but everyone has a Blackberry. They've got something. Somebody's got something, and—trust me—the ones who don't, we can work with them. And that's just a handful. If we survey the kids and I think we have, it's just a handful of kids who don't have access. Blackberry, Twitter, Facebook, that's where parents are at, and you have to reach them where they're at. You have to kind of meet them halfway. Also, the schools have to do a better job in supporting initiatives that celebrate the teaching of reading instruction and accomplishment of reading. (Jamie)

> When the schools work well, I guess what you really hope for is that people will come in and share family stories, share cultural artifacts, that you'll have parents participating here, and it never got off the ground. I tried to do something where I had parents come in, I wanted parents to come in, have teachers set aside an hour every Friday and speak a language other than Spanish. Speak Urdu, speak Tagalog. (Jeannette)

*As I read the statements that some of the teachers make about schools needing to stop making excuses for parents, I cannot help but wonder about the barriers that prevent parents from participating actively in their children's education at the school level. There are parents who do not feel welcome at their children's school; therefore, they stay away and remain silent. I also wonder about the additional demands that schools place on the already stressed, unemployed parent or parents like mine, who work two or three jobs to provide for their family. There are many families who care about their child's educational well-being but are also preoccupied with basic necessities, such as paying*

*bills, keeping the lights on, feeding and clothing their children. I ask, "To what extent can schools lessen the burden?" Then again, Anyon (2005) says that it is not schools that need to lessen the burden; rather, the economic system needs to be changed.*

*Anyon (2005) argues that past policies relating to education have not addressed the unemployment and joblessness of families. In the same vein, Berliner (2012) writes that "the achievement gaps between Blacks and Whites, Hispanics and Anglos, the poor and the rich, are hard to erase because the gaps have only a little to do with what goes on in schools, and a lot to do with social and cultural factors that affect student performance" (p. 2.). Similarly, Delgado and Stefanic (2001) argue that the effect of the socioeconomic status of children of color on their performance in school is often viewed as the students' fault rather than recognized as another barrier resulting from the racism and inequalities that they and their families face. Educators need to ask themselves, how does a parent begin to sit and read with the child if the parent is struggling to feed, shelter, and clothe that child? It is not as simple as saying "no excuses." Schools and policy makers need to take home life, community structure, health, and environmental factors into consideration when making demands on parents (Anyon, 2005; Berliner, 2009; Comer et al., 1996; Epstein, 2001; Ferguson, 2007).*

*The issue of parental accountability is an ongoing debate and struggle for teachers. There are two primary schools of thought on the matter. There is the institutional belief that, for children to succeed in school, it is imperative that parents be actively supportive of their children's educational experience. On the other hand, there are educators and policy makers who take the position that children can succeed in spite of the lack of parental involvement in their schooling experience.*

*It is well documented and argued that parental involvement not only contributes to a child's success but also improves social skills and likelihood of pursuing a college education (Epstein, 1995; Ferguson, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Ferguson (2007) reports that students' learning improve with parental participation and that this is true regardless of grade level, regardless of whether the family is rich or poor, and regardless of whether or not the parents finished high school.*

*There is a need for schools and educators to move away from expressing their frustrations about the lack of parental involvement in terms of a deficit model. Rather than blaming parents who are often overworked and lack the knowledge to advocate effectively on behalf of their children, schools need to recognize their role in determining the levels of parental involvement (Epstein, 2001). Finders and Lewis (1994) argue that, instead of assuming that parental absence means noncaring families, educators need to understand the barriers that hinder some families from participating in their children's education. There is also a need to recognize and understand the various forms and levels of parental involvement. Parents can be supportive of their children as learners but may not be actively involved in their learning by helping them to complete homework assignments or even attending parent-teacher conferences.*

*We need to re-envision parental involvement. Rather than hosting class celebrations during the day, when most families are unable to attend, schools need to schedule functions during the evening to maximize attendance by families. This is a practice that runs counter to the contractual hours mandated by bargaining agreements; however, it is a gesture that can reap many benefits and contribute to improved parental participation and perhaps student behavior in class. Research indicates that, when*

