READING CAMDEN: EXAMINING THE LIVES OF CHILDREN IN CAMDEN

THROUGH AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reading Camden: Examining the Lives of Children in Camden through African-

American Children's Literature

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My dissertation examines the contemporary lives of children in Camden, NJ,

paying particular attention to how they view life in the city, their thoughts on their

families and how they understand and make meaning of race. The perspectives of the

children of the Walt Whitman School, where this research took place, were gained using

African American children's literature as a way of getting the children to talk about their

lives and all that they shared was informed by growing up in one of the "most dangerous

cities" in the country. Using a critical race methodological framework that situates the

voices and experiences of children of color at the center of analysis, this dissertation

highlights a more nuanced perspective of the city of Camden, one not quite known in

scholarship or recognized by media accounts, which is where most individuals get their

perspectives on life in Camden. As an emerging scholar in the field childhood studies, I

subscribe to the thinking that children should be studied in their own right, with effort

paid to documenting their perspectives and attending to their standpoint (Thorne, 2009, p.

7). However, more than that, through this dissertation I argue that greater attention needs to be paid in particular to the varied perspectives, experiences and circumstances in which children of color grow up. Using a critical race theoretical framework that asks questions such as: whose stories are privileged and whose stories are distorted and silenced? And, what are the experiences and responses of those whose stories are often distorted and silenced? I seek to add the voices of Camden's children to conversations about the city and to research more generally about minority children. I do so to challenge misperceptions about their lives but also to provide greater context about how they are living through and making meaning of the challenges that shape their childhoods in Camden.

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you are. To the children of Camden, I am, because you are, and will continue to commit

my life in service to you and children like you everywhere.

CHAPTER 1

Reflections on Camden's Children: Framing the Research and Understanding the Researcher

As I sat in English class one day during my senior year of high school in 1995, our teacher handed out a copy of a *Time* magazine article published in 1992 by Kevin Fedarko entitled "Who Could Live Here?" The article was about Camden, NJ. Below the headline was a picture of an abandoned, garbage-filled lot with the skyline of Philadelphia off in the distance. Fedarko (1992) wrote: "The story of Camden is the story of boys who blind stray dogs after school, who come to Sunday Mass looking for cookies because they are hungry, who arm themselves with guns, knives and—this winter's fad at $400 each—hand grenades"(p. 1). He continued, "It is the story of girls who dream of becoming hairdressers but wind up as whores, who get pregnant at 14 only to bury their infants" (Fedarko, 1992, p. 1).

I remember being immediately filled with rage as I read the article. This was not the Camden I was growing up in. None of my friends poked the eyes out of stray dogs or had hand grenades. The guys I hung around were the star athletes, bringing home championships in track, football and basketball. They were the "peer leaders" in the school, mediating issues within our student body, not drug dealers and most certainly not in gangs. Yes, I had several girlfriends who were pregnant with their first child before we graduated, but they were honor roll students who still aspired to go to college. As the youngest of ten children, in my Camden, I lived on a tree-lined street in a five-bedroom home in East Camden, with a yard big enough to build another house on it. There were no abandoned buildings in my neighborhood, no "visual brutality" as Fedarko (1992, p.1) described as I walked to and from school through Dudley Grange Park or to the corner

store on 32nd Street. My street had single-family homes, with nice yards; some even had

pools. I saw parents who went to work every day, my own father included. We trick-or-

treated for Halloween in our neighborhood, and Christmas lights shined up and down the

block during the holidays. On the 4th of July, neighbors, family and friends would come

to our house for a BBQ that my parents began preparing weeks in advance. Everyone

knew everyone else on the block, and everyone helped everyone else on the block.

By the time I was in high school, most of the kids on my block were much

younger than I was, but while I was growing up, the girls jumped double-dutch or raced

in our skates down the street all wanting to be Tootie from the 1980s television show

"The Facts of Life." The boys played football in the streets or chased the girls down the

block on their bikes. Most of the time while we played outside, our parents were inside

the house: the block was safe and quiet except for our laughter. As I read the article, I

kept thinking—where was the sorrow and destruction that Fedarko found? I was an A/B

student and the drum major of my high school marching band. I went out to the movies

with my friends, went to school dances and hung out at amusement parks in the summer.

My family wasn't rich, but contrary to Fedarko's view, my childhood was pretty good.

As I continued to read the article, my rage intensified: "'I think of Camden basically as a

doughnut,' says Joe Balzano, CEO of South Jersey Port Corp, 'Everything worthwhile is

on the edges, and the center is hollow" (Fedarko, 1992, p. 3). I was stunned; this article

had reduced me and every person in the city to nothing. Who I was, my family, my

friends, all of the people who lived in the city, we were the "hollow;" none of us

mattered. It was from this moment on that I decided that whatever I would come to do in

life, I would prove this article wrong. I would show that Camden was not where

childhood was a "luxury few children can afford" (Fedarko, 1992, p.5)

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In the following chapters, I examine the contemporary lives of children in

Camden, NJ, paying particular attention to how they view life in the city, their thoughts

on their families and how they understand and make meaning of race. While these may

seem like disparate topics, they are all intertwined and informed by how the city of

Camden shapes the lives of its children. Moving beyond my personal experience, my

research seeks to understand how low-income, minority children experience and make

meaning of the world around them, especially those who live in what is considered to be

one of the "most dangerous cities in America" (Morgan Quitno, 2008). Although not

much scholarly attention has been paid to Camden, much is known about the city and its

challenges: violence and poverty, failing schools, a complicated political system, and the

impact of disinvestment after being one of the most successful economic centers in the

country (CamConnect, 2012; Gillette, 2005; Kozol, 1991; Taibibi, 2013). Life in Camden

has primarily been understood through crime and poverty statistics and media accounts,

and not from the perspective of those who live there. As an emerging scholar in the field

of childhood studies, I am most interested in the perspective of those in the city who are

least heard from but who make up a sizeable population—the children. Believing that

their thoughts, opinions and experiences are just as valuable as adults and that knowing

their experiences provides a fuller understanding of life in the city, I ask: what is life like

for children in Camden? How do they make sense of the violence and crime that

surrounds them? Is childhood a luxury in the city as Fedarko (1992) claimed, or is it more

"normal" than one would expect with the challenges that exist? When it comes to families, given that almost half of the children in the city live in single-parent, female-headed homes, what are their relationships like with their fathers? What presence and role do these men play in their lives, and how do their children feel about them? With racial inequality still present and a driving force behind the challenges and disparities that exist in the city, what knowledge do the children have about the historical role race has played in the lives of minorities? How do they make meaning of race in their daily lives? Can they connect the historical legacy of racism to their contemporary understanding of race? Drawing from my year-long teaching experience in a third grade class in a Camden city school, I will shed light on these questions. Using a critical race methodological framework that situates the voices and experiences of children of color in the center of analysis, I aim not only to provide a different perspective about Camden, but to do so through the stories of those whose experiences are not often told: the children of the city.

Why Camden and Its Children?: Using a Critical Race Methodology

There is no denying that the city of Camden has significant challenges. Crime, poverty, economic disinvestment, bad housing, lack of resources and educational inequities have significantly impacted the city. Relatively small at only nine square miles, and made up almost exclusively of African-Americans and Latinos, Camden has become known internationally for being "the most dangerous city in America." (Morgan Quitno, 2008). This designation has been fueled in part by violence, crime and poverty, but Camden is also nationally known for its corrupt mayors, failed revitalization efforts, methadone clinics, "tent cities" (makeshift communities of homeless individuals who live

under major highways), arsons, changes in its police force, the state's taking authority from the local elected leaders and a challenged educational system.

While there are plenty of news reports that focus on Camden and the challenges that exist within the city—most recently an article in *Rolling Stone* magazine entitled "Apocalypse, New Jersey: A Dispatch from America's Most Desperate Town" (Taibbi, 2013), which describes current day Camden as a chaotic, ungoverned war zone run by unarmed teenagers—there are only a few scholarly works that explore the complexity of the city and its residents. *Camden After The Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City* (2005), by historian Howard Gillette, Jr., is the exception. Insightful and well-received by scholars, policy makers and others, Gillette's (2005) work examines Camden's contemporary plight by tracing the historical impacts of deindustrialization, "white flight" and political corruption. Using historical documents, media accounts, and the stories and memories of current and former residents, Gillette (2005) carefully crafts the history of Camden's rise, fall, and hopeful renewal. This is a much-needed book on Camden; however, children and their experiences or the impacts of the plight of the city on their lives are not Gillette's focus.

The most infamous book about Camden, however, is focused, in part, on the lives of Camden's children: *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991) by Jonathan Kozol. Using an investigative journalism approach, Kozol (1991) accounts in scathing detail the educational inequities that poor, minority children faced during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Offering up their stories to incite a moral outrage against the policymakers and elected officials that allowed such gross disparities between the rich and poor educational systems throughout the United States to exist, Kozol (1991) makes

a severe assessment of what he witnessed in schools. Traveling between Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, San Antonio, East St. Louis, Washington, DC and what is described on the book jacket as the "urban wreckage" in Camden, Kozol (1991) uses the voices of teachers and children to tell stories of the daily challenges faced by children as they struggled to live and receive a basic education in these urban communities. The book and its focus on Camden received considerable attention both locally and nationally when it was released and is still widely discussed in conversations relating to urban education and youth. At the time, *Savage Inequalities* was a timely book, written and published in the midst of a 30-year legal battle centered on school finance laws that created the inequities that Kozol (1991) highlights in the book. The class action lawsuit *Abbot v. Burke*, brought by families of students in the poorest cities and school districts in New Jersey against the state to equalize school funding, has its roots in Camden and the Camden City Public Schools. While the battle rages on in Camden about school funding and student achievement, no other book or work has taken up the cause of Camden's children.

At the foundation of my work is the belief that race and racism play a crucial role in the poverty, crime, disinvestment and inequities that exist in the city of Camden (sentiments shared by both Kozol [1991] and Gillette [2005]) and, as such, that they shape not only how children in Camden experience and understand the world, but how those outside of Camden see and perceive Camden's children and the city. With this belief I turned to the field of critical race studies to provide a theoretical framework and methodological approach for engaging Camden children in my research and making sense of and organizing the experiences and understandings that they shared. Critical race

theory (CRT) began in legal scholarship, examining the intersection of race and power and how the law contributed to the systematic disempowerment of African-Americans broadly (Valdes, McCristal, & Harris, 2002) and over the past several decades has been embraced as a framework for scholars interested in educational inequities in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gilborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). While there is no "canonical set of doctrines or methodologies" to which all critical race theorists subscribe (Ladson-Billings, 1998, pg. xiii), CRT begins with the notion that racism is "normal, not aberrant in American society" and is ever present and impacts all aspects of life in the United States (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv). CRT scholars believe racism has silenced or distorted the voices of minorities and those who are marginalized, allowing majority voices and stories to shape what we know about minorities and their experiences (Delgado, 1989; Taylor et al., 2009; Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002).

Google terms like "youth" and "Camden, NJ" and you will find articles, media reports and comments that portray Camden youth as educational failures, high school drop-outs, juvenile delinquents or children in need of saving from violent neighborhoods as portrayed by Diane Sawyer in her 2007 special "Waiting for the World to Change" on the primetime show 20/20 (and in her follow up on the city in 2012). Read almost any comment, any day, in any newspaper or on any website where there is a story about Camden and the general sentiment is that Camden is a wasteland and all of those who live in Camden are less than nothing and doomed to failure. From time to time there are bright spots, like the Sophisticated Sisters, a dynamic drill team made up of over 200 girls from the city who were widely featured in 2013 in *People* magazine, on *Good Morning America* and even performed on *Dancing with the Stars*. The founder, Lawanda

"Wa" Jones, a Camden native, was honored as a CNN top 10 Hero in 2013 for her mentorship and leadership of the girls in the drill team and the girls themselves were seen as glimmers of hope in a city full of despair. But stories like these, focused on more positive aspects of Camden youth and their lives in the city, are few and far between and rarely make their way to the national stage.

It is my belief that the children of Camden, their voices and experiences, are largely absent from conversations about the city or when they are spoken about, most often by those outside of the city, the perspective is usually negative—negative towards them personally or negative about the context of their lives. While the image of Camden's children may be invoked at times to garner sympathy or incite outrage about the impact and effects of poverty and crime in Camden, these conversations are generally fleeting and tend not to provide any nuance about the lives children lead in the city. At other times, even though children make-up a third of the population of Camden, they are simply spoken about and not spoken to about their views and opinions. As a way to counter false, missing or inaccurate perspectives about students of color in particular, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) developed a critical race methodology that they define as a theoretically grounded approach to research with youth of color. Their approach seeks to (a) foreground race and racism in all aspects of the research process; (b) challenge the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; (c) offer a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender and class subordination; and (d) focus on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). At the core of this approach is the insistence that the voices, values and experiences of these youth sit at the center of the

analysis through the composition of counter stories. Through storytelling or narrative, people of color can and should present "counter narratives," which CRT scholars contend are stories grounded in their reality about how they live and understand the world around them (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Matsuda, et al. 1993) . These approaches not only allow for the countering of deficient or incomplete perspectives that exist about minorities and the lives they lead, but critical race scholars believe that "the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate and critical" to understanding their lives and must be included in any discussions or research about them (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

I approach and situate my research by marrying the ideas discussed above with those from the field of childhood studies, which asserts that voices and experiences of children are just as valuable as adults and that children's perspectives of their lives should be included more in research done about them. It was my ultimate goal through this work to explore exactly what children in Camden thought about their city, their lives and the world around them, believing that their voices are legitimate, appropriate and critical to any conversation about them or Camden. In this way I am allowing them to speak for themselves and providing an opportunity for their voices to be heard about their lives and their city.

As I considered the approach I would use to access the stories and experiences of Camden youth, I wanted to use an approach that served two purposes: first, it should provide an unobtrusive way to get the children to talk about their own lives and experiences; and second, it should allow the children to learn about those who have overcome adversity and challenge. A core tenet of critical race methodology encourages

the use of unconventional and creative methods to draw on the knowledge and experiences of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 37). In light of this tenet, I decided to do my research in a Camden city public school, and I turned to the world of children's literature, specifically African-American children's literature, as a way to get children in Camden to talk about their lives.

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives of African-American Children's Literature

Children's literature, literature written especially for those under the age of 14, is said to play a powerful role in conveying to children ideas about the world and their place in it (Sims Bishop, 2007) and is widely available in schools for children to engage with either by being read to by adults or by reading themselves. Nursery rhymes and counting books, fairy tales and fantasy, history and fiction, and stories of everyday life experiences, the field that children's literature covers is vast and deep. My goal was to use children's literature as a way of engaging children in Camden to talk about their lives and experiences. In schools, literature is most often used in very pragmatic ways—to learn knowledge, seek information or to comprehend something—such as gathering historical facts or coming up with "right answers" in response to a text. However, I was most interested in what reader response theorists call the experiential processes of engaging with literature (Beach, 1993; Beach & Hynds, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1995). I wanted to understand how these children respond to children's literature based on their own unique lived through experiences, how they identify with characters, bring their own memories and relate their own experiences and knowledge, when attempting to make sense of or engaging with the text (Beach, 1993, p. 50-51). Given the experiences of

children in Camden, I did not believe that popular children's books, those most readily

available and commonly found in Barnes and Noble bookstores and in classrooms, would

tackle the themes and issues that I wished to explore. I didn't think popular books would

resonate with the children in a way that represented the experiences they have growing up

in a low-income city, nor provide historical perspectives and representations that I felt

important for minority youth to engage with in literature. Therefore, I turned to the field

of African-American children's literature.

   Children's literature is said to be a powerful way to convey to children ideas

about the world and their place in it. As one example, scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (1994)

believes that literature is "one of the vehicles through which we adults transmit to

children our values, our attitudes, our norms, our world views, our philosophies of life"

(p. xiii). During the late 19th and early 20th century, American children's literature was

filled with racist and dehumanizing images of Blacks that emanated from popular culture.

The unique institution of slavery in the United States brought forth a multitude of

stereotypes that caricatured Blacks. These stereotypes over time became cemented in the

minds of Americans and others through popular culture representations in photographs,

paintings, advertisements, songs and literature that were widely accessible to both adults

and children. Even though the Romantic ideal of childhood in the U.S. during this time

sought to shield and protect children, particularly middle class White children, from the

harsh realities of the adult world, this did not mean they were kept away from racist

imagery of Blacks. From children's books of nursery rhymes, ABC and counting books,

to books focused on history and even series books like *The Bobbsey Twins*, children were

bombarded with both subtle and blatantly negative representations of Blacks in the U.S.

Children's magazines, such as *St. Nicholas* (which launched in 1873) and picturebooks during this time portrayed blacks as dumb and subservient and rarely, if ever, doing anything worthwhile, let alone important. Blacks were depicted as ignorant and lazy, needing the "guidance" of Whites to survive. Visually they were drawn with exaggerated features—bulging eyes, "kinky" hair, extremely dark skin, big red lips—and often portrayed in ways that made their lives seem expendable. For examples of such extreme portrayals of black characters, see *A Coon's Alphabet* (1848), *Ten Little Niggers* (1894), and *Little Black Sambo* (1899). More subtle, yet also damaging portrayals of African-Americans as maids, servants, and field hands were included in popular books such as *Diddie, Dumps and Tot* (1882), by Louise Clarke-Pyrnelle, *Elsie Dinsmore,* a book series by Martha Finley (1867), and *The Two Little Confederates* (1888), by Thomas Nelson Page.

In *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood*, Murray (1998) explores the social construction of childhood and how adults use children's literature to convey social values that they deem important and argues that during the 19th century, children's authors "constructed settings and dialogues that conformed to America's growing preoccupation with a whiteness reinforced by racial and ethnic hierarchies" (p. 117), a sentiment shared and found by other scholars in children's literature (Broderick, 1973; MacCann & Woodard, 1972; Osayimwense, 1995; Pescosolido, Grauerholz, & Milkoe, 1997). At the time, children's literature was geared towards White children because publishers and authors did not believe that Black children could read or purchase books (Martin, 2004, p. xiii). However, another possible interpretation is that the education and entertainment of Black children was not a concern

of White authors and publishers. This left Black children exposed to literature that more than likely perpetuated distorted images and representations of Black Americans. It was within this context that African-Americans began their quest to create literature for African-American children that put forth a truer representation of Blacks' and African-Americans' experiences.

African-American children's literature is defined by Bishop (2007) as books written by African-Americans, focused on African-American people and their life experiences and primarily intended for children up to age fourteen (p. xi). To challenge the prejudice, hardship and discrimination that surrounded black children during the early 20th century, W.E.B Du Bois created *The Brownie's Book* magazine in 1920, which is credited with initiating what is now known as the field of African-American children's literature. Wanting to be clear about his intentions, in the 1919 children's issue of *The Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP, Du Bois (1919) laid out seven objectives for the forthcoming magazine*:*

1. To make colored children realize that being colored is a normal, beautiful thing;

2. To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race;

3. To make them know that other colored children have grown into useful, famous persons;

4. To teach them delicately a code of honor and actions in their relations with white children;

5. To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their own homes and companions;

6. To point out the best amusements and joys and worthwhile things of life; and

7. To inspire them for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice (p. 285).

Du Bois, and contributors such as Jesse Faucet, Arna Bontemps, Nella Larsen and Langston Hughes, wanted the "children of the sun" as Du Bois called them to know that their blackness was "normal" and beautiful and wanted to teach them about the history and achievements of Black people. Writing about the creation of the magazine, Dianne Johnson-Feelings (1996) comments that it was important for Du Bois and his contributors to publish a magazine that taught black children about the lives of other Blacks and their accomplishments. Du Bois and his contributors wanted Black children to know that even though blacks in America endured significant struggles, they had also achieved great things (Johnson-Feelings, 1996, p. 13). These early writers for Black children could have been called some of the first critical race theorists, using their writings in children's literature as a way provide a counter narrative about the lives and experiences of Black Americans that was being portrayed in children's literature at the time. While *The Brownies' Book* only existed for two years, its publication was a significant achievement and turning point in the creation of literature specifically for Black children.

The first issue of the 32-page monthly magazine for the "children of the sun" was published January 1, 1920. The inside cover stated "Designed for all children, but especially for *ours*," making clear to Black children that this magazine was for and about them. Jessie Faucet (1920), one of the founding writers, told the readers in the first issue of the magazine: "To Children, who with eager look, / Scanned vainly in library shelf and nook, / For History or Song or Story / That told of Colored Peoples' glory, -- / We

dedicate The BROWNIES' BOOK" (p. 32). For 15 cents a copy or one and a half dollars

for a year-long subscription, Black children were showered with positive images of

themselves. From the Black ballerina on the inaugural cover to photos sent in by people

described as "some little friends of ours" depicting cute, round-face Black infants and

children, Boys Scout troops in Philadelphia, girls at the YWCA club in New York City

and children marching in the Negro silent protest parade of 1917 protesting brutality

against Blacks, the magazine showed a range of Black children in real life situations (*The

Brownies' Book*, p. 11). All of the images were positive and while some like the

"Children in the Silent Protest Parade" photograph (Johnson-Feelings, 1996, p. 35)

served to politicize the "child" and the readers, they also served as a way to build Black

pride in the children and have them see beauty in their Blackness. The magazine garnered

some detractors because the majority of the images were the children of the middle class

elite, ignoring children of lower social class. This was because part of Du Bois' mission

was to show not only Black children, but also Black and White adult readers, the success

of the race in rearing a generation of "New Negro" children based on his talented tenth

ideology.

The magazine included fiction and non-fiction stories, letters to the editors

(mainly from children), poems, music and history, all to delight the readers but also to

educate them about their place in the world as Blacks and their moral and social

obligations to their race. The writings were intentional about taking pride in Blackness. In

a poem entitled, "The Wishing Game" by Annette Browne, three children were sitting

around the fire asking each other, "Tell who we'd rather be / Of all the folks that's in our

books / (Of course, we wouldn't want their looks)" (quoted in Johnson-Feelings, 1996, p.

30). This reference highlights the invisibility, or lack of positive representations, of blacks in children's literature and textbooks at the time. The girl says she wants to be Betsy Ross, "And have the papers print my name,-- / If colored girls could rise to fame" and one of the boys wants to be Roosevelt, but the last boy who is also considered the wisest says, "… I'd be a Paul Dunbar / Or Booker Washington. / The folks you named are good, I know … Of those two men I'd wish to be. / Were colored boys like you and me" (quoted in Johnson-Feelings, 1996, p. 30). Through the child narrator, Browne is communicating with the child readers about successful Blacks and suggesting that the readers take pride in them and look to them as role models.

Children's literature scholar Perry Nodelman (1992) asserts that when adults write for children we "use our knowledge of 'childhood' to dominate children … Indeed, we almost always describe childhood for children in the hope, unconscious or otherwise, that the children will accept our version of their lives" (p. 31). Du Bois agreed with this sentiment and believed that Black children were the key to social progress for African-Americans and reimagined the Black child through the writings in *The Brownies' Book* as culturally, politically and aesthetically sophisticated in the hopes that they would take up the fight for social justice (Smith, 2004, p. 1). Du Bois did not believe in childhood "innocence" and shielding Black children from the realities of Black life and history. In the same 1919 issue of *The Crisis* he wrote, "to seek to raise [Negro children] in ignorance of their racial identity and peculiar situation is inadvisable and impossible" (p. 285). Du Bois wanted parents to talk openly to their children about segregation, discrimination, lynching and those things that impacted the Negro community (Martin, 2004, p. 136). For Du Bois, *The Brownies' Book w*as a step towards building new images

of African-American children but also in building a new breed of African-American children. By placing them at the center of his ideas about the New Negro Movement, Du Bois challenged the assumptions of the black child as, "impoverished, rural, benighted, uncivilized and uncivilizable" (Smith, 2004, p. xxii). After the demise of *The Brownies' Book* in 1921 due to lack of financial support, *The Crisis* magazine continued its commitment to Black children through an annual children's issue that featured materials reflective of a more "innocent" side of Black childhood, in addition to the political essays and stories typically offered in *Brownies*.

While short-lived, *The Brownies' Book's* tenets and ideologies continue to influence the field of African-American children's literature today. Contemporary African-American children's authors and illustrators continue to produce books that seek to empower black children regarding the beauty of being black (i.e. skin tone and hair); teach about the history of blacks in the U.S. and abroad; and make Black, and all children aware of the successes and accomplishments that Blacks have achieved and the challenges they have endured. Even though these books are suitable for any children, African-American children's authors and illustrators explicitly use Black characters as the protagonists, Black vernacular and Black cultural references and traditions as a way to connect specifically with Black children and make "blackness" and the lives they experience more visible. These authors and illustrators also create books that focus on "everyday" life experiences of children, their families and friends; books that discuss race and racism, violence and crime and living life in the city; or reimagine classic fairy tales such as Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood.

To acknowledge these authors and illustrators and their positive and more accurate depictions of African-American experiences, in 1970 the American Library Association established the Coretta Scott King Book Awards. Focused on books that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values, these awards are given exclusively to African-American authors and illustrators annually, highlighting some of the best and most popular books written that year. Even though children's books by African American authors and illustrators focused on Black experiences are more prevalent and have been recognized by the prestigious Caldecott and Newbery awards, there are still considerable challenges in the field of children's literature as it relates to highlighting African-American (and multicultural) experiences. In his 2013 *New York Times* article, "The Apartheid in Children's Literature" award-winning African-American children's author and illustrator Christopher Myers talks about the continuing lack of diversity in children's literature. "Too often today's books remain blind to the everyday reality of thousands of children," says Myers, "Children of color remain outside the boundaries of imagination" (Myers, 2013). Of 3200 children's books published during 2013, only 68 were by African-American authors or illustrators and only 93 were about Black people (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2013). With African-Americans making up close to 13% of the population in the U.S. but only averaging about a 3% presence in children's books, there is still a tremendous need for African-American children's authors and illustrators to focus on black experiences and black characters in children's literature and for this literature to get into the hands of African-American children.

It is for all of the reasons that I state above that I wished to use African-American children's literature in my research. While children in Camden don't see themselves represented as pickaninnies or being called a nigger in children's books or on television, in their daily lives they continue to deal with negative representations, negative perceptions and challenging realities about where they live, who they are and who they can become. I believe that using African-American children's literature as a way to engage Camden's children in conversations about who they are and what they think about Camden can also serve several purposes: exposing them to literature that is not readily available in their schools or libraries; focusing on people who have overcome challenging life situations and gone on to great accomplishments; and speaking about experiences that may be more prevalent in their lives—all in the hope that engaging with this literature will have an impact on how they see and understand themselves.

Research on Children's Engagement with African-American Children's Literature

Over the past 20 years, how children respond to African-American children's literature has become an area of study. In one of the earliest studies using the terms "black children's literature," Bennett-Powell (1976) found that black children exposed to racially relevant storybooks and learning materials exhibited more positive racial attitudes and racial identifications immediately after a six-week intervention in comparison with children who did not have racially relevant books and learning materials. However, other studies focused on "Afrocentric" curriculums for children, adolescents and college-age students have shown mixed and inconclusive results for impacting racial identity development or racial preference (Cross, 1991, p. 108). However, since then, more research has been conducted focused on African-American

children's literature, seeking to understand how children and youth engage with such literature, respond to and "make meaning" of it, primarily through the theoretical perspective of reader response. Beach (1993) explains that those interested in reader response are interested not just in the meaning readers take away from text, but the roles of the reader, the text and the social/cultural context that shapes the transaction between the reader and the text (p. 1). This type of research is especially interesting because while it is only a small body of work, it privileges the voices and experiences of the actual children who read African-American children's literature as a way to provide a broader context for understanding the field of children's literature generally and African-American children's literature specifically.

In "But This Story of Mine is Not Unique: A Review of Research on African-American Children's Literature," Brooks and McNair (2009) provide the only extensive review of studies related to African-American children's literature. While the article covers several areas of research done in the field of African-American children's literature, for the purposes of my work I was most interested in those studies that focus on reader response. From 1982 through 2008 there have been 20 research studies that focused on some aspect of reader response in relation to African-American children's literature. From this list of 20, 12 focused on elementary-school-aged students (pre-k through fifth grade) and of those 12, only four focused solely on African-American children and only two focused specifically on how African-American children engaged with picturebooks (see Appendix A).

Overall, the studies that focused on elementary-school- aged children examined a range of topics: whether ethnicity affects student engagement with African-American

children's literature (Altieri, 1993); factors that influence reader enjoyment (Sipe & Daley, 2005, listening and comprehension (Copenhaver, 2001; Harris, 1997; Bell and Clark, 1998); student perceptions about the power and relevance of African-American children's literature (Hefflin, 2003; Grice & Vaughn, 1992); how a character's race influences the comprehension and recall of readers (Lehr and Thompson, 2000; Smith, 1995; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; Sims-Bishop, 1983) and whether African American children's literature can increase academic achievement (Bell & Clark, 1998). Each of these studies is important and sheds new light on some aspect of children's engagement with this literature. However, gaps in the research exist that if filled will provide a broader context for understanding children's engagement with African-American children's literature. It is this space I believe my research can occupy.

Many of the studies take place in schools but few take into consideration the cultural and social context in which the children live and how it shapes their responses or what can be learned about their daily life experiences from their responses to the literature. All of the studies cited present generalized demographic information about where the children live—in an "urban setting" or "attending school in a racially mixed neighborhood." However, none focuses on the sociological, economical or educational contexts that shape the children's everyday lives in any significant way, which impacts how children engage and interpret the literature. One study took into account how the lives of the children outside of the school impacted their interpretations of the text (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996), but only in response to the specific responses children gave about some aspect of the book they read. The study did not seek to better understand the children as individuals through their interpretations of the text. Outside of the selected

text used for the research, none of the studies considered children's access to literature generally (in the home, at the library) or the availability of African-American children's literature in their lives, even though all of the researchers believed that access to this literature is important and necessary in the lives of Black children. The gaps that I have listed are tall orders to fill for any one research study, but I will attempt to address many as I explore using African-American children's literature to get at the lived experiences of children in Camden.

The Process of Discovery

To address the questions and gaps in research that I have outlined above, I conducted ethnographic research in one Camden City Public School, the Walt Whitman School, located in the South Camden section of the city.[1] During the 2012-2013 school year, I spent four to six hours per week in the school. I was primarily located in a third grade language arts literacy class, but also spent time attending parent-teacher conferences, afterschool programs and other school events over the year. I conducted formal and informal interviews with school personnel, teachers and students and collected site documents from the school. While I attempted to speak with parents formally about my research, they all declined being interviewed.[2] I also spent time touring and observing the neighborhood around the school, which is where many of the students in the class lived.

I began on the first day of school in the classroom with the students. For the month of September, my role in the classroom was primarily as an observer. Since I have

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[1]The name of the school as well the names of all of the children and adults have been changed.
[2]All of the parents I reached out to said that they didn't believe they had any worthwhile insights to share but were happy to let me speak with their children.

no formal teaching experience, these days of observation allowed me to study how the teacher, Ms. Washington, taught the class and handled classroom management and to learn the general rhythm of the school day. The class was made up of 20 students ages eight-nine, seven boys and 13 girls.[3] Three of the students were Puerto Rican, two of the students were African-American and Puerto Rican ("Blackarican" is how they described themselves) and the rest were African-American.

By October I began teaching an hour to 90-minute class weekly on African-American children's literature, reading one book per week with a corresponding activity, until the end of the school year. The books (see Appendix B) were chosen based on the definition of African-American children's literature provided by Sims (2007): books written and/or illustrated by African-Americans, focused on African-American people and their life experiences and primarily intended for children up to the age of 14 (Sims, 2007, p. xi) with one exception, the book *Something Beautiful* by Sharon Dennise Wyeth and illustrated by Chris Soentpiet. I used this book because it was in the classroom library and selected by one of the students to be read. All of the authors and/or illustrators of the books chosen have garnered awards for either the books I used in class or other children's literature books they have written or illustrated (e.g. Coretta Scott King Award, Caldecott and Newbery Awards).

After the first week of teaching, I selected a student from the class to choose the book for the next week based on a collection of books I had already assembled. This allowed the students to have some voice in the process of what books were read week to week. Each class consisted of pre-reading questions or an activity to prime the students

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[3]Over the course of the year two male students transferred out of the school and were replaced by another male student.

about the themes that were present in the book. Students would then answer these questions out loud or write responses in the journals I provided them. After I had read the book aloud, there would be a follow-up activity, journal writing or art activity that corresponded with the book. Weekly lesson plans were created for each book drawn from teacher curricula from the book publishers, on-line lesson plans provided by educators, and my own questions and activities based on aligning the book theme with the questions I wanted to explore about the lives of the students and their thoughts about the city. I reviewed all of the student journals on a weekly basis, thanking them for sharing their thoughts, following up on answers they provided and even answering questions they posed to me from time to time.

My intention was to set up the classroom read-alouds and activities in a way that would allow the students to process what they were "experiencing, thinking, and feeling during the reading" (Rosenblatt 1991, p. 444) in our classroom discussion and their subsequent journal writings. That is, I wished for the students to think about the content of the book, what was discussed in the classroom discussions, and their own personal experiences as they responded to questions in their journal writing. Using a perspective from reader response research, I wanted to explore how these children brought their lived experiences to their responses to the children's literature (Lehr, 2000, p. 480). This approach values and privileges the voices of the children and their responses, and my hope was that it would provide some insight into their daily life experiences, thoughts about the city, family life, race and racism, their childhood and the larger world around them. I sought to create a trusting environment in the classroom by providing ample opportunities for students to talk and share their thoughts about the literature and

allowing them to engage in open conversation with other students in the class. Providing opportunities to share their experiences and building an atmosphere of honest, respect and trust were key in having students open up about their lives. Often times in the classroom I was a critical participant, engaging students in conversations about the questions that I constructed as a way to elicit thoughts about their own lives in relation to the books and to challenge their thinking, especially as it related to the history of racism and slavery in the U.S. Because the students were only eight to nine years old, there were significant gaps in or lack of understanding about the history of slavery and racism in the U.S.; without my mediating some conversations, the students would have been left with misleading or inaccurate information. However, at other times I stood back and let the conversation flow amongst the students, letting them guide the pace and the direction of the conversation.

Also key to this research was my own subjectivity. Seeking to understand how children lived and made meaning of their lives in Camden was both a personal and scholarly endeavor. Being raised and educated throughout my entire childhood in the city and currently working and living in Camden has led me to this research interest. I know that the orientation of my research has been shaped not only by my experiences of living in the city, but also by my race and culture, my gender, my values and interests. With my personal and professional life so enmeshed in the city, I worried about my own objectivity as it related to the city, the schools and the children of Camden. Throughout my experience it was important for me to reflect critically on how I interpreted the data based on my personal connections to Camden and to make sure that it was the perspectives of the participants that informed my analysis. Throughout the year I kept a

journal to reflect upon my own emotions and experiences, and as a way to keep my own opinions and memories from overshadowing those of the children and adults that I worked with over the year. I certainly was aware that my presence in the school and classroom impacted the setting, but my hope was that my social and cultural knowledge of Camden forged a deeper connection with my participants and enhanced the detailed and nuanced perspectives of the lives in Camden that I sought to understand. As an emerging scholar, I approach my research from a critical perspective wherein I am committed to social justice and the empowerment of poor, minority children and seek specifically to use this research in my dissertation as a counter narrative perspective on Camden and its youth.

I admit that this is a limited view of the life of children in the city, as my research was confined to one classroom of 20 students over the course of one school year. However, with ethnographic research the focus is on providing rich details about individuals and how they understand their lives. It is my hope that through my dissertation the lives of the children of Camden are reconsidered and that their stories will spur additional research on their lives and their experiences.

Analyzing the Data

In this project I drew on a wealth of data collected from my yearlong interaction with students and adults both inside and outside of the school day. Extensive participant observations, both inside the classroom and the neighborhood; interviews—both formal and informal—with students, teachers, administrators and residents; and the volumes of journal entries and pictures provided by the children themselves helped to shape the story

of life in the city of Camden as experienced by those I encountered over my year at the Walt Whitman School.

I conducted a descriptive analysis of the books that were used in the classroom along with the transcriptions of the tape classroom discussions and students' journal responses to uncover the key themes that emerged from the students engaged with the various books read in class. I systematically analyzed these text based on a classification of categories adapted from reader response research by Beach (1993) and Lehr (1991) (as cited in Lehr &Thompson, 2000, p. 483). The categories are: literal thinking, inferring, moral response, building meaning interactively, interpretation/dialogic response, background knowledge and personal/connecting (Lehr & Thompson, 2000, p.484). For the purposes of my work, the category I was most interested in and used as the basis for my analysis is "personal/connecting," which is explained as "Readers apply autobiographical lens on actions in the novel, make personal links to their lives in a direct or indirect way, offer personal life assessment of characters' actions or events in the book, or evaluate the book as a whole (e.g. 'it was boring')" (p.484).

Using the experiences and perspectives of the children, as analyzed through the classroom discussions, journal entries and interviews, provided the basis for my overall analysis about how the children made meaning of their lives in Camden. Their thoughts and opinions gathered through this analysis form what CRT scholars calls the counterstories. However, counterstories cannot stand alone, so I have situated the stories of the children alongside those of the adults I interviewed, media and demographic reports about the city, and research from the social sciences and humanities that relates to the experiences the children shared. This approach is advised by CRT scholars Solorzano

and Yasso (2002), who also encourage researchers of color to bring personal and professional experiences to their analysis (p. 34).

What's to Come

The next chapter will provide an overview of the history and current reality of life in Camden to provide a context to lives of children in the city and the overall dissertation. Each of the subsequent chapters will be rooted in the perspectives of the students, with chapter three focused on their experiences and understanding of violence and crime in the city, chapter four focused on families and their relationships with their fathers and chapter five on their views and understanding about race.

Some of what the children and adults shared about life in the city was heartbreaking; violence and poverty touched many of the students' lives. While none of this was a shock since I too live in the city, hearing the perspectives of the children about how the violence and crime impacted them and how they longed to have their fathers be a more consistent presence in their lives was eye-opening. Their stories put faces and emotions behind the crime statistics and statistics about children growing up in challenged circumstances. When discussing race, they were knowledgeable and inquisitive, sharing a solid understanding of the historical legacy of racism against African-Americans. Even with gaps in their understanding they desired to better understand why prejudice and discrimination against Blacks even existed and struggled to understand race today. They shared a nuanced perspective of contemporary racial issues and showed that even though state assessments rank them as "less than proficient," they possessed an awareness about race that is not readily discussed or explored during the school day.

I aimed throughout my work to stay true to the words and feelings of the children involved, in all of their complex and contradictory feelings about the city and how they saw the world. Treating the children of Camden not as objects, but as the subjects of my work, I valued and respected their thoughts and opinions as valid and truthful accounts of life in the city. Because youth make up a significant portion of the population of Camden—close to 35% of the residents are under the age of 19 (U.S Census, 2010)—it can be argued that without their perspectives we have an incomplete accounting of life in Camden.

However, I also learned about and witnessed heart-warming and joyful experiences from the children, showing that their lives in Camden are not defined solely by destitution and despair. Using their own words, I seek to share a more nuanced perspective of the city, and its children, a perspective that is not commonly discussed. Even though these children live in challenging circumstances, with violence and crime frequent occurrences in and around their neighborhoods, and the impact of poverty is a reality, they still experienced a "childhood" and share similar experiences with their suburban counterparts 10 minutes away in Cherry Hill and elsewhere in the US. I sought to understand not only their perspectives on the challenges of life in Camden, but also on the "ordinariness" of their lives. This view of life in Camden is rarely discussed.

In his book *Ordinary Resurrections,* Jonathan Kozol (2000) writes about his intentions in understanding and writing about the lives of minority children who live in "inner cities." While not all of this description applies, I used this selection as inspiration for how I approached my work. Kozol (2000) states:

I hope, however, that this book is neither bitter not despairing, because despair and bitterness are not the words that ordinarily come to your mind when you spend time with children here. They live, admittedly in what is known as "a bad section" of a racially divided city, but they live as well within the miniature and often healing world that children of their age inhabit everyday in the United States. Statistical curses—dangerous words like "AIDS," "incarceration," "needle drugs," "deficient performance"—stand around them like unfriendly social scientists with cold prophetic powers; but the actual kingdom that they live in for a good part of each day is not the land of bad statistics but the land of licorice sticks and long division, candy bars and pencil sets, and Elmo dolls and, in the period in which this book take places, bewildering computer toys called Giga Pets that make a squeaking sound and are the bane of their schoolteachers (p. 5).

Through their engagement with the African-American children's literature, I was able to analyze how children made meaning of their lives—from the daily ordinariness to their thoughts on crime and violence, their relationships with their fathers, and their views on race. Focusing on what reader response theorists call the transactional nature of reading, examining the interaction between the reader and text, I was able to explore how African-American children's literature can be used a methodological tool to engage children in discussing their lives and the world around them.

I will end the dissertation by offering concluding thoughts on what I learned over the past year, summarizing the issues and experiences that arose in doing this research and exploring how critical pedagogical approaches using multicultural children's literature can be used not only as a research tool but to empower towards making social

change. I will also provide my thoughts on how I think scholars who are interested in the

lives and experiences of minority children can use the fields of critical race theory and

childhood studies as complementary theoretical frameworks.

CHAPTER 2

Invincible City: The Camden of Yesterday and Today

As I head up Cooper Street, the stop-and-go traffic reminds me that it is back to school time in Camden. At eight a.m. faculty, staff and students from Rutgers-Camden and Camden County College are either rushing off the River Line light rail train to their respective campuses or stuck in their cars behind a line of yellow school buses with blinking red stop signs. Blue and burgundy plaid uniformed children of all sizes, many with their parents, are walking gingerly crossing Cooper Street from all directions. Screaming loudly to get the attention of their friends or singing the latest R & B song, the kids are trying to hold onto their last minutes of freedom before they enter one of the several university-affiliated charter school buildings that dot both sides of the street. While doctors and nurses are catching the shuttle from the parking garage that shares space with the university district bookstore to take them to Cooper University Hospital a few blocks away, others on the street are hurrying to their jobs or appointments at the federal courthouse, City Hall or one of the various social service agencies or stores that make up the business district. In the morning, downtown Camden is abuzz with the sights and sounds of a city on the move.

Merging onto Interstate 676 South, things begin to change as the bustling downtown fades from the rearview mirror. Luxury loft apartments and waterfront attractions are replaced with crumbling row homes, abandoned lots, and liquor stores. The sounds of children laughing as they skip across the street and women chatting on their iPhones as they roll their work bags behind them are replaced with the loud banging of trash trucks and tractor trailers heading down the highway towards the Morgan Boulevard exit, going to the sewage treatment plant, trash incinerator or the South Jersey

Port Authority where everything from bananas to steel to plywood is shipped from the city, around the world. At the base of the exit, scantily clad White women with matted dirty blond hair sashay up and down the busy ramp nervously looking from side to side at the busy traffic whizzing by. Flicking the ashes from their cigarettes while yelling "hey honey" to the truck drivers as they come off the exit, the women look weary as they smile and run to the trucks once they begin to slow down. Welcome to South Camden.

A little further down the boulevard, groups of mothers are pushing strollers down the street as their older children run ahead of them racing into the bright yellow corner store or to the crossing guard at the end of the block. The street is little quieter now away from the tractor trailers except for the moms and the women in various colored nursing scrubs laughing and talking while they wait at the bus stop, heading to their jobs as assistants in preschools or aides in nursing homes. The only men out this early besides the truck drivers are the young guys sitting on the steps of burnt out and abandoned row homes or those standing outside the corner store, hands in their pockets, leaning back with their feet up against the wall, looking like they've been out on the corner for quite some time even though it's still early in the morning. As I make my turn towards the Walt Whitman School, the block does not hum like the block on Cooper Street, even though the school is only yards away. The sounds of kids are drowned out by Lil Wayne and 2 Chainz blasting from the cars that are driving too fast down the street. Unlike the charter school downtown that's surrounded by the university and the community college, a Barnes & Noble bookstore, two Starbucks cafes, Subway and a 7-11 convenience store, neighborhood eateries, law offices and small businesses, the Walt Whitman School stands out for its newness, but also sits isolated. Flanked on one side by old train tracks

and by a church on the other, the school is surrounded by bleak scenery, with only a partially fenced-in abandoned lot next to a boarded up warehouse across the street to complete the view. There is no hustle and bustle around this school.

The Walt Whitman School is where I spent a significant amount of time in the 2012-2013 school year doing my field work with a class of 20 third grade students, seeking to learn from them what life is like in Camden and their thoughts on the larger world around them. I approached this work by teaching and engaging the students using African-American children's picturebooks. These books, which are intended for all children, but were made with the experiences of African-American children in mind, acted as unassuming and non-threatening conversation starters to get the children to share their thoughts and opinions on what I would come to learn were extremely challenging topics of crime and violence in the city, family life and the absence of fathers, and race.

As I attempted to understand their lives in the city of Camden, one of the main things I wanted to know was if these students see and hear in their neighborhood the sights and sounds that keep Camden ranked as one of the most dangerous cities in America. If they do experience the violence and physical and social disorder (loudness, trash, abandoned buildings, drug dealing, crime) that come with living in a persistently dangerous and poverty-stricken city, what impact does it have on their ideas about their neighborhood and the city more generally? If they do not discuss any of the well-documented violence or social challenges of their South Camden community, how do they describe life in their neighborhood? What sense do they make of the world around them? Do their perceptions differ from the common, adult narrative of Camden as crime-ridden, dangerous and bleak? These are serious questions to ask anyone, let alone third

graders, but the books provided us the opportunity to ease into these conversations. Instead of sitting in a room with one or two children as an adult they did not know, with a list of prepared questions, I began the school year with them in the familiar surroundings of the classroom using an object they came in contact with every day at school: a book. Ultimately, the books and the discussions we had over the course of the school year provided the students not only the opportunity to read and learn about books, authors and illustrators they had not come in contact with before, but the chance for them to connect what they read in the books to their daily lives and personal experiences. They learned how to "see themselves" in the books. However, the books also served as a different lens through which I, as a researcher, could come to understand how these children talked about and made meaning of their lives in Camden.

As a way of providing context for how these children see and perceive the city, I begin by offering a history of the Camden of yesterday. Examining the city from its highest level of dominance as an economic powerhouse in the early 1900s, to the subsequent fall in the late 1970s, I explore how decades of disinvestment, racism, and lack of political leadership contributed to creating Camden in 2012 as one of the poorest and most violent cities in the United States. I spend time providing this context because I believe that this grounding is necessary for two reasons: first, to understand the contemporary context of Camden, one must understand the history of the city and the circumstances that led to the current challenges that exist; and, second, to understand the lives of children in the city, context matters.

The leading conceptual framework for understanding why and how context plays a role in the development of children has been presented by developmental psychologist

Urie Brofenbrenner. Brofenbrenner (1994) asserts that in order to understand how children develop, one must take into account the entire ecological system in which they grow, a system that he outlines as composed of five socially organized subsystems that support and guide human development (p. 37). In her paper on the effects of poverty on children's social-emotional development, Mary Keegan Eamon (2001) succinctly describes Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory:

> Brofenbrenner (1994) conceptualized the ecological environment, or the context in which human development occurs, as a set of "nested structures." Developmental outcomes are influenced by interactions within microsystems, or the immediate settings that contain the developing person. The remaining structures, in order of the distance of their influence on the developing individual, include mesosystems (processes among two or microsystems; both contain the developing person) exosystems (processes between two or more settings; only one contains the developing person), macrosystems (influences of the broader cultural and socioeconomic environments), and chromosystems (effects of consistency and change over the life course) (p. 257).

The five structures or systems that Brofenbrenner (1994) lays out place the child at the center and moves outward from the most to the least direct influence: from the microsystem that includes the family, peers, neighborhood and school, which have the most direct influence on the development of the child; up to the exo and macro systems that include laws and policies, resources, societal expectations, beliefs and values that have indirect influence on the life of the child but shape how the child sees and understands the world; through to the chromosystem, which is made up of the

environmental events and transitions that occur during a child's life as they develop

(Brofenbrenner, 1994, p. 37-43). Thus, for children living in Camden, their families,

neighborhoods and schools and what happens in these systems make up their

microsystems and have the most direct impact on their daily lives. Things that occur that

impact the microsystems—changes in policing policies, the exodus of major corporations

and jobs, a weakened tax base, the influx of drugs, increases in unemployment, crime,

violence, lack of high quality teachers—all of these factors interact and influence the

child and will shape their experiences in those environments and their overall

development. The interactions between the child's own biological development, her

immediate family and community context and the overall societal landscape fuel and

steer her development and influence how she makes meaning of her world.

Understanding the context cannot be divorced from how meaning is made about the

context.

This framework provides the necessary foundation upon which to understand how

the context of the city influences how youth live and make meaning of their lives in the

Camden. It also provides the opportunity to examine significant influences in their

lives—crime, violence and social disorder. While there has been some debate on the

accuracy of Camden's being labeled one of the most dangerous cities in the U.S.

(CamConnect, 2012), it is well-documented that Camden is a violent place to live. Given

that close to 35% of the population is under the age of 18, I will end the chapter with an

overview of the research on the impact of exposure to frequent and persistent violence in

their communities on youth, paying special attention to those studies that put youths'

voices at the center of their analysis. All of this research provides the backdrop against

which to understand how the Walt Whitman third graders experienced and perceived life

in Camden, which will be presented in the next chapter.

The Camden of Yesterday

> I dream'd in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the
>   whole of the rest of the earth,
> I dream'd that was the new city of Friends,
> Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love, it led the rest,
> It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,
> And in all their looks and words. (*I Dream'd in a Dream*, Walt Whitman, 1904)

In *Leaves of Grass,* originally published in 1855, Walt Whitman writes about his

new home Camden, NJ, as a city invincible, where he says that love was ever present in

the words and actions of every man. Fast-forward to the present day and Camden is

dramatically different. Labeled "the most dangerous city in America" numerous times

over the past decade and also deemed one of the poorest cities in the nation

(CamConnect, 2012), Camden is barely recognizable from the economic powerhouse and

thriving working class community it was even 70 years ago.

In his book *Camden After the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial

City*, historian Howard Gillette (2005) recounts how de-industrialization,

suburbanization, racial isolation and bad political decision making brought down the city

that was once home to RCA/Victor, the New York Shipbuilding Company and the world

headquarters of the Campbell Soup Company. At its height Camden was an economic

powerhouse in the United States, serving as a hub of industrial activity for the entire

country, at its nadir in 2012, 67 people were murdered in one year. To understand the

Camden of today, let's begin with the Camden of yesterday.

Even though the city is small, only about nine square miles, in the 1920s and

1930s, Camden was the place to be. It was home to the first drive-in movie theater in the

country, the $1 million dollar Stanley Theater, the illustrious Walt Whitman Hotel and one of the grandest Sears and Roebuck stores in the nation. In 1926 when the Benjamin Franklin Bridge opened, connecting Camden to Philadelphia, the city was no longer seen as an extension of Philadelphia, but as a thriving metropolis in its own right. In 1917 there were 365 industries in Camden, employing about 51,000 (*Camden Courier*, 1917). Jobs were plentiful in the city. Even in the mid-1930s, during the Depression, there were more than 25,000 people employed by the three largest employers in the city— RCA/Victor, the New York Shipbuilding Company and Campbell Soup Company—and an additional 10,000 jobs in various other businesses in the city (Gillette, 2005, p. 22). By the mid-1950s with over 100,000 residents, Camden was still flush with opportunity with 62,564 jobs in everything ranging from metalwork to shipbuilding and textiles to soap making (Gillette, 2005, p. 42) Both large manufacturing companies and small local businesses could be found on Camden's main corridors. Jewelers, lawyers, doctors, food shops, hardware stores and real estate brokers lined the streets of Broadway, Kaighn Avenue, Haddon and Westfield and kept Camden booming. Camden was a city "that worked."

And those who worked in the city lived in the city. From incorporation as a city in 1828 up until the 1970s, Camden was made up of close-knit, White, ethnic neighborhoods. In the chapter "A City That Worked," Gillette (2005) explores the stories and lives of the dominant ethnic populations that made up the majority of Camden's residents during this time period. The Polish, Italians, Irish, Germans and Jews each had their own sections of the city; these were vibrant working-class neighborhoods with their own churches and synagogues, food shops and stores, even their own funeral homes,

social clubs and cultural events. Parkside and East Camden for the Jews, "Germantown" in Cramer Hill, and "Polocktown" in Whitman Park—which is still called such by some residents of Camden today. Even though Camden was a thriving economic hub, the people of Camden were never wealthy. When former residents talk about their time in "Old Camden," they speak fondly of the city, describing themselves as hard-working people who took care of their own through aid societies and charities and wide social networks to assist friends and family members who could not make ends meet.

While African-Americans have roots in the city dating back to 1828, few who speak of "Old Camden" talk about them. When Gillette (2005) interviewed former White residents they consistently mentioned that there were no significant racial tensions in the city, even though in the 1940s and 1950s segregation was a way of life. When speaking with former Black residents about their experiences in the city, they talked about having to sit in the backs of buses, being restricted to the balcony of the Stanley movie theater, not having access to the downtown YMCA and having limited restaurant options in the city that would serve them. Former Camden mayor Randy Primas recalled how he had to travel across town to Veterans Junior High School even though there was a closer school in his Cramer Hill neighborhood, but it was for Whites only (Gillette, 2005, p. 30). As things became more integrated in the late 1950s and 1960s, with African Americans over 20% of the population (US Census, 1960) Blacks still faced challenges of being racially profiled by the police and could only find temporary employment at places like Campbell Soup where full time employees were frequently let go from their positions just short of being able to qualify for retirement benefits (Gillette, 2005, p. 32-35).

Enter the 1960s and 1970s and things began to change radically in Camden, socially and economically in ways that continue to have a lasting impact on the city today. At the city's height in 1954, the U.S. Census (1954) Camden had about 62,000 jobs; however, moving into the 1960s, industrial jobs across the city and country began to vanish. By 1958, about 5,000 jobs left the city and by 1967 Camden's industrial base of manufacturing jobs declined by 48% mirroring the job losses seen in the rest of the country. This decline lasted into the 1970s. Industrial jobs were the heart and soul of the city, but as jobs left, so did the people. Whites began to leave at the same rate Blacks began to enter hoping to find opportunities. In the 1950s, Whites made up close to 80% of Camden's residents with Blacks at 13%. By the 1970s, the White population in Camden dropped to 60% while African-Americans increased to almost 40% (U.S Census, 1970). While it can be said that the loss of jobs was a significant influence for Whites to leave and seek jobs and homes in the suburbs like Cherry Hill and other surrounding communities, which were burgeoning at this point, it can also be said that the increase of African-Americans and Latinos, the infamous riots of 1971 and the aftermath certainly contributed greatly to the perception that Camden was no longer "the place to be," especially if you were White.

As jobs quickly dwindled and industries left the city in the mid to late 1960s, physical blight began to take shape. Former stores and businesses turned into abandoned properties that dotted the city. The housing market began to suffer as residents moved out to the suburbs to follow the jobs, leaving their homes at a pace quicker than the housing market could handle. Residents began to fear that the economic powerhouse that was "Old Camden" would soon be no more and urged elected officials to develop an

aggressive plan to stop the downward spiral. Several redevelopment plans were created and campaigns to "Save Camden" were mounted, which included designs to rebuild the downtown into an enhanced "City Centre" with new roads and highways to connect residential areas to places where the jobs were, new industrial centers, shopping malls, waterfront development, and new housing opportunities (Gillette, 2005, p. 69). However, all of these new plans would lead to the displacement of a significant number of minorities, and civil rights activists began to sound the alarm.

After being confined for years to only certain sections of the city, which tended to include the least desirable housing stock, African Americans and Puerto Ricans began to mount a civil rights campaign that lasted throughout the 1960s into the 1970s, demanding better living conditions and jobs. Blacks and Puerto Ricans were forced to live in overcrowded housing projects or in dilapidated homes owned by slumlords, and they were also denied access to move into neighborhoods that were still majority White even though Whites were quickly leaving the city. Public protest and marches, sit-ins at city hall, suits brought by the NAACP against the Camden Housing Agency for discriminatory housing practices, and the rise of more vocal and militant civil rights organizations of SNCC and CORE maintained pressure on city officials to change the housing conditions for minorities. Gillette (2005) recounts that for more than a decade minority leaders, White sympathizers and activists continued to speak out against social justice issues in housing, education, employment and overall poverty that disproportionately impacted Blacks and Latinos, but it was the riots of 1971 that signaled a significant turning point in the social, political and economic history of the city.

On July 20, 1971 two Camden police officers savagely beat and arrested a Puerto

Rican motorist who subsequently fell into a coma. When demands for a full investigation

by Hispanic leaders were disregarded and repeated requests for meetings with the Mayor

and Chief of Police were delayed, the rising racial and social tensions that existed in the

city erupted. A tense demonstration outside of City Hall about a month after the incident

quickly grew out of control and for the next three nights, fires, looting, and destruction of

property paralyzed the city (Gillette, 2005, p. 86). This was a defining moment in

Camden's history and the beginning of a narrative by Whites that Camden was a

dangerous and undesirable location—a perception that is still alive today. In examining

this time, Gillette (2005) states that former White residents he spoke with constantly tied

the downfall of the Camden to the rising influx of Blacks and Hispanics, the social issues

that came with their arrival and to the riots that erupted. There seemed to be a lack of

understanding or unwillingness on their part to acknowledge the context that produced

the anger held by Blacks and Hispanics that preceded the riots. Nor was there any

acknowledgement of the role that the loss of the industrial core of the city had on the

decline on the part of former residents; it was the belief of former White residents that

those who remained in Camden brought down the city. In his book, *Voices of Decline:*

The Postwar Fate of U.S Cities, Paul Beauregard (2003) writes "When we discuss urban

decline or read how others perceive it, we engage with highly charged stories built up of

layers of subjective impressions, not emotionally flat renditions of objectively specified

conditions" (p. x). He goes on to state that while a few critics attempted to resist blaming

inner city minorities for the social and economic challenges that cities began to face

during the tumultuous change in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a heroic but futile act

because, "race was increasingly the glue that bound together all of the perceived problems of the declining class" (Beauregard, 2003, p.155).

Changes in city leadership and new redevelopment in the 1970s and 1980s led to some small victories for the now majority minority population: better housing, new employment opportunities for individuals and minority businesses, new positions of power within city government and more collaboration between government and grass root activists, but the city still faced serious challenges. "It looked like the Vietcong bombed us to get even" was how Mayor Errichetti, who took office shortly after the riots, described his hometown of Camden to a reporter doing a story on the city (Culnan, 1979, p.55). He went on to comment that, "The pride of Camden…was now a rat-infested skeleton of yesterday, a visible obscurity of urban decay … The years of neglect, slumlord exploitation, tenant abuse, government bungling, indecision and short-sighted policy had transformed the city's housing, business and industrial stock into a ravaged, rat-infested cancer in a sick, old industrial city" (55).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Camden continued to get poorer, even though it had some successes with redeveloping the downtown and waterfront. By and large the presence and success of these institutions—the aquarium and all of the other attractions that eventually came to the waterfront, including the 60,000 person entertainment center and the Camden Children's Garden–did not dramatically change the poverty and violence, high unemployment and failing schools that are at the core of Camden's challenges today. There are many reasons why these efforts did not transform the city, but I believe two stand out. First, Camden is a poor city and these institutions do not bring in any significant revenue into the city because they operate tax free. I believe this

is a flawed incentive system because while the tax credits help the corporations and

businesses, they do nothing to strengthen the tax base, which funds the necessities of a

city: schools, police, infrastructure, housing and overall quality of life. Secondly, these

attractions were not made *for* the residents of the city. These attractions were set up to

bring outsiders in with the idea that they would come and see how safe Camden is, have a

good time, spend money and tell their friends who in turn would come to the city.

Eventually, the thinking was, Camden would be perceived as a safe and happening place

to be; revenue would be generated with the hopes that some would choose to live in the

city and create the social and economic vitality that would bring Camden out of poverty.

However, the reality has been that after visiting the attractions, the outsiders quickly

leave, many because of safety, but also because there are no retail or other amenities to

keep them in the city spending money. The institutions are not the type that keeps

outsiders coming back frequently enough to create the change, as was the original plan.

So while these efforts have brought attractions and patrons into the city, there has been no

"trickle down" financial or other benefits for the day-to-day lives of those who live here.

For the residents, these institutions sit at the outskirts of town, disconnected from the

neighborhoods, only offering low-skilled and part-time jobs, certainly not enough to raise

a family or bring oneself out of poverty. Without attention paid to the areas that impact

the daily lives of residents of the city—providing high quality education, well-paying

jobs, reducing crime, decent places to live—without getting back to an economic

powerhouse that serves not only those outside of the city but those who live within its

borders, Camden became a shell of itself with poverty and crime becoming deeply

entrenched for generations to come, impacting the life chances and future opportunities for every child in the city.

The Camden of Today

In 1985, Kozol wrote in *Savage Inequalities* that Camden was the fourth poorest city in the country but as the years have progressed, Camden has sadly climbed the list. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Camden had the highest percentage of children growing up in poverty in the entire state of New Jersey at 45%. This far exceeded the percentage of youth in poverty in some of the other poorest cities in the state at the time, such as Asbury Park at 39% and Newark at 36% (CamConnect, 2004). The poverty rate for children in Camden at this time also exceeded the 15% rate for children living in poverty in Camden County and the 11% rate of children living in poverty statewide. Children from Camden city only represented 15.7% of the total child population in the county, but they accounted for 62% of the county's children growing up in poor families. Given that Camden is an extremely youthful city, with about 35% of the population under the age of 18, it makes these poverty rates even more disheartening.

As the years have progressed, things have not improved. According to the 2005 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census, Camden continued to suffer under extremely high levels of poverty. More than 57% of Camden's youth lived in poverty in comparison to 20% of children in the county and 12% of children in the state. The same holds true for working age adults in the city, with 44% of adults living in poverty in comparison to about 10% for adults in the county and 7% for adults in the state (U.S. Census, 2005). Looking at this from another perspective, the U.S. Census calculates poverty based on income and in 2005 a three-person family that had an annual income of

$7,868 was defined as living in "severe poverty" (50% below the poverty level). In Camden, 20% of people were living 50% below the poverty line, in comparison to about 6% countywide and 4% statewide (Legal Services of New Jersey, Poverty Research Institute, 2007, p. 7). That meant that a family would have needed an additional $9,000 just to bring them up to the federal poverty line. In 2011, the numbers were even more startling. 64.5% of the total population in the city lived 200% below the poverty level, including 79% of all children (Legal Services of New Jersey, Poverty Research Institute, 2007, p. 10). Camden is not the only city that faces dire poverty conditions for its youth, but its rates far exceed those of any other city in the state.

But what do all of these numbers mean for the lived experiences of children in Camden? Living in poverty means that poor children deal with a disproportionate share of deprivation, hardship and bad outcomes. In a report on the impact of poverty on children, Lewit, Terman, and Behrman (1997) state that living in this type of extreme poverty, children are more likely to have less access to food and the food available is not typically nutrient-rich, less clothing and other material goods, experience poor health (asthma, lead exposure, obesity) and inadequate or substandard housing. As it relates to education, poor students score lower on standardized tests, are more likely to get left back a grade and to drop out of school (Lewit, Terman & Behrman, 1997, p. 2). Poor youth are more likely to live in single family homes headed by women, in largely minority neighborhoods plagued with bad schools, high unemployment and crime. These are all current realities for the youth in Camden today.

"The Most Dangerous City in America"

Camden began making national headlines for violence in the early 1990s. The crack epidemic was in full swing, and open air drug markets occupied many of the street corners in the city. Thirty-second (32nd) Street in East Camden, Haddon and Kaighn Avenues in Parkside, 3rd and York in North Camden, Farnham and Dudley Grange Parks: these were some of the biggest drug areas in Camden, where stick-ups and assaults happened almost daily. Gangs made of up young Black males like the "Sons of Malcom X" and the Puerto Rican counterpart "The Organization" terrorized Camden, killing rivals over drugs and turf and taking over blocks of neighborhoods in North Camden, East Camden and beyond. Camden county prosecutors would argue that during the 1990s the Sons of Malcolm X was responsible for one in every five murders in the city, even randomly killing innocent people as a part of the gang initiation process (Lewis, 1996). The Organization was just as brutal. A loose configuration of drug dealers from across the city who formed an allegiance to become the biggest drug syndicate in Camden, The Organization ruled by violence for almost a decade, selling upwards of $2 million worth of drugs a year and dominating the city along with the Sons of Malcom X until 1998 when leaders from both gangs were arrested on multiple drug and murder charges. The Organization even went as far as infiltrating and corrupting the police force and local elected officials, including Camden Mayor Milton Milan (Kummer & Riley, 1999). While most of the violence from the gangs and the impact of drugs on the community were confined to local newspapers and evening news (and heavily covered), it was Halloween eve aka "Mischief Night" of 1991 that put Camden in the national spotlight, further framing its minority youth as thugs and deviants.

In 1990, 30 fires were randomly set around Camden in abandoned buildings and cars on the night before Halloween. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that refrigerators were "heaved" from roof tops and "booby traps" were set for firefighters as they tried to combat the blazes (Burney, 1991). The police arrested 81 people and vowed to be better prepared the following year. However, in 1991 it happened again, but this time on a much larger scale. Based on various media accounts, more than 100 fires were set throughout the city on "Mischief Night," nearly paralyzing the fire department and causing widespread panic, violence and mayhem. Most of the blazes were in vacant buildings, but several were in occupied homes and a five-alarm blaze ruined a large discount store on Haddon Avenue in Parkside that had been there for about 15 years (Riordan, Uris, & Hall, 1991). Fifty-seven people were arrested, 41 of them juveniles. "[We need to] listen to the kids who are frustrated at lacking a future," said one community activist in the article, but some of the youth involved said the Mischief Night antics were "crazy fun" (Riordan, Uris, & Hall, 1991). Youth were blamed for the majority of the fires and violence that took place, and while some thought it was "exhilarating" and their only time to "let loose," others believed they were doing the community a service. "On the street, they covered their faces with black ski masks and donned matching black outfits," Judith Thomas (1991) reported of the youth she interviewed that day after Mischief Night. "Their mission," they said, "was to set North Camden on fire." North Camden "is a hell hole inside of a hell hole," said one high schooler, while another went on to say " All we did was burn down drug dealers' houses and vacant houses … I think we did some good" (Thomas, 1991).

The Courier-Post, the local South Jersey newspaper, ran a series of stories on the fires with the headlines "Bored teenagers take the rap for many of the fires" and "'Bad' kids, poverty and the media are blamed for Camden blazes." Community activists believed that youth caused the mayhem because they were "poor, angry and frustrated" and blamed their behavior on the social disorder in the city (JaiPaul, 1991). "To me, it's just a reflection of all of the social ills of Camden … it's all hooked into crummy schools, poor families, people struggling, … [and] the devastation that drugs do to people," said longtime resident and activist Tom Knocke (JaiPaul, 1991). Others, such as the president of Camden Churches Organized for the People, a coalition of churches in the city, believed it was the fault of the media for hyping up the potential of mayhem in the days leading up to Mischief Night: "The media promoted, and the kids carried it out. When they do good things kids don't get any attention" (JaiPaul, 1991). Article after article cited various reasons why youth took to the streets that night: the lack of opportunity and a sense of hopelessness, bad parenting, drugs and gangs, or simply that Camden youth desired to be hooligans and thugs who were excited by crime and violence. This incident and how youth in Camden were portrayed became a part of the growing narrative of Camden as a violent city. Articles about Mischief Night ran for up to a week afterward locally, but were also picked up around the entire country. The *New York Times*, the Associated Press, the *Seattle Times* and the *Detroit Press* all covered the events and many of the same news outlets, locally and nationally, followed up in 1992, rehashing what happened the year prior, in anticipation of another wave of violence. However, as a teen in the city at the time, I was quite naïve about what was going on around me.

As I think back to this time, I remember feeling that Camden was a rough place at times, but overall the city was okay. As I made the transition to middle school in the early 1990s, I thought my mom was overreacting when she made my brother come from high school to meet me at my middle school to walk me home. Yes, I saw the boys hanging out on the corners; I wasn't quite sure what they were doing, but if you didn't bother them, they didn't bother you, and also one of my oldest brothers hung out with them so I would try to assure my mother that I would be fine. Naïve I was, not knowing that one of my brothers dealt drugs and that one block from my house was one of the most violent and largest open air drug markets in Camden. All I remember thinking was that these guys followed the old adage of the post office: "neither snow, nor rain" kept these young boys off the street corners. It was also about this time that my mother stopped handing out Halloween candy and stopped my brother and me from going out trick or treating. "People are crazy out there," she would say, and she would make us turn off the outside lights so kids wouldn't come to the door trick or treating.

I was freshman in high school when the 1991 Mischief Night occurred and was in awe when I came to school the next day and heard stories of what some of my peers had either seen or done. My mother would barely let me walk to and from school or go anywhere by myself, let alone be out after dark, so I was shocked. My mother kept tight reins on all of her younger children. We walked to and from school either with our siblings or a group of friends whose parents she had met and felt comfortable with. She would constantly say—don't stop at the corner store, talk to no one, and if anything just doesn't feel right, run and don't stop until you get home. However, that didn't mean if someone bullied or harassed you that you didn't fight them: "Don't let anyone punk

you," she would say, but also, don't go looking for trouble. Looking back I really had no sense of the level of crime and violence that existed in the city at the time and when I did hear about things happening I just thought, this is Camden, this kind of stuff just happens here. In 1995 when I graduated high school, Camden had a record 58 murders, at that time an all-time high. Many of the murders were drug related and at the hands of young Black and Puerto Rican males.

I did not see or understand the media portrayals of Camden because the Camden they saw was not the Camden I experienced growing up. From what I experienced, crime and violence did not impact my family. I grew up in a two-parent home with a father who worked hard outside the home and a mother who worked hard inside the home. We had chores and extracurricular activities that kept us occupied outside of school. We went to church on Sundays and played with our cousins on the weekends and in the summer, and this type of life was shared by many of my friends. It was only when I got older that I truly began to notice and understand that violence and crime, along with poverty, did significantly impact my family and almost every one of my friends, in ways that have left lingering effects. It was only when I got older that I began to understand this disconnect between what I experienced inside of my home and within the context of my family and the challenges that existed in Camden. It was this eventual understanding that led me to wonder about the lives and multiple realities of children in Camden and the desire to gain a better understanding of how those who live here today see their lives.

As the years went on, Camden's woes remained in the local papers. Drugs, violence and crime continued to plague the city, and in 2004 it earned the designation of "the most violent city" in America. In 2003, the Morgan Quitno Press, which publishes

an annual "City Crime Rankings,"[4] ranked Camden third, with Detroit taking the top

spot, but in 2004 Camden took over and has remained at or near the top since. In 2008

when it regained the top spot after several years, Camden was reported to have had 2,333

violent crimes for every 100,000 residents, with the national rate at the time being 455

(Hirsch, 2009). With about 80,000 residents living in about nine square miles, the

incidents of violence in a city so small are staggering. The violence and crime are tied

mainly to the drug trade, but others believe it was also tied to poverty, as one resident

remarked, "When you concentrate all the poor in one area this is what happens" (Hirsch,

2009, last para.).