*children become aware of their parents' participation in their learning, they may be more*

*apt to do what their teachers ask them to do (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research also*

*indicates a need to be specific about the type of parental involvement that is desired in*

*school and at home (Epstein, 1995; Ferguson, 2003).*

*Parents need to begin to see themselves as teachers, too, regardless of the level of*

*their own education or expertise with the English language. They are and still can be*

*teachers at home. The role of parent as teacher is something with which I struggle. I do*

*not always get it right. I often come home exhausted from work, wanting to just wash up*

*and get in bed, but I know too well the consequences of not reading to my child daily.*

*Besides, Kioja will not have it any other way. She will say, "So, no reading tonight?!"*

*Hearing that and seeing the look of disappointment on her face, the only choice is to*

*muster energy and read.*

*School administrators, policy makers, parents, and teachers are all responsible*

*for the success and failure of schools and children. All of these stakeholders are*

*responsible for the disparities and opportunities that exist in schools; it is not the sole*

*responsibility of teachers. When asked what suggestions teachers have for parents in*

*working with their children at home, given the limitations that some families face, the*

*teachers suggest that the best way for parents to help their children to succeed and*

*develop into proficient readers is to read with them. They posit that the first thing parents*

*can do is read with their children.*

> That's 98% of what I would suggest. And when they're done with that, they
> should READ with their child, and READ more with their child, and they should
> discuss what was read. The parent may have limited English ability, but this is
> where the child can be the teacher, can read to them from a book. The parent is
> listening and watching when they read, the child can explain, summarize, recap
> what has happened. I think if parents did only that, we'd see scores on tests

increase radically. And I don't mean do it only until they get to fourth grade. It should start when the child is young and keep on going to be lifelong readers. This is something that can happen even if you're a working mom and dad. (Colbert)

Secondly, just have quiet time; quiet time for them to play, and use some of those other sensory skills, quiet time for them to take some books and read, quiet time for them to write. I think that cutting off the television, the computer, and video games is crucial because what I see in the classroom is that as a whole, it's getting harder and harder for kids to be able to sustain listening to a story or to sustain reading for a period of time. I think the electronics have a lot to do with it, so that would be one thing that would help. (Meredith)

The third thing is, go to the library and get books on tape. Going to the library and even spending some time there just reading so that you're creating an atmosphere for reading. You're creating it even if you're not able to sit down and read it with them. You can sit down and have your own book and read with them or just listen to them read. Read books that are in Spanish, if you're a Spanish speaker. There's nothing to say that you can't, or that reading is only limited to English. It's harder to do when you don't have a lot of time, but if you rely on other parents to help you pick up your children and all of that, maybe you and that parent can have a conversation to create a little quiet book time and things like that. So, just creating the atmosphere is really important, and that can be done with very little money. (collective voice)

A fourth thing that can be done is when friends and family members give gifts, suggest that those gifts be books. I try to give books as gifts myself. It doesn't cost a thing to converse and discuss things with your child. Oral language skills are important; and so are listening skills; you know, listen to them. (Antoinette)

*When I ask what families can do at home to help their children to succeed as readers, administrators emphasize that we can do more in bridging the gap between home and school.*

Parents can read. That's the simplest thing. They can privilege literacy, make it important. (collective voice)

### Review of the Findings

Many forces shape the sense of self, among them education, nationality, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and geography (Chang, 2008). Teachers bring these forces into the classroom, thus influencing their perception of students and their families

(Lincoln et al., 2011). Using a research paradigm that combines auto-ethnography and action research enables me to discover the strength and advantage of teachers as researchers. The teachers who share information candidly during focus groups and individual interviews do so largely because I am also a teacher and share similar experiences with them; however, they also recognize that I am making myself vulnerable through the study process, which makes them more willing to share insights with me. Just as Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars question the usefulness of education research that is conducted about the education of children of color but lacks the authentic voice of people of color as researchers or participants, I question the usefulness of teacher research that lacks the authentic voice of teachers (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The findings of this study illuminate the experiences of teachers and district administrators. One revealing aspect of this process is that many of the district administrators whom I interview really "get it." That is an eye opener for me, for I did not think that administrators understood what it is like for teachers to have to deal with so many demands while attempting to meet the needs of such a diverse group of students. But they remember what it is like to be a classroom teacher with a plate full of demands. Some of the administrators realize that students face great social, emotional, economic, and educational challenges. They are struggling to find ways to provide teachers with the support and guidance that they need. The administrators also face challenges in trying to balance the political, racial, educational, and socioeconomic aspects of educating children in a diverse suburban school district. During my conversations with district administrators, I learn that they feel the pressure of being leaders and have themselves been wounded by some of their experiences within the Oakwood community.