Over the years, the high levels of violence and crime in Camden have been

covered both locally and in national media outlets. In 2005 on his show "Geraldo At

Large" Geraldo Rivera came and did "ride alongs" with the Camden police force

(Geraldo, 2005). In 2007, Diane Sawyer came for the news show 20/20 and covered the

impact of the crime and poverty on the youth of the city (ABC News, 2007). The segment

garnered widespread support for the three children and their families profiled, and

viewers were also outraged at the crime, living conditions and families' lack of basic

necessities. One family that was profiled was subsequently given an Extreme Home

Makeover by the ABC television show (even though they would eventually lose the

home because they could not afford the bills), and financial donations poured in for the

other children and their families. Katie Couric came in 2010 and focused on the

challenges in the Camden City Public Schools (NBC News, 2010), which have been

under some form of state intervention since the late 1990s, and Brian Williams came in

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[4]In July 2007 Morgan Quitno was acquired by CQ Press, a division of Congressional Quarterly Inc.

2013 to report on "America's 'invincible' city brought to its knees by poverty and violence" after a record year of 67 homicides in 2012 (NBC News, 2013).

"Imagine that 5,600 people have been murdered in New York City so far in 2012. People from every part of the city are shot, stabbed, burned, and beat to death at a record-breaking rate. A two-year-old is decapitated alive after his mother tells the 911 operator she didn't take her Prozac and then takes her own life," writes community activist Fr. Jeff Putthoff for the *Huffington Post* about the record breaking number of murders in Camden in 2012. Puthoff (2012) goes on to state:

> And yet, there is little outrage about Camden. It is rarely mentioned, neither in the news nor by our political leaders at a local, state, or national level. In July, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie had the flags flown at half-staff for the Colorado theater shooting victims. That same month was the deadliest of the year for Camden, and yet our state flags never lowered for our own residents. The *Philadelphia Daily News*, the local paper of the workingman, is ambivalent in its recent headline, "Is there any hope for Camden?" The difference is that unlike New York, Chicago and many other big cities that face violence in the streets, the entire city of Camden is poor. It's not just poor, it's immersed in poverty. Poverty that is endemic, piercing and devastating to the human spirit. Neighborhoods in Camden are broke—with crumbling infrastructure, abandoned houses and crime. Worse, though, is what this poverty means to the people who live here. Poverty itself is trauma-inducing and threatens the daily existence of life. People are evicted, electricity is turned off, there is not enough food and drugs are sold on street corners [Camden has an estimated 170 such corners] Compounding this

trauma is the fact that these circumstances destabilize people and directly produce

violence, which, in turn, results in even more trauma (paragraph 5).

By all accounts this was one of the most violent years in the city. Most of those

killed were under the age of 25, but as Father Putthoff (2012) stated, little attention was

paid to Camden. Was it because in recent years Camden had been so violent that even the

sharp increase in violence during 2012 wasn't worth special attention from elected

officials and those outside of the city? The Governor and Mayor would disagree and say

that during this time they dismantled the city police force and restructured it to a county-

wide force solely to combat the increased levels of crime and violence in the city;

however, this sentiment was not shared by all. Or, did Camden not receive mass attention

because it is a city of extreme poverty, as Father Jeff (2012) states? Or is it because

Camden is almost a "majority minority city," unlike Chicago and New York? As critical

race theorists believe, race is at the foundation of everything, and the fact that Camden is

mainly a city of African-Americans and Latinos cannot be ignored when seeking to

understand how violence and crime are viewed and handled in the city. Whatever the

reason, it cannot be denied that violence and crime in Camden are daily occurrences and

the impacts should be examined and understood from the perspective of those who make

up a significant population of the city, the youth who live there. There was a time during

the 1990s when great attention was paid to the youth of the city and their involvement in

Mischief nights, in gangs and as drug dealers; they were seen as thugs that needed to be

dealt with. And as I stated above, big name news personalities visited Camden during the

mid-2000s, at times looking specifically at how poverty and violence impacted the

children and youth of the city, shining a national spotlight on the challenges experienced

by youth in the city, but the impact of their presence was always short lived. It is my hope to make the voices and experiences of the children in Camden more visible in examining the most violent year on record in the city.

When it comes to how the Walt Whitman children experienced and discussed the violence and social conditions of their neighborhood, they each presented and lived multiple realities. Some of them seemed oblivious to violence and challenges that surrounded them, with students who lived side by side having completely different recollections of the frequency of gun shots heard outside or the trash and disorder on the streets. Other students seemed to take the violence in stride, believing that what they saw and heard are things that just happen in Camden, while others were scared and frequently on edge, wanting to move out of Camden because of the constant violence they either heard about or experienced. I will argue that the Walt Whitman children did not fall easily into one category or another in terms of how they understood or made meaning of the violence and social conditions of their lives in Camden. The thoughts and feelings they shared about their anxieties and frustration about the violence in their community were mixed with the good and happy "childlike" times they experienced with their family and friends, sentiments that are oftentimes left out of conversations about how youth in persistently poor and violent neighborhoods live. For the most part, Camden was never all bad nor was it all good for these youth, which is also what other researchers have found who have studied youth who live in high poverty and violent areas, and while this is important to note, it should not take away from the reality that these children live in extremely challenging circumstances that will impact not only their childhood and how they understand violence, but the adults they will become.

Constructing Meaning About Violence: Youth Exposure to Community Violence

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing body of research focused on the impacts of community violence on youth, especially minority youth who live in high poverty areas where the rates of violence are staggeringly high. Osofsky (1995) defines community violence as "frequent and continual exposure to the guns, knives and drugs, and random violence" (p. 782). Some of the acts that tend to fall under the *community* violence umbrella include sexual assault, burglary, use of weapons, muggings and the sounds of gunshots. Children are witnesses, victims or knowing individuals impacted by such acts, as well as by social disorder issues such as the presence of gangs, people buying and taking drugs on the street, drug dealing, fighting on the streets and prostitution. In the 1990s the concern over community violence in the U.S. became so great that federal agencies began to call it a public health crisis (Centers for Disease Control, 1990; Public Health Service, 1990; Richters & Martinez, 1993), and researchers began to focus their attention on the rate and impact of the exposure to community violence on youth (Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Groves et al., 1993; Marans & Cohen, 1993; Lewis et al. 1994). Richters and Martinez (1993) examined exposure to violence for 165 children aged six to 10 and their parents who lived in a low-income, moderately violent neighborhood in Washington, DC. Parents reported that 19% of their first and second grade students had been victims of violence, while 61% had witnessed violence to someone else. For fifth and sixth grade students, 32% of the students had been the victims of violence, and 72% had witnessed violence. Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, and Fick (1993) found high rates of violence exposure in their study of 53 fifth grade students in New Orleans. The mothers of those children reported that 26% of their children had seen

a shooting, 49% had seen someone wounded, and more than 70% had seen weapons being used. All of these studies began to expose the increasingly severe and chronic violence present in urban communities. When interviewing the mothers about the violence in their communities both Richters and Martinez (1993) and Osofsky et al. (1993) commented that even though the mothers were very concerned about the safety of their children, they discussed the prevalence of violence in a very matter of fact way. This observation was so surprising to both sets of researchers that they felt they needed to consider this behavior further, with both ultimately concluding that the mothers responded in such a way because they had "normalized" the consistent presence of violence in their lives.

From this body of research came another wave of research that focused on the psychosocial and educational impacts of prolonged community violence on children and their families. Researchers have found that some children and adolescents who are exposed to this level of violence become depressed and their sleep is disturbed (Pynoos, 1993). They can also become anxious and less likely to explore their physical environments and play freely in their neighborhoods (Garbarino & Kosteln, 1997; Osofsky, 1995; Pynoos, 1993; Richters & Martinez, 1993). Parents of children in high crime neighborhoods acknowledged feelings of helplessness and often times an inability to feel like they are able to protect their children from violence (Lorion & Saltzman, 1993; Osofsky et al., 1993; Richters & Martinez, 1993). As it relates to education, researchers have found that students in these persistently violent neighborhoods exhibit difficulty concentrating in school, disruptive and aggressive behaviors that can impact the classroom, a decrease in GPA and a lack of school attachment (DuBois, Felner, Brand,

Adan, & Evans, 1992; Osofsky et al., 1993; Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004; Schwab-

Stone, et al., 1995; Schwartz & Gorman, 2003). Taken together, this research makes a

compelling case that community violence is a major environmental, psychosocial,

educational and public health problem for children and adolescents who live in high

poverty neighborhoods. However, what does this persistent exposure to community

violence mean to everyday living? How does it impact how a child or adolescent feels

about their neighborhood? Do they live in fear daily? How has the violence and disorder

become a "normal" part of their lives? How do they experience and make meaning of the

violence and social disorder that is present in their communities?

Across many of these studies, the voices of the actual children with whom the

researchers were concerned were captured largely through their responses to survey data,

if captured at all. Primarily using a 1-5 Likert scale, the surveys limited the ability of

children to offer nuanced responses to the questions posed. Their participation in

interviews or focus groups, which could have allowed for deeper examination of their

responses, was rare. Using qualitative assessments would have allowed for more nuanced

understandings of how children and youth made meaning of the violence in their

neighborhoods, allowing for a greater understanding of how they actually *live* with the

persistent violence, or the threat thereof, in their daily lives. There are a few exceptions

(Cooley-Quille, Turner, & Beidel, 1995; Osofsky, 1995; Polivka, Lovell, & Smith, 1998;

Schaefer-McDaniels, 2007) that privilege the voices and experiences of children and

youth, on par with the adults, allowing them the opportunity to share their knowledge and

opinions about their neighborhoods and their daily life experiences in persistently violent

surroundings. Only Schaefer-McDaniels (2007) used qualitative measures, in addition to

quantitative data on neighborhood violence statistics, asking adolescents (11–13 year olds) to report on what they actually saw, heard and experienced in their neighborhoods. While it was interesting to hear what the youth had to say about their neighborhoods, because it was more in depth than simply reading the results of a questionnaire or survey, the study did not provide more complex insight. Issues of safety and violence and concern over social disorder (noises, unfriendliness, litter, etc.) were significant themes mentioned by a number of adolescents, but what did this mean about their deeper feelings about their neighborhoods? Do youth who live in these types of challenging environments want to move because of the challenges in their neighborhoods? Do they believe they can help change their neighborhoods? Do they live in constant fear because of the violence or threat of violence? Do they believe that everything about their neighborhood is bad because of the dangers? Or do they have a more complicated relationship with their communities?

While Polivka et al. (1998) did not use qualitative approaches, their findings on minority youth perceptions of their high poverty neighborhood in Cincinnati, OH, show a nuanced perspective of how youth view their high crime neighborhoods. Using the Kidspace survey, Polivka et al. (1998) asked 379 students ages five to 12 to respond to 20 descriptive words (i.e. happy, sad, beautiful, friendly, peaceful, noisy, dirty) by writing what thing or place in their neighborhood comes to mind in relation to the words (p. 173). More often than not, students chose negative descriptive words to describe their neighborhoods. For "community," 27% of the students chose the descriptive word "danger," 33% chose "dirty" and 15% chose "noisy;" additionally 24% of the students said there was garbage in their neighborhoods, and 36% said their neighborhoods smelled

bad. When asked about violent activities in their neighborhoods, 27% said they feel danger, and 24% said they feel sad. In relation to the positive words, less than 3% felt their communities were friendly, only 4.2% described them as quiet and only 1.7% said they feel safe (Polivka et al., 1998, p. 174). However, it wasn't all bad. Even though these numbers aren't terribly high, they show that some children experience some positives. Some students did find areas of their neighborhoods that they enjoyed; they felt their homes were peaceful (39.4%) and quiet (44.4%); they thought their neighbors were friendly (35.8%) and helpful (36.7%); they thought their schools were peaceful, quiet and safe (36.6%) and that they had trees and flowers in their neighborhood that were beautiful (16.6%) and smelled good (10.6%) along with good smelling food (22.1%) (Polivka et al., 1998, p. 174).

These findings show that even though the students believed their neighborhoods were dangerous and had challenges, they did not universally believe that everything about their neighborhoods was bad, ugly and unredeemable, which is contrary to popular opinion about inner-cities. In addition to exploring the youths' perceptions of their city the researchers also asked them what should be done to make the city a better place for kids. The most frequent responses focused on preventing violence (27%), which included stopping people from killing one another, stopping making guns, stopping the violence; next came cleaning up the city from litter (11%) and preventing drug abuse (11%), which included taking the drug dealers off the streets and taking drugs away (Polivka et al., 1998, p. 177). While none of these responses differs significantly from what adults would likely say, these findings do provide a youth-focused perspective that is absent from the literature about the impact of community violence on youth.

In the next chapter, I will add to this body of research by using qualitative approaches and engagement with African-American children's picturebooks focused on minority youth experiences in inner cities. I will examine how the Walt Whitman students discussed the community violence they see, hear and experience in their Camden neighborhood and what impact it has on their perceptions and feelings about their city. Like the youth in many of the studies cited above, the Walt Whitman students are surrounded by community violence on a persistent basis, and, as Osofsky (1995) and Richters and Martinez (1993) found, oftentimes have a very matter-of-fact way of speaking about it. However, I will show that this matter of factness, or at times, absence of talk of community violence by some of the students, exposes a more complex view of life in Camden. Even though the city was not all bad for the children, one should never forget that these children do live under considerable challenges and that any "normalizing" on their part about the violence and crime and social disorder they see, hear or experience should not be taken lightly nor discounted. With children and youth being such a significant part of the population in Camden, more attention should be paid to their understanding and experiences, for how they manage and interpret their lives in the city will greatly impact not only their childhoods, but the adults they become and the overall future of the city.

CHAPTER 3

Accepting, Resisting and the Space In-between: How Youth Make Meaning of

Violence in Camden

The Walt Whitman School is located in the southern portion of the city of

Camden in a neighborhood of about 3,100 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The

neighborhood is largely African-American, with Latinos making up the remaining 20%.

It's a fairly young community with about 37% of the residents under the age of 19. There

are slightly more females than males living in this area of the city, but male teenagers

make up a greater percentage of the population than other young residents. The average

age is 27 with more than 50% of the residents living in poverty. Not surprisingly, female-

headed households make up the majority of the community and most youth live in homes

where family members receive some form of public assistance and with adults who have

not graduated from high school (U.S Census Bureau, 2014).

The neighborhood around the school is a mix of row homes and public housing.

In the past several years, former "projects" and high rise apartment-style public housing

units in the neighborhood have been demolished using HOPE VI federal government

grants awarded to the city that allow for sections of neighborhoods to be revitalized into

more "family style" and "town home" style residences available for rent and purchase.

Launched during the Clinton administration as an urban revitalization effort, HOPE VI

grants have as some of their objectives to improve the physical appearance of

neighborhoods that had formerly contained distressed public housing; reduce

concentrations of poverty by encouraging a mix of incomes among public housing

residents; and to provide support services, such as education and training programs, child

care services, transportation and counseling to help public housing residents get and keep

jobs (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2000). Given that only about 40% of the residents are high school graduates and that 20% of adults are unemployed in the Walt Whitman neighborhood, it is hard to tell what impact the support services are having on the residents in the community and their overall quality of life; nonetheless, the removal of the menacing "project" style housing complexes that oftentimes served as the central location for crime, violence and drug dealing seem to be a step in the right direction.

Named after a leading citizen from Camden, the Walt Whitman School first opened in 1907, with eight classrooms above a basement. The original school remained open and operational for students in kindergarten through grade five until 2008 when the new 88,000 square foot school opened on land adjacent to the former building and expanded up to grade eight. The new building launched a new chapter in the history of the school, a school that just a few years prior had been plagued with theft and deception at the hands of the former principal. In 2005, the Walt Whitman School became mired in scandal when the principal at the time was caught stealing tens of thousands of dollars from parents, staff and the school district. Parents, school officials and community members were stunned when they learned of the principal's actions; however, in 2006, at the same time as the allegations were surfacing about the thefts, the school was also under investigation for potential test score fraud when reports began to surface about the significant jump in test scores from one year to the next. It was reported that students in Walt Whitman scored some of the highest assessment scores in the state of NJ after years of low performance. It took several more years for the deception and thievery under the former principal's tenure to become fully exposed, but eventually he and several other

district employees caught up in the schemes were found guilty and sentenced to jail time and forfeiture of their pensions and teaching licenses in the state of New Jersey[5].

Under new leadership in 2008, the Walt Whitman School became one of only four new schools built in the Camden City Public School district since 1865 when the district was founded. The building can accommodate up to 700 students and has 35 state-of-the-art classrooms with smart boards, security systems and wireless technology throughout the building. As you enter, the school is bright and airy with large windows and sunny yellow paint on the walls. The hallways are wide, lined with the schoolwork and colorful art work of the students and posters of the principal offering "Devoe Bucks" (named after himself) to those students who do well academically and socially. These "Devoe Bucks" may be traded in weekly for prizes and treats. There is a large gymnasium, cafeteria and library that are always in use during the day with parent or student programs and spacious administrative offices throughout the building. There are 62 certified teachers in the school, primarily focused in language arts literacy and math, but others support special education and "specials," which are the arts and physical education classes. Also on staff are a school nurse, technology coordinator, guidance counselors, and the media specialist (also known as the librarian) who retired in January 2013 and was not replaced for the remainder of the school year (Interview with Mr. Devoe, 2013).

The academic profile of the school mirrors most of the other schools in the district. Even though students have shown some gains over the past four years, the New Jersey Department of Education reports in the annual school report card that the Walt Whitman students, "significantly lag in comparison" to their peers across the state (New

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[5] Citation not provided to maintain the anonymity of the school at which I conducted my research

Jersey Department of Education, *2011-2012 School Performance Reports*). For the 2012-2013 school year, Walt Whitman students only outperformed 7% of their peers in New Jersey on state assessments, with just close to a third of the students reaching proficiency in language arts and less than half reaching proficiency in math (New Jersey Department of Education, *2012-2013 School Performance Reports*). The school also lags on indicators of college and career readiness. Success in Algebra I and consistent attendance are seen as predictors of high school completion and future college enrollment, areas in which the district consistently struggles (Hein & Smerdon, 2013, p. 5-6). However, Algebra I is not offered at the school (which isn't surprising given the low proficiency scores in math), and 27% of students were chronically absent during the 2012-2013 school year, many missing 15 days or more. However, on any given weekday, the streets in the Walt Whitman neighborhood are filled with youth making their way to school.

School officially begins at 8:25 a.m., and since this is a neighborhood school, the majority of the students walk. From all directions you see them in their uniforms, blue and yellow tops and khaki colored pants and skirts. Many walk with siblings or friends, others by themselves, but there is also a steady stream of adults in cars who pull into the roundabout in front of the school to drop students off. As soon as you walk through the doors, you are greeted by a friendly African-American female security guard, Ms. Howard, who knows all of the names of all of the children and their family members. Ms. Howard never shies away from gently chiding the students in a loving, grandmotherly sort of way if they are too loud or too rambunctious as they enter the school. "Leave the street in the streets," she tells the students and their young parents too if they ever got out of line. Typically, standing behind Ms. Howard in the morning is Mr. Devoe, the

principal. At six foot seven, with a bald head, glasses, a beard and lean stature, at first glance, he reminds you of an NBA player, but as the educational leader of the school, he uses his stature and his status as an African-American male to build relationships with his students and his families. At 36, he is about the same age as some of the parents, but with such young families in the neighborhood, he has also been a teacher of some of the parents who come to his school. The Vice-principal is also African-American, as is about a third of the teaching staff, which is also majority female. The staff in the school is generally friendly and cordial with each other. The younger teachers, especially the African-American staff, tend to laugh and joke more freely with each other and the principal, when you would see them in the halls or when they come into each other's rooms. Overall, the teachers tend to stay in their own classrooms most of the day except for when they had to report to lunch duty in the cafeteria or when professional development and planning were taking place. As you walk the halls, the adults greet others with a smile or a nod of acknowledgement. As the students move quietly in single file lines or with hall passes in hand heading to the main office or bathroom, they too, smile faintly at other adults in the hallways. Even when the older students pass through changing classes, the halls only have a mild hum of teenage banter or the occasional shout-out of a name. All in all, the atmosphere inside the walls of the Walt Whitman School is calm and welcoming, but right outside the front doors of the school this isn't always the case.

In this chapter, I will show the nuanced and complicated views the Walt Whitman children have about life in the city. These children have a clear sense that Camden is a violent city and speak frequently about shootings, muggings, drug dealers and a general

lack of feeling safe outside of their homes. But just as frequently, and sometimes in the same breath, these children also talk about the joys and pleasures of riding their bikes around the neighborhood, the smell of *arroyos con pollo* wafting down the block, the flowers and trees they see and the fun they have outside playing with friends. I will argue that even though these students have complicated and at times contradictory feelings about the city, they also challenge and resist the common perception and "outsider" narrative that Camden is a place of nothing but destitution and despair. For these children, Camden is more than the violence and crime it is known for; Camden is also about the people and the relationships they have with their family and friends and the fun and happiness they find with them in their neighborhood in spite of the challenges. However, even though the children provide a counter narrative to public perceptions of life in Camden, it is my hope that this chapter will also bring forward a more detailed understanding of the prevalence of violence in the lives of children in the city. It is one thing to have a broad sense of the violence that exists in Camden from the crime statistics and news accounts, but it is another to have first-hand accounts of the daily violence and social disorder that surround children in the city. I hope that this chapter will do a couple of things: (a) encourage those who work with children on a regular basis, such as the educators and staff in the schools, to seek to better understand how prevalent violence and crime are in the lives of their students and think more critically about the role that persistent violence can have on their development and (b) make us all pause and consider what must be done, not just to help these students navigate this reality but to change the detrimental social conditions that surround their lives.

"Some boy Jahiem got shot in the jaw"

It was after school one day in May and I was meeting with José and his classmate Imani in the library to talk to them some more about their lives and their family. Up until this point, I had only spoken with the students in the classroom while teaching my weekly lesson using one of the African-American children's books. Even though they had given me a good sense of how they viewed their lives in the city and their families through their journals, interviewing them in small groups gave me more time to speak with them individually and follow up more immediately on their responses. José, who calls himself "Blackarican" (his mother is Black and his father is Puerto Rican), is the class clown. He stood out from the very first day of school because Ms. Washington, the teacher, called his name so often. He always had something to say, right or wrong, and normally made Ms. Washington and his classmates laugh because he was so witty. Out of the class of 20, he was one of seven boys (by the end of the school year there were only five boys because two others moved away from the neighborhood) and one of the smartest in the room, but at times José could be a handful. He had an energy that he couldn't quite contain, and he constantly teased his seatmates, especially India, prodding her with little quips under his breath just to get her attention while she worked, until she would shout out, "Stop it José! Ms. Washington, José keeps bothering me!" José knew which buttons to push with people and sometimes seemed to enjoy getting Ms. Washington and his classmates all riled up.

"So what are we going to talk about today, Ms. Watson?" José asks as we are setting up our seats in the library. "I just wanted to talk to you about living in Camden to try to get a sense of what goes on in your neighborhood." To that José immediately begins swaggering like a hip hop artist and offers the following rap off the cuff: "Like life

in Camden/Yeah, you know it's hood around here/Ok, we chill in the hood around here/We ain't got no scared people around here/And if they scared, they're gonna fear/Cause this is the hood around here/people always getting capped in the ear." He is laughing while he says this and even though I am amused, I am not quite sure how to take his response, not knowing if he is being serious or not. I ask, "Are you being serious José? What does it mean that people are getting capped in the ear?" He smiles again and then says, "Oh! You're really serious!?" Sometimes the kids thought it odd that I listened to everything they said and took it all very seriously. However, it had also been a long day for me, and I was becoming slightly annoyed because Jose had been singing and dancing around the library and teasing Imani for the past 10 minutes. He did not give me any answer about what he meant that people get capped in the ear so I move on to ask him if he likes living in Camden and he says "yeah" and as I go to ask him why he likes living in the city he says, "Well, not really, but yeah." It takes a few more minutes to get José to focus, but through his witty rap songs he eventually leads into the story about Jaheim, a young boy at his school who was shot before school one morning, a couple of days prior:

> **José:** I like to live around here, 'cause no people get shot in the ear. Not a lot of people do. Not people who get killed. Ok, not a lot of people, but …
>
> **Me:** Sometimes people get killed, but not a lot of people? Ok.
>
> **José:** Some people that get shot, they get shot—like, some boy named Jaheim got shot in the jaw.
>
> **Imani:** No, in his face [she yells from across the library]
>
> **José:** In his jaw right here [he points to his jaw]

Me: You both know him? Or you know of him?

José: Someone named Marvin shot him in this jaw.

Me: What happened?

José: It was like an accident.

And then José launches into a story about how on the way to school a few days prior, an 11-year-old accidently shot a 12-year-old in his apartment around 8 a.m. in the morning. "It was like 7:30 in the morning, or something like that in the morning, and they was playing football … It's either Marvin's big bother or Jaheim's big brother gave Marvin some type of pistol and Marvin didn't know if it was loaded, so he pulled his gun thinking that they aren't throwing something away like that, and from out of nowhere it was, like, bam." Based on a story in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Vargas & Lai, 2013), José has gotten most of the incident wrong, but the 11-year-old did accidently shoot the 12-year-old and Jaheim's brother, who was 19, was the only adult in the house at the time. The media never covered the story again so I couldn't find out whom the gun belonged to or how the 11-year-old got access to it. The incident happened less than a quarter of a mile away from the school in an apartment complex in which many of the students live. Over the past year, the apartment complex had its share of home invasions, disturbances and murders take place in the complex. Both José and Imani knew the students involved in the shooting, and while Imani had a more colorful version of the story, neither seemed disturbed by the incident. Even though this shooting occurred just after I had seen them the week prior, and after I had asked them at the beginning of the interview if anything exciting happened since the last time we saw each other, neither told me this story until I specifically asked about violence in Camden and only after I continued to nudge José

about the question. When I asked Mr. Devoe later on about the incident, he just shook his head and said he didn't really know much more except that it was an accident and both boys and families were extremely distraught.

When José and Imani are done talking about Jaheim, I ask them if they know of anyone else who has been shot or hurt, and Imani quickly begins to tell me a story about a drug addict, who from time to time also sells drugs in the neighborhood and was shot over Mother's Days weekend. Imani, who is also Black and Puerto Rican, has a cute round face, a bright smile and is very bubbly. She calls herself a "diva," and she uses her whole body when she talks and begins to tell me the story as if we are gossiping girlfriends. The man was someone that Imani and her family knew and would help from time to time by giving him food and blankets because oftentimes he didn't have a place to sleep, even though Imani also said this man, "would like sell drugs and things." She said she was in the shower early Sunday morning on Mother's Day around 1 a.m. and heard about 10 to 15 gun shots outside of her window. It is hard to follow the story in the beginning because she jumps back and forth between the incident and talking about how her and her family knew him, but eventually she shares that she and her family didn't realize it was "Ray-Ray" who had gotten shot until the next day when they were at the corner store and heard some guys, his friends, in the store asking to see the video camera footage because Ray-Ray had gotten shot outside the store. He had only gotten shot in the arm, she said, but she felt sad for him, even though he was a drug dealer and potentially got shot because of it: "I think they just did that because he was, like, because, he was in jail and he came out, and he really didn't have money. He was here to make money and then the dude [Ray-Ray] just hears gunshots." She seemed to sympathize with Ray-Ray's

need to make money in order to survive and being shot because of it. However, even in her sadness about Ray-Ray's shooting, the tone in her voice is that these things "just happen" in Camden. Like José telling me about Jaheim, she spoke about these situations in a very matter of fact way, with very little emotion, with no indication that she was upset or scared.

As I discussed both of these situations with Imani and José, neither of them questioned how Marvin got access to the gun that he shot Jaheim with or expressed concern about the fact that Jaheim was critically injured and could have died, nor did they wonder or ask what would happen to those who shot Ray-Ray. They seemed to accept that guns are present in their neighborhood, at times people get hurt and that violence just happens. Though both of them told their stories with energy and excitement, they relayed the stories to me as if they were telling me about the plot script of a television show or movie, something that was disconnected from their lives, even though they both personally knew the people involved in the incidents.

At the end of my conversation with José and Imani, I ask if they are going to stay in Camden when they get older, and José immediately answers no, too much violence he says. I go on to ask, "So do you see a lot of violence? Or do you hear a lot of violence, but don't see it?" "Violence is everywhere," he says, and for the first time during this whole interview his voice drops, there is a quiver in his voice as he shakes his head from side to side, "Everywhere. One day I see a person getting jumped. The next day, I see a person cussing at an old man. Next day, somebody getting shot." This acknowledgement by José shows while in one breath he can talk about Jahiem getting shot as if it is a plot in

a movie, in the next breath he is clearly upset and shares that the violence and social disorder in his neighborhood does bother him and affect his future plans.

What is to be made of the responses of José and Imani? Does the occurrence of violence in their neighborhood happen so frequently that it doesn't cause them to have any emotional response? From the matter of fact way both students discussed the incidents, one may think so and believe that the violence they witness and experience has no impact on their lives, but the reality is more complicated. As you will learn in the rest of the chapter, violence and social disorder were discussed frequently by the students throughout the school year; it was ever-present in their lives. Throughout the school year six students, a third of the class, shared that they had a cousin or family member who had been shot and killed, and, by their descriptions, their cousins seemed relatively young when they were killed. Additionally, Ms. Washington shared that Imani's mother had been shot in the neck earlier in the school year by her boyfriend (thankfully, she eventually recovered, but Imani was never told exactly what happened) and another student, Tammy, shared that her father had been shot five times in the face during the spring of the school year and killed. Outside of these two incidents, Ms. Washington said she was unaware of the level of violence that existed in the lives of her children until she heard them speak when I was teaching.

Since consistent violence is what these students have grown up around, they seem to have adapted to this reality and adopted an "it is what it is" mentality, a belief that violence in Camden is normal, and have constructed coping processes, ways of speaking and ways of dealing with the violence that seem matter of fact. Other researchers have found the same effect in their studies with minority youth who live

among violence. In her research with middle-school-aged African-American and Latino youth in Philadelphia, Alice McIntyre (2000) found, "The recurrence of violent acts becomes habitual, and what appear as matter-of-fact, unaffected responses by participants become normal" (p. 126). A few years earlier, Spanish scholar Ignacio Martin-Baro (as translated by Aron & Corne, 1996, p. 122) called it "normal abnormality" a theory he coined while studying children during war in El Salvador. Martin-Bare (1996) asserts that people who have been forced to live with violence develop coping mechanisms and patterns of speaking about the violence (playing outside where violence takes place, speaking matter of factly, lacking fear or emotion) that seem counterintuitive to the situation at hand, especially to those who don't live in such circumstances. However, he says that these responses by those who live in under these conditions become "normal" because of the frequency with which such violence and disorder take place in their lives, so their responses are a way of adapting to their surroundings, needing some way to cope and deal and "live" with the violence in their daily lives (130).

It must be understood that for the Walt Whitman children and the children in the research conducted by Martin-Bare (1996), their realities and responses to what they are experiencing and the meaning they make of those experiences are directly influenced and linked to the social context in which they are developing, connecting back to Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory. However, researchers Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann (1997) took Brofenbrenner's theory one step further in their theoretical model PVEST (Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory). Spencer et al. (1997) provide a framework, developed in 1995, for understanding how youth, especially minority youth, navigate and make meaning of the social contexts in

which they live. While Brofenbrenner (1994) focuses on contexts (i.e. systems) and how

different levels of context impact children (and also how children impact their contexts),

Spencer et al. (1997) focus on the decisions that children and youth make and how they

make their decisions in response to the systems that impact their lives. Not to

oversimplify their theory, but PVEST can provide a rationale for why children and

adolescents who live in persistently violent inner cities develop manners of speaking and

dealing with the violence that may seem counterintuitive to some and that may serve

them well in the moment and allow them to cope and adapt to the challenges at hand, but

that in the long run may not provide them comfort or appropriate coping mechanisms.

     Spencer et al. (1997) argue that minority youth live with constant stressors

(poverty, racism, violence, sexism) and will respond to these stressors in adaptive or

maladaptive ways. Their responses, which are influenced by their social and physical

environment and level of support systems present in their lives, will lead to an outcome

that is either productive or non-productive (Spencer et al., 1997, p. 818-821). While there

is more to the theory, for my purposes, this perspective lends insight into why and how

José and Imani, and their peers as you will read later, speak about the violence in Camden

in the way that they did. José, Imani and their peers, who live among persistent violence,

can respond to these stressors by becoming so fearful of their surroundings that they

develop anxiety so great that it keeps them from going outside and living life because of

the constant threat of violence, keeping them from school or other activities. Rather than

letting fear rule their lives, another way they can choose to respond, which is what I

believe the Walt Whitman students did, is to learn (and they are taught this response) to

accept that persistent violence is an inescapable part of their lives. They adapt based on

their circumstances. In doing so, the acceptance of violence becomes normal, and while the violence does bother them, their manner of speaking about it becomes matter of fact or seemingly lacking in emotion, because the violence just is. These responses stem from the reality that violence is prevalent and probably mirrors how they have seen others in their lives deal with it. In the short term, these coping strategies allow them to deal with and talk about the violence and social disorder that surrounds them in ways that are somewhat disconnected from them emotionally and psychically; they can compartmentalize the violence so that they continue to live their lives (go to school, study, play with friends, have fun). But as stated earlier, research has found that in the long run these coping or defense mechanisms that seem resilient at the time may not serve them well emotionally or psychologically and could negatively impact their growth and development (behavior problems, poor performance in school, depression), potentially leading to desensitization to violence, engaging in crime and violence and contributing to social disorder themselves (DuBois, Felner, Brand, Adan, & Evans, 1992; Osofsky et al., 1993; Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004; Schwab-Stone, et al., 1995; Schwartz & Gorman, 2003). Thus, when attempting to understand how children and youth in Camden deal with and speak about the violence that exists in their neighborhoods, it is worthwhile to keep Brofenbrenner's (1994) framework and Spencer et al.'s (1997) PVEST in mind.

Another example of how the students' realities are influenced by their immediate environment is that even though many of the students said they wished to move out of Camden because the violence scares them, they do not seem to have a firm sense that the level of violence they experience is not experienced by children outside of Camden.

When José was asked if other kids who live outside of Camden experience violence, he said yes and mentioned the incident in Newtown[6], which happened during that school year, not knowing that school shootings such as the one in Newtown, while becoming more prevalent, are still rare and different from the violence that exists around him in Camden. Additionally when the same question was asked of other students in the class, Imani, India and others, they also responded with the belief that violence exists in other areas because "bad things happen" and "violence is everywhere," but they did not quite understand that most children do not experience it to the same level or degree as they do in Camden. Again as Brofenbrenner's (1994) theory shows, their reality and understanding of the world is formed by their daily experiences in the city. Almost of all of the students have lived only in Camden, they may have moved from one neighborhood to another inside of the city and may have visited other places, but they do not have a firm understanding of how children and others live life outside of Camden and that those lives are, in most cases, very different.

In the remainder of the chapter, I will continue to explore how the children spoke about the violence and social disorder that existed in the city, sharing in more detail some of their anxieties and frustrations, but also the joys and pleasures they found in their neighborhood. Children's lives in Camden are multidimensional and complex, as are the lives of all children, and while they may experience more challenges, their lives also include experiences that I consider a part of some "universal" aspects of "childhood" that

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[6] On December 14, 2012 there was a shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. A gunman entered the school and killed twenty children and six school employees. http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sandy-hook-elementary-school-shooting-leaves-students-staff-dead/2012/12/14/24334570-461e-11e2-8e70-e1993528222d_story.html

are experienced by all children, but run counter to general sentiments about life in Camden.