The focus group and the individual interview conversations indicate that most of the teachers in the Oakwood Public School District are knowledgeable about their craft. They are aware of the needs of their diverse student population and their families. Some acknowledge their lack of training and understanding of teaching reading. They are not comfortable in teaching children with various degrees of reading levels. They express a level of discomfort when they are asked to switch grade levels and teach a grade level that they have not previously taught. They find it difficult to "switch gears" and apply their knowledge of teaching reading from one grade level to another. This difficulty in transferring teaching skills points to a need for a cohesive reading curriculum and additional training in the area of reading instruction, as well as differentiated instruction. If a teacher is used to differentiating instruction and meeting children where they are, as opposed to where mandates dictate, a knowledge bank of teaching reading to children at various levels already exists—but perhaps it needs to be expanded or strengthened.

During my conversations with the teachers it is apparent that we believe that, if children are to succeed as readers, adjustments need to be made in the way we approach the teaching of reading today because of changing demographics, the role of technology, and the limitations that some families experience. Many teachers continuously seek ways to incorporate the culture of students into the reading curriculum as best as we can, despite the lack of guidance and resources provided by the district. While some materials are available in the classrooms and various school buildings, individual classrooms are not properly equipped to plan and implement efficient and effective reading instruction for the district's diverse student population.

We need a reading curriculum that not only addresses the demands of the common core curriculum standards but also takes into consideration the diverse needs of Oakwood's student population. Our classrooms need to have books that incorporate a variety of reading levels and genres. The district needs to provide this leveled classroom library to achieve consistency in the skills that we teach and the reading habits that we want students to develop. If each classroom has a reading library, teachers may find it easier to release control of the books and allow students to borrow the books and take home developmentally appropriate materials to read and share with their families. The district needs to assess and replenish this leveled reading library as needed.

Teachers need consistent ongoing conversations with colleagues and administrators about the teaching of reading. The district needs to provide time during staff meetings or professional development days for these conversations to take place, for teachers to plan and implement the curriculum effectively. Time needs to be provided for teachers to attend professional development sessions that will contribute to our growth as literacy teachers in a diverse suburban public school district. We also need release time to visit other classrooms and other school buildings in the district to observe colleagues who may have strengths in areas where they may need to improve.

Reading instruction in the elementary grades needs to become a priority. In the same manner that safety issues are addressed with a sense of urgency, so must the district address the need to provide all students who are reading below grade level with the support and services that they need to meet grade-level benchmarks in reading. Currently, district remediation support services for students who are reading below grade level are not available to all students; only students in the lowest percentile of those reading below

grade level receive additional reading support. Whereas, at one time the number of students below grade level could be addressed through two literacy enrichment teachers per building, the current need for literacy remediation far exceeds the available services. As a result, many students who are reading below grade level have no access to additional support services beyond the classroom. The district still relies on two literacy enrichment teachers per school building to provide these remediation services. Consequently, many students continue to struggle and fail to meet grade-level benchmarks. This raises the question: Why does the district not reassess this structure, in light of the increase in students with diverse linguistic backgrounds and literacy needs? It also raises a question about the viability of the district's expectation that teachers meet these diverse needs in the classroom without additional support.

Teachers who participate in this study advocate for a district philosophy on the teaching of reading that is created by all stakeholders rather than taking the top-down approach to reform. We have identified the stakeholders to be students, parents, teachers, and administrators who understand the significance of culturally responsive teaching and the contributions that such practice make in optimizing the learning outcomes of a diverse student population. We recognize that the student demographics of the Oakwood Public School District have changed over the past 20 years. The findings of this research indicate that many teachers approach the teaching of reading with the common core standards and cultural needs of Oakwood's student population in mind, even without a district wide reading curriculum. The shift in demographics in the suburbs makes it imperative to implement a literacy curriculum and policy that are culturally responsive to meet the needs of students and their families. It also means that we have to educate

parents on the "culture of school," with which they may not be familiar. They may have a different perspective of the role of parents within schools in the United States, and this needs to be addressed.

This transformation in student population that school districts such as Oakwood are experiencing also requires teachers to shift the way in which they think about and view students and their families. My conversations with the teachers reveal that we make assumptions about a child's life at home based on the students' low test scores, reading levels, or a parent's inability to attend parent-teacher conferences or Back-to-School Night. Some teachers assume that students are performing at a low level in school because their parents are not supportive, not reading to them, speaking to them, or taking them to places such as the zoo or the museum. Some teachers also assume that, because the student population in the Oakwood school district is changing, the students in Oakwood lack consistency in their lives and need to be "fixed."

When we make assumptions about students' lives, those assumptions guide our attitudes and expectations for the students. Teachers need to be careful about making such assumptions and instead find ways to learn about the students and their families. Parents may very well be reading to their children. They may very well engage in conversation with their children and take them on outings. It is difficult for teachers to know what is happening in the home. When we make these assumptions, we are taking the position that families are at fault for a child's low academic performance and that the child's educational experience at school does not play a determining role in his or her academic success. CRT scholars argue that this kind of deficit thinking is one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in American schools (Yosso, 2005). According

to Yosso, deficit thinking also assumes that it is the students, their parents, families, and communities that should change and conform, not the schools.

The deficit paradigm affects the curriculum that schools value and implement. It also dictates which curriculum is left out, leaving some children feeling unworthy and academically cheated. The assumptions that teachers make speak to the need for teachers to engage in culturally responsive teaching. By adopting a culturally responsive perspective, teachers question their own biases and may avoid making dangerous assumptions about students, their families, and their homes (Ladson-Billings, 2009). We need to begin to rethink the way we view students and their families. Just as we are not solely responsible for the academic success or failure of students, similarly their families are not wholly responsible. As Ladson-Billings (2009) says, teachers are not "bad" educators purely because of the way they view African American children or other children of color. She posits that these very same teachers decry racism and believe in equal opportunity; however, they do not understand that their assumptions about their students interfere with their ability to be effective teachers for them.

Another critical theme that emerges from the focus group discussion is the role that federal, state, and district mandates play in the day-to-day teaching of and learning by students. One of the limitations of policies such as NCLB is that much is being demanded of districts but the resources and funding required to implement the law are not available. Thus, schools are asked to do more and are held accountable for much more while receiving very little funding from the state department of education to assist in the process. These reform policies take the position that the problems with public schools, failing schools, and poor children are confined within the schools (Akom, 2008; Anyon,

1997; Belfield & Levin, 2007; Berliner, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noguera, 2002; Yosso, 2005). The policies fail to acknowledge and address the additional factors that affect student achievement and the ability of schools to engage effectively in the business of teaching and learning. There are many challenges to be overcome by students, families, teachers, and school administrators. Those challenges will continue to exist if stakeholders do not work together to address each issue, create a plan of action, implement said plan, and see it through. It is acceptable to regroup and refine one's plan, but the plan needs to be created and executed first.

When I ask how district administrators can support elementary teachers in implementing the reading curriculum to improve students' learning outcomes, teachers and administrators make the following suggestions.

Teachers say they want their voices to be heard. "Listen, listen to us, really listen to what we're saying, what works, what doesn't work, what we need, the problems we're facing." They say, "Get answers for us; give us the training that we need. If we are going to implement these things, the district needs to know what the program is about, and administrators need to be educated about it." According to teachers, administrators should be educated about the target population and be honest about the demographics of the student population, rather than approaching decision making as if the students are primarily White middle-class children. "These are not the kids of 17 years ago. You've got to respond to what's in front of you."