As I talked to the kids over the course of the year about their lives in general and their responses to the picturebooks that we engaged with, the topic of violence in Camden came up often. Either they had witnessed violent acts, experienced violence themselves or knew that violence took place in Camden enough that many feared living in the city and wanted to move. Since my project took place during 2012, the deadliest year on record for the city, and based on the research presented in the last chapter about the prevalence of community violence in high poverty areas, one would have expected talk of violence to come up in their conversations. However, Camden's violence wasn't all they discussed when they talked about their city or their lives in the city. They talked about having fun playing outside with friends and riding their bikes around the neighborhood; they talked about the yummy smell of food from the local Chinese take-out and drew colorfully painted homes with trees lining the streets and birds flying around to represent their neighborhood. Their perception of Camden was not all negative and how they saw their neighborhoods was often similar to how children in a neighboring suburb might view and experience their neighborhood. These children in Camden challenge and resist the dominant narrative that Camden is a violent wasteland, a city full of bleakness and despair where childhood frivolity and innocence doesn't exist, as described by Mike Tabibi (2014) in "Apocalypse, New Jersey: A Dispatch from America's Most Desperate Town," published in *Rolling Stone* magazine. As was true of the authors Sharon Dennis Wyeth and Tony Medina, who wrote *Something Beautiful* (2002) and *DeShawn Days* (2001), two of the picturebooks we read together in class that focus on city life, the

students don't shy away from the violence and social ills that plague their life in the inner city. The authors each talk about the challenges, but also make a point of sharing the joys, the hopes, and the beauty they perceive in their neighborhoods and in their lives in those neighborhoods. Through their youthful eyes and the encouragement to see more than the negative that surrounds them, as suggested by Wyeth and Medina in their books, the students share a more complete, and, for some, a more complicated, reality of life in the city for children.

Challenging and Resisting the Narrative

One of the first books we read together in October was Caldecott Honor Book *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* (1987) by John Steptoe. For the school year, I put together a collection of 25 books written and illustrated by African-Americans that covered topics such as life in the city, family, friends, fairy tales, historical fiction and African-American history. Each book was selected not only to engage students with books that were written with their lives and experiences in mind, but also to engage students in conversations about the topics presented in the books, in an effort to explore what connection, if any, the books may have to the children's own lives. I constructed lesson plans that included pre-reading activities to prime the students about what was to come in the book, a series of questions to be discussed with the students during the in-class out loud reading, making sure to leave time for any student generated questions, and I ended each class with questions for the students to consider and answer in their personal journals after we completed the in-class discussion. I wanted to make sure that the journal questions would encourage to the students to think about their own lives in relation to what we had just read in the book. At the end of class each week, a student would be

selected to pick a book out of a collection of five to be read the following week. But to

begin the school year, I chose *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*. Even though *Mufaro's*

Beautiful Daughters is based on a Zimbabwean folktale it resembles a typical Cinderella-

type tale that I believed would be familiar to the students and allow us to ease into our

conversation.

The book begins with Mufaro's daughters, Manyara and Nyasha, being

summoned before a king who is looking for a suitable wife, but their journey to the

king's palace tests the character of each sister about pride before a fall. Steptoe (1987)

illustrates this tale with lush and rich details of the African landscape and people. Each

page is filled with vibrant colors—greens, golds, reds—animals, birds and aspects of

African culture through the characters' dress, and how they go about living their daily

lives. In discussing the book, we focused primarily on the meaning of beauty, selfishness

and the idea of being nice even when no one is looking. But in their journal writings, I

asked the students to describe five things they see when they look around their

neighborhood. I was interested in what they would say knowing that whatever they see in

their neighborhoods would be in stark contrast to what Steptoe illustrated in *Mufaro's*

Beautiful Daughters. Response after response from the students talked about seeing cats,

dogs and squirrels (27); flowers and birds (19); trees, flowers and grass (16); different

objects—cars, houses, streets (15); adults and kids playing (6); and, insects (5). One

student mentioned seeing sewers, while others mentioned seeing trash (6), but more often

than not, their comments presented a seemingly neutral description of their Camden

neighborhood that could match how most children who live outside of Camden describe

their own neighborhoods. If you didn't know these children lived in Camden, you

wouldn't be able to tell from their descriptions. There is no talk of abandoned buildings or poorly boarded up houses, no mention of men hanging out on the corners selling drugs, nor discussion about the abandoned lots that dot the neighborhood, all things that exist when you walk down many of the blocks in the Walt Whitman neighborhood. Maybe the students didn't mention these things because I was still new to them, an outsider. Or maybe their descriptions of their neighborhoods extended from what they found pleasant in the book. I do think there was some of both of these factors at play; however, I contend that it could also have been that while these other more challenging images do exist in their neighborhoods, they are not the first thoughts that come to mind when they describe where they live.

Most adults, either from the community or outside of the city, have a different understanding of Camden or come to a Camden neighborhood with preconceived ideas, but this isn't necessarily true for children. For adults, especially outsiders, Camden is known largely from what is highlighted in the media (murders, violence, crime, poverty), but this narrative of Camden has not yet been seared into these children's thoughts and perceptions of the city. This is not to say that children don't see these things, or aren't worried about the violence, but they put forth a more complex view of Camden that is missing from the discussion about the lives of children in the city. Children in Camden engage in the same daily practices as children outside of Camden in the neighboring suburbs. They eat, sleep, attend school and study; they watch television, play video games, listen to the radio, go to the movies, and participate in sports. In response to my questions about what they like to do in their neighborhoods, they said they like to play with their friends, go to the parks and hang out with their families. As I stated earlier

related to the research about youth exposure to community violence, it is not that these children don't see and discuss the violence or trash, seedy adults or deteriorated surroundings, but as Polivka et al. (1998) and McIntyre (2000) note, these youth also notice the kindness of their neighbors, the flowers and trees, good smelling food coming from barbeques or take out restaurants; they discuss the peace and calm in their homes and the safety they feel in their schools, aspects of life that that are just as important and necessary in having a more complete picture about life in a violent city.

A month later in mid-November, we read *The Other Side* (2001)*,* by Jacqueline Woodson, and it was clear that the students did see and understand the dangers that existed in their neighborhood, even though this was not the focus of the book. The story is about two girls, Clover, who is Black, and Annie, who is White, and the physical and metaphorical "fence" that separates them. The book jacket reads, "Clover has always wondered why a fence separates the black side of town from the white side. But this summer when Annie, a white girl from the other side, begins to sit on the fence, Clover grows more curious about the reasons why the fence is there and about the daring girl who sits on it, rain or shine. And one day, feeling very brave, Clover approaches Annie." Setting the story in a non-descript rural town, Woodson said she wrote the book to show how powerful kids can be in their own small way, fighting the power of discrimination to become friends ("Books I've Written: Picture Books," *Jacqueline Woodson: Books for children and young adults*). In a subsequent chapter, I will explore the ideas that the children had about race and racism and their understanding of the history of slavery and the civil rights movement as it related to conversations about this and other books, but

how the children responded to this book also provided more insight about how these children experience life in the city.

"That summer the fence that stretched through our town seemed bigger" the book begins (Woodson, 2001, p.2). "We lived in a yellow house on one side of it. White people lived on the other. And Mama said, 'Don't climb over that fence when you play.' She said it wasn't safe" (Woodson, 2001, p.2). After reading this opening paragraph, I asked the students "Why do you think mama said it wasn't safe to climb the fence?" From the cover illustration of Clover and Annie separated by the fence and the opening paragraph, the students immediately understood the tension of the story. Maria, the only Puerto Rican girl in the class responded, "Black people lived on this side of the gate. And then White people lived on the other side of the gate. That's why her mom said not to go to the other side because it's not safe because White people might threaten her and say they are going to beat her." The entire conversation in class focused on race, prejudices and discrimination that Blacks faced "back in the day." When I later followed up with the journal writing questions, I asked "Are there places you are not supposed to go, and why?" Using an open-ended format, I wanted to hear what the students would say. More than half mentioned not being able to travel to certain places in their neighborhoods because of safety:

"I am not aloud [allowed] to go to the parks around the corner while I am riding my bike."

"Can't go to the park with my bike because last time I went there with no one like it got taken."

"Yes it is a place I'm not supposed to go. Because it is not safe, like around the corner. It is not safe because people are crazy and you can get shot."

"I can't go through the shortest [route] to school alone. I can't go through there because it looks dangerous." [This is an abandoned lot by the school.]

"I can't go places by myself like … Crestberry [an apartment complex in the neighborhood] because it is not safe."

"I can't go on the other side because people be shooting, playing with fire crackers, smoking, and cussing and the most important things is over there is dangerous."

"There is places I can't go is Lakeshore [a street in the neighborhood a few blocks from the school] because there are people that do drugs."

"Yes! There are place I am no aloud [allowed] to go like I can't go through the valley." ["The valley" is an abandoned lot by the school that some use as a shortcut, also mentioned by another student above. It is an area where one can frequently see drug dealers and people just hanging around].

Prior to asking this question, I asked the students, "Are there people you are not supposed to play with? And if so, why?" All of the responses I received back were general "stranger danger" comments that most parents tell their children about not talking to strangers or going anywhere with strangers, for fear they would get "snatched up." So when I asked the question above, I thought the students would be more focused on not being able to go places alone because of their age or because their parents just didn't want them going places alone. I was surprised that this particular book would bring up thoughts of danger in their neighborhoods, even more so since none of the students

mentioned these ideas while we were reading and discussing the book out loud in class. However, I think this shows that danger and violence are ever-present aspects of their lives.

The types of spatial restrictions the kids discussed are in line with studies that have found that parents who live in areas of high crime and violence employ various strategies to minimize the likelihood of their children falling victims to violence or crime (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Clark, 1983) by restricting their children's access to specific locations (Furstenberg, 1993). However, even though the children said that their parents told them that they couldn't go to particular places in the neighborhood, I am not sure if they actually listened to their parents and did not go into these places, nor am I certain that limiting access to certain areas dramatically impacted their ability to play outside, which is what Spilsbury (2005) found. When examining children's home range, which Spilsbury (2005) defines as "the distance children travel away from their home in the course of their outdoor play and leisure pursuits," Spilsbury (2005) found that there was no relationship between the level of violence in neighborhoods and the size of children's home ranges. That is, children were not kept closer to home even with considerable levels of violence in their neighborhoods (Spilsbury, 2005, p. 94). The youth in Spilsbury's (2005) research were limited in terms of places they could go, but they were able to "work with and around" the restrictions placed on them and found opportunities to have fun outside by themselves or with their peers (p. 95). The same held true for the Walt Whitman students. When I asked the students later in the year to name some of the things they like to do on their blocks, all of those who mentioned going outside stated that they played outside and rode their bikes in and around their neighborhood, either alone or with

their friends, went to the park with friends and family and enjoyed being outside because it was fun. These were regular, "normal" childhood activities they engaged in. Even though the students have a sense of the danger in their neighborhoods and had places that they could not go in their neighborhoods, these factors did not completely stop them from playing outside, even though they, and whoever else talked to them about the dangers in their neighborhood, were definitely correct in being concerned. Beginning in the summer of 2012 through to 2013, the Walt Whitman neighborhood was plagued by a string of violent incidents that finally forced Mr. Devoe, the principal, who initially moved into the neighborhood to be closer to his students and to gain a better understanding of their world, to move out of the neighborhood.

During 2012, the Walt Whitman neighborhood was one of the most violent and crime ridden areas in the city. Right before the beginning of the school year in early September, a man high on "wet" (a marijuana cigarette laced with PCP) broke down the door of the apartment of his girlfriend and slit the throat of her six-year-old son and stabbed his 12-year-old sister when she tried to intervene. The 12-year-old was seriously hurt but eventually survived and a third child in the home was not hurt (DiPento, 2013). This incident took place in the same apartment complex where 12-year-old Jaheim, José and Imani's friend, was shot several months later and where several of the students mentioned that they were told by their parents not to go. This story was carried locally on all of the television evening news and in the newspapers and, because of the gruesome attack on children, it was picked by the Associated Press and made its ways to HuffingtonPost.com and Yahoo News (Walters & Zezima, 2012). Later in the spring, seven people were arrested in a major drug bust that took place four blocks from the

school. The police compared the drug operations in this neighborhood to a "drive in restaurant" (Simon, 2013). The U.S Attorney Paul Fishman said, "You call ahead, you could order something. You could walk up or you could drive off the highway, pick up stuff, drive around the block and get right back on the highway" (Simon, 2013). He added, "Like a restaurant, they had a pretty broad menu. They had heroin, they had cocaine, they had crack" (Simon, 2013). Over the summer prior to the beginning of the school year, there were also multiple shootings in the neighborhood, several resulting in death at the Branch Village Apartments, another housing "project" less than five blocks from the Walt Whitman School ("2 wounded in Camden shooting," 2013).

As mentioned above, when he first got the job as principal, Mr. Devoe moved into Camden because he wanted to live in the neighborhood of his school, and he initially enjoyed it because he felt that it helped him connect with his families, "Some people see me get up, put my suit on every day. But what I liked is I thought it brought something to the neighborhood, you know. Nobody ever messed with my house. People respected the fact that I lived in the neighborhood. They would say, 'hey teacher, hey principal, how you doing?'" He said people would even stop him from time to time when they saw him on the weekend at the local drugstore, "What are you doing here on a Saturday?" they would ask, and when he told them he lived there, he would always get a smile. But once he married and had a family of his own, life in the city became "too real." He said living in the neighborhood helped him connect with the families because he could understand the violence and struggles since he lived with them, but when gunshots rang out one night and he and his family members had to duck on the floor, Mr. Devoe recounts how living in the neighborhood became too much to take:

It started to become a little too much when you hear the gunshots, and kids want to go outside. And, you know, I remember one night, Saturday night, sitting in front of–you know I live on the main road [says street name], and I remember, you know, gunshot sounds like they were right outside and ducking on the floor with my family. And my wife kind of was looking at me like we got to start looking to get out of here. And, you know, now that my kids, you know. I would always make them go upstairs to watch TV. You know, you can't watch TV down here, and I remember, you know, one night sleeping on the couch, getting ready to go on a fishing trip and hear all this commotion outside, and I look out the window. It's this guy shooting down the street. And it's like, you know, here I'm laying—it could've been the other direction, somebody shooting in, I'm laying on the couch. I could've gotten shot five times laying on my own couch. So it was kind of like, it's time to, you know, it time to go … but you start raising a family, and not saying that my family can't be raised out here or my family's too good. But I want to give my child an opportunity, not to be harmed by somebody else's way of living and my child innocent, you know?

Unlike most of the children in his school, Mr. Devoe made the conscious effort to move into the city but also had the resources and ability to move out of the city when the violence became too much to bear and the safety of his family was threatened. For the parents and caretakers of the students in the Walt Whitman school, when things got tough, moving out was probably desired and discussed, but not always possible. Later in the year when I was talking to India, an eight-year-old African-American girl in the class about wishes she had for her family, her first response was to be able to make enough

money when she grew up to move her mom and siblings out of Camden because of crime. Ahmad and José shared in this sentiment, with José wishing that he could become a millionaire so that he could move out of Camden. Oftentimes the children were aware of the limited resources of their families and shared that they knew their parents worked extremely hard and sacrificed for what they have, so many of the children wanted to "give back" and take care of their families when they got older. When I talked to Imani in the spring about the things she likes do to in her neighborhood, she shared that she was moving and said it was because "like, over there, they is just—so much dirtiness over there [unintelligible], and there's too much danger and stuff like that because, like, every—when—every time when like, my brother would come on my block, but like two hours later like, when we outside, they be shooting and stuff. And one time a bullet almost hit my brother, but my brother was lucky that he run." Imani said that her mother saw this incident from the window of their home and cried. When I asked Imani where she would move to, she named the next neighborhood over, which actually rivaled the Walt Whitman neighborhood in the level of violence and crime present, so it was unclear why her mom believed the adjacent neighborhood was a better option. However, Imani shared that her mother had dropped out of school when she was pregnant with her and currently did not work, so her options and resources for where she could move were likely severely limited. Months later, at the end of the school year, Imani and her family still lived in the Walt Whitman neighborhood.

The thoughts that were shared by Imani, India, Ahmad and José came in the spring after I spent considerable time with the students in the classroom, but when we were reading *The Other Side* in November, moving out of the city was not a common

sentiment shared by the students. Even with the challenges that the students shared about crime and safety in their neighborhoods while reading this book, in the last journal question for *The Other Side,* when I asked the kids if they wanted to change anything about their life, only two mentioned not wanting to be in Camden. José said, "I would want to change the fact that I'm living in Camden because it is vilence [violence] around everywhere," and another of his classmates said "I would change were [where] I live because there are a lot of shootings and noises. I don't always hear shootings a lot. I hear people cursing and fighting. I am always scared where I live." Five of the students said that they didn't want to change anything because they believed their lives were "perfect," and the other half of the class focused on more "childlike" areas of concern such as wanting to be able to do whatever they wanted. India wrote, "If I could change my life I would change my life to do whatever I want. I would change my life to watch TV all night and stay up late. And also I will walk to school by myself and get my own phone." While other students, such as Malani, wrote "it would be that I was a preinssen [princess] and I had a twin sister and we all had powers" or Ebony who wrote that she wanted to be a celebrity and a singer, but fears she won't because she is shy.

These variations in response could mean a couple of things. One, it could have taken some of the students more time to trust me in order for them to share their true thoughts and feelings. When I asked questions early on in the school year about what they would change in their lives, they may have chosen to say what they thought I wanted to hear. Since I didn't ask specifically about what they would change about Camden (a question that I did ask in the spring) and if the violence in the city made them wish to leave, I believe some of the kids took the question in the broadest term possible and

thought about their lives in general as connected to their families and not necessarily connected to the violence in the city. That is, they may have thought I was asking them to change something about or move away from their families.

A few weeks later in early November when we read the book *Something Beautiful* (2002) by Sharon Dennis Wyeth and illustrated by Chris Soentpiet,[7] which challenges readers to find "something beautiful" in a neighborhood that seems to be stressful environment like Camden, the kids still came up with many of the same responses as those they shared after we had read *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*. *Something Beautiful* reads:

> When I look through my windows, I see a brick wall. There is trash in the courtyard and a broken bottle that looks like fallen stars. When I walk I pass a lady whose home is a big cardboard carton. She sleeps on the sidewalk, wrapped in plastic. I run past a dark alley, where Mommy told me I must never stop. Behind a fence, there is a garden without any flowers. Mommy said that everyone should have something beautiful in their life. Where is my something beautiful?" (Steptoe, 1987, p. 1-8)

The illustrations for these passages mirror the text, showing the bleakness of urban life. As the story goes on the little girl walks through her neighborhood asking her friends, the grocer down the street and her mother what in their lives is something beautiful and from their responses she begins to realize that there are positive aspects to her neighborhood and that there is beauty around her, even thru the broken glass and abandoned buildings. The local restaurateur Miss Delphine says there is nothing more

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[7]Chris Soentpiet is Korean American.

beautiful than tasting her fried fish sandwich, her friends find their something beautiful in playing jump rope with each other, playing basketball on the playground and dancing on the sidewalk. Each person she encounters in her journey to find something beautiful has something worthwhile to share about the neighborhood and its people. The dark colors and bleakness that highlighted the initial images are gone from each illustration and have been replaced with vibrant colors and warm smiles of children and community members enjoying the company of one another and engaging with one another in their neighborhood. As the story nears its close, the young girl is feeling more hopeful about her neighborhood and now sees that she has the power to change some of the negatives she sees in her community, "I go back home and sit down on my stoop. I look at the trash in my courtyard. I see the word *Die* on my door. I go upstairs and get a broom and a sponge and some water. I pick up the trash. I sweep up the glass. I scrub the door very hard. When *Die* disappears, I feel powerful" (Wyeth, 2002, p. 23-26).

When working with the students I would often ask the same questions repeatedly, and sometimes in slightly different ways, as a way of trying to find the stability in their answers and to see if there were any significant changes in their responses. After reading *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 2002), I asked the class what they see in the neighborhood where they live, and they wrote in their journals:

"I live on a street with no kids, just old people."

"I see pretty houses. I see people walking. I see birds, rabbits, and I see people throwing trash away."

"I see my friends, trees."

"I see people walking up and down the street. I live near the school. I see the store across from my school."

"I see houses."

"I see Christmas decorations [we read this book in December] on the street where I live. I see dogs and a trash can."

"I see boys playing basketball. I see a man smokeing. I see kids riding their bikes."

"I see trees, kids and a highway."

"I see the trees with colorful leaves. I also see cars driving in the midway of the street."

All of the 15 responses were along the same sentiment as above or similar except for Khadijah's, **"**What I see in my neighborhood where I live is people arguing and people using the bathroom outside and people living on the streets, and people throwing trash around." I followed up by asking the class what they hear in their neighborhoods and almost all of the responses were that they hear kids and adults talking, kids playing, people singing Christmas carols walking down the street, birds and cars driving by. When I asked the students to draw their neighborhoods, they drew colorful row homes or single-family homes, the corner store, tree-lined streets, the school and kids outside playing. With the level of violence in this neighborhood, and a number of abandoned homes, one might have expected more responses like Khadijah's or José's drawing of his neighborhood depicting a mugging taking place outside of his house, but these were the only two negative responses from the entire class**.**

Throughout the fall, the students seemed to challenge the perception that Camden, and by extension their neighborhood, is nothing but blighted, worn down and extremely dangerous with drug dealers on the corners and crime happening not only in the evening but in broad daylight. As time went on, the students shared more about seeing drug dealers, hearing yelling and gunshots, and seeing a lot of trash in their neighborhoods, but at this point in time, when asked to think about what they see and hear in Camden, the more challenging sights and sounds they shared while reading the next book *DeShawn Days* (Medina, 2001) which they read in the spring, did not quickly come to mind. Even in sharing some of the challenges they did when we read *The Other Side*, (Woodson, 2001) there was no overall sense that the student's lives in the neighborhoods were all filled with doom. In their journals, the positives of their communities dominated their responses. It is possible that the students did share exactly what they saw and they didn't perceive their neighborhood as wholly negative. Wyeth (1987), in *Something Beautiful,* encourages this perspective by not presenting a one dimensional view of an "inner-city." Yes, there are challenges as she highlights earlier in the book, but she has the young girl take another look at her neighborhood through the eyes of her peers, neighbors and family, and the girl begins to realize it is not all bad. I suggest that the Walt Whitman students share this multi-dimensional perspective and see both the good and bad of their communities. They could have been telling me what they thought I wanted to hear because it was still early in our time working together, but I don't believe that was the case.

Throughout our time together, the students carried with them both positive and negative feelings about their city, and while the negative aspects became more

pronounced as our time together continued (I think in some part because I became more explicit about asking them about Camden), the positive feelings or experiences they had or felt in their neighborhoods were not negated. As Polivka et al. (1998) also found, the youth found fun and positive aspects in their neighborhood in the midst of the dirt, noise and violence. Camden's children, too, represented through their journals and drawings a more nuanced and multidimensional perspective of their neighborhood than common public perception would suggest. This multidimensionality does present a tension in how to think about children's lives in Camden. On the one hand, yes, one must be concerned about the level of violence and crime that exists in the neighborhood and how it impacts the lives and overall development of the children who live there, but on the other hand one must remember that children are still children and are sharing in many of the common joyful and pleasant experiences had by children across the country: playing outside, riding their bikes, hanging out with friends. One cannot dismiss the challenges and say that children in Camden are fine, but one also needs to acknowledge that through the challenges, pleasant experiences of childhood are occurring.

"What is life like in the 'hood"[8]

As the school year went on, the students' thoughts about the city became more nuanced and my questions in relation to the books became more targeted about their specific thoughts on Camden, but the students still displayed mixed reactions and emotions. In the late spring, one of the last books I read with the students was *DeShawn Days* (2001), written by Tony Medina and illustrated by R. Gregory Christie. This book was not on my original list of books to use with the students; however, over the course of

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[8] Name of poem in the book DeShawn Days by Tony Medina (2001)

the year, it became clear that the students really enjoyed poetry, especially José, and this was a picturebook of poetry written specifically for minority youth who live in urban settings. The publishers, Lee and Low, describe DeShawn as "a ten year old boy who talks about his life in poems that celebrate his family, friends, neighbors and the urban street on which he lives" ("DeShawn Days" *Lee and Low Books*). The major themes of the book focus on family love, growing up, self-esteem, urban life and African-American interest.

Lee and Low Books is an independent publishing company focused on books that children of color can identify with and that all children can enjoy ("About Us" *Lee and Low Books*). Since Lee and Low published their first book in 1993, their titles have won the Coretta Scott King Award (for African-American children's literature), the Pura Belpré Award Honor (for Latino children's literature), the Parents' Choice Award, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, ALA Notable Children's Books, *Child* magazine's Best Books Award, American Bookseller "Pick of the Lists" honors, "Choices" honors from the Cooperative Children's Book Center and Best Children's Books of the Year honors from Bank Street College, in addition to receiving praise from a broad range of media, such as *The New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, CBS This Morning, *USA Today*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *Smithsonian* magazine ("Awards and Honors" *Lee and Low Books*). For each book, Lee and Low provides an extensive set of lesson plans and a range of activities that can be used with children to help them explore the multicultural themes that exist in the books and to assist children in engaging with each book on a more personal level. In addition, each lesson plan connects the books to the core curriculum content standards for elementary school learning in the areas of language arts literacy,

social studies, health and nutrition and music. Author Tony Medina says he wrote this book because he was, "a skinny brown boy from the projects with asthma, an active imagination, and a grandmother who was there for me" and wanted to write literature "to promote literacy and solidarity among 'sensitive urban youth'" because he did not believe that available literature for children addressed the lives of kids like those he grew up with ("DeShawn Days" *Lee and Low Books*).

DeShawn is a collection of 13 poems focused on family, friends and life in "the hood." Each illustration of DeShawn and the people in his life is strikingly expressive and realistic. Whether it's the men hanging out on the corner or playing dominoes, or DeShawn at his kitchen table with his grandmother and family or in the school yard playing with his friends, illustrator R. Gregory Christie used bold acrylic paint colors to show the details of DeShawn's life. I chose seven poems to read with the students,[9] with the most interesting comments about their lives in Camden coming from the poems, "I Love my Block" and "What Is Life like in the 'Hood" Each poem is situated on a two-page spread with one side reserved for the poem and the illustration woven into the background and extending over to the next page.

With this book I wanted to have the kids think specifically about their lives in Camden. Up until this point, I had asked the students more open-ended questions about their lives, not specifying to think about Camden or their block or neighborhood, but with this book, I wanted to try to target their responses because I believed that the tone and content of this book would resonate with them and their experiences the most. For our classroom activity, I made a copy of the entire book and passed it out to each student,

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[9] (1) "In My House" (2) "Watching the News" (3) "My Friend in School" (4) "I Love Rap" (5) "I Love my Block" (6) When my Grandmother Died" (7) "What Is Life Like in the 'Hood."

allowing each child to read the poem quietly to him/herself after I read it out loud in the class. Sadly, I taught this book right before the statewide assessments were to begin so instead of fully engaging students in dialogue about each poem and having classroom discussions while reading as we did with the other books, with the time I was allotted for this class, I could only read the poem out loud and have the students re-read it for themselves and then answer a set of questions I provided them.

The fifth poem we read was "I Love my Block" and it reads:

I love my block
and playing with my friends

In front of our building
the girls play double dutch
jumping fast and high

While us boys play skellies
with shaving cream tops
and different color clay inside

We play hopscotch, cops and
robbers, and hide-and-seek too

We always think of fun things to do!

One day we found a bed outside
and turned it into a trampoline

Me and my friends jumped up and
down on it—off its bouncy blue

Tiffany tried to do a cartwheel
but fell in the sandbox

We all laughed before she could cry

Then she laughed too
brushing the sand off her butt! (Medina, 2001, p.20)

After the students re-read the poem at their seats, I asked them to share in their journals three things that they love about their block and three things they would change about their block (for all of the responses the students shared about both poems, see Table 1). When asking the students to share their thoughts, I asked them to first focus on the positives about their neighborhoods, in line with what they had just read in the poem. As I was going over the questions with the class before the students began to write, focusing on the first question about what they liked about their block, Ahmad immediately said out loud that he hated his block. Following up in his journal in response to the three things he loves about his block he wrote, "I hate my block because they shoot. I hate my block because people jump people." For the next question, which asked him to write three things he would change about his block he wrote, "I don't want to change my block because I am leaving" seemingly not caring enough to even think about the things he wanted to change because he wanted to leave so badly. He unequivocally disliked living in Camden because of the dangers. Throughout the school year, Ahmad was one of the few students who consistently talked about his dislike of living in the city because of the crime and violence. However, almost all of his classmates were able to share things that they enjoyed about their blocks (nice people, kids playing outside and playing with their friends, riding their bikes, going to the park, trees, having barbeques, their neighborhoods; see Table 1), even those who pointed to violence and noise as challenges in the next question as things they wanted to change.

There were some children, such as Carlos, Tammy, Deana, and Shaneka, who had nothing but positive things to say about their neighborhood. They climb trees, jump on trampolines, and play outside with their friends. They feel "good" about their blocks and

each said they didn't want to change anything. In response to this poem, there was no overwhelming consensus either way about life in the neighborhood; the children shared multiple perspectives, the good and the bad. Even though they heard gun shots, saw drug dealers hanging out the park, and saw people in their neighborhood with bats and knives and wanted to change all of these things, including the loud noise, litter, smoking and cursing they witnessed in their neighborhoods, the children still wanted to go outside and play with their friends, still rode their bikes to the park and enjoyed time there with their friends and believed that their neighborhoods had good things and most of the people on their block were nice people. They saw beauty in the trees and flowers, loved seeing kids playing outside, and thought their blocks had fun in them and through the challenges experienced "ordinary" and "normal" experiences that could be found in childhoods in many other cities and surrounding suburbs.

Nonetheless, by the time we got to the poem, "What Is Life like in the 'Hood," the frustration about crime and the social disorder became more pronounced and shared by more of their classmates. The poem reads:

What is life like in the 'hood

You don't just hear music
you hear sirens too
cop cars and ambulances
screaming all the time
real loud at you.
What is life like in the 'hood

People walking everywhere
broken bottles in the stairs
crooked spray paint letters
on benches and buildings
and dog mess smell in the air

What is life like in the 'hood

In the summertime
Everyone hangs out
In front of the building
Playing cards and dominoes
And me and my cousin Tiffany
Put on a show – and she thinks
She's a magician doing rabbit tricks
With a hamster and I'm
Saying corny jokes and
Making funny voices
Like a comedian

What is life like in the 'hood

In the wintertime we wait
For Christmas to come and when
It snows we go to the little park
And make a snowman
And when we go home
I sit by the steam to warm my frozen hands up
And my mother brings me
Hot chocolate so I could
Watch my favorite cartoons (Medina, 2001, p. 5-6)

After reading the poem I told the class, "Now close your eyes and think of your neighborhood. Can you see your house or apartment? What is outside of it? What do you hear? What do you see?" After a few moments of their giggling and sneaking a peak at their friends to see if their eyes were closed, their faces began to soften as they thought about the questions. "Now open your eyes and open your journals and answer the questions on your handout," I said. The students were asked to describe what they see, hear, and smell in their neighborhoods and to explain how they felt about living in their neighborhoods.

More than half of the class, ten out of the 17, showed conflicted feelings towards their blocks in their responses. Again, they found fun and joy in living on their blocks as they had shared before and as Medina (2001) highlighted in the poem, but in the same

statements, they also expressed many more of their fears and shared the sights and sounds of violence, highlighting the constant presence of violence in their lives. For instance, José, "I play football in the hood. I see robins and cars. I hear noices [noises] like nooo and bang! I feel bad when something happens to some body. I be in my house playing video games and I hear noises that scare me." Ahmad shares he sees trees and hummingbirds, but also states, "I feel like I am going to die or get kidnapped." India says that her block smells "fresh" and that "the things I see on my block is clean things, planted flowers and old people." And while she shares "I don't hear nothing on my block" and that she feels safe, immediately after that she says, "and sometimes I hear gunshots around the corner." Or Maria, who like India initially says that she loves that it is quiet on her block and that kids play with her, who writes, "I see homeless people smelling like stinking garbage. I hear gunshots outside my window sometimes. Sometimes I want to leave my neighborhood just because of what happens and it makes me scared. One day someone stole my heater." Other students also write about hearing gunshots and cursing, seeing garbage, and being scared in their neighborhood. Malani wrote, "In my neighborhood you can smell rotting garbage. I see large trees. And I hear gunshots. I feel scared living in my neighborhood. I never liked living in my neighborhood." All of these experience show that even though the students can cite the good and talk about the things that they love, the violence and the challenges are real, and they are scary and something that these children are experiencing daily.

In *DeShawn Days*, Medina (2001), like Wyeth in *Something Beautiful* (2002), presents a multifaceted perspective of life "in the 'hood" through the eyes of DeShawn. He doesn't shy away from the negative, but also doesn't dwell in it. The same can be said

for the Walt Whitman students. Throughout the year, they shared both the good and bad about life in Camden, presenting a perspective that many outside of the city choose not to see or believe about Camden. There isn't all crime and violence and the children of the city express that. However, what cannot be cannot be overlooked is the level of violence that does exist in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

In talking about the violence and challenges that existed in their "'hoods," at times the children's words were matter of fact, lacking emotion and seemingly disconnected from their own lives, even though they were witnessing or experiencing violence often. But at other times, they clearly articulated their fears and anxieties about the violence in their neighborhoods, desperately wishing not only to change the conditions but to move out of Camden or even just out of the Walt Whitman neighborhood to get away from it. However, interwoven throughout their conversations about the violence, which some of the children did not seem to notice or discuss at all, they also shared the fun they had with their friends and families and pleasant times they experienced in their neighborhoods. The stories and experiences of the students highlight the complex reality of life in an inner city. By and large, the students did not dismiss the violence and social disorder that exists in the Walt Whitman neighborhood, but through their stories and experiences they showed that their lives were not all bad, which supports what Polivka et al. (1998) found in their research and is the perspective Medina (2001) and Wyeth (2002) wanted to encourage in their picturebooks.

In both *Something Beautiful* (2002) and *DeShawn Days* (2001) the authors present both the good and bad in the neighborhoods and encourage more nuanced thinking about

"inner cities" and those who live there. Through these books, Wyeth (2002) and Medina (2001), as African-American children's authors, follow in the thinking of Du Bois and others who aimed to present a more balanced look at the lives and experiences of African-Americans, one that "reflect[s] the simultaneous consciousness of pain and pleasure prevalent in Black life" (Sims Bishop, 2007, p.89). What this means in children's literature is that these books acknowledge and affirm the reality and experiences of not only the African-American children in Camden, who are in the majority, but I would argue all of the children in Camden, which is rare in mainstream children's books. These books allow the Walt Whitman children to see their lives reflected back at them, both the challenging aspects and the fun, but are also shown that they can be leaders and change agents in their communities. These books also present children who do not live in areas like Camden what reality is like for those who do, showing them some of the challenges but highlighting that life isn't all bad and that children in these areas experience some of the same childhood joys as kids in the suburbs or elsewhere.

As the school year progressed, students continued sharing nuanced and complex perspectives of their neighborhood, and unlike Ahmad and Malani, who seemed to have the most critical and unwaveringly negative view of their surroundings, most could find their "something beautiful" in their friends and family, in the birds and the trees, in the food and fun they experienced outside their houses. This reality on the part of the children showed that even in the midst of the challenges that exist in Camden, they still experienced "normal" aspects of childhood that many adults outside of the city don't believe exist. Understanding life in violent cities through children's own stories and

experiences is sorely missing in the research. Including their views provides a more nuanced perspective about life in high crime, urban communities than quantitative data on incidents of violence or markers of social disorders can provide.