Teachers make the following suggestions:

1. Develop a common district philosophy for teaching reading that has an enduring quality. A philosophy is different from a program, from the box that is dumped

in the teacher's room, presuming that the teacher can "figure it out." A philosophy is a vision statement that one invests in, develops, and crafts carefully to guide practices. The school community needs to do the hard work of crafting a vision to share with the families of the students and the community.

2. Develop a curriculum that empowers students, encourages them to be excited about learning, develops their creativity and critical thinking skills, and most of all, instills an appreciation for books and creates lifelong learners.

3. Provide support for the elementary school principals. They cannot do two jobs at once effectively, both as building manager and instructional leader. Create the position of assistant principal or dean to facilitate teaching and learning in the elementary schools, making it possible for principals to be effective instructional leaders who spend more time in the classroom or function as building managers, but not both.

4. Reinstate the teacher liaison position to improve communication and relationships between central office administrators and teachers.

5. Separate the responsibilities of the literacy enrichment teachers. They need to either be coaches or reading teachers, not both, because they do not have time to do both jobs well. Additional staff needs to be provided to assist in small group work at the kindergarten level.

6. Allow each subject supervisor to spend at least 12 days a year as a substitute teacher in the subject area that he or she has been assigned to supervise, to gain a first-hand experience of what teachers experience daily.

7. Hold people accountable to do what they are supposed to do at all levels in the system and make ongoing accountability a focal point of teaching reading. There needs to

be a balance among meeting mandates, data collection, data analysis, and conversations among teachers and administrators. The responsibility and challenge of helping students to move from one reading level to the next needs to be shared by teachers and administrators.

8. Provide more books on CDs to support the fluency needs of ELLs. This will provide models of reading expressively available at home. This will also lesson the burden of parents who may not be available to read aloud to their child.

9. Provide each classroom teacher with sets of books on topics of interest, topics about the students, more cultural books, books that are of different genres and levels. This will communicate to students that we are aware of their interests, we value them, and we respect their cultural background.

10. Provide professional development that is immediately usable and valuable so teachers can take any book and extract from it the things that students need to know and be able to do. Provide ongoing job-embedded professional development opportunities that meet the needs of both novice and veteran teachers. Customize the professional development sessions based on teachers' needs, years of experience, and level of training.

11. Create a professional teacher center to collect a library of professional materials for teachers, where teachers from all schools can coordinate, meet, collaborate, and brainstorm.

12. Provide professional development about the changing student population, including cultural practices and beliefs of children from Pakistan, the Philippines, and various parts of Africa who are part of the student population. We have not had training

on their cultural backgrounds to understand fully the ramifications of our practices and interactions with students and their families.

13. Reinstate monthly grade-level meetings to improve articulation across the district and collegiality among staff members. These meetings will allow teachers to reflect and evaluate their teaching practices so they are not islands in their classrooms. Providing teachers with time to participate in a learning community and collaborate with colleagues allows them to share experiences and challenges and collaboratively develop instructions plans of action that will benefit and meet the needs of students.

14. Make use of alternative assessments that can inform and drive instruction. Teachers want to see students thrive, to "light up." They look forward to witnessing the moment when students realize that they are reading fluently with expression, understanding what they read, and engaging in conversations about what they read. Teachers anticipate students saying, "I'm doing it," "I get it now," "I can do this!," We want to assess students' learning not to collect data for the sake of collecting data but to reflect and create an instructional plan that will help students to move to the next level and continue to grow as learners.

15. Acknowledge and show appreciation for the work that teachers do.

16. Engage in meaningful dialogue with teachers and ask them about what they see as impediments to the teaching of reading and making learning more successful for students.

17. Check with teachers to see how new programs/curriculums are being implemented. Follow through on plans with materials, support, and professional development.

Building-level administrators make the following suggestions for their colleagues and central office administrators:

1. Provide professional development that is meaningful, job embedded, and differentiated for novice and veteran teachers.

2. Provide consistency in professional development opportunities for teachers. The information that is shared by content area consultants cannot vary from teacher to teacher or from school to school.

3. Support teachers as leaders by rewarding them when they go the extra mile of helping to streamline district initiatives. Support teachers' interest in being leaders by providing opportunities to demonstrate expertise in a particular content area. Instead of hiring outside consultants to provide professional development, survey the current teaching staff for teachers who remain abreast of current research and demonstrate their strength in a particular content area.

4. Create a culture of learning and a culture of communication in which administrators are eager to share information and materials. Opportunities for building principals to collaborate and discuss the needs of their schools and share ideas need to be increased.

5. Provide content supervisors with an office space in each of the schools so they have an ongoing physical presence in the building, allowing them to interact with teachers, visit classrooms, and immediately address the concerns of teachers and the building principal.

6. Provide assistance to elementary school principals by creating the position of vice principal to manage and prioritize tasks that are important for their vision of their school.

7. Provide support services to every child who is reading below grade level by hiring additional literacy enrichment teachers. There is a dire need to make K–3 a priority. Early intervention is critical to assuring that students gain skills to be fluent readers who can think critically. Rather than waiting for the results of the NJASK3 to address the needs of students, identify and address weaknesses early and provide students with intensive intervention to develop and strengthen their reading skills.

8. Support initiatives that celebrate the teaching of reading instruction and celebrate student success.

9. Improve communication with families by making use of the parents' technological resources, such as iPhones, Blackberries, Facebook, and Twitter.

### Conclusion

Teachers speak of demographic changes that the school district is experiencing and how this shift is moving the district toward a mastery-style approach to teaching and learning. Some teachers maintain that this is occurring because the majority of the students in the district are children of color. Other teachers argue that this shift is occurring because of policies such as NCLB and the national common core standards. The conversations with Oakwood teachers and administrators reveal that this shift in the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic representation of the public school's student population is creating a need for suburban school districts such as Oakwood to engage in honest dialogue about the current student population and their academic and social needs.

The conversations also reveal a need for suburban public schools districts to learn how to integrate the needs of numerous immigrants, ELLs, and low-income students. While the central administrators in the Oakwood District focus on the high school, the importance of a strong literacy initiative with benchmarks in the elementary schools seems to be key to the success of students in high schools, especially in the rich offering of advance placement classes. While adding a second literacy supervisor at the elementary level is certainly a budget issue, this is worth revisiting, along with the idea of increasing the number of literacy enrichment teachers who provide support services to students who are reading below grade level. Certainly, the goals and standards across K–12 literacy need to be aligned vertically, but perhaps more emphasis and support needs to be given to Grades K–4, especially given the diversity of the children and families. This initiative may circumvent the need to intervene and remediate students' literacy skills intensively at the middle and upper grades.

Oakwood teachers and administrators identify specific ways in which they are addressing this transformation, which will be useful to suburban school districts that are experiencing a similar trend. Likewise, this trend of income disparities, unemployment, and poverty in the suburbs speaks to the need for policy makers, suburban public school administrators, and teachers to recognize and address how "social class characteristics in a stratified society like ours may actually influence learning in schools" (Rothstein, 2004, as quoted in Berliner, 2006, pp. 8-9). The narratives from this study provide detailed accounts of the challenges that teachers and administrators encounter as they strive to implement district, state, and federal mandates.

The growing racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic transformation that suburban public school districts are experiencing demands the attention of teachers and administrators who have both the capacity and the will to ensure that each child is armed with the skills and learning tools to become critical readers. This changing demographic in Oakwood Public Schools calls for the development of a reading curriculum that not only addresses the common core standards but is culturally responsive. An effective reading curriculum that is culturally responsive benefits all students and provides the foundation to be successful life-long learners in all content areas. When teachers employ reading instruction that is culturally responsive, students thrive; they learn to appreciate differences, their cultural background, and that of their peers.