Even though I was well aware of the level of crime and violence, it was still alarming to read the number of the children's responses that talked about hearing gunshots and how many of the children's lives had been impacted by gun violence. When reading the poem "When my Grandmother Died," in *DeShawn Days* (Medina, 2001, p. 23-24) close to half of the students wrote about having a family member who was shot to death. Coupled with the news reports of the rampant crime and violence in the Walt Whitman neighborhood, the accounts of these students show the intimate connection between their lives and violence in the community. While there is research to show that there is resiliency among youth who are exposed to chronic community violence and that living in such conditions doesn't necessarily have to be adversely impactful, there is more research that shows that living in such conditions does have a detrimental impact on children's behavior, mental health and academic achievement, which in turns impacts their adolescence and transition to adulthood. In order to ensure that these children are not desensitized to the violence and social disorder that exists around them, their normalization of these experiences needs to be disrupted, and the conditions that create the violence and social disorder in the first place must be changed. This should be the first priority. In thinking about what can be done, it cannot be forgotten that youth exist in and are impacted by the context of their multiple environments, and, as such, one cannot just focus on changing youth; rather, change must come to the systems of social relations

and institutional and societal infrastructures that influence their lives (McIntrye, 2000, p. 91)

However, focusing on what may be done in and through the schools may be more feasible than trying to consider how to change all of the social challenges that come with living in a high poverty neighborhood. Can conditions be created where youth can talk about their experiences with violence, have their thinking challenged about the role that the violence and social disorder plays in their lives (including helping them understand the structural reasons why these challenges exist) and be provided with the opportunity and support to develop and implement plans of action to address some of the challenges in their neighborhoods? If given more time in the school setting, I would have liked to expand my approach, moving towards a more participant action research model to do just that. I believe that African-American children's literature, or more broadly multicultural children's literature which focuses on not only informing but oftentimes includes calls for actions, can encourage youth to become agents of change for themselves and their communities. The adage "the children are our future" is true, and without working with poor, minority youth to help them to understand how their neighborhoods have come to be what they are and providing them with the knowledge, tools and support to serve as leaders in making change, the likelihood is that violence and social disorder in their neighborhoods will remain as these youths grow to become the adults in these communities.

CHAPTER 4

"I just want him to know I love him:" Exploring Fatherhood and Family Using the Works of Javaka Steptoe and Jacqueline Woodson

"GOOD MOR-NING Miss Watson" greeted me every day as I walked into the classroom. I began with the students on the second day of school and used the month of September to get to know the rhythm of the class, the students and their teacher, Ms. Washington. Ms. Washington is a young African-American woman in her early thirties, with cocoa colored skin and long black hair that is perfectly coifed and feathered. The principal, Mr. Devoe, raves that she is his best teacher in the school and every year almost all of her students pass the NJASK exam in language arts literacy, a rarity in the school district. When she speaks, her voice is high pitched, and she sounds more like a "Valley girl" than a girl from Brooklyn; there is no hint of her New York upbringing. She has taught in the school district for six years and when she arrived in Camden she said she really had no knowledge of the city and its history, only that people told her it was "bad." When we initially met over the summer 2012, she was welcoming and said that she looked forward to hearing what the students would share during my time with them because she did not use African-American children's literature in her classes while she taught, but did keep an array of such books in her classroom library for students to read during quiet reading times (see Appendix C).

"Today Ms. Watson is going to read you a book and she wants to know what you think about it, okay? Now all eyes and chairs face Ms. Watson." Ms. Washington primed the class before I got to the front of the room. I was anxious about what the reaction of the students would be or if they would even like the books I had selected. They were a talkative group in general and always well-mannered, so I hoped to get something out of

them, even though I had only been in the class with them for about a month. "Today we are going to read the book *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall: African Americans Celebrating Fathers,"* I told the class and asked if any had read the book while I held the cover up for them to see. One student faintly said yes, and others shook their heads no. Written in 1997, Javaka Steptoe's book provides colorful, textured illustrations made from collages to match poems celebrating Black fatherhood written by 11 different poets, including Sonia Sanchez, Josea Johnson and himself. The book has received wide acclaim, winning honors and accolades such as the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, an ALA Notable Book award, a *Parenting* magazine Magic Award, and a NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Children's Literature work finalist. "This innovative, stunningly illustrated picture book celebrates the role of fathers in the African-American experience," reads the review in the *School Library Journal* (Amsberry, 1998). "Libraries will want this title for Black History Month, National Poetry Month, Father's Day, or anytime a patron asks for a book about fathers" (Amsberry, 1998). Knowing the prevalence of female-headed households in the city, I chose this book hoping to begin a dialogue with the students about their family lives and their relationships with their fathers in particular. What I came to learn from the students after reading this book and *Visiting Day* by Jacqueline Woodson (2002), a book about a young girl visiting her father in prison, is that while these children certainly love their fathers, their relationships with them also caused them heartache due to the lack of time they were able to spend with them.

In this chapter, I will explore the complex and complicated relationships that the children of Ms. Washington's class share with their fathers. When statistics are discussed about the drastic increase of children born to unmarried mothers and the number of

female headed households (45% in Camden and 48% in the Walt Whitman

neighborhood) (CamConnect, Neighborhood Facts

http://www.camconnect.org/fact/map_neighborhood.html) there are stories and feelings

behind those numbers that are rarely heard: those of the children, how *they* feel about

their families, particularly, their fathers. While virtually all of the children professed deep

love for their fathers (both biological and stepfathers) and made certain to share publicly

how much they know their fathers love them, their feelings of love sat alongside their

feelings of anger, disappointment, longing, shame, sadness and loneliness in large part

because of the minimal contact they had with their fathers and the lack of their father's

presence in their lives.

Through what reader response theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1995) calls their "lived

through" experience, personal and intimate feelings about their fathers welled to the

surface while reading *In Daddy's Arms* and *Visiting Day*. The emotions came out not

only as they discussed these books as a class but even more so as they reflected on the

books when they wrote privately to me in their journals. The journal provided an outlet

for the students to share their most personal feelings, those that they consciously or

unconsciously felt were too private to share with the class. Over time and through mutual

trust being built among the students and with Ms. Washington and myself, the classroom

became a safe space for students to share openly about one of the most taboo subjects: the

incarceration of their fathers. The picturebooks served as the catalyst that launched the

students into emotional classroom discussions about how they felt about their fathers

being incarcerated. Using Rosenblatt's (2001) transactional reader response theory, I will

examine how the students' engagement with what Rosenblatt (2001) calls their

"aesthetic" responses to these books in particular show how African-American children's literature can be used as a tool with children, especially those in a city like Camden, to better understand some of the most personal details of their lives.

To provide a context for the feelings and emotions of the Walt Whitman children, I will begin this chapter by examining some of the notions and research related to Black fathers. I do this in part because the relationship between Black children and their fathers and how that relationship is analyzed and understood in the broader social context, is shaped by how Black men have been and are currently viewed as fathers and the role they play in the lives of their children. Since the mid-1960s, there has been much attention paid to the "crisis" of Black fatherhood and the impact of female-headed households on Black families and children, and the discourse has not been positive (Conner and White, 2011; Clayton, Mincy and Blackenhorn, 2003; McAdoo, 2002). "Deadbeat," "absentee," "baby maker" are all popular refrains used to describe African-American men who become fathers, rendering them oftentimes invisible, useless and non-existent in the lives of their children. However, contemporary research on black fathers, specifically research on low-income, non-residential fathers, a category into which many of the fathers of the Walt Whitman students would fall, has shown the opposite; contrary to popular opinion, even though these fathers are not in the home, they do love their children and are a presence in their lives, providing guidance, support and nurturing when they can (Choi & Jackson, 2012; Coley, 2001; Hamer, 1997; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004). What is missing from the understanding of these fathers' roles in their children's lives is how their children feel about their relationship. How much of a presence do these fathers have in the lives of their children? Are the children angry and disappointed about their

relationships with their fathers or do they feel loved and supported by their fathers regardless of their living situations? Or does the answer lie somewhere in between? These questions will be addressed in how the Walt Whitman school children discussed their fathers; however, I will argue that contemporary research on these fathers provides a limited perspective of their relationships with their children because the voices and experiences of their children are almost non-existent in the research.

I acknowledge that what I am presenting here is a limited view, but given the growing number of children—poor, African-American children especially—living in female-headed households, and the challenges that exist growing up in such a home, the stories of these children and children like them are sorely missing from the research related to Black fathers and fatherhood. It is my hope that this work begins to fill that gap and raises some questions that can be taken up in future areas of study.

The History and "Crisis" of Black Fatherhood

When considering the "traditional" role and image of American fatherhood, that of the breadwinner, disciplinarian and head of the household usually comes to mind. While the nature of families and the role of mothers and fathers have dramatically changed over the past 50 years, due in large part to societal shifts in gender norms and economic conditions, the role and image of the "Black father" has always been less than positive. Scholar Harriette McAdoo (2002) notes that Black fathers have been stereotyped as "a visitor to his family, underemployed, marginal to his family, inattentive to his children, rather violent, and plainly not in the picture" (p. 4). All in all, the "Black father" has frequently been viewed as useless and uncaring by the general public, public policy makers and even scholars.

In the 1965 report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," Daniel Patrick Moynihan offered a scathing critique of "the Black family" and Black men, putting absentee Black fathers at the core of the downfall of the Black family. Moynihan (1965) linked the demise of Black families to a "tangle of pathology" stemming from the absence of fathers in the home, which in turn led to the burgeoning of matriarchal households during the 1940s and 1950s, and proclaimed that, "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society, is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time" (Chapter II, The Negro Family, paragraph 1). In the report, Moynihan (1965) discussed the lack of education and employment suffered by Black men as significant obstacles impacting their abilities to be breadwinners and providers and acknowledged these lacks were due in large part to the long-term effects of slavery and discrimination. However, Moynihan (1965) and others in his report quickly moved away from these insights to lay the brunt of the challenges faced by Black men not on the structural and institutional racism that existed, but on Black women and their "emasculation" of Black men. Moynihan (1965) believed the rise of Black matriarchy brought on juvenile delinquency and crime in young Black men, began the cycle of dysfunction for Black families. Without a father in the home, adolescent male behavioral issues were said to go unchecked, leading to disruption in school, which in turn led to lower levels of academic achievement ultimately resulting in less opportunities for stable, well-paying employment, leaving them unable to contribute to a family (Moynihan, 1965). This led Black women to become better educated than Black men, giving them access to better

paying jobs that Moynihan (1965) and others like Whitney Young argued made the men feel inadequate and made Black women deem them irrelevant.

Whitney Young, a prominent African-American leader at the time who also served as one of the most influential directors of the National Urban League, believed this sense of inadequacy that some Black men felt came:

> Not because he is unlovable or unaffectionate, lacks intelligence or even a gray flannel suit. But in a society that measures a man by the size of his pay check, he doesn't stand very tall in a comparison with his white counterpart. To this situation he may react with withdrawal, bitterness toward society, aggression both within the family and racial group, self-hatred, or crime. Or he may escape through a number of avenues that help him to lose himself in fantasy or to compensate for his low status through a variety of exploits. (as cited in Moynihan, 1965, Chapter IV, The Tangle of Pathology, paragraph 35).

This retreat on the part of Black men was said to lead him to walk away from his family and, in doing so, to open the doors for social ills to run rampant in female-headed households (juvenile delinquency, youth dropping out school), a situation that caused Moynihan (1965) to firmly state, "Negro children without fathers flounder—and fail" (Chapter IV, Tangle of Pathology, paragraph 43). This report has played a key role in how Black families have been viewed and pathologized and decades later continues to be cited and revisited by scholars and advocates concerned about Black children, their families and the role of Black fathers (Acs, Braswell, Sorenson, & Turner, 2013). I too will return to this report later in the chapter.

It took quite some time for scholarship and research to begin to challenge public perceptions of Black fathers and to provide context for the refrain of the "absentee father." Prior to the 1980s, research on Black fathers ignored, grossly distorted or reinforced perceptions held by the dominant society about the parenting role of African-American men (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; McAdoo, 1988; Miranda, 1991). Using White, middle class and "mainstream" families as the norm, much of what emerged from the research on fatherhood until the mid-1990s viewed Black men from a deficit perspective, largely absent or on the periphery of the day-to-day lives of their children and families (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Miranda, 1991). Such studies failed to take into consideration that Black men have historically been denied the means and opportunity to function in the manner prescribed by the Western ideal of fatherhood (Hamer, 1997, p. 566). As racism and discrimination have been ongoing, Black men have always experienced higher rates of unemployment, poverty, morbidity, and imprisonment and less access to quality education than their White counterparts, all of which significantly impacts their ability to parent in the traditionally Western sense of being a provider and breadwinner (Cochran, 1997, p. 341). However, scholars have now begun to assess Black fatherhood from the social and cultural contexts within which Black men live and are beginning to show that fathers who are "nonresidential" or "noncustodial" are not necessarily non-participants in the nurturing, caretaking, and social and emotional development of their children; however, their participation in such activities does look different and has various impacts on the growth and development of their children (Choi & Jackson, 2012; Coley, 2001; Hamer, 1997; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004) .

How Fathers Matter

With the significant increase in the past five decades of the number of children born to non-married couples and being raised in single-parent, female-headed homes, there has been increased research on fathers, fatherhood and how fathers matter in general (Amato & Gilbrith, 1999; Coley, 2001; Marsiglio, Amato, Randal, & Lamb, 2000; Raeburn, 2014). While this research has not always included Black fathers, especially those who are low income and nonresidential, it has shown that greater interaction with fathers is significantly linked to decreases in delinquency and behavior problems and increases in cognitive development, educational attainment and psychological well -being (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Harris, Furstenberg & Marmer, 1998; Marsiglio, et al., 2000). In his book *Do Fathers Matter: What Science Is Telling Us about the Parent We've Overlooked*, Paul Raeburn (2014) looks at the growing research on fathers and shows that in ways big and small, fathers matter. From even before birth, the impact of the fathers' physical and emotional health can impact their children; obese fathers can impact the birth weight of their newborn (Raeburn, 2014, p. 116), and depression in fathers can lead to depression and behavioral problems (excessive newborn crying and fussiness) in children (Kvalevaag et al., 2013). In terms of cognitive and emotional development, fathers have been shown to have a greater impact on language development than mothers (Vernon-Feagens & Pacsofar, 2010) and when present in the home, their sensitivity, responsiveness and positive regard can boost children's intellectual development and decrease internalizing behaviors such as depression, fear, and self-doubt (Pougnet, Serbin, Stack, & Schwartzman, 2011).

As children get older (middle childhood into adolescence), positive encouragement by fathers is associated with better overall behaviors and good social

skills and also a better transition to school and positive relationships between children and their teachers, all things that encourage academic success (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2004). Specifically, fathers who play with their children, read to them, take them on outings and care for them also show fewer behavioral problems—they are less likely to smoke or engage in delinquent and criminal activity and are less depressed (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg 2008). However, children who grow up without fathers in the home have been shown to engage in increased drug and alcohol use; participate in unprotected sex, facing a higher likelihood of teenage pregnancy; experience cognitive challenges that impact their academic abilities; are less likely to graduate high school; and are more likely to be poor and live in higher crime areas (Brooks-Dunn, Duncan, and Maritato, 1997).

(In)visible Men: Research on Black Fathers and Fatherhood

Research is clear that having fathers present in the lives of their children matters; however, the research on low-income, non-residential Black fathers (like those of the Walt Whitman children) and their particular perspectives and impact is limited. In the studies that do exist, researchers have found that contrary to popular belief, these fathers are oftentimes present in the lives of their children (Choi & Jackson, 2012; Coley, 2001; Hamer, 1997; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004), but the dynamics of their relationships and the impact of their interactions are not well understood (King & Sobolewki, 2006). What is known, however, is that the relationship these fathers have with their children is most impacted by the social and economic challenges they face as Black men. Unemployment, underemployment, lack of an education—all of these things are significant hurdles for managing their own lives and in turn impact their ability to be financial providers, one of

the most important responsibilities, for their children (Acs et al., 2013; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; King et al., 2004). The challenges that Furstenberg (1995) highlighted still ring true today:

> The dilemma for African-American men is how to overcome the structural and institutional barriers that inhibit landing, keeping, and being promoted on jobs that pay the kinds of wages that can support a family (so that he can be the financial provider). Ethnographical research suggests that for many young inner city African-American fathers, even strong motivation to provide for or "do for" their children is difficult to sustain when fathers face bleak employment prospects because of a dearth of jobs combined with inadequate educational preparation in ghetto schools. (as cited in Connors & White, 2006, p. 9).

Even though the research above discusses how these fathers are engaged with their children, as well as issues and challenges that impact their ability to parent and some of the outcomes of their children's development based on their presence or lack thereof, the voices of the actual fathers and their thoughts on fathering are rarely heard in the research. In the article "The Fathers of 'Fatherless' Black Children," Hamer (1997) presents results from one of the few qualitative studies focused on how Black men, in their own words, speak about their roles as fathers, sharing what they feel are the most important responsibilities of a father and discussing the types of relationships they have and would like to have with their children. While the article is dated, I will spend some time discussing it because I feel it is important for two reasons: first, it presents the voices of fathers directly, and what they say can be matched up with more recent research focused on the actions and behaviors of this same type of fathers; secondly, the thoughts

and feelings expressed by these fathers can be looked at in comparison to the sentiments expressed later on in the chapter by Walt Whitman children about their relationship with their fathers.

Hamer's (1997) qualitative study focused on the perspectives of 38 nonresidential and noncustodial Black fathers, ranging in ages from 25 to 34. Hamer (1997) found that the men believed that as fathers their most important role was as caregivers—spending time with their children, providing them emotional support, teaching the boys how to be men and the girls to be young ladies—followed by serving as role models and acting as disciplinarians, with providing economic support as the least important. They felt that the one thing mothers could not do was take the place of a male influence (Hamer, 1997, p. 574-75), but that providing economic support for basic necessities such as housing, food, clothing and money was something the mothers could (and if necessary would) provide without their help, through their family and/or social network, public assistance, their own earnings, etc. Research has shown that Black men's ability to be financial providers for their families, one of the ways they can most directly impact the well-being of their children, is significantly impacted by the challenges they face in finding and keeping a stable, well-paying job (Choi & Jackson, 2012; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; King et al., 2004).

Many of these men did not grow up with their own fathers in the home, or if they did, they did not spend a lot of time with them, so spending time with their children and being present in any way in the lives of their children meant a great deal. One father said:

> See, my father didn't do for me what fathers are supposed to do—take me to the
>
> park, teach me how to shoot hoops—little things. It was always momma … It hurt

but at the same time it didn't 'cause that's jus' the way it was. But I don't want to

be that kinda father to my children. That's why I say it's important to spend as

much time as possible doin' the things that other fathers that live with their kids

take for granted. (Hamer, 1997, p. 569).

Even though spending time and being present was what these men felt was the most

important function a father could perform for his children, it didn't necessarily mean they

spent a significant amount of time with their children. Twenty-six percent said they

visited with their children weekly, twenty-nine percent said bi-weekly and 26% said on a

daily basis, with the rest only seeing their children once a month or less (Hamer, 1997, p.

570). Subsequent research has shown that while these fathers do have good intentions,

only half of nonresidential Black fathers have regular contact (multiple times a week)

with their children during the first few years after their birth and that time spent with their

children decreases as they get older (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). While some of this

disconnect can be attributed to their not having employment and potential shame of not

providing financially for their families keeping them away, the second most important

determinant of whether Black fathers will have a significant relationship with their

children is based on the quality of the relationship with the mother (Choi & Jackson,

2012; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Nelson, Edin, & Clampet-Lundquist, 1999). How

well the couple knows each other, how well they get along and the emotional support the

mother feels while pregnant prior to the child's being born and when the child arrives—

all of these factors significantly impact the amount of time that non-residential Black

fathers spend with their children. Oftentimes mothers block access to the children for a

variety of reasons: if the status of her relationship with the father changes, if he fathers

other children with other women, issues of domestic violence, or if she feels he has not adequately provided financial support (Coley & Chase-Landsale, 1999; Nelson et al., 1999). Geographic distance and time are also reasons fathers give for not spending more time with their children.

Hamer (1997) found that the fathers in her study used "spending time" as catch-all phrase primarily meaning that they simply wanted to be physically near their children and make themselves present in their lives (p. 569). They did not speak of spending time necessarily with a particular activity in mind; it could have meant talking to their children on the telephone, playing basketball, taking them to the park or the mall, sitting in the house watching television or playing video games, mainly recreational and social activities (Hamer, 1997, p. 569). More recent research suggests that more intensive types of involvement beyond mere contact and recreational activities, which are the activities that most low-income, non-residential fathers participate in, are most important for child development (Amato & Gilbrith, 1999). King et al. (1999) found that when non-residential Black fathers were present in the lives of the children, the activities that Hamer's (1997) participants described were the types of activities that they did participate in with their children, but, more importantly, they also helped their children with their school work, talked to their children about growing up in general, helped them with problems they may be facing and attended church with them. Overall, these fathers actively participated in the care and nurturing of their children, engaging in higher quality relationships that promoted the type of closeness and being present that has the most positive impact on their children's well-being (Amato & Gilbrith, 1999; Choi and Jackson, 2012; King & Sobolewski, 2008; Marsiglio et al., 2000).

In sum, this research shows that while there are challenges that impact the ability of low-income, nonresidential fathers to parent, when they are present and engage in high impact activities, they can have a positive impact on the lives of their children. However, research has also shown that there is a disconnect between what the fathers say is important and how they actually parent their children, with the types of relationships they have with their children not necessarily being the most meaningful for the child's overall well-being. Yet, it is hard to make broad assumptions based on this research because just as this research is limited in the breadth and range of topics to be explored as it relates to these fathers, it is also limited in providing a fuller account of these fathers' relationships with their children because the voices of their children are largely absent from the conversation.

Where Are the Children's Voices?

All of the scholars above urge for more research to be done on Black fathers, not just on those who don't live in the home or those who don't see their children often, but also on those who do reside with their children and are married to their mothers. The whole range of experiences and circumstances of Black fathers and fatherhood needs to be explored more fully. While some say that there has been steady but slow progress in this area, others contend that the social science literature on African-American fathers still remains unbalanced and incomplete (Roopnarine, 2004, p. 60). Instead of simply or solely focusing on the statistics of Black men (incarceration rates, children born out of wedlock, etc.) and the viewpoint of the mothers, researchers, as was true of the men in Hamer's (1997) study, agree that more qualitative work needs to be done because pure survey data does not capture the complexity and nuances of their relationships with their

children (Cochran, 1997, p. 347). Additionally, even though there is more research on mother child/relationships, there is also a need for more research from the perspective of mothers and caregivers about the quality and types of relationships that exist between children and their non-custodial/non-residential fathers (Roopnarine, 2004). Having additional insight from fathers' perspectives would allow for greater understanding of the entirety of the relationships these men have with their children.

There are several studies that ask African-American teens, primarily those from low-income backgrounds, to discuss their relationship with their "absent" fathers (Chadiha & Danzinger 1995; Cochran, 1992; Dawsey, 1996; Way & Stauber, 1996). These studies are dated, but in all of them, the youth speak about their complicated and emotional relationships with their fathers. While many of them share that they love their fathers, they also discuss their sadness and frustration about the quality of their relationships, often due to the lack of or limited presence of their fathers in their lives. However, studies that focus on the voices and experiences of African-American or minority children under the age of 12 do not seem to exist. This is a significant gap in the literature, which I believe presents an incomplete understanding not only of the role that nonresidential, low income Black fathers play in the lives of their young children, but also how these children actually feel about their relationships with their fathers. Most of the studies that exist present the parent or caretaker side of the parent/child relationship, and when the children are included, they are observed in relation to their parents and not spoken to directly about the nuance of their relationships. In the meta-analysis by Amato & Gilbrith (1999), many of the findings address the sense of connectedness the children feel with their nonresidential fathers; while useful, the findings come from the

perspective of White children in the U.K. or White children in the U.S. whose parents are divorced or separated. This reality does not necessarily reflect American Black children's experiences. With 72% of Black children born out of wedlock and the number of Black female-headed household rising from 20% in 1960 to 53% in 2010 (Acs, et al., 2013), hearing the voices and understanding the feelings and experiences of Black children in these families is crucially important to have research address. To shed light on the perspectives of children, I now turn to the students of the Walt Whitman School to explore their experiences and feelings about their fathers.

"I just miss him so much": Love and Longing in Response to Javaka Steptoe's *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall: African-Americans Celebrating Fathers (1997)*

"So from the title what do you think the book is about?" I asked during the first class I taught with the students. "I think that the story is about the little boy who loves his dad, he loves his dad," said José, while others took the title more literally and thought the book was about the little boy who was pictured on the cover in the arms of a man, growing up to be tall. Once we established that the book is about the relationship between fathers and their children, I asked the class what is special about a dad. "That they'll always love you and they'll never forget you," says one student. After some additional responses, I read the opening poem by Folami Adiabe, "In daddy's arms":

> in daddy's arms I am tall
> & close to the sun & warm
> in daddy's arms
>
> in daddy's arms
> i can see over the fence out back
> i can touch the bottom leaves of the big magnolia tree
> in Cousin Sukie's yard
> in daddy's arms

in my daddy's arms the moon is close
closer at night times when I can almost touch it
when it grins back at me from the wide twinkling skies

in daddy's arms I am tall
taller than Benny & my friends Ade and George
taller than Uncle Billy
& best of all
i am eye-ball-even-steven with my big brother Jamal

in my daddy's arms
i am strong & dark like him & laughing
happier than the circus clowns
with red painted grins
when daddy spins me round & round
& the whole world is crazy upside down
i am big and strong & proud like him
in daddy's arms
my daddy (p. 4)

The illustration that accompanies the poem is one of a father smiling fondly at his son as he holds him high in the air. The son is smiling too, with his eyes closed tightly and his white teeth gleaming, looking joyful at being in the arms of his father. After reading the poem, I asked the students what they thought about the poem and several said they thought the boy narrating the poem loves his daddy very much because of the many times he mentions the name "daddy" and that they think that is "sweet," while others think the poem is about the little boy wishing to be taller than his father or believing that the boy will grow taller every time he hugs his father. I did not judge their answers, or correct them; rather, I let them share their thoughts and opinions and ask follow-up questions based on their responses to try and get a better sense of their thought processes and also provide every student the opportunity to speak if they have something to say. After all of the children have spoken, I then move on to asking them what about this poem reminds them of times they shared with their fathers. With that, each student begins telling stories of their fathers holding them when they were a baby, coming home from work and

hugging them, making breakfast for them, playfully putting their faces in birthday cake and throwing them up in the air and catching them. As I went around the room, many of students shared some of the exact same experiences as their classmates, shouting "my dad did that too!" with only slight differences as they shared their version of the memory. Some of them said that the experiences were from when they were toddlers so I kept asking them if they actually remembered these things happening or if someone told them about them and each said, no, they were experiences they remembered happening with their fathers. Since all of the stories were so similar, I remember not being sure what to think. Did all of these experiences happen, or is this what students think they should be doing with their fathers? Are they just restating the stories of their classmates, or even just trying to one up each other? With such similarities in their stories, it is hard to tell, but what they presented were fairly common, warm experiences that children share with their parents, so I believed them. "This reminds me of the times when last year I was going to school and I woke up and I went downstairs and my dad was right there and he picked me up and then that's when he put me down and he walked me to the store and brought me like everything I wanted," says José. "Everything?" another kid in the class asks, slightly challenging José. Ms. Washington and I both looked at each other skeptically, but José said, no, it really did happen. "And he brought you everything you wanted," I asked, and José said no, not everything, "but the stuff I wanted." When I tried to ask him why his dad did this, and if his father did this type of thing often, José just smiled and shook his head yes. Ahmad, laughing, follows up José's story with, "Last Saturday when my dad picked me up and he threw me up, he caught me then he threw me up again and I hit my head on the fan!" Ahmad is tall, a solid eight-year-old. I'm not sure

if this is true, but he is smiling and his classmates are laughing, and he too swears it is real.

As the kids continue to laugh, I remind them that not everyone lives with his or her father and ask them how would a friend of theirs or someone their age feel if unable to see or live with their fathers. As soon as I finished the statement, Ahmad says in a low voice, "well [long pause], sometimes I feel unsafe without my dad" and when I ask him why, he says it is because he doesn't have him around and only gets to see him on Saturdays. Ms. Washington lets out a sigh, "oh my little Ahmad." After Ahmad, other students begin to share how they think others would feel, "I think they would probably feel sad if their dad wasn't around them when they was a baby, if they didn't have fun with them when they was a baby if he wasn't around," says José, and then the other kids chime in that they too think others would feel sad and disappointed; then Juan says "maybe their fathers left because their dad's didn't love them anymore." The room gets quiet, only for a few seconds, but it feels longer; none of the children speaks. Then another student, Diana, begins:

Diana: I have something

Me: Okay

Diana: Yesterday I felt sad because my dad is in jail. [the entire class gasps loudly]

Me: Okay.

Diana: My stepdad.

Me: Your dad or your step-dad?

Diana: My step-dad.

Me: Your step-dad.

Diana: My real dad lives in Florida.

Me: Okay, well I can see how that would make a lot of people feel sad that their dad wasn't with them. Thank you for sharing.

Ahmad: [whispers, barely audible] My dad is in jail too.

Unidentified student: Mine too.

Malani: I can't believe she said that.

I thank the kids for sharing and then move on, but I was surprised that on this first day of my teaching, the students would share such personal information out loud. Malani was also surprised and scowled at Diana, who was sitting across from her, and at me for the rest of the class. After thanking the students for sharing, I moved on to the next few poems, "Tickle Tickle," by Dakari Hru which talks about children playing with their fathers and "My granddaddy is my daddy too," by Dinah Johnson which talks about grandfathers raising their grandchildren, which brought up fond stories of the kids going with their grandfathers to baseball games and fishing. The last poem we read was "Promises," by David A. Anderson which is about a son apologizing to his father for not doing what he is supposed to do. The poem reads:

> Dear Daddy,
> I'm sorry I did not do what you told me to do.
> If I do better
> Can I still be your little boy?
>
> Dear Son,
> You will be
> My little boy
> For all of your little boy days
> And when
> You are no longer a little boy
> I will still be your daddy (p.19).

The poem is gentle and endearing and so is the illustration. The white text of the poem is written against a muted red background and on the opposite page is an image of a little Black boy hugging his Black father tightly, grasping him with both hands with his head curled under his father's neck. There are no facial expressions on the boy or his father, but the simple lines of their faces and blue background create a warm embrace. "So what do you think?" I ask the class. "This make me think of the time when I wrote my dad because he still in the hospital because he got brain cancer and chemo and I wrote him and he said he would get out and come see me sometimes soon," said Tammy. Her voice is quiet and low. I asked was her father feeling better, and she said yes, but her face was sad. "This reminds me of the last time I seen my dad," says José, "when I was ya know about seven and I went over his house with my mom and we had a fun time." José goes on to share that he hasn't seen since father since then, which was last year, and this makes me think back to his earlier comments about his father taking him to the store and buying him whatever he wanted. I wondered if that was the last time he saw his father. Again, I was surprised at the willingness of the kids to be so open and honest with their feelings, especially since this was the very first time I had even spoken to many of them. None of the kids laughed or teased when others spoke about their feelings; for most of the class, the kids were extremely quiet, allowing everyone to speak without talking over each other. Throughout the rest of the class, all of the students shared positive and loving stories of their fathers, more memories of birthday parties and warm embraces, gifts and trips with dad to visit family members or amusement parks. It wasn't until I began to read their journal responses that I really began to realize how many of them did not actually live with their fathers and longed to have better relationships with them.

For this first journal assignment, I asked the students to write five words about how they feel about their father or grandfather after we finished *In Daddy's Arms* and most of their responses were quite moving. Out of 20 students in class that day, 11 wrote that they feel "sad" as it related to their fathers, many saying because they don't get to see their fathers as often as they would like. Ahmad, who shared in the class that his father doesn't live with him, wrote "happy, missed, disappointed, sad, loved, cry," and many of the other students shared the same sentiments:

"I am sad that I got to see my dad on the weekings [weekends]. But I am stile [still] happy to see him. Me and I my dad stil [still] have fun. We have a happy family and I love my dad so much." [Jason]

"I think that my dad loves me in his heart. My dad will come out of jail. I feel so bad that my dad is in jail. I will get a lot of money so I can get my dad out of jail. So my dad can get my mom out of jail." [Eric]

"I am sad because I don't know my father. I know his name. My dad left when I was 1 (one) years old, my mom told me my dad left. But even though I don't know him its fine." [Maria]

"When my dad was in jail I was crying because mostly I don't get to see my dad. This reminds me of my dad said he loved me to the bottom of his heart." [India]

"I feel sad because I don't see him a lot. Excited when I get to go with him to see the baby. I feel upset because I really miss him. I feel sad because I moving and I won' get to see him." [Erika]

"I'm mad because my dad don't live with me. I feel sad because I see him on weekend. Loved. Happy. I feel happy because he love me and I love him." [Tammy]

"I felt happy in my dad's arms. I felt sad because my dad was in jail. I felt loved because my dad was nice." [Deanna]

"My dad gave me everything I wanted from the store. My dad never hit me. I love my dad. I seen my dad five times in my life. My dad was their when I wanted him to be." [José]

Even though the purpose of the book is to celebrate Black fathers and fatherhood, with each poem and illustration paying tribute to the strength, love, and presence of Black men in the lives of their children and their families, for the Walt Whitman children, these poems also brought to mind feelings of longing and sadness about their relationships with their fathers. There was no mention in any of the poems about fathers not being present in their children's lives or how children may feel about not having their fathers around, but the four poems shared in class brought up these emotions without prompting.

Louise Rosenblatt (2001) argues that when readers engage aesthetically with texts they draw on their reservoir of past experiences with people and the world and that the words of a story can stir up feelings and emotions from the personal lived experience of the reader that shape how they will respond to the text (p. 270). If we apply this theory to the Steptoe's (1997) poetry, we see that even though he only focused on the positive experiences with fathers, the lived experiences of these children are built on a broader range of interactions with their fathers that generated a broader range of emotions later reflected in their writings. Rosenblatt (2001) goes on to state that when a book resonates

with the reader, the attention of the reader shifts inward while they are reading, allowing a much broader range of ideas and emotions to rise into consciousness "not simply the abstract concepts that the words point to, but also what those objects or referents stir up of personal feelings, ideas and attitudes" (p. 269). In other words, although Steptoe's (1997) poems point to warm and positive experiences with fathers, each child brought his/her own personal stories to the text, stories that have been shaped by only seeing a father on the weekend, if at all, stories that include fathers being in jail, stories that are tinged with hurt, frustration and sadness. By the very nature of the book, Steptoe (1997) is asking readers to reflect on their own feelings and experiences with their fathers, and by doing so, the personal story is going to be much more complex than what Steptoe (1997) presents. It is clear that with these poems Steptoe (1997) is presenting a counter narrative to common perceptions of Black fathers as deadbeats and absentee, but the poems also serve as a bridge to more complex stories from the children. In reality, more than half of Black children in the U.S. are not growing up in homes with their fathers (Acs et al., 2013) and the same holds true for the Walt Whitman students. For them, regardless of how positive the relationship may be when they are with their fathers, the feelings and reality of children growing up without their fathers in their home or as a consistent presence in their lives are much more complicated than what Steptoe (1997) presents, and that is what is being raised to consciousness and shared by the Walt Whitman children.

As the students left for lunch at the end of class, Ms. Washington asked me if I heard what Malani said earlier, and I hadn't because I was so focused on listening to Diana and Ahmad. She told me Malani's comment (and I later heard it on my audio tape

of the class) and said that Malani probably felt that sharing that your father was in jail was too private to be shared amongst the class. Maybe it was that the students agreed, because outside of the comments made by Ahmad, Diana and José, the majority of what was shared during the classroom discussion were positive and loving stories of the students' interactions with their fathers. Consciously or unconsciously, the students did not wish to expose their less than positive feelings about their fathers out loud with the class. Did they feel it is unkind to speak less than lovingly about their fathers in public? Or did believe they would be judged or teased if they shared their true feelings with their peers, leading them to only share the good times and the joyful moments out loud in class? It is hard to know the answers to these questions, but it is clear from the responses above that the journal provided the students a space to share deeply and personally about their conflicted emotions and feelings. (Malani didn't write anything that day and for several weeks after didn't speak when I was teaching or write in her journal. It's hard to know why).

On our first day of class, I told the students that the only person who would read the journals would be me and that I would not share the information in the journal with anyone unless they wrote that someone had hurt them or that they were going to hurt someone else, and all of the students said okay or nodded in understanding. As I would come to learn later, many of the children actually wanted to share their thoughts and feelings with me, Ms. Washington and their classmates because they said they wanted those around them to know just how they were feeling, and for their peers especially to know that they were not alone and that they too experienced some of the same feelings and family circumstances as they did.

Even though some of their students did not live with their fathers or see them as much as they wanted (six students revealed that their fathers were either in jail currently or had been in jail), they wanted to make clear that they loved their fathers and believed that their fathers loved them. However, their feelings were complicated, as in the statements by Ahmad, José and Tammy; they might be sad or mad that he isn't around, but they loved their fathers and expressed their feelings of love alongside their feelings of disappointment and hurt. I believe these stories and feelings provide a more nuanced perspective of the impact of "absentee" fathers and how the children themselves feel about their fathers. While Black fathers in the research stated that they desired to spend more time with their children and felt spending time and providing emotional support were two of the most important aspects of being a father, the fathers of the Walt Whitman students do not seem to be a consistent presence in the lives of their children. Or if these fathers are seeing their children once a week or are absent for whatever reasons (distance, mother keeping them away, incarceration), the feelings expressed by the Walt Whitman students show that they would like to have their fathers play a greater role in their lives and if they were asked would probably share exactly how they would like their fathers to do so. Certainly if the fathers are not good people, then their relationship with their children should be reconsidered; however, both fathers and mothers may need to better understand the thoughts and opinions of their children as it relates to their relationship with their fathers and take them more seriously when considering the relationship children should have with their fathers.

From my brief engagement with the students, reading and discussing these four poems about fathers, and by asking them to simply write how they feel about their

fathers, I was able to learn more than Ms. Washington said she had ever learned about the students in her class. My very first class with the students was far more revealing than I had anticipated and provided a glimpse of understanding into how these children felt about not having their fathers more present in their lives.

Sharing Secrets, Sharing Hurts: Talking about Fathers' Incarceration in Jacqueline Woodson's *Visiting Day* (2002)

When I chose the book *Visiting Day* (2002), written by Jacqueline Woodson and illustrated by James Ransome, a story about a young girl going to visit her father in jail with her grandmother, I thought that some of the students might be able to relate, but was taken by surprise when almost the entire class of students began to share stories about their fathers or stepfathers being incarcerated. Even though I had chosen this book specifically because I wanted to hear if students had fathers in jail or prison and, if so, how they felt about it, I was extremely anxious about teaching it. This was the only time during the school year that I was hesitant and began to wonder if I was prying too much into the personal lives of the students and concerned of the impact if they or their parents felt that I was. At the end of each class, I would pick a student to choose the book we would use the following week. I would have several books available from the list of all of the books I wanted to use throughout the school year, and I would call one student up to the front of the class who had either been thoughtful that day or well-behaved and would have him/her select one book, as classmates lobbied for the book they wanted selected from their seats. Doing this provided an opportunity to allow the students to have some input into the direction of the class. Diana chose this book about a month after we read *In Daddy's Arms* (1997) and when I asked her why she chose the book, she said it was

because she had read it before. *Visiting Day* was published in 2002, and Woodson said she wrote it because as a child she remembers visiting her favorite uncle in prison and while the book is not autobiographical, she says there is a lot of her it in ("Books of Children and Young Adults" *Jacqueline Woodson website).* The same holds true for the illustrator, James Ransome, who remembered visiting his brother in prison when he was younger (Wilde, 2002).

Without knowing the backstory of the book, one would not be able to tell from the initial prose and illustrations where grandma and the young girl are going so early in the morning. The book begins, "Only on Visiting Day is there chicken frying in the kitchen at 6 a.m. and Grandma humming soft and low, smiling her secret just-for-daddy-and-me-smile, and me lying in bed smiling my just-for-Grandma-and-Daddy-smile" (Woodson, 2002, p. 1). When I ask the students where the grandma and little girl are going, only Diana keeps saying that they are visiting the father in jail, which upsets the rest of the class who respond with gasps of shock each time she says it. Some students say they are visiting the father in the military, a thought that many hold onto throughout reading the entire book, and others aren't quite sure, maybe the father lives in a different house or maybe they are visiting him at work they say, but none believes Diana that the book is about visiting a father in jail. As the book goes on, one sees the young girl and her grandmother board a bus full of women, where they are "passing around fried chicken, cornbread, and thick slices of sweet potato pie" (p. 18) to each other on the bus. When I get to the page that reads "but instead, I go to sleep and don't wake up again until the bus pulls up in front of the big old building where, as grandma puts it, 'daddy doing a little time,' " (p. 19) the image is of a charter bus pulling in front of a brown building with a

watch tower and barbed wire fencing surrounding the top of the building. One student says:

> **Student 1:** Doing time in what?
>
> **Student 2:** Maybe he works there.
>
> **Student 1:** Time in jail?
>
> **Student 3:** He's in the military.
>
> **Me:** So where do you think he is doing time?
>
> **Student 3:** In the military.
>
> **Student 3:** The military is like jail.
>
> **Student 4:** It's a school.

After some additional back and forth, the kids continue to think that the father is in the military, many believing this because they said they have either been to military bases or seen military bases on television and in movies and they have barbed wire around them. The kids also think it is the military from the image on the previous page of the father getting ready for the visit. The father is buttoning up his khaki shirt, which matches his khaki pants, and there is a man in the background wearing the same exact attire and the kids say that only men in the military wear the same exact clothes. Up until this point in the story, I believe both Woodson and Ransome (2002) purposely leave out any indication as to where the child and grandmother are going and leave it vague as a way of engaging the children reading the book in conversations about different possibilities as to where they are headed. As the father is getting ready for the visit, there are pictures on his wall, which look to be drawn by his daughter and photographs of her next to a calendar that is counting down the days that have passed. Nothing about the illustration suggests

the father is locked up; there are no bars or jail cells, no common images of prison life. The kids questioned why there was another guy in the room with him that was also dressed like the father but came to believe that he was a roommate and seemed comfortable with that answer.

Once the grandma and daughter arrive inside the facility and are in the waiting room with the other men—all wearing the same exact outfits—visiting with their families, the majority of the class still believed that the father was in the military and continued to vigorously debate it as they analyzed the image. "Who are those other people in the room?" I ask, and the students said they believed they are either friends or co-workers or maybe even this is a family reunion, even though to that idea one student responded: "I'm saying, they would have had some food." This is one of the few times throughout all of our book readings that the students are truly engaging with the book as children's authors and illustrators of picturebooks and scholars suggest they will: using the images in connection with the text in an attempt to make better sense of the story (Arzipe & Styles, 2002; Hunt 2005; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000, Nodelman, 1988).

"A picture book is text, illustrations, total design…. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words," says Bader (1976), author of *American Picturebooks: From Noah's Ark to the Beast Within*. Other scholars agree (Arzipe & Styles, 2002; Hunt 2005; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000), including Perry Nodelman (1988) who states, "placing them [text and image]into relationship with each other inevitably changes the meaning of both, so that good picturebooks as a whole are a richer experience than just the simple sum of their parts" (p. 24). In this book in particular, as with many of Woodson's books, the story is *in* the marrying of the text and the

illustrations—one cannot stand without the other. As the end of the book nears, one of the last images is of the little girl getting ready to leave her father. In the two-page spread illustration, the little girl is on the left side of the image, holding the hand of the grandmother, who is not shown in the frame, and looking back longingly at her father as he is turning around to follow another man dressed just like him out of the room. What finally makes the children realize that the father is in jail is the other man in the image; he is wearing a blue guard uniform, with a hat and a badge, and standing with his hands clasped behind his back and eyes forward as if he is watching over the room. A round of "OH!" erupts in the class as I read the text that accompanies the illustration; "Grandma says it's not forever going to be like this," (p. 23) and the kids see this illustration. The kids begin to talk:

Diana: I told you he in jail for things he did!

Me: Ok, you think he's been arrested for doing something that he did? OK.

Erika: He probably in jail because he probably did something that he didn't have no business doing.

Me: OK.

Brianna: I think he in jail because he did something wrong.

Carlos: I think in jail because someone framed him.

Me: Explain that Carlos, what do you mean?

Carlos: Frame means when somebody did it but they blame it on someone else

Diana: I think that Maya's dad had matches and he had fire on it, and he threw it into a building, and it burned down.

Me: These are all interesting. José.

José: Probably somebody plant something in his pocket.

Me: Why do you think these things happened? Why are you making these assumptions? By just looking at the picture?

Multiple students: Yes.

The range of comments the students had as to why they thought the dad is in jail was interesting. Throughout the book, Woodson (2002) does not specifically refer to the father being in jail nor make judgments about his being there. In illustrating the grandmother's house, Ransome highlights pictures of the father on her mantle, showing the grandmother's love for her son. Ransome's illustration of the father is of a handsome well-kept man; his hair and mustache are neat, and he has kind and warm eyes; he does not look like a "criminal," but either through television or movies or from real life experiences, the kids have an understanding as to why men go to jail and some rather worldly and critical thoughts about it. Except for Diana who read the book before and knew where the father was, the students seemed genuinely surprised that the father was in prison. Knowing now how many of them had fathers who are or were incarcerated, there could have been a couple things at play as to why the reveal in the final scene was so shocking to them. The only indication that Ransome provides that the father is in jail prior to the last scene is the image showing the daughter and grandmother arriving to the jail with the barbed wire covering the walls and the watch tower prominent. Maybe the students had not been to a jail to see the outside of it themselves so this image didn't convey an image of jail to them. The students do understand the concept of jail, but maybe because of the taboo nature of the topic, they didn't want to let on that they know

in class. Or maybe the students simply did not think of jail at all because they didn't expect a children's book to cover such a topic.

As the grandmother and child are returning home the daughter says, "She says, one day, we'll be able to wake up and have Daddy right there in our house again, and we won't have to take long bus rides once a month and walk home from the bus stop hand in hand, feeling a little sad, already starting to miss Daddy" (p. 25). As I get the last words out of my mouth I hear:

Tammy: That's how I felt when my dad was in jail.

Me: Say that again.

Tammy: That's how I felt when my dad was in jail.

Me: That's how you felt? You were sad? OK.

India: When my dad was in jail and I was crying.

Me: You were crying? It's sad. It's sad when that happens, and you're separated.

Erika: When my dad was in jail, I missed him.

Me: You missed him?

Diana: When my dad was in jail, I was crying. When my dad was in jail, I was throwing everything around.

Me: So you were really upset? No. We're going to be respectful [the kids were all beginning to raise their hands wanting to talk] and let everybody speak. I'm sorry. Did you have something to say? José?

José: Be respectful.

Me: Thank you. José?

José: When my dad was in jail serving time, I was just mad.

Me: You were just mad?

Brianna: Does it have to be about jail?

Me: It doesn't have to be about jail. I'll get to the two of you. Could you put your hand down? Imani, could you be quiet, please? Yes.

Me: Yes. It doesn't have to be about jail. OK. Akeem?

Akeem: When my dad …

Akeem: When my dad was in the military, I was really sad because we were separated. OK.

Me: OK. Imani?

Imani: My dad is in jail and I went to visit him.

Me: Go ahead.

Imani: I went to visit him on Saturday. And he started crying because he don't come home until two more years.

Me: OK. Diana.

Diana: When my dad was in jail and he sent me a birthday mail. He said happy birthday. He loved me. And he sent my mom one. And I said, Mom, I really miss my dad. I was crying and my dad went to my mom and he said that he love her too.

Khadijah: And my dad was in the hospital because something happened at work. So I wrote my dad a letter and he sent me a letter back and he said, thank you.

Me: OK.

Erika: When it was my birthday, my dad sent me a letter, and he gave me $20 on my birthday. And he bought me a puppy. That's nice.

Erika: And a cake.

Me: OK. Then we're going to talk about this, and we're going to move on.

Brianna: When my dad was in the hospital, I was really sad because my dad got lung cancer.

Me: OK. So a lot of you can understand why she was so sad, why her and her grandmom were so sad when they were leaving that day.

One after the other, the students began sharing about their fathers being in jail and how they felt about it. As *In Daddy's Arms (2001)*, the topic of this book encouraged the students to bring their own experiences to the reading of the book, without my asking them specifically about their fathers being in jail. They seemed to feel much more comfortable sharing with the entire class about what is considered a highly taboo topic after listening to *Visiting Day* versus when we read *In Daddy's Arms* a month prior, even for those like Brianna, Khadijah and Akeem, who just wanted to share their very personal thoughts and feelings in general about their fathers. I believe some trust had been built in the class in order for the students to feel comfortable enough to share this information about their families, but I would also argue that using a book in class that focuses on parental incarceration allowed students to feel safe enough to share their stories, since social stigma and shame normally keep this type of knowledge out of public view.

I think one of the main reasons the children felt more free to discuss that their fathers were in jail and how they felt about it publicly was because Woodson and Ransome (2002) not only opened the door to having this conversation with the content of the book, but also because they present the father's incarceration in a way that is non-threatening and non-judgmental. The grandmother and daughter, while sad that the father

is in jail, still love him, so for the students this might have shown to them that it is okay

to still love a father who was in this situation but to also share the sadness that it made

them feel, as was done in the book. In comparison, I think *In Daddy's Arms*, in which

there was nothing but positive experiences shared in the book, encouraged sharing only

the positive thoughts out loud with the class. Maybe if *In Daddy's Arms* covered some of

the sadness and frustration that children feel not seeing their father, the children would

have felt more comfortable discussing their feelings openly in the classroom too. Steptoe

(1997) and the poets he includes only put forth positive views of Black fathers and

fatherhood, and, as I said before, I believe they did this to counter common negative

perceptions of Black fathers, but, in doing so, they left a set of experiences that over half

of the Black children in the U.S. have in that they do not live with their fathers and have

them as a consistent presence in their lives. This is not to say that this particular book

should have shared these range of experiences, but if it did, as in the case of Woodson's

(2002) book, it probably could have encourage a different level of discussion in the

classroom.

When Dads Are in Jail: Research on the Emotional Impact of Parental

Incarceration

There is a growing body of research on children's experiences and feelings about

parental incarceration (Mazza, 2002; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Oslick, 2013; Siegel,

2011). Based on recent estimates, there are close to two million children in the U.S. who

have a parent incarcerated in a state or federal prison, with more than half of those

parents being African-American or Hispanic (Glaze & Marushak, 2008), and research

paints a dark picture of the impact of parental incarceration on children. Some scholars

have said that many children will be "scarred" for life by a father's incarceration (Hairston, 1989; Kohan, 1983) and that those with parents who have been incarcerated are five times more likely to follow in their parent's footsteps and become incarcerated themselves as they get older (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Parental incarceration is said to take a toll on children emotionally, with the anger, sadness and frustration children may feel about the incarceration spilling over to their school performance, behavior, peer relationships, sense of self and feelings about the future (Mazza, 2002).

One significant area that hasn't received considerable attention is how children manage the social stigma attached to having a parent in jail or prison. While some researchers have come to believe that in certain socioeconomic (i.e. poor) and racial groups (i.e. minorities), having a parent incarcerated has become normalized and even a status symbol (Hairston, 2002); others have found evidence to the contrary (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Gadsen & Jacobs, 2007; Hairston, 1998; Gabel & Shindlerdecker, 1993). In their study of 34 children ages eight to 17 whose parents were incarcerated, Nesmith & Ruhland (2008) found that these children wished they could share their thoughts and feelings with others about their parent's incarceration, such as with their peers, teachers and other important people in their lives, but often felt stigmatized in schools so they were conflicted: "I just want to, but I just don't want them to know, so I don't tell them about my dad," said one young boy in the study (p.1123). Nearly all of the children desired to share their feelings, but also knew there were risks associated with doing so—teasing, bullying, loss of neighborhood friends (Gabel & Shindlerdecker, 1993; Gadsen & Jacobs, 2007; Hairston, 1998).

Many of the youth were keenly aware of the negative assumptions people would make if they shared information about their parents being incarcerated. One nine-year-old spoke about the risk associated with sharing information about his father, "Well, because you know how kids are? They like, oh where's your dad? We don't hardly see him as often, it's always your mom picking you up. And then it starts—then I tell them well, he's in prison. And then they start being smarty pants, and then it turns into a whole conversation, and like, it takes me a while to get the damn thing out of my head" (Nesmith & Ruhland, p. 1123). Teachers have also been found to stigmatize and have lesser expectations of students academically once they learn of a parent's incarceration (Dallaire, Ciccone & Wilson, 2010) even though other research has found that teachers can be a valuable support to children with incarcerated parents (Clopton & East, 2008; Lopez & Bhat, 2007). Because of the shame and stigma, many of the youth were told, or believed it was imperative, to keep their "family business" private. One 12-year-old said, when asked if he told his close friend about his father's imprisonment, "No, because I like to keep my business private. Sometimes, I talk to her, sometimes I don't. I don't like to talk about my business because it's private to me" (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008, p. 1129). Often times the incarceration of a loved one becomes a family secret that members have verbally or nonverbally committed to not discussing outside of the family, and sometimes they may not even discuss it within the family (p. 1129). A clear example was one youth being told explicitly by his mother to say nothing about his family affairs, "my mom said I'm supposed to keep everything that she tells me and that my dad tells me to myself" (p. 1123). Children are then forced to keep the knowledge of their parent's incarceration a secret, and by their very nature, secrets create anxiety, tension, shame,

guilt and fear within those who hold them (Karpel, 1980). And when talk comes up that potentially involves the secret (such as when Malani became upset when Diana shared in class that her father was in prison) the holder of the secret may then begin to feel uncomfortable, living in fear that her/his secret may be "found out" (Mazza, 2002).

For these reasons, it is surprising that the children in Ms. Washington's class felt so comfortable sharing their fathers' incarceration with the class. Was it that this book, by covering a topic that is normally kept taboo, made the students feel comfortable in sharing? I believe so, even though it took a while for the students to share their true feelings. For all but Diana, this reading in class was the first time the students had come in contact with this book, or any book about a father being in prison. However, on the other hand, it is not surprising that the students shared this information for several reasons. The nonjudgmental tone of the book could have helped the students to share in spite of any feelings of embarrassment or shame about their family situation, especially after hearing their classmates share that they had the same family situation. Mazza (2002) asserts that because of stigma, it is important for children to learn that there are others who have or are currently experiencing the same situation, such as their school peers, and recommends to social workers that children be brought together to meet and share feelings and stories about how they feel about their parents' incarceration in a non-judgmental space not only because it helps them handle and deal with their emotions, but also because it lets them know that they are not alone. It was evident from the classroom discussion that Woodson's (2002) book in the class created such a space in the classroom.

Mothers, Fathers and Intimate Violence

One glaringly absent comment from any of the kids was that no one discussed the lack of the mother in the book. It wasn't until we finished the book, and I asked the class why they thought the young girl lived with her grandmother, that I began to get some responses. One student said maybe it was because her mother passed away, while another said, "Because her mom probably got a new husband." The class "oohed" and gasped at this comment to which the student responded, "it really happens" and that maybe the girl didn't want to live with her mom and her new husband. And from this started a new conversation about how many of their own fathers had new girlfriends, some that the kids liked and others they did not. And Malani, who has been quiet throughout the time we read this book, said, "I think she's living with her grandmother because her dad killed her mom," and I ask her why she thought that, and she responded simply, "because he's in jail." I'm not sure where this idea came from, but Malani says it in such a matter of fact way that it made me pause. Was she just making this up? Did this idea come from some personal knowledge or experience? Or did she see something like this on television or in a movie? When I asked her again why she thought he would have killed her, she just put her head down. Other students continued to say that maybe the mom wasn't in the story because she couldn't financially take care of the daughter or that her mom "walks the streets" or even lives on the streets. I ask the children why they came up with these responses, and they said because they have either seen it in their neighborhoods or because they know people like this. This leads us into more of their personal stories:

> **Student:** I think the father is in jail because he and the mom might have got into a fight and the mom had to file for adoption.
>
> **Me:** Do you know of anything like this happening to people you know

Ahmad: Yes … to me

José: Well, my dad didn't really see me a lot. So every time I would come over his house he would threaten my mom

Me: That's really sad, I'm sorry that happened. Diana.

Diana: I feel bad for my dad, my stepdad, because when I was [little] like he been raising me for like five years I think. And he's been in jail, and I miss him because this is what my mom tells me all the time. And I hate it. She tells me, he been raising you? Well I'm the only one who changed your diapers. But my dad did [too], he changed my diapers.

Diana chokes up while speaking because she is upset that her mom tries to deny what she believes her father did for her, but this begins a new stream of conversation where the kids start sharing some of the intimate dynamics between their parents:

Brianna: This happened to me because every time I would call my dad when he was in the hospital and would call my mom and argue with her for no reason

Erika: The reason why I don't visit my dad is because my dad, he had to go to jail because somebody put a gun in his pocket for no reason.

Me: Okay. Carlos.

Carlos: Now I see my dad because we only see him for like twice a year.

Imani: I was raised by my stepdad a little for like, for three years. Then my stepdad got locked up because he was threatening my mom.

Me: Okay, India

India: I don' get to see my stepdad a lot because my mom and him they don't get along sometimes.

Me: OK.

Ahmad: I haven't seen my dad in a while because he doesn't pick me up.

Me: OK, Tammy

Tammy: I don't see my dad anymore because he moved away and I don't get to spend a lot of time with him.

Me: OK, so a lot of you have some of the same situations that the little girl had in the book or you have a different situation where you don't get to see your dad or stepdad as much as you would like. So how does that make you feel?

Multiple kids: Sad

And then the students begin sharing again. Diana comments that she was very angry with her mom because once her mother went downtown and visited her stepfather in the county jail but did not tell Diana she was going nor did she take her. Diana said her mother just told her when she came home that she went to go see her dad and he said hi and sent a picture. The room was silent. As the children were sharing, other students had their hands up eager to share their own stories but respectful to let everyone say what they wanted to say. It seems from their comments that intimate violence and turmoil between their parents also played a significant role in why they may not see their fathers as often as they would like. As the students kept sharing, it felt like they yearned to do so, wanting to have their stories heard and acknowledged by someone. India shared, "I feel sad because I miss him. I haven't seen him [her stepfather] in a long time. And he do a lot for us," sharing that the reason she hasn't seen her stepfather is because of the tumultuous relationship he has with her mother. For the students, it seems that violence was not only outside of their homes, but also inside, with Erika saying, "I feel sad because I used to

live with my dad and then first thing my mom and my dad started fighting. And that's when my dad started hitting my mom. And my mom called the cops."

Except for Akeem, whose biological father lives at home and is married to Akeem's mother, every other child in the class that day had a disheartening story to share about missing or not being with their fathers. Almost of their fathers or stepfathers were either currently in jail or had been in jail, and for many of them, even if their fathers were around, they didn't get the opportunity to spend time with them like they wanted. They talked about being jealous of their step-siblings, believing their fathers spent more time with them and being angry at their mothers for either calling the cops or kicking their fathers out of the house, often due to issues of domestic violence. Their emotions were all over the place, but it seemed as if an emotional wall that had been built up inside of the kids had come crumbling down over the course of the class as they shared freely and openly about their hurts and frustrations. But even when angry or sad, all of the children maintained that they loved their fathers and wanted to publicly state their love.

I was emotionally exhausted by the time I finished hearing all of the kids speak and so I told them for their journal activity they could write or draw anything they wanted about their fathers. Many students drew a picture of their fathers or of them with their fathers and many listed messages:

> "I don't see my dad because when I was 2 years old my mom kicked my
> dad out of the house. I drawed this picture because I don't get to see my dad"
> [Ebony, who has a picture of her father smiling and a picture of her smiling
> standing next to him.]

"I am mad because I wish my dad still lives with me. I am mad because my step dad take me to school on my first day of school instead of my dad" [Erika, who drew a picture of herself with her "evil" face when she gets mad]

"My dad loves me and my mom but I know dip [deep] inside that my dad loves us a lot. I will die for my dad I know it but my dad do not I love you dad. From Laila, to dad. I love you." [Laila, who has a picture of her father smiling and a picture of her smiling standing next to him]

"I miss my dad because I have not seen him since I was 5 years old. I drew this picture so I can remember my dad" [José]

At the end of the class when the students left for lunch I had the chance to speak with Ms. Washington, who was also stunned by what she heard from the students that day:

I didn't realize that no one had a dad. I really didn't because when they say step-dad I never ask, I just don't. Usually we don't even touch upon things like that because they're so sensitive and you don't want the child going home saying that this was one picking on me, but they all obviously have a very close relationship with the idea of jail and the reasons why their father went to jail, or whatever the situation. I really, that was my first time hearing that, from any class that I've ever taught in.

Ms. Washington shared that from time to time families would share with her some of the challenges going on in their lives, like when Imani's grandmother came and told her that Imani's mother had been shot in the neck by her boyfriend or when she learned of Tammy's father being shot and killed. However, as a teacher she said she really shies

away from knowing personal information about the students unless the parents tell her because she doesn't want parents to think she is "up in their business." Like her, I was anxious about what the students would say when they got home about what we had just discussed in class. Ms. Washington said, "Also … the parents may think 'like why are you asking my child about'—they have a lot of pride and you know they just want to be private at times. But if they hear we are all discussing things like that, then it just may be a little different [that I am doing this for research purposes], and it's not going to be used against you, a note is not going to be placed in your child's file that it's like a group session, a therapy session." I was anxious the entire night expecting a phone call from her or the principal saying that a parent contacted them, but none came.

I never thought of that day or the work I was doing with the kids as a group therapy session, but I do think there was something bonding about the experience of their sharing these personal aspects of their lives with each other. The following week before I began class, one of the students asked if they could share with the entire class what they wrote in their journals. Up until this point, I was the only person who had read or heard what the children had written. I told them in our very first class that only I would be reading their journals, and I wouldn't tell anyone what they wrote unless they shared something that talked about them being hurt by someone or their saying they would do something really mean and hurtful to someone else. I told the student, yes, that if we had time at the end of the class, they could share anything out of their journals that they wanted, and most of the class yelled, "yeah!" in excitement. When sharing time came, most of the class stood up one by one to share something out of their journals and a third of the class shared what they wrote about their fathers, re-sharing their feelings of love,

sadness and anger about their relationships with their fathers. After everyone finished sharing, I asked the class why they wanted to share out loud to the class and some said:

"I wanted to share what happened to me when I was a baby [her father left her] because sometimes I get upset and I need to share it with people." [Maria]

"I want to share to express my feelings." [José]

"I wanted to share mine because I wanted people to know I was sad about my dad." [Khadijah]

"I wanted to share out because I wanted to tell everybody how my life is." [Tammy]

I was amazed at their courage and willingness to share what seemed at times to be painful feelings about their lives and their families. I was also concerned about opening up these feelings and emotions in class and then not following up with them. I left little notes of thanks or encouragement for them when I responded to what they wrote in their journals, but I kept wondering, did talking about their family lives bring up feelings that they wished to discuss further but did not have an outlet for? Would talking about these things bring them pain? If so, whom would they speak with? Having family members shot and killed, domestic violence incidents, fathers in jail or prison, not knowing who their fathers were or where they were, these things are certainly highly sensitive, emotional and personal, and it made me wonder what coping mechanisms the kids used to process their feelings. However, the kids seemed to appreciate having a space to share their emotions and feelings and the methodology of using the books by Steptoe (1997) and Woodson (2002), in the classroom with their peers and journaling provided them to space to do so.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to address the void in the research of how poor minority children, Black children especially, feel about their fathers. With half of the children in Camden and across the country being raised in female-headed homes and with fathers incarcerated, and these numbers steadily on the rise, their voices are important to add to the conversation about Black fathers and fatherhood. Research has focused on the fathers and the mothers, gaining their perspectives on who they are and how they parent, the challenges that impact their parenting, their relationship with each other and the impact of their relationship and their perspectives as individuals on the growth and development of the children, but the voices of those they impact, the children, have been primarily silent in the research. As it relates to fathers, there are many questions that can be explored with these children. How do they feel about their relationships with their fathers? Do they agree with the sentiments expressed by the fathers about the type of roles fathers should play? Is what these fathers provide in turns of emotional support, caretaking and nurturing enough for their children? What is the type of relationship these children would like to have with their fathers? Do children's perspectives of their relationship with their fathers match their father's or their mother's perspective? There is research that exists on children and family dynamics in general, and some research does exist that looks at minority adolescents specifically regarding their relationships with these types of father, but based on the questions I posed above, there is so much more work that can be done.

While we only heard from the side of the Walt Whitman students and their thoughts were based on limited discussions, I think it is clear that the children desired a

different relationship than the one they had with their fathers, wishing for them to play a larger role in their overall growth and development. Research has shown the positive and negative impacts fathers can have on their children, and while important, I don't believe it is enough to know about the academic challenges, social or behavioral issues that students may exhibit that can be correlated with a father not being in the home or a consistent presence in their lives. It is just as important to understand the emotional impact and feelings children have that are associated with their disconnect from their fathers and what they believe are important aspects of parenting. Knowing this kind of information would add a more nuanced perspective to the quantitative data collected on children's cognitive and social development. Additionally, by gathering the voices and experiences of these children, it creates an opportunity to share this information with their parents. How much do low income African-American mothers and fathers know about how their children feel about their relationship with their fathers? It seems certain that they would know something, but how much? Depending on how much they are aware, does it influence how they co-parent? Does knowing their children's feelings encourage fathers to seek a greater role in the lives of their children or encourage mothers to allow greater contact between father and child? With the quality of the relationship between low-income Black mothers and their children's fathers playing a key role in how much fathers engage with their children, providing parents with this information could change the dynamics of these relationships.

As I stated earlier, the perspectives provided by the Walt Whitman students are a limited view, certainly not enough to make any generalizable claims. Nonetheless, using African-American children's picturebooks in conjunction with classroom discussions and

journaling did shed light on the subtleties and nuances of the experiences and feelings of the Walt Whitman students and their relationships with their fathers. It was powerful to witness how the books by Steptoe (1997) and Woodson (2002), opened up the students to sharing such personal, emotional and private information about their families. As we read the books, the students brought their "lived through" experiences to the text, relating to and understanding the texts through their own personal lives. Their sadness, anger, and disappointment with their fathers were activated through their engagement with each book, with the books also providing an opportunity to share their personal stories with their peers. This is not to say that these students didn't have these emotions prior to reading the book, but that reading the books in class provided an outlet for them to share their emotions and feelings out loud with the classmates. This created a bonding experiences among the students, having them realize that they were not alone in their feelings and also created a new awareness on the part of Ms. Washington about the lives of her students outside of school.

As a methodological approach, using African-American children's literature can expand the research scope of reader response theories, but these books coupled with classroom discussion and journaling also provide a fresh perspective to qualitative methods to be used with children. This combination provided an unobtrusive way to ask deeply private and personal questions, engaging the students in less threatening ways about discussing their lives than I believe could be done with interviews and focus groups. What the students did not feel brave enough or confident enough to verbalize in front of the whole class or out loud, such as when reading *In Daddy's Arms*, they could articulate in their journals and what is a taboo topic to discuss in public, parental

incarceration, became easier to share after seeing it represented in *Visiting Day*[10]. Using

these books, discussions and journaling together provided rich data that if time would

have allowed in the class could have been used as a stepping stone to deeper, more

illustrative data about family dynamics. With the pressures on school teachers and

administrators, especially those in low-income areas where assessments show that

students of color still lag behind their White suburban peers, it is difficult to say that this

approach should be used more in the classroom, but it is worth considering how teachers

and staff can learn more about the lives of their students since it has a significant impact

on their academic achievement and behavior in the schools.

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[10] At the end of the year, *Visiting Da*y was selected at the third most enjoyed book by the class specifically because the students said it reminded them of their fathers)

CHAPTER 5

Reading, Writing and Race: Exploring Racial Understanding through

Multicultural Children's Picturebooks

It was the second to last week of school and as I was sitting in the back of the classroom beginning my interview with Akeem and Carlos, the end of the school year carnival was being held outside on the playground. It was about 10:00 am and each class was being called downstairs to spend a couple of hours having fun on the moon bounce, climbing the rock wall or playing boardwalk games. At stations all around the playground there was enough water ice, soft pretzels and cotton candy to keep all of the kids satisfied for the rest of the day. When the boys sat down, I began by asking them about their families and their lives at home, and they shared with me some of their hopes and dreams for themselves and for their families. I then asked, "So why do you think there is crime here in Camden?" a topic that I had discussed with them and their classmates throughout the school year. I had the boys think for a few minutes and write down some thoughts. After a few moments, both boys told me they were ready and as Akeem opened his mouth to begin to speak, his peers began jumping up and down with excitement because the 3rd grade classes were being called over the loud speaker to go outside. For a moment I thought that Akeem and Carlos would change their minds and ask to go with their friends, but they agreed to stay back for a half hour to talk to me.

"You know. I think since—not to be racist," Akeem begins, "you know—I say since the—I don't want to say." I encourage Akeem to say whatever he feels and remind

him that whatever he says is okay. "Since the White people lived here before—I don't want to be racist I just …" He pauses for a minute and then sharply continues:

> It's just the first thing that came to my mind. Since the White people lived here before, I think that the White people are trying to make the Black people, like, weaker so that—so the White people can come to Camden, you know, and take over Camden again so the Black people won't have nowhere to live, begging people for money and stuff, you know … they're trying to make the Black people weak so they could take over the Black people. You know that this is just like slavery, so I think that's why crime and—you know, crime is going on in Camden, because people are taking drugs and making people—other people crazy, and they just shooting all over the place. And I think that's why. And I think that the White man is that evil to just send all the cops to Camden because— but it's not even Camden's fault. It's their fault because to want to send all their drugs to Camden.

Never in any of our classroom conversations or in his journaling had Akeem expressed such pointed comments about Whites or Blacks, or how race influenced how he understood life in the city. The ease with which he spoke made me believe that these were not just off the cuff comments but ideas and beliefs that he had considered well before our conversation, which made me wonder why he chose to offer them up now.

In this chapter, I will examine how Akeem and his peers discussed, questioned and challenged ideas about race, from historical and contemporary contexts. We know that every day children are living, learning and being socialized about race in multiple ways, explicitly and implicitly by their parents, family, peers and other adults in their

lives; and through multiple contexts: schools, neighborhoods, media—but how do they make meaning of all the messages they receive? That is, what understanding do eight- and nine-year-old children have when the topics of racism, prejudice and discrimination come up? When these topics come up, what do they say? Do they have an understanding of the historical experiences of Blacks in this country with racism and prejudice, and, if so, do they believe that Blacks, or other minorities, are impacted by racism and prejudice today? Overall, I aim to examine how they take in all that they see and hear to come up with their own ideas about race.

Using their own words and stories, I will attempt to shed some light on these questions, arguing that not enough attention has been paid to how children in middle childhood, especially poor, racial and ethnic minority children, understand, discuss and explore ideas of race, discrimination and prejudice. Given that racism is still prevalent in the United States, especially for those who disproportionately live in poverty, I believe that it is necessary not only to better understand what these children know and don't know about racial issues and how they make meaning of race, but for serious consideration to be given to how children should be taught about racism, past and present. This can be done through the use of multicultural children's literature and a critical pedagogy. Underlying this pedagogy is not only teaching children about inequality, but empowering students to see themselves as agents of change, what scholars call a "critical multiculturalism" (Banks, 1992). This is no easy task, and it is full of complications, but as Beverly Tatum (1997) states, "As a society, we pay a price for our silence. Unchallenged personal, cultural, and institutional racism results in the loss of human potential … and a rising tide of fear and violence in our society… racism stifles

our own growth and potential" (p. 200). With the recent tragedies of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Tamir Rice, young African-American teens killed in what many believe were racially motivated shootings, Tatum's (1997) concerns ring ever more loudly.