Although standardized testing is currently part of the U.S. education system, the approaches to prepare students for these tests need not stifle the creativity of students and teachers. Additional testing demands and data-driven instruction will not optimize learning and enrich the lives of students if teachers are pressured to teach to the test. In a similar fashion, anti-teacher policies and top-down leadership will not promote collegiality nor foster a culture where teachers and administrator work as partners in education. A culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student population will be served best in an environment where teachers' voices are heard and acted upon, not just taken into consideration. It is not enough for administrators to seek teacher input simply for the sake of asking. Extensive efforts need to be made to include teachers in the decision making aspect of curriculum and policy making. Teachers have first-hand knowledge of what students need, their struggles, and directions to be taken to help them achieve.

Likewise, the district needs to rethink ways to communicate and interact with families. We need creative ways to include parents in the educational lives of their children. Many families are not visible during the school day, yet support their children and expect them to succeed. We need to provide families with specific tools and strategies that they can use to support their child's reading life at home. For example, families need to be invited to share with the school community how they support their child's reading life at home. Families may be more receptive to trying strategies that are modeled by a member of their peer group, as opposed to having a teacher do the modeling.

While teachers and administrators in our district speak of diversity, there is an absence of in-depth of conversation about race and educational inequalities. Some participants are more comfortable discussing issues of racism and educational inequality in private. Participants in this study used code words to refer to race. Participants use words such as "urban, migrant, immigrant, these people, culture, parental involvement, poverty, diverse student population, budget cuts, Title 1 funding, free, reduced lunch, test scores, remediation, basic skills"—code words that are primarily associated with children of color and school districts that are primarily populated with children of color.

Our collective inability to engage authentically and talk to each other about race and racism contributes to the persistent educational disparities in the Oakwood Public School District that we say we want to address. Some participants gloss over the issue or take a race-neutral approach when speaking about their experiences in working in a diverse suburban public school district. As CRT scholars argue, a race-neutral or color-blind approach to education and policy making does not benefit students. The education

community must find ways to engage in this difficult dialogue about race and its role in education. Teachers who fail to incorporate the culture of their students into the curriculum and profess to be color blind and lump people of color into one category are reproducing a hierarchy in which White culture dominates over other cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2003). This view of color blindness also influences a teacher's expectations and assumptions about home.

Ladson-Billings (2009) states that these reluctant attempts by teachers and administrators to acknowledge racial differences or grapple with these differences "mask a dysconscious racism, an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p. 35). Teachers may not be conscious of their assumptions and racist practices, but racism (whether or not color blind) will manifest in attitudes and daily interactions with students. Ladson-Billings encourages teachers and administrators to engage in culturally responsive teaching practices in an effort to help students to achieve academic success and to develop and maintain pride in their cultural heritage.

Racism creates an environment in which conversations about race are viewed by many as dangerous, uncomfortable, and to be avoided. CRT scholars argue that, whether or not administrators agree, issues of race and educational inequality must be addressed by school and community stakeholders in order to close the achievement gap and improve the learning outcomes of all students, especially Black and Hispanic students (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Kumasi, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Noguera, 2008; Yosso, 2005). This research conversation reveals that without honest, uncomfortable, in-depth dialogue, the educational disparities will continue, with

very little chance of making strides toward closing the achievement gap and providing a high-quality educational experience for all children.

This research conversation has the potential to make some individuals feel that they are being attacked. It has the potential to make others fearful for continued decline in educational quality and property values. It has the potential to move some to reflect on their practices, teaching styles, and leadership styles. The narratives from these conversations can be a catalyst for the district to reach out to parents with an eye toward partnership. The narratives can also serve as a catalyst for empowering teachers to continue to ask for materials that are needed in the classrooms, as well as the time to collaborate with colleagues and district administrators to optimize learning for students.

These narratives can serve as a catalyst for empowering district administrators to advocate for the materials and resources that they need to carry out their responsibilities effectively and to support their staff. Education reform models and the push for standardized testing should not drive the education community to self-silence. It is imperative to find ways to engage in honest dialogue with colleagues and district administrators so the voices of all stakeholders will be heard and extensive efforts will be made to implement reasonable suggestions. However uncomfortable one may feel when reading this work, it is my hope that opportunities for conversations among all stakeholders will continue and that we will collectively learn to more authentically listen to each other.

I look forward to meeting with the Superintendent and discussing the report that I have submitted to her office.