Ms. Washington's students held both very naïve and very sophisticated understandings and opinions of race, and what was most interesting to witness was *how* students grappled with these ideas. For instance, Akeem mentioned often during class and in his journal writings, along with his peers, that race relations between Blacks and Whites now were fine and that Blacks did not face the same challenges today that were present in the books that discussed racism and discrimination that Blacks endured during the early 20th century. But clearly, as Akeem's comments above and those of his that will be discussed later in this chapter demonstrate, he also believes that Whites are systematically trying to oppress Blacks in Camden today. Or in the case of José who knows but cannot clearly articulate that there are spaces and places today that Blacks are welcome to enter, such as the world of professional sports, but not others, such as Hollywood where he noted that Black males especially are not as represented in film and on television as Whites. At times the students held contradictory ideas simultaneously and I could see them trying to reconcile the complex social and political history of Whites and Blacks in the U.S. as they understand it and use that understanding to inform their current thinking about the status and condition of Whites and Blacks today. It was clear from our conversations that these children rarely if ever were asked their thoughts or opinions on race, discrimination or inequality or believed they had the opportunity to discuss these topics in the school setting with their peers—which also begs the question,

what is the role of the school in facilitating and encouraging critical conversations around these topics? There are no easy answers to the questions I have posed, but the fields of critical pedagogy and multiculturalism provide perspectives worth considering for how schools can become spaces for critical engagement on challenging subjects such as those mentioned above, since it was obvious from the intensity of our discussions that these children desperately wanted the opportunity to talk about the history and contemporary realities of race with adults and with their peers.

Putting it together: Examining the Research on Children and Race

There is a long history of research focused on children and race. It's been found that children as young as three understand the concepts of racial prejudice and by five years of age come to hold attitudes that favor the majority and disfavor minorities (Aboud, 1988; Cross, 1991; Katz, 1981). Children across this age period, early childhood to elementary school, have also been found to understand and use racial stereotypes (Hirschfield, 1994). In what they call "stereotype consciousness," McKown and Weinstein (2003) show that with increasing age, children become more aware of stereotypes, finding that around the age of six, the proportion of children able to infer stereotypes held by other individuals increased linearly, peaking at age ten (p. 504). Additionally they found that by age 10, children were aware of broadly held stereotypes (e.g. White people think Black people are not smart; White people don't like Black people; Sometimes police pull over Black people just because they are Black; People from different races fight a lot), but that some children as young as six were also able to understand these types of stereotypes, primarily those children from stigmatized groups (McKown & Weinstein, 2003, p. 506). Ambady, Shih, Kim, and Pittinsky (2001) found

similar results earlier when they found that even kindergartners predicated that an Asian student would be more likely to do well in math than a White student (p. 22).

As children get older there is a significant amount of research on racial and ethnic identity development (Bennett, 2006; Constantine & Blackmon, 2005; Cross 1991; Demo, 1990; Hughes, 2006; Phinney & Rotherham, 1987; Spencer, 1990) primarily focusing on adolescents. There is also research on how children under the age of 12 are socialized about race, looking at what messages parents send about race (Brown & Lesane-Brown, 2006; Coard Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004; Harrison, 1990; Thomas & Speight, 1999), how and when parents send those messages (Brown, Tanner-Smith, Lesane-Brow, & Ezell, 2007; Caughy et al., 2006; Hughes, 2003) and why parents send the messages that they do (Brown & Caughy, 2007; Hughes, 2003; Thomas & Speight, 1999; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990).

This research has proved invaluable in helping establish when children become racially aware, the sophistication and type of racial awareness they have, and how children are socialized about race. However, what is lacking from the research is a body of work that explores how children, especially those in middle childhood, understand the social constructs of race, prejudice and discrimination in a way that puts their understanding, experiences, perspectives and voices at the center of the analysis. Zwiers and Morrissette (1999) note that in the social sciences, "Few researchers have made consistent effort to include the thoughts, feelings, experiences and specific statements of children in their empirical investigations" (p. 127). Relating specifically to race, Robyn Holmes (1995), author of *How Young Children Perceive Race,* agrees, stating that, "If we are a child-centered society then our existing research methods have failed to represent

accurately children's perceptions of race" (p. 3). While there certainly has been an increase in having children's perspectives represented in research overall, their presence primarily in studies that use quantitative methods means there are limitations as to what can be learned.

Large data sets, closed-ended interviews, surveys and psychological assessments have served as the primary tools through which to understand race and racial socialization and its impact on identity development, self-esteem, academic achievement, peer relationships, and behaviors of children and adolescents. In Hughes et al.'s (2006) review of the research on parents' ethnic-racial socialization, in which their children participated, sample sizes of those in the research they highlighted ranged from 2,107 to as small as 23 participants (adults and children) with the majority of participants in each study falling in the range of a couple hundred and with the primary mode of understanding coming from responses to Likert-type questionnaires. Some scholars believe that these methodological approaches, while important and necessary, are focused more on gaining reproducible results than on truly understanding how children define, speak, understand and shape their own views on racial matters (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, p. 14). In over half of the studies examined by Hughes et al. (2006) youth participated but were asked to mainly discuss their parents' behaviors and what their parents said to them and how their parents talked to them about race. Thorton et al. (1990) realized earlier that the experiences and perspectives of the youth were missing in these types of studies and were just as important as their parents' or adults' perspectives: "Most racial socialization studies frequently overlook the fact that children are not merely passive receptors of information but are themselves active in the interpretation and

construction of their own understandings of matters of race" (Thornton et al., 1990, p. 402). Scholars Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) contend that in quantitatively-focused studies, the everyday realities of how children live and understand race are neglected in the interest of obtaining a snapshot of individual attitudes in a brief and too often superficial examination of the suspected state of mind of individual children (p. 14).

More recent scholars, such as Walker (2012), Chin (2001) and Lewis (2003), have taken a more experiential approach to understanding children and race, using qualitative and ethnographic approaches. Their efforts focus on children's voices and perspectives, looking more closely at children's thoughts, opinions and experiences about and with race to better understand what they think and why they think the way that they do. In doing so, these scholars seek to understand how children construct their own ideas about race and how they make meaning of the social construction of race as it relates to stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. By expanding research in this way, using more qualitative or mixed method approaches, allowing the voices of children to lead the conversation and to be at the center of analysis of their own racial understanding, a different perspective for understanding children and race is introduced (Hughes et al., 2008; Winkler, 2010),

"Doing the research": How Children Live, Learn and Understand Race, Using a Critical Race Methodology

In her book *Learning Race, Learning Place: Shaping Racial Identities and Ideas in African American Childhoods*, Erin Winkler (2012) examines how African-American children experience and understand race in their everyday lives. To examine and understand the perspective of the child, Winkler (2012) developed a framework she calls

"comprehensive racial learning," which she says is "the process through which children negotiate, interpret, and make meaning of the various and conflicting messages they receive about race, ultimately forming their own understandings of how race works in society and their lives" (p. 7). Winkler (2012) seeks to understand the nuanced processes through which children develop their own ideas about race, using the term "learning" as opposed to "socialization" because learning suggests the centrality of the active role that children play in their own developing ideas about race (p. 8).

I sought to view the Walt Whitman students through this lens of comprehensive racial learning when examining their thoughts about race because I was most interested in how they understood and processed historical racialized contexts and their understanding of how race operated in contemporary contexts. With the exception of Akeem, I was not able to learn about how parents and families explicitly talked to the students about race, but through our class discussions I was able to learn about some of the perspectives that the students have of race that were powerful and complex, and it was *their* perspectives, comments and opinions, not those of their parents, that I most cared to learn. Comprehensive racial learning is ultimately "child-centered" says Winkler (2012) versus adult or "source" centered (the entities sending the racialized messages) (p.8). This does not mean that the adults, peers, media and other contexts that have shaped the ideas that children express about race, prejudice and discrimination are not taken into consideration, but that by using a child-centered approach one can examine these other factors at the children's prompting, listening to the children's interpretation of their experiences or their understanding race, prejudice and discrimination and allowing them to direct how the conversation proceeds (Winkler, 2012, p. 7).

Winkler (2012) argues that while some may feel that using open-ended interviewing and qualitative tools as a method of understanding children's ideas of race is imperfect, other scholars disagree and believe that for minorities especially, this approach to research is necessary to understanding "non-majority" experiences. As I discussed in chapter one, critical race theorists believe in placing emphasis on the stories that people of color tell of their experiences at the center of analysis. Winkler (2012) may not say that her approach is guided by this theory, but comprehensive racial learning is in line with one of the core tenets of CRT. Stories and "counter" stories, which are gathered through formal and informal interviews and interactions, allow those whose voices have been devalued or suppressed to share their reality and their perspective and legitimize their experience. "One of the major principles of critical race theory," says Ladson-Billings (1999), "is that people's narratives and stories are important in truly understanding their experiences and how those experiences may represent confirmation or counterknowledge of the way that society works" (p. 219). As Winkler (2012) states, open-ended interviewing, and I would add journaling, drawing and classroom discussions like those that I facilitated in Ms. Washington's class, can allow research participants to identify what they see as key areas of discussion and address issues not covered by a pre-established set of questions and responses commonly used in quantitative research (p. 14). In this way, the voices of the children provide a counter narrative to current understandings of how children make meaning of the complexities of race.

When examining ideas of race with the Walt Whitman children, I used several books I believed would prime our conversations about racial discrimination and prejudice: *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold (1996); *Sit In: How Four Friends Stood Up by*

Sitting Down, by Andrea and Brian Pinkney (2010); *The Black Snowman* by Phil Mendez (2005); and *Goin' Someplace Special* by Patricia McKissack and Jerry Pinkney (2008). While we were reading or in my interviews with the students, I would pose questions to begin a dialogue, but would let them take the conversation in any direction they saw fit. I tried to be conscious and careful in how I framed the questions because I did not wish to "lead" the students in any particular direction of thinking and responding. As a research tactic this is a risky move, because it may not yield the information or knowledge you are seeking to gain, but while doing this work, especially in the classroom, I saw my role as one of a facilitator or a cultural mediator.

In their article on reader response with children reading books focused on race, segregation and integration, Lehr and Thompson (2000) suggested that in school settings when engaging children in conversations about what they have read, it is best that teachers serve as prods and catalysts to elicit deeper responses from children and to make sure all children have the opportunity to speak. The role of the teacher is not to be an active participant in the conversation with the students, but to let the students guide the conversation. However, Lehr and Thompson (2000) note that there are other times when teachers need to serve as a cultural mediator, scaffolding and extending the children's responses and filling in historical gaps when reading about events about which they lacked a deeper understanding, such as slavery and the civil rights period (p. 484). Lehr and Thompson (2000) found, as did I, that without playing this role, students would have been left with inaccurate information about the historical contexts of some of the events in the books read in the classroom due to significant gaps in how they understood United States history (p. 484). Overall, I aimed to provide the space and opportunities to allow

for the children to discuss the complex themes contained in these African-American

children's books. With a focus on critical race and child centered perspectives, my goal

was to add their voices and experiences to the small but growing body of literature on

racial attitudes and perspectives of children, but before I discuss the sentiments shared

when the children engaged with the books, I would like to go return to Akeem and his

thoughts about race and examine the role that his family played in developing racial

identity.

"The White men are trying to make the Black people weaker:" Understanding

Camden through the Lens of Racial Socialization

I missed opportunities throughout the school year to talk to Akeem because

outside of school he had an extremely busy schedule performing with a well-known

African dance company founded by his family. Ms. Washington said that Akeem had

even missed a couple of weeks of school because he traveled throughout the country

performing with his family. Even though she had seen Akeem perform several times and

thought he was talented and was happy to see that his family had him involved, Ms.

Washington didn't think Akeem's missing school to perform was necessarily the best

decision. Akeem was smart, he did well in school, and his parents were committed to his

education, she said, always asking for packets of work to take on the road with him, but

she believed that he belonged in school more than on the road. Ms. Washington hinted

that because Akeem was doing something "cultural" (what I took as code for "Black")

that no one was willing to tell his family that it wasn't appropriate for them to take him

out of school for long stretches of time. She said the school administrators, who were also

Black, feared that his family would think that the school was not being supportive of the

"cultural activities" to which Akeem was being exposed. Ms. Washington's and the school personnel's thoughts about Akeem's family and their "Afro-centric" approach to parenting and raising him did not seem to me to be off target.

One thing that is clearly evident when speaking with Akeem is that his "Blackness" and African heritage are important to him. Before we began talking about crime in the city, Akeem expressed his desire to learn more about his African heritage. "One wish for my family would be to go to Africa to learn more about the culture," he said, and he told me in a previous conversation that he considered himself an "African, in America." As we continued discussing his desire to go to Africa, Akeem excitedly told me about all of the African musical instruments that he and his family play, commenting frequently that everything he has learned about Africa and his heritage has come from his family. He said he was very happy that his family (aunts, uncles, grandparent, but especially his mother) spoke to him often about African culture. "She will buy me African culture things, you know. I like how she persuades me [to go to Africa] because like, if she didn't persuade me, I wouldn't want to go to Africa and that's—I feel to me that that's wrong, because you know, that's where I'm from. And that's where all the culture is coming from, you know, because of slavery and stuff." He went on to state that he was extremely proud of the work that his family does in the city, bringing African culture "to the youth before the culture goes away," believing that it is important for Black youth to know their heritage and their history. In all of my conversations with the students. Akeem spoke the most openly about the role his family plays in his racial identity development. Some scholars believe that family is the most influential socializing agent for children's attitudes, values and overall emerging sense of self

(Demo & Hughes, 1990), and it is clear that Akeem's family has spent a considerable amount of time engaging him in conversations focused on racial pride, race relations, African and Black cultures, familial history and the struggles African-Americans have endured both in the U.S. and in Africa.). Scholars define this as "racial socialization," broadly understood to be how families of color, primarily African-Americans, use messages and strategies to help children understand their racial identity (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Sanders-Thompson, 1994). Boykin and Toms (1985) categorized African-Americans as approaching racial socialization in three ways: (a) mainstream, (b) minority socializing and (c) Black cultural. Mainstream approaches generally socialize Black children to Eurocentric values and beliefs; minority socializing includes socializing children to accept racist and oppressive beliefs and adapt to a racist society; and Black cultural approaches are the most pro-Black, a culturally-focused way of socialization. Parents focus on transmitting Afrocentric values connected to West African traditions emphasizing the importance of spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive, orality and social time perspective (Boykin & Toms,1985, p. 37). Through his family's work with their dance studio and how they are imparting knowledge to Akeem about who he is and where he has come from, their socialization approach is intensely steeped in the Black cultural perspective. As I move on to talk about life in Camden specifically, how Akeem's family has racially socialized him becomes more pronounced and while the views of his family and other adults in his life have informed his thinking about race, I believe he has embraced the views of his family as his own.

As Akeem expresses his belief that Whites are purposely bringing drugs into Camden to oppress Blacks and cause a level of crime and disorder that would pave the way for them to come in and control the city and the residents, I try to interject to ask a follow-up question, but Akeem is speaking a mile a minute. His name means "justice and truth" and from the conviction in the tone of his voice, he seems to feel there is a significant injustice taking place, almost bordering on conspiracy, against the city and specifically the Blacks who live here. In addition to 2012 being the most violent year on record for the city, it was also the year that the Camden City Police Department was disbanded by the Mayor and reconstituted as a county-wide metro police force. In an already tense situation with violent crime soaring and not enough police officers on the street to handle the more than 150 open-air drug markets, and shoot outs happening in broad daylight near daycare centers and schools, many residents were stunned by the Mayor's decision. The Mayor professed that a county-wide metro police force would allow for Camden to have more police officers in total—on the streets walking the beat, as detectives and in administrative positions—and would provide Camden with more technological resources to fight crime, such as high tech cameras called "eyes in the sky." However, the police union and some of the residents thought disbanding the current police force to bring in a metro police force was a strong-arm tactic intended to break up the union and renege on union contracts and agreements in order to restructure the department. The truth seems to lie somewhere in the middle. For 2013, crime indicators in the city are showing a downward trend in shootings, violent crime and homicides, a significant reduction of open-air drug markets and an increase in the arrest of drug dealers in the city (Zernike, 2014). The county-wide police force, using the same budget

as the former Camden City Police Department, went from about 250 officers in 2011 to 411 in 2013, which lends credence to the belief that the city-wide force was disbanded due to economic reasons, but the Chief of Police and Mayor tout a change in culture (more officers walking the beat, meeting and greeting residents, reduction in response times, technological supports) in the police force as some of the driving forces behind crime reduction (Zernick, 2014). However, when the force was created in 2012, Akeem was clearly not impressed by the Mayor's plan, "I think that the metro police aren't doing anything. I think they're just here to—so the White man can get what he wants." When I ask him who he thinks "the White man" is, he says:

> Like, he want—I think he wants more slavery. Like he wants the Black people to suffer. Like he wants the Black people to suffer all over again. And I think—you know, because I never told you, but my Aunt is running for Camden Council. And my—and her and the rest of her team is too. And [names another person] is running for Camden mayor. He wants to make Camden better so that the White man can stop trying to take over—take—try—stop trying to take over Camden. Like, Mayor Dana Redd is not doing anything.

I believe due to the influence of his family, Akeem has a perspective of the city and its politics that was not present in my conversations with his classmates and that has influenced his thinking about race. When I asked his peers specifically about life in Camden, none mentioned the politics nor the police force. Also, when I talked to them about race, none of them mentioned their families or other adults in their lives and what they thought, unlike with Akeem who specifically pointed to his family's conversations. Moreover, his repeated racialized assault on "the White man" harkened back to the calls

for action during 1970s Black Power movement with the Black Panthers demanding, "an end to the robbery by the white men of our Black Community" (The Black Panther Ten-point Program, 1968), and while the Black Power movement could have been a significant influencer in the lives of his grandparents, this was a time long before Akeem was born. Akeem has received what Bowman and Howard (1985) and Sanders-Thompson (1994) would call "racial barrier" messages. In addition to the messages of racial and ethnic pride and focus on African heritage that were being conveyed by his family, Akeem was also receiving distinct messages focused on how racism and prejudice have impacted Blacks, mainly in ways that have disenfranchised them. One can say that Akeem is parroting what he has heard from the adults in his life about race, buying into the belief that children cannot understand the power dynamic and social construct of racism on their own, but I disagree. As Van Ausdale and Teagin (2001) state, "generally speaking adults evaluate children using a deficit model, assuming without questioning that children do not possess maturity or sophisticated knowledge of their social world." (p. 4). I believe that Akeem has taken in his family's views of life in Camden and their perspective on race and the social and political status and power of Whites and Blacks in society and embraced them as his own. He is not just parroting what he has heard other say, when asked to elaborate can he, providing context and examples based on what he has seen and provides his own personal thoughts.

I would even take Akeem's thoughts on race a step further and say that he may have had a distrust of Blacks who he believed were "run" by Whites. Later on in the conversation in which I asked him why he didn't think the Mayor was doing a good job in Camden, he called her a "puppet." As I pressed him about what he meant by this

statement, he became visibly annoyed, not at my question but seemingly exasperated by some of the Mayor's actions. He launched into an animated story about issues between his family and the Mayor (that had been covered in the local press) and kept saying that she only listened to "others" and that "they" told her what to do, intimating that she didn't think for herself when it came to policies or issues related to the city. As he spoke, his level of disdain was palpable; his voice was tense and his hands began to move in sync with each word, as he kept venting his frustration, and when I asked him who these people were that he believed controlled the mayor, he stopped short of saying, "the wh--" about to invoke again "the White man" as the culprit.

While I will not say there is some grand plan by the White males in power in and around Camden (elected officials, power brokers, police chief) to systematically oppress Blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities in the city, Akeem's thoughts on the "White man" do have some merit. It is widely believed by adults in and around the city (both White and Black) and verifiable that major policies and decisions about who gets to be elected (or is even allowed to run for office) and how the city is run on a day-to-day basis are heavily influenced, if not wholly shaped, by White elected officials (the Governor, county and legislative members and political bosses outside of the city). This leaves many of the Black and Brown residents of Camden with little to say about the major institutions in the city, such as the school system and the police force and who ultimately becomes their elected officials. Akeem may not be able to fully articulate the role that race plays in the governance of Camden, but he knows something is amiss.

As Akeem shared his opinion about crime and race in Camden, I tried to encourage Carlos, who had been sitting beside Akeem this entire time, quietly listening,

to give his thoughts as to why he believed there was crime in the city, and he said that his mom told him that some people are just unsuccessful in life and that they turn to drugs and crime and that leads them to do bad things. Carlos's comments are not filled with the racialized ideology that underscored Akeem's perspectives about crime in Camden, but before I could follow-up on Carlos's comments, Akeem burst back into the conversation, stating that he believes "the White man" is bringing more drugs into Camden to make Blacks dependent on them, thus making it easier for Whites to take over the city. When I asked Carlos, who is Puerto Rican, whether he or his family believed that there is a race or group of people trying to hold Puerto Ricans down like Akeem believes that Whites are trying to hold down Blacks, he said no, that neither he nor his family ever felt that way. By the time I got done following up with Carlos, it was about 10:25 a.m. and Akeem was shifting from side to side in his seat, still a bit amped up from our conversation, but as the clock caught his eye and he realized that we had been chatting for about 25 minutes, he asked was I almost done because he was anxious to get outside to the carnival.

Akeem's sense of self and feelings about his family, his thoughts about the city and the violence and crime, the police force, the Mayor, the citizens—all are intertwined in his ideas about race. Throughout my time with Akeem during the school year, he seemed to exhibit a greater knowledge and understanding of Black history than his classmates but never shared this level of intensity about race in our class discussions or in his journal, and I'm not sure why. Was it that he didn't feel comfortable sharing these thoughts with the whole class for fear of being called "racist"? As I will share in the next section, some of his classmates did share out loud some very pointed views, believing

Blacks to be the prime perpetrators of crimes and stating that this is why Whites treat

them badly. Others in the class believed that presidential candidate Mitt Romney was

racist and would have put Blacks back into slavery if he were elected, so Akeem

wouldn't have been alone in his racialized thinking. However, his intense feelings about

Whites as they related to crime in Camden and city politics did not seem to impact his

thoughts on minority characters in children's books and friendships. When asked at the

end of the school year if it was important to have children's books with Black and Puerto

Rican characters in them, Akeem said no, that it didn't matter and listed that some of his

favorite books to read on his own were books with SpongeBob Square Pants, the cartoon

character, and several books from *Captain Underpants*, a series of chapter books by Dav

Pikey. Captain Underpants is a White, bald, middle-aged school principal turned into a

superhero who flies around in his underpants with two "pesky" fourth grade boys who are

also White. When I asked Akeem about friendships, he said it didn't matter what color

people were—White, Black—that everyone could be friends with anyone and that he had

friends of different "colors." So are these views closer to his "own" thoughts and

opinions and not as influenced by the adults in his life? I contend that like adults, Akeem

has complex and contradictory feelings about race. I believe that he is just trying to make

sense of the world around him, as adults do when it comes to these complex subjects.

This fluidity in thinking and grappling with understanding is all the more reason why

more time should be spent with children to fully explore how they understand and make

meaning of race. If I had more time with Akeem, I would have delved more deeply into

his thinking, challenging and seeking clarification on some of his ideas in an effort to

understand more clearly the line between how his racialized thinking has been informed

by the adults in his life and how he has taken their teachings and constructed his own thoughts and opinions. Our discussion provided me with significant insight into how he made meaning of race based on the racial socialization practices of the adults in his life.

<div align="center">***</div>

It wasn't until I began to review my field notes in early March of 2013 that I realized that during the first two months of the New Year, the students and I spent a considerable amount of time in class focused on books that dealt with race, identity, discrimination and prejudice. Even though by this time during the school year, the selection of books that they could choose from included books focused on mothers, friendship, imagination, and growing up in the city, we spent the entire months of January and February steeped in stories that brought on thoughtful and complex conversations about race and the challenges faced by African-Americans in the U.S., historically and now. This certainly was not planned since from week to week I allowed the students to select the next book we would read, but it created an unexpected focus that provided an opportunity to explore these topics in a deeper way with the students.

I can't say that the students consciously picked these books to be read in succession, beginning with *Tar Beach* (1996) by Faith Ringgold, which discusses job discrimination faced by Blacks in the 1930s; then *Sit In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down* (2010) by due Andrea and Brian Pinkney, about the Woolworth lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s; followed by *The Black Snowman* (1991) by Phil Mendez, about Black self-hatred and eventual self-love; and finally *Goin' Someplace Special* (2008) by Patricia McKissack and Jerry Pinkney, which focuses on racial segregation tensions of the 1950s. Overall it's hard to know why the students picked the books they

did. Maybe it was the covers, maybe it was the shouts of their classmates encouraging

one book over the other, but I do know that it was not because of the racialized and

historical contexts. Almost all of the students said they had not read nor heard of any of

these books before, with the exception of a few that knew of *Tar Beach*. Nonetheless,

each book provided an opportunity for the students to discuss racial issues from

contemporary perspectives, from the presidential election of Barack Obama and his

opponent Mitt Romney—with the students expressing fears that if elected Mitt Romney

would have re-enslaved Blacks—to media portrayals of Blacks and Whites as they relate

to crime and violence, with Blacks being seen by some of the students as more violent

and prone to committing crime. Further on in our readings, two students had an extremely

heated discussion about how Blacks are represented in sports and in Hollywood, with a

sophisticated acknowledgement of the overrepresentation of Black male athletes and the

underrepresentation of Black actors on screen. Throughout the two months, discussions

about slavery came up often with the students grappling with the history and trying to

make sense of why slavery was even allowed to happen in the first place. The students

questioned why Blacks did not fight back against the Whites or run away from slavery

and echoed deep disappointment and frustration that Blacks "allowed" themselves to be

enslaved. The conversation on slavery showed a gap or lack of understanding about the

history of slavery in general (maybe due to their age or to the limited education they have

received about these topics in school) but overall showed that the students did have some

understanding of racism and discrimination that could be built on to engage them in more

critical conversations and that the students wanted to speak openly about these topics and

had many unanswered questions.

"Abraham Lincoln was a little Black:" The Politics of Race in *Tar Beach*

Tar Beach, written and illustrated by Faith Ringgold in 1991, is the award-winning story of eight-year-old third grader Cassie Lightfoot and her dream to be free to go wherever she wants to go in life, both literally and figuratively. As she flies through the Harlem sky in 1939 with her younger brother Be Be, Cassie's imagination takes her on a magical journey that allows her to "claim" whatever she flies over. "All I had to do was fly over it for it to be mine forever," she says as she flies over the George Washington Bridge, so that she could "wear it like a giant diamond necklace" (p.9) or as she flies over an ice cream factory, so that she and her family could have ice cream every night for dessert. But Ringgold, who says in the book jacket that the story of *Tar Beach* is partially autobiographical, also combines historical narrative, discussing discrimination African-Americans faced in work practices during the 1930s and the tradition of African-American quilting to take readers on a journey not only through the magic and whimsy of Cassie's imagination but through real life experiences of African-Americans and some of the social injustices they have endured.

Bordering each vividly illustrated page of Cassie's journey are segments of intricately woven quilts made by Ringgold. Colorful and bold, the quilt border tells a story within the story. As an artist Ringgold works in multiple mediums, but she has used quilt making prominently as a vehicle for her storytelling, following in the African-American tradition that was largely ignored for quite some time in the history of quilt making in the U.S. (Quilting in America, 2009). Though disputed, it is commonly believed that quilts were made and used by Black slaves as a way to send and receive messages about escaping slavery and safe passages through the Underground Railroad.

(Quilts reveal a message, 2011) While there are some debates about these claims, there is much history to be gleaned about Black female experiences from slavery, onward, through understanding the history of quilting in the U.S. Most of the quilts produced by Ringgold focus on Black women in America, with the images that border the pages of *Tar Beach* taken from a five-quilt series called "Woman on a Bridge," which is housed in the Guggenheim Museum in New York City (*Tar Beach,* back flap). Thus, as readers examine and admire the fanciful illustrations in the book, they can also learn more about aspects of African-American history and culture.

In addition to broadening the reader's perspective beyond the story of Cassie that filled the interior of the pages, in the story itself, Ringgold alludes to the challenges African-Americans faced in finding work because of racial discrimination practices during the 1930s. One core tenant of African-American children's literature held by Du Bois (1920) was that Black children and youth should not be shielded from the harsh realities that Blacks faced in the U.S., and Ringgold and all of the others authors I will discuss in this section continued to hold onto that belief and share in their literature, in ways that children can understand, the prejudices and discrimination that Blacks endured during the first half of the 20th century. Midway through the story Cassie states, "Daddy took me to see the new union building he is working on. He can walk on steel girders high up in the sky and not fall. They call him the Cat. But still he can't join the union because Grandpa wasn't a member." Earlier in the story, Cassie shares that her father was a construction worker who helped to build the George Washington Bridge. After I finished reading those sentences, Carlos immediately states, "I don't get it." I ask him what he doesn't understand and he says he is confused about why Cassie's father couldn't

be in the union simply because Cassie's grandfather was not a member. I turn and ask his classmates for their thoughts and some say that they think Cassie's father couldn't join because they already had enough people working or that the father was too young to work in the union. None of these answers satisfies Carlos, but I continue reading because I believe that the next sentence will answer Carlos's question and potentially spark a conversation among the students. "Well, Daddy is going to own that building, 'cause I'm gonna fly over it and give it to him. Then it won't matter that he's not in their old union, or whether he's colored or a half-breed Indian, like they say" (p. 14). Ahmad then asks, "he's Indian?" and when another classmate says no, that her father is a "half-breed," I ask the students what they think the term means and that question moves us far beyond a conversation about Cassie and her father and launches us into a dialogue that spans from the civil rights movement to the recent re-election of President Obama:

Me: So what do you think that [the term "half-breed"] means?

José: Because he is different. Because he's a different color then them … they're [the union members] are probably White and they don't want no Black people in it.

Me: It could potentially be that, that the union is White and they don't want Black people in it. [I said that to see if the students would come up with some other response but they did not] But do you think that is fair?

Class: NO!

Student 1: That's why we have civil rights now and Dr. Martin Luther King

Student 2: And that's why we got schools with all kids.

Ahmad: That's why we have a Black President

Me: So I like Ahmad's answer. He said, that's why we have Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. … and José said that's why we have schools with all different kids in it. Diana, now you can respond.

Diana: And that's why Martin Luther King made a boycott and nobody got on taxis and buses.

Student 4: That's why we got a Black President now.

Student 5: That's why we got Rosa Parks.

It is clear from this exchange that the students have some basic understanding of some aspects of the history of Blacks in the U.S. They know that at one point in time, Blacks were discriminated against by Whites because of their skin color and that the civil rights movement, with key leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, played a role in achieving some form of racial equality that has led to desegregated schools (even though the Walt Whitman school is split almost 50/50 between Blacks and Latinos) and paved a way for a Black president to be elected. Being able to connect the civil rights movement to the election of Barack Obama is savvy for students of their age to comprehend, so I assume that someone made this connection for them. When I ask the students where they learned this information, those who respond say, school, with some saying they read it, but couldn't say specifically what books or if they read this information at home or at school.

Earlier in the school year when we read *The Other Side* (2001) by Jacqueline Woodson, which is a story about a young White girl and young Black girl navigating friendship in the time of segregation, the students shared some of the same thoughts about the civil rights movement. While discussing the overall moral of the story the

students quickly realized that Woodson was aiming to show them that just because the girls were different races didn't mean they couldn't become friends and came to the conclusion that the civil rights movement played a role in their budding friendship. In the discussion of this book and asking about the relationship between Blacks and Whites "back in the day," the students knew that Blacks couldn't go to the "White side." The students largely said this was the case because Whites "didn't like them" or thought Blacks were "bad people" and because of this dislike, Whites put Blacks into slavery and during the time of segregation would "threaten" and hurt them if they came to the White side of town. Again, the students demonstrated some understanding of the civil rights movement and the challenges faced by Blacks. But, when pressed, several students had an interesting take on how Martin Luther King, Jr. came to lead the struggle for civil rights:

>**Me:** So why do you think this happened? Why do you think there was a time when Blacks and Whites couldn't play together like that?
>
>**José:** I think they couldn't get along because back in the day when Martin Luther King was playing with his friends, his mom said he couldn't play with them no more because they weren't the same color as him. That's why. It went on and on and he kept asking if he could play with them and they didn't like him and didn't play with him.
>
>**Me:** So what eventually happened to Martin Luther King, Jr.?
>
>**José:** He just kept on trying to be friends with White people. Then, they just couldn't be friends.

A couple of the students nodded in agreement, then another student added her perspective:

> **Diana:** India was right. They [Whites] kept [inaudible] and then Martin Luther King came and then Martin Luther King got threatened by the little boy's mom [referring to the friends José mentioned] and so he got shot and died.

It seems that while the students know that Martin Luther King, Jr. was the leader of the civil rights movement and have been told such by the adults in their lives (a couple said they have read books about Martin Luther King, Jr. but couldn't remember the names of the books), they don't have a firm grasp on how he became leader. So José and Diana seemed to fill in their lack of knowledge about his childhood by maybe conflating it with the story of Clover and Annie, believing that Martin Luther King, Jr. might have had a similar experience in his childhood and that is what led him to become a civil rights leader or maybe they read a story about Martin Luther King Jr.'s childhood and made this connection. After this exchange, Diana then tells me the story of Rosa Parks and how she wouldn't give up her seat on the bus, connecting the bus boycott and Rosa's actions back to Martin Luther King, "so then Martin Luther King said it's a boycott and that we are not over the separation and we should all be together." Other students also chime in, sharing their knowledge of the civil rights movement, most restating what their classmates have already said about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., but wanting to make known that they too understand the civil rights Movement.

It is evident that this basic information about the civil rights movement and its key leaders has been taught to the children, potentially at home but most of the students say at school. In our very first meeting Mr. Devoe, the principal, was clear that he wanted

students to have a good understanding of Black history. He said that he ruffled many feathers among both the White and Black teachers because he wanted the students to stop learning and singing the same "tired ol' Negro spirituals" during the annual Black History Month concert and come to know that there is much more to Black history. He told me that he challenged his teachers to dig deeper when teaching about Black history, to go beyond Rosa Parks, George Washington Carver and Martin Luther King, Jr., who are centerpieces of most Black History Month programming in elementary schools and teach the students about Black leaders, historical and contemporary, that they might not have heard about and their contributions to American history and culture.

However, the deeper understanding that Mr. Devoe wanted to see in his school was not on display during my time with the students, and I wasn't able to learn from Ms. Washington exactly what she covered during Black History Month or throughout the school year related to Black history. In the third grade the Walt Whitman students spend close to 80% of their time in language arts literacy and math classes. The emphasis on these subject areas, almost to the exclusion of others, is because of the low proficiency rates achieved at this school and across the district in these areas on the NJ ASK standardized tests, which begin in the third grade. Ladson-Billings (2003) call these efforts "phony curricula" (p. 59) where students of color in schools in high poverty areas focus solely on "teaching to the test" and spend little time on curricula outside of test preparation. Instead of "phony curricula," I would argue that this approach of teaching to the test is limited or narrowly focused. Certainly language arts literacy can provide students the opportunity to explore history, social studies and geography (especially using multicultural children's picturebooks) and often Ms. Washington did incorporate these

topics into her lessons, but during my time with her, she did not specifically discuss African-American experiences, and her classroom library only included one book specifically about African-American history (a book on Rosa Parks). Of the few other African-American children's literature books available, none focused on historical African-American experiences or the experiences of any racial or ethnic minority group.