### *To Be Heard*

*Working towards obtaining a PhD is a long, arduous, and lonely process. And so after another in one of my many rounds of revisions, my chair, Carolyne asks, "What do you want?" Instantly, I say, I want to be done. She repeats the question, "What do you want?" Again, I say, to be done.*

*Here I am up as always at 3:30 in the morning answering Carolyne's question, but only 7 days later. I now realize what the question means. The question is not about getting a PhD. The question is not about being done and turning the dissertation in to the graduate school. The question is about illuminating the voices of the marginalized. The question is about creating a forum for honest dialogue about student achievement, family involvement, the interplay between race and education. The question is not about me.*

*Carolyne has always been about making sure that my work is my work. She gently, but firmly probes and guides you towards excellence, to reflect and rethink your position on issues. And so to answer her question, what I want is for teachers to be heard. I want teachers to be appreciated. I want administrators to stand with teachers. I want children to have the opportunity to be creative critical thinkers. State and federal mandates, top-down approach to leadership, daily teacher bashing by policy makers, political leaders, and even families at times, drain our energy and eat away at our self-confidence. But we persist. We continue to stand for children. Why? Because we know who we are and why we choose this profession. We know that being a teacher is no easy feat. We know that research conducted by researchers who have never been a K-12 teacher or have long left the K-12 classroom does not define us. We know that unreasonable expectations and mandates by administrators do not benefit students and optimize learning. We know that the children count on us. When a child makes that Freudian slip and calls you "mom" or "dad," we know that there is nothing more precious than that moment.*

*I want teachers to be recognized as experts in teaching and learning. I want teachers to be treated like professionals with valuable contributions to be made to pedagogy, curriculum, and policy. I want teachers to be provided with opportunities to make policy and curriculum decisions, for we know what our students need. Yes, some of us do not belong in the classroom. Yes, some of us do not have high expectations for students. Yes, some of us are pay check collectors. Yes, some of us need to engage in culturally responsive teaching. Yes, some of us need to remain abreast of current research, adjust our thinking and practices. But the majority of us are highly dedicated and committed to educating children. We want to partner with families and administrators. We want to see our students thrive. We want to be there when they "get it". We want to be there when our students return years later to say thank you. We want the state of education to improve. We want the freedom to teach as if life-long learning matters, not standardized testing. We want our voices to be heard.*

**Curriculum Vita**

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## Publications

White, C. J., Makris, M. V., & Lizaire-Duff, S. (2011). Listening to the city: Community research with the Historic James Street Neighborhood. *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies, 11,* 453-463.

## Conference Presentations

Lizaire-Duff, S. (2010), *Listening to the City: Community Research with the Historic James Street Neighborhood,* Everyday Life in the Segmented City Conference, Florence, Italy.

Lizaire-Duff, S. (2010). *Visions of Haiti: Using first-hand account to explore trans-nationalism in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake,* 41st Urban Affairs Association Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Lizaire-Duff, S. (2011), *Inciting DiverCity curriculums: Indigenous research methodology in an urban context,* 2011 AERA Annual Meeting: Inciting the Social Imagination–Education Research for the Public Good, New Orleans, LA.

Lizaire-Duff, S. (2011), *Advocacy-based qualitative inquiry in Newark: Illuminating political participation, architecture, education and neighborhood.* 7th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry Conference: Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Advocacy, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Lizaire-Duff, S. (2012), *Teaching reading with excellence and brown eyes in mind.* 8th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry Conference: Qualitative Inquiry as Global Endeavor, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Lizaire-Duff, S. (2012), *A conversation about changing demographics: Transforming curriculum, pedagogy, and policy,* Urban Systems Conference, Newark, NJ.

**Accolades**

Featured in *Literacy for Children in an Information Age,* by V. Cohen & J. Cowen
Who's Who Among America's Teachers, 2007
Featured in *Teaneck Suburbanite* newspaper for classroom studies, 2003
Nominated for Weston Award for Excellence in Teaching, 2000
Received Weston Award for Excellence in Teaching, 2001
Featured in the *Star Ledger* for innovative teaching methods, 2001