In the classroom language arts literacy is taught guided by *StoryTown*, an elementary school textbook published by well-known educational publisher Harcourt, there are 60 stories focused on teaching students language arts skills through non-fiction and fiction literature, including news articles, biographies, research, narratives, poems, plays and fantasy. Of the 60 stories in *Storytown*, there are two stories by African-American children's authors and illustrators and two by Latino children's authors and illustrators. Three of the stories are fiction, and none discusses history. Throughout the book are stories of real life individuals—astronauts, police officers, playwrights, and scientists: not one is a person of color. These are the required textbooks throughout the school district. Critical race theorists believe that school curricula serve as culturally-specific artifacts designed to maintain the current social order (Ladson–Billings, 2003, p. 59), an order that is built on promoting a Eurocentric view as the "master script" of the society. "Masterscripting," Ladson-Billings (2003) contends, "silences multiple voices and perspectives" leaving stories about people of color, women, and others who are subjugated either muted, erased or transformed in textbooks to make them more palatable to dominant constituencies (p. 59). Ms. Washington was told by Mr. Devoe not to use the textbooks when she taught. He said that he didn't feel as though they were "high-quality" or had the "types of readings" that he felt were appropriate for students in the school. She

and the other teachers were told to find "more engaging" materials to use to teach the students and she said she did by using educational websites and suggestions from other colleagues. Ms. Washington never said what Mr. Devoe meant by these statements, so I can only speculate about whether the lack of diversity of individuals and experiences was behind his dislike of the textbooks.

Additionally, when students spent time in the library at school, it wasn't clear if they focused much of their time on reading, let alone reading books with a multicultural and/or historical focus. When one enters the library, one sees a bulletin board filled with book jackets of African-American children's literature, but gone are the days of endless rows of bookshelves filled with books coded by the Dewey Decimal System. The library space (or what is now called the Media Center) is big and open with long tables for gathering and studying, soft seating spread throughout and rows of computers and white boards for instruction. Three low-to-the-ground bookcases are stationed throughout the space (each with three shelves), at eye level for students in grades three and younger and about four larger bookshelves for the older students in the school. When I asked the students how often they went to the library, they said about bi-weekly and that they spent their time learning how to find information on the internet, being taught sign language, making book marks and sometimes reading chapter books. When I asked them about the types of books they read, they mentioned several chapter books, all stories with White youth as the protagonists. However, when I went to follow-up with the librarian, Ms. Washington told me that she left the school at the end of December and decided to retire without giving the district warning. Her position remained vacant for the rest of the school year.

When I talked to the students about their favorite books to read outside of classroom, the books they had at home, or the books they read either in their school library or in the library in their neighborhood, multicultural children's books were almost non-existent. Out of the more than 60 books that the students said that they owned at home or said were their favorite books, only three focused on the experiences of African-Americans with such popular book series such as *Judy Moody, Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Goosebumps* among their top favorites. Since several of the students did say that they read about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks in children's books, I can't say with certainty that they did not own these books or read them in school, but it is clear from their favorite books that books like these were not at the top of their lists. It is unclear where the students gained their knowledge related to Black history; they did have a good basic understanding of the civil rights movement and could connect it with social and historical events impacting Blacks, which I found unexpected. Overall, I was disappointed that I did not follow-up with the students and Ms. Washington, or have the opportunity to meet with the librarian, to discuss more pointedly where the students learned this information or how it was mandated in the district to be incorporated into the curriculum.

The students connected what they did know about the civil rights movement and discrimination during this time period in a very interesting way to the re-election of Barack Obama. Still continuing the conversation about *Tar Beach*, Tammy, who was always pretty outspoken, stated that the civil rights movement led to the election of Barack Obama and not Mitt Romney, which led to a lengthy exchange:

Tammy: I think that's why we got a Black president and not Mitt Romney.

Me: So why do you think we have a Black president and not Mitt Romney? No ooh's. This is Tammy's question to answer. And what does that have to do with the union not letting someone in because they're colored? We need to bring it all together.

Tammy: Because probably some people in the union is White. And the Black people can't go.

Me: But what does that have to do with the president and Mitt Romney?

Tammy: Because Mitt Romney is White, and Barack Obama is Black.

Me: Well, I think we have Barack Obama as president because more people voted for him than voted for Mitt Romney.

Diana: But I think that they voted for Barack Obama because he was the best president. And he was the one who did everything. And he is Black. And most of people is Black.

Students: [in the background] No, that's wrong!

Me: I'll let you respond, India. One second. Let Diana have her thought. Everyone's entitled to their own opinion.

Diana: And so people won't vote for Mitt Romney.

Me: OK. India?

India: The reason why people voted for Barack Obama is because he, Mitt Romney, whatever his name is, he only let White people do more things than Black people do. And Barack Obama make it fair.

Me: Why do you think Mitt Romney would let White people do things that other people couldn't do?

India: Because he's a different color.

Me: He's a different color. So you think that happens often? Do you think that people who are a different color let people of their own color do things, but not other people of other colors?

Students: Yeah.

Student: Mhmm [students in agreement)]

Ahmad: That used to happen.

The biggest challenge I faced when working with the students in the classroom was not always having the time to follow up on interesting statements the students made because I was often so focused on just getting through the class. Even though I was there expressly for research and to explore their thinking about race, during my days in the classroom, I felt more like a teacher. I was either trying to make sure I finished my lessons with the students within the time I was allotted, since I was taking up a significant portion of their school day, or I was focused on classroom management, trying to get the students to focus, settle down in their seats and stop chatting with each other. For the most part, the students were engaged and attentive, but like any class of third graders and given my inexperience as a teacher, there were times when I was just trying to get through the lesson before the students got bored and rowdy. This was one of the times I wish I had taken the opportunity to slow down and follow up on some of the statements made by Diana and India.

For Diana it seems that on the one hand she thinks that people voted for Barack Obama because he was the best president, but on the other hand believes he won because more Blacks voted for him simply because he is Black and would not vote for Mitt

Romney because he is White. This statement did not sit right with the other students. In the background, students were waving their hands wildly, stamping their feet and sucking their teeth because they wanted to add their thoughts to the conversation like India, who through her tone forcefully let her thoughts about Mitt Romney be known. From her perspective, Mitt Romney would not be as fair to Blacks and non-Whites if he were elected, a sentiment shared by many African-American adults writ large who discussed— on the radio, on Black focused entertainment and news shows and among family and friends during the time of the election—that they believed the election of Barack Obama was going to be especially good for the lives of Black Americans. The sentiment shared by Diana that Blacks voted for President Obama simply because he was Black was also an opinion widely shared by many, both White and Black, but confirmed when many Blacks in news reports, again on the radio and just in family and friend circles agreed that, yes, his simply being Black was the reason many voted for him. Both Diana and India have probably been influenced by what they have heard around them from adults, family members and what was on radio and television at the time, but it is hard to convey through words the conviction with which each girl spoke of her opinion and the excitement in the room when the students clamored to speak and engage in this level of debate and conversation about race and the presidential election. None of the students ever said that what they were sharing was the opinion of their parents or some other adult in their lives. The students did not state that they were just sharing or repeating what they heard, which did happen other times in class when we were discussing a topic, nor did they say that they picked up this information on television or the radio and were sharing it

out to the class, which also happened from time to time. In this debate the students presented these thoughts and opinions as their own, and I took them as such.

Even though we are only still halfway through the book, the students continue to engage in a spirited debate about race, which I allowed them to continue, leading to a new conversation focused on what they believed Whites and Blacks are and are not allowed to do in society. When I asked the students to explain further why they believed that people of certain races are allowed to do certain things, but not people of other races, Diana stated that Whites are allowed to shoot people, use drugs and kill Blacks, and before I could ask her to clarify what she means by this, the class has erupted: students are gasping, shaking their head furiously from side to side, shocked that she has even said these statements, and before I can calm them and go back to Diana, Imani interjects:

Imani: They [Whites] need to stop killing people and kidnapping people!

Me: You think they should stop killing people and kidnapping people. What does that have to do—we're talking about people of different colors. What does that have to do with that? Akeem, you're being disrespectful [he is loudly disagreeing with her in the background]. Everybody can have their own thoughts and opinions.

Imani: Because maybe if Mitt Romney was the president, he would've changed everything around. And he might not care if White people kill Black people. And Black people killing White people.

Me: OK. Are you OK? Imani, did you have something to add?

Maria: Diana was saying that she thinks that White people mostly do the things that she said. Actually, both colors do things like drugs. It doesn't have to be your

mom. It can be other people. It doesn't have to be your mom or your dad or anybody.

Me: I agree, Maria, that all people of all races do all sorts of things.

Maria: Because if you watch the news, mostly you see Black people are making shootings. You [see the news reporters] go into Black people's houses, and the next day on the news, you see White people killing kids in schools and killing teachers and all that stuff. [The Newtown shootings had occurred a week prior to this class.]

[Students are shocked at Maria's comments, gasping again, and every student's hands go up wanting to be called on to respond.]

Diana: I was talking about like …

Me: Everybody—OK, one second. Let me say something, OK? I want you to feel free—Ahmad, have a seat please—to say whatever you feel. And this is the time where you can share your thoughts and opinions.

And just like we've talked about before, we're going to respect—let me finish—we're going to respect what everyone has to say. I appreciate very much hearing everything you have to say. That's why I'm here every week talking to you, asking you to write in your journals, reading you these books. Because I like hearing what you have to say. So the thing that you have to do in class and in life, you may not agree with someone and what they say—bless you—but you have to respect them and allow them to speak. And so I respect everyone in here. And I respect the fact and I thank you that you're allowing other people to speak. So

we're going to take two more comments, and then we're going to get back to the book. Akeem?

Akeem: I think that some White people still don't like Black people. But some White people do like Black people. But the only reason why some White people don't like Black people is because back in the day, all White people didn't like Black people. They used to make them clean their house and stuff and whip them and things.

Me: And so those things happened. That is ignorant. And so those things used to happen. Akeem is correct. So there used to be times when White people didn't like Black people. And slavery happens, and they would make people be slaves. And that happened. And maybe sometimes people still feel the same way. But just like what Maria said, everybody of all races does things that are a little bit crazy and inappropriate.

Diana: Definitely. That's true. Because I was talking about like …

Me: So let Diana speak, Carlos, and then we're going to move on.

Diana: I was talking about like back in the old days when White people used to be mean to Blacks.

Me: OK. But thank you for clarifying. Carlos, and then we'll move on.

Carlos: I think it's just Barack Obama, because if Mitt Romney were president, we would've been back to slavery.

Me: Back to slavery, maybe. So where did you get that idea from? Why do you think that's the case?

Carlos: Because back when White people used to make the Black people slaves, he just make that happen again.

Me: OK. So before Barack Obama was president, do you remember who the president was?

José: Yeah. George W. Bush.

Me: George W. Bush. Was George W. Bush Black?

José: No. Every president was White. But Abraham Lincoln was a little bit Black.

Me: So he was White. Did George W. Bush put Black people in slavery?

José: No. But he kind of messed up. He messed up.

Me: Everybody have a seat, please. Thank you for pointing out the presidents.

José: He should've never been the president. He messed up.

Me: That's on your ruler? [The students had rulers in their desk with the U.S. Presidents on them and they were showing them to me.] So it doesn't necessarily mean that if you have a White president, that he would put Black people back in slavery. But thank you for sharing your thoughts and opinions. And now we're going to go back to reading the book. One second. So Cassie is talking about her dad still.

A lot took place during this exchange. The students were all grappling with the complex racial dynamics between Blacks and Whites, both historically and in present day, and were making some leaps based on the limited knowledge and experience they have. If Imani, Carlos and others believe that simply because he is White, Mitt Romney would re-enslave Blacks or allow Whites to commit crimes and violence against Blacks, there are clearly significant gaps in their understanding about the historical relationship

between Blacks and Whites in the U.S., gaps that need, and should be filled, even at this age. However, even though the entire class said previously when we were discussing *Goin' Someplace Special* and the *Other Side* that race relations between Blacks and Whites were now fine and that they can be friends and that Blacks don't face the discriminatory practices they faced before, there are clearly some beliefs that Whites still don't care for Blacks and feel ill will towards them, which are beliefs that should be explored. Maybe these are comments that the students have heard from the adults in their lives or they are parroting what some of their classmates have said earlier, but either way, they need to have some of their assumptions challenged and be engaged in a critical dialogue about race and race relations and how they have come to have these thoughts and opinions to better understand their overall racialized thinking.

Beverly Tatum (1999) believes that adults should talk to children about racial issues, sharing that she had discussed slavery with her four-year-old son, but that these conversations need to be done in a way that take into account children's cognitive abilities and told in a way that is developmentally appropriate (p. 37). Just because children may not bring these racialized conversations up without some prompting doesn't mean that they aren't thinking about these ideas or don't have questions about race, prejudice and discrimination. With the level of understanding the Walt Whitman students already had about the civil rights movement and slavery, their perceptions about race and the information they heard from other adults, I believe they certainly could understand some of the more nuanced aspects of the relationship between Blacks and Whites, if explained properly. With better understanding, I believe that the students could begin to have perceptions of Blacks and Whites that Maria and Akeem seem, as this exchange

demonstrates, to understand much better. I tried to leave the students with the same level

of insight that Maria and Akeem already had, that just because people are a certain color

and have a certain historical background doesn't mean that they will act in certain

discriminatory ways, and to challenge their thinking. Both Maria and Akeem seemed to

understand that the world is simply not "Black and White," and even though there have

been Whites that have done bad things against Blacks, there are those who have not, and

even though Blacks have been victims of violence and wrong-doing, they have also been

perpetrators. This classroom discussion with Akeem came before my interview with him

at the end of the school year when he railed against "the White man"; he clearly has

conflicting ideas about Whites. Did something happen over the course of the year to

change his thinking? Or did he always hold these contradictory thoughts, maybe having

more positive ideas about Whites in the broader sense, about those who did not impact

his life on a daily basis, but more negative ideas about those who he feels are in positions

of power in Camden? It's hard to know, but these are certainly questions worth exploring

further. Adults at times also have some levels of conflicting or contradictory thinking

related to race, where they may think that there are certain segments or individuals of a

racial or ethnic group that are "good" but others that are not. The question then becomes,

why do people think this way? It is this way of thinking existing in a child or adult that

makes clear that more open conversations on race and race relations need to be

encouraged and that the space needs to be provided to explore these issues in all their

complexities. Without this type of dialogue, both children and adults remain

misinformed, leading to continued tensions, unchallenged assumptions of and between

racial and ethnic groups, furthering racial divisions. However, for children especially, not

talking to them about racialized histories and racial dynamics perpetuates the illusion that we are in a post-racial or "color-blind" society or silences them when they know or feel otherwise.

Children in Camden face the stark reality of inequality every day, inequality built on historical racialized social and economic practices, practices that continue to exert control over their lives today and will ultimately impact their future. To not explicitly engage them in conversations about the role of race and inequality in their lives, perhaps signally to them that race does not matter (i.e. color-blind ideology), is to "avoid confronting the racial realties that surround them" argues Amanda Lewis (2003), author of *Race in the Schoolyard* (p. 34). I agree with Lewis and believe that talking to the Walt Whitman children about the historical and contemporary impacts of race, through the use of multicultural children's literature and other pedagogical approaches, can help them better understand why there is violence and crime in Camden, can help them understand why there are so many abandoned buildings throughout the city and trash on the streets, and can help them understand why their fathers (and for some their mothers) are in jail or have come in contact with the criminal justice system. Race shapes access to resources and opportunities, so to not talk about or understand race in this way, to not have open and honest conversations with the students, only serves to mask the racial inequality that is still present in our lives. Children and society are not "color-blind" and to act as such is a disservice to children and leaves them unprepared to fully recognize and challenge the racial and social injustices that exist.

"Why didn't the Blacks fight back?" Asking Questions, Seeking answers, and Rethinking How to Talk to Children about Race

In one of the most visually stunning books about race that we read throughout the year, acclaimed African-American children's literature husband and wife duo Andrea and Brian Pinkney brought the story of the Woolworth lunch counter sit-in to life using her poetic prose and his rich and finely detailed illustrations in *Sit in: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down* (2010). Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the sit-ins, the Pinkney's take the readers from Greensboro, NC, where the infamous lunch counter sit-in took place, all the way to the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by President Johnson, helping students understand how these peaceful forms of protest ignited a generation of young people into acts of civil disobedience that changed history. Using food as a metaphor throughout, "This was the law's recipe for segregation. Its instructions were easy to follow: Do not combine white people with black people. Segregation was a bitter mix,"(p. 5) the Pinkney's don't hold back in detailing the challenges of the time and share in words and images the cruel and unpleasant experiences that Blacks and Whites faced as they sat in at lunch counters across the country. Images of the four protestors and others being taunted by White officers, ignored by waitresses, and being stared at harshly by White patrons fill the first section of the book and help to convey the mood of the time. The most startlingly images, those of the protestors being screamed at by White faces that "Gave the students a big dose of hatred—are served up hot and heaping. Coffee, poured down their backs. Milkshakes, flung in their faces. Pepper, thrown in their eyes. Ketchup—not on the fries, but dumped on their heads. They yelled at the students. 'We don't serve your kind!' 'Go home!' 'Goodbye!'"(p. 19) are the images that truly show the humiliation and indignities suffered by Blacks (and Whites) during the sit-in's. However, throughout the book the

Pinkney's also fill the pages with words of hope and encouragement, telling readers, "Be loving enough to absorb evil," (p. 8) "Demonstrate calm dignity" (p. 26) and letting them know that "We are all leaders" (p.28).

The Walt Whitman students picked up on all the Pinkney's wished to convey and used our class discussions again as a time to share their knowledge about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his "I Have a Dream" speech, Rosa Parks, segregation and the discrimination faced by Blacks at the hands of Whites and the civil rights movement, with several of the students, Marcus, India, José and Akeem, even sharing that they had seen the 1977 miniseries "Roots" based on the book by Alex Haley at home, and from their comments, a couple of them had also seen the "Eyes on the Prize" miniseries that focused on the civil rights period from 1954 through 1985. These two series are extremely powerful and at times graphic representations of the struggles Blacks endured, but evidently deemed important enough for their families to allow them see them at such a young age. However, even with the knowledge that the students had, they still justifiably had questions about slavery and civil rights that seemed to have not been answered, or maybe not even asked, in other discussions about these topics.

"If White people used to whup Black people back in the day, why didn't they fight back?" asks Ahmad, "because Black people *could* fight," he says. This was a question that came up repeatedly while reading this book and having other conversations with the students about slavery. They just could not comprehend how slavery could even exist, how one group of people could enslave another group of people against their will because of the color of their skin, and why Blacks didn't fight back to free themselves. We were barely a third of the way through the book when Ahmad asks the question and

then frustratingly responds to himself and the class "they didn't fight back" believing that Blacks just allowed slavery to happen to them and passively accepted the brutality that came with their enslavement. I stop and take some time to explain to him and the class in a way I thought they would understand that Blacks did in fact fight back, that they did not just accept what was happening to them, and that they had their own forms of resistance but that in general, they were overpowered. As I finished, José states:

> **José:** There's something I don't get. It's like, how did White people get all these weapons and Black people didn't get nothing? But [inaudible], again. Back in the old days, some White people had more money than Black people. I just don't get that. How did they get that money before us—Why didn't you just get it [money] the same time?

> **Me:** You are all asking very good questions.

> **Akeem:** I have a response to José.

> **Me:** Do you have a response to that, Akeem?

> **Akeem:** Yes.

> **Me:** OK. You can respond.

> **Akeem:** In the old days, Black people were free in their own country in Africa. And then White people weren't getting enough money, so they just decided to start slavery. So they ran over to Africa and just took all the Black people and took all their money. And that's how White people got money before the Black people could get their money back.

> **José:** Thank you very much.

Akeem was eager to share what he knew with José and the class quieted to hear what Akeem had to say. Again it was clear that the adults in Akeem's life had taken the time to share with him some of the history of African enslavement—a simplistic version—but enough for him to make sense of Black/White dynamics at the time and the crux of what led to slavery in the U.S. I knew that in reading these books, my role as the "teacher," and I believed as researcher, was to be ready to fill in the blanks and make connections for the students, which I did, so that they could have as accurate and developmentally-appropriate understanding of history at this time as possible, but in this exchange José and the class came to see Akeem as an expert and so José then asks Akeem directly:

> **José:** Why would the Jamaicans let the White people take them and take their money?
>
> **Akeem:** Africans are Jamaican, but two different …
>
> **Ahmad:** Countries. [inaudible]
>
> **Akeem:** Thank you. And at that time, Africans and Jamaicans were apart. They were apart. So how was the Jamaicans [inaudible], taken [to] Africa?
>
> **Me:** It's still somewhat the same concept, because Jamaica was also occupied. And Whites came in. And they were still enslaved. So it's a different continent, a different culture, but some of the same things happened.

Jose has confused Jamaicans and Africans, and Akeem knows this, and even though he too gets a bit tripped up in his response, he is trying to explain the difference. As in all of the class discussions, I wanted to make a space and provide the opportunity for the students to question, to share, to contribute in ways that restructured the power dynamic in the class to allow them to be in control of the discussion, for them to guide the

conversation and for them to feel comfortable to share their knowledge, thoughts and

opinions. This exchange between Akeem and José led to a series of other questions posed

by the students that extended this discussion another 20 minutes, "How come back in the

day, White people always hit Black people with switches?" "Why did the White people,

when they went past, the White people spit on them or throw water on them? Or kick

them or hit them?" The students were curious, constantly striving to understand the

deeper "why" these things happened to Blacks and why at the hands of Whites. The more

I answered, the more the questions continued, wondering who the president was during

this time and why he didn't do anything, and why Blacks just didn't try to dig a hole and

get out of slavery when they were in the field picking cotton. With each question I

answered, the students continued to chime in and share what they knew about the

Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman and even lynching. After 90 minutes we

eventually read through the entire book, and the questions never stopped.

Conclusion

What was obvious over the course of these two months was that these students

had a good understanding of the historical dynamics of race. Even though at times they

misunderstood or had gaps in their knowledge about certain historical facts, they were not

naïve. In an exchange between José and Marcus when discussing the book *Goin*

Someplace Special, I ask the class whether there are places today that Blacks cannot go

and José quickly replies yes and makes a very astute and mature observation. He says that

if a White person goes to Hollywood to make a movie, no one would question them and

what they were doing there, but if a Black man goes to Hollywood, "they'd be like,

where he come from?" When I follow up to make sure I have understood him correctly,

he says that I have and goes on to make the connection that there are a lot of Black men in football, but not an equal number in movies and that it should be equal. This begins an extremely heated exchange between José and Marcus with Marcus shouting loudly and repeatedly that Blacks are in movies and other students chiming in agreeing, stating that Beyonce who is also Black, is in Hollywood, trying to debunk José's claim, not understanding the larger point that he is trying to make. José even clarifies that yes there are Blacks in Hollywood, and that he wasn't saying that Whites didn't play football, but Marcus and several other classmates are shaking their heads and emphatically saying that José is flat out wrong and José stops responding. Now while José cannot quite understand and articulate the complicated connection between White privilege, Blackness, sports and the fetishization of Black male bodies, he does know that in the present day there are spaces and places where Blacks are not as represented as Whites are and that discrimination plays a role. Researchers need to acknowledge and respect what children like José know, take their opinions into consideration and allow their voices to be heard when studying the many facets of the social construction of race and its impact on the lived experiences of individuals, especially, children of color.

These students wanted to talk about race, racism, discrimination and prejudice and the messy and complicated history of Blacks and Whites in the U.S. They clamored to share their own thoughts and opinions, with these books garnering the most substantive, liveliest and engaging in-class discussions and interactions between the students and myself—and these took the longest amount of classroom time to teach. The students were fully engaged, with the books and with each other; they were inquisitive, not accepting the answers of their peers, nor what was presented by the authors in the

text, at face value. They challenged, always seeking a deeper understanding. They were far more than the "less than proficient" title they hold for not doing well on state assessments. By using qualitative approaches—classroom discussions, interviews, journaling—I was able to learn a lot about how these students thought about and made meaning of race in their lives and how they understood race from a historical perspective. The biggest challenge I faced over these two months was not a lack of understanding on the part of the students; it was not having enough time to thoroughly address every question they had and not being able to dig deeper and more critically into their thoughts and opinions to get a better understanding of how they came to know what they believed and to make connections between their historical understanding of prejudice and discrimination and their lives today. The space of the classroom lent itself to powerful exchanges that at times were energizing. I strongly encouraged students to share their thoughts and opinions openly and honestly and tried to create a space free of judgment and full of respect, where they could ask their "burning" questions and have them answered; however, the classroom space was also at times constraining, with the incessant focus on teaching "to the test" prohibiting time and space to go "off script" and allow these types of engaging conversations to occur.

So what is the role of schools in fostering and supporting these types of critical conversations around race? Lewis (2003) asserts that, "if we recognize schools to be institutions responsible for challenging the status quo, for initiating new, more critical and more honest understandings of the world, then we must continue to try to imagine what more critical educational experiences might look like" (p. 37). Not everyone views schools from this perspective, but I do, and for Lewis and other scholars who also share

this perspective, a more critical approach to education can come through the pedagogical approach of critical multiculturalism (Sweeney, 1999; Sleeter and McLaren, 1995; Mattai, 1992). Over the past 30 years, multiculturalism has come to mean many different things to different people. At its most simplistic, it is defined as "any form of education or teaching that incorporates the histories, texts, values, beliefs, and perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds" ("Multicultural education," 2014). In schools this kind of education can be seen through celebrating and appreciating diversity, discussing some of the contributions of racial and ethnic minorities in shaping American culture and potentially using multicultural children's literature as a means of engaging students in these types of celebrations and discussions. However, for the most part, multiculturalism in school has been viewed as "watered down" from its original intentions. Sleeter and McLaren (1995) argue that many educators, White educators especially, "have pulled multicultural education away from social struggles and redefined it to mean the celebration of ethnic foods and festivals" (p. 12), turning away its original intention, which was to critique racism in education. They agree with Mattai (1992) that it is it important to locate multicultural education in the civil rights struggle for freedom, political power and economic integration.

Others believe that in some instances multicultural or "antiracist" school interventions do not lower race-based thinking, but that they actually encourage kids to think in racialist terms or make them pity minorities. Documentary film maker Adrian Hart argues that "Today's anti-racist educators … missionary zeal … exaggerates racism and profoundly misunderstands children" (cited in Hirschfield, 2012), p. 21) believing that if left alone children would embrace neither racialist nor racist views. This is a myth,

says Hirschfield (2012) that too many adults cling to: that even if children are "aware" of race, they are without prejudice and if we draw attention to racial differences we will encourage racist or prejudicial thinking in them. As discussed earlier in the chapter, research has shown that children do understand stereotypes and use them. "By early preschool age," Hirschfield writes, "children endorse the strident racial prejudices—believing the majority race folk are smarter, cleaner, more honest, and richer than minority race folk" (p. 18). And children do so because these beliefs already exist around them and they pick up on this thinking without prompting or being taught (Hirschfield, 2012, p. 18). So while some may believe that these are weighty topics for elementary school children to understand, they are not. Adults have an important role in helping students make sense of these stereotypes and prejudice and discrimination more broadly and working aggressively towards combating the racism that underlies them.

The ultimate goal of critical and multicultural pedagogies "challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance their literacy and knowledge" (Shor, 1993, p. 26). It requires that students are made aware not only of the history of the social construct of race and the injustices that stem from prejudiced and discriminatory thinking based on race historically, but also helped to connect this understanding to the role race and inequality continue to play in their lives and to empower them to become agents of change. Lewis (2003) states, "a more critical multicultural education must not only work to produce students who can think critically about their world but also endeavor to serve the larger goal of changing the world" (p. 38). It was evident that the children in the Walt Whitman School have the basic understanding of how race worked historically, and Akeem and

José and some of their other classmates know that racism is working in and around their lives now but can't articulate well or make the connection to what has happened historically. A critical pedagogical approach would provide them with a firm base of historical understanding in a way that is developmentally appropriate, but also not "white washed" or dumbed down and can also expand their thinking towards making the connection to the present day. More practically, when this approach is used in the classroom with children's literature in general, or multicultural children's literature specifically, such the books I discussed in this chapter, students should be asked to consider alternative views of events past and present; to look for missing or silenced voices in the material; and to consistently ask of what they read, heard or witnessed, is this fair? Is this right? Does this hurt anyone? Additionally, teachers should engage students to question, is what they are reading the whole story? Who benefits and who suffers in the text? Is this right? How could it be different, more just? (Sweeney, 1999, p. 96).

Taking this one step further, students could then be encouraged to think about what injustices they see around them and how can they work towards changing them, taking this critical approach from theory to practice. As Sleeter and McLaren (1995) suggest, "[Those] who work with critical pedagogy largely emphasize forms of pedagogical practice in which students are invited to problematize aspects of everyday life as it is lived out in the home, the classroom, the school, the community in larger institutional and social context" (p. 25). As seen in chapter 3, the Walt Whitman students have a firm grasp of the challenges that exist in the city of Camden and when asked what they would change came up with a list of things, so how can we empower them to make

change in ways that are impactful and meaningful? Banks (1992) says, "when students are empowered they have knowledge of their social, political and economic worlds, the skills to influence their environments, and human values that will motivate them to participate in social change to help create a more just society and world" (p. 194). Empowering the Walt Whitman students in this way has the potential to not only make their education more engaging and relevant to their experiences but also to make them engaged citizens who can use their voices and actions to make change—citizens that are sorely needed in the city.

Teaching from this perspective is a fundamental shift in the goal and purpose of education, but for the children of the Walt Whitman School this shift could provide them with the opportunity to engage in conversations that they desperately want to have and a new lens through which to see and understand the world that surrounds them. Moreover, the larger goal of using a critical multicultural pedagogy is that students believe that they can make a difference in shaping the world they live in, both locally and broadly. This is a lot to ask from a challenged educational system like the one in Camden, but I fundamentally believe that a deeper examination of this approach, and its practical application in schools, can prove beneficial to the overall education of students and the city more generally.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

As an emerging scholar in the field childhood studies, I believe that children should be studied in their own right, with effort paid to documenting their perspectives and attending to their standpoint (Thorne, 2009, p. 7). This is how I approach my work; however, more than that, I believe that greater attention needs to be paid in particular to the varied circumstances in which children grow up, especially children of color who are poor. I aim to do so not to perpetuate popular refrains about their childhoods (poverty stricken, violent, dangerous, educational inequities or achievement gaps, being raised by single mothers) but to better understand the nuances of their lives, *from their perspective.* Using a critical race theoretical framework that asks questions such as: whose stories are privileged and whose stories are distorted and silenced? And, what are the experiences and responses of those whose stories are often distorted and silenced? I seek to add the voices of Camden's children to conversations about the city and to research more generally about minority children. I do so to challenge misperceptions about their lives but also to provide greater context about how they are living through and making meaning of the challenges that shape their childhoods in Camden.

As discussed in chapter 3, the Walt Whitman children had a clear sense of the violence, crime and social disorder that existed in their neighborhoods. Most of the children expressed feelings of fear, anxiety and frustration about what they witnessed and spoke of all of the things they wanted to change about Camden. However, just as frequently, they discussed the joys they experienced, not only in their families but in their community. They enjoyed playing basketball and football outside with friends, riding their bikes and going to the park. When discussing their neighborhood, they said they saw

colorful trees and flowers and nice houses and that they liked their neighbors and felt that they lived around nice people. They traveled to places like New York, Florida and Washington, DC for family vacations and weekend getaways and went to the movies, had birthday parties and participated in extracurricular activities. Even though violence is ever present and living in poverty creates challenges, their lives are not simply full of destitution and despair, as is commonly perceived about the Camden and its people.

In chapter 4, while discussing their fathers, these children brought a perspective to the conversations on Black fatherhood that is, surprisingly, rarely heard, that of their children. With the increase in the number of children born into single-parent, female-headed homes, the research on fathers in general and fathers of color has increased, so has the research on Black mothers and parenting practices of those who are low-income. Research has found that low-income Black fathers wish to play a greater role in the lives of their children, and that they believe that providing emotional support and being "present" is paramount; however, it has also been found these low-income, non-residential/non-custodial fathers do not see their children often. So how do their children feel about their relationships with their fathers? It's hard to know because there is limited research on children in these circumstances. What does exist tends to focus on the experiences of adolescents, with younger children, particularly in middle childhood, often missing from the conversation. However, while certainly only a limited perspective, I found that the Walt Whitman children loved their fathers and said that they knew their fathers loved them, but also that they longed to have a greater relationship with them. Many saw their fathers and stepfathers infrequently, most often due to incarceration, and expressed that they were sad, mad and scared without their fathers in their lives. Do their

fathers know how they feel? If so, how do they respond? How can understanding low-income minority children's perspectives about their relationships with their fathers change the relationship between their parents and the dynamics of their parenting? The responses and experiences of the Walt Whitman children show that there are questions that can be answered by engaging the children in conversations as it relates to fathers, mothers and family structures.

In chapter 5, I explored how the Walt Whitman children understood and made meaning of race. As children who are most often labeled "less than proficient" and "not meeting standards," they were the most thoughtful and insightful when we engaged in conversations about race. They challenged, argued, critiqued, questioned and reflected on the historical legacy of racism and discrimination and contemporary issues of race. Whether in our classroom conversations about slavery, my interviews with Akeem and Carlos, class discussions on the 2013 re-election of Barack Obama or student-to-student interactions, such as José and Marcus debating the representations of Blacks in popular culture, the students were consistently inquisitive and thoughtful. Sadly these were not conversations they seemed to have daily in their lives, especially not while in school. Race and inequality shape every aspect of these children's lives in the city of Camden and will shape their pathway onto adulthood. Through use of a critical multicultural pedagogy schools can play a role in educating students about social injustices that exist around them and how inequality shapes lives. This can be done in a way that not only makes learning more interesting and connected to the everyday lives of the students, but can also help them become agents of change in their communities.

One of the major principles of CRT is that the narratives and stories of people of color are important in truly understanding their experiences and how their experiences may represent confirmation or counterknowledge of the way that society works (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 219). By allowing the Walt Whitman children to have their voices heard and focusing on their experiences, brand new perspectives on Camden may not be revealed. The same holds true for the students' thoughts about their fathers or how they make meaning of race in their lives; but what is gained is hearing *their* voices, which have been largely non-existent in conversations about the city and limited in research on these topics. In her article "Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials," Allison James (2007) urges scholars within the field of childhood studies to move beyond the refrain of "giving voice to children." She argues that it is not enough to open up theoretical and conceptual space in which children can speak as participant-observers about their experiences of the world, that this is not sufficient in and of itself to ensure that the children's voices and views are heard because oftentimes little of what children say is heard outside of the academy (p. 262). I have mixed feelings about this sentiment as it relates to poor minority children. Circling back to CRT it is absolutely necessary simply to have the voices and perspectives of children of color about their lives and experiences made more visible. They need to be able to tell their own stories about their own lives, but more than that, their stories need to be acknowledged in a society that devalues them.

With the recent tragedies of Trayvon Martin (17 years old), Michael Brown (18 years old), Tamir Rice (12 years old), Jordan Davis (17 years old), Darius Simmons (13 years old), and so many other young Black youth who have been shot and killed in what

many feel were racially motivated incidents, Black children lead a perilous existence. In her article, "Black children, don't get to be children," *Washington Post* writer Stacy Patton (2014) contends that "America does not extend the fundamental elements of childhood to black boys and girls. Black childhood is considered innately inferior, dangerous and indistinguishable from black adulthood" (second paragraph). It is certainly the case that many believe the lives led by Black and Brown children in the city of Camden are inferior and dangerous, and while there is truth to the sense that their lives are more challenging than their suburban counterparts, it goes beyond that. Recent research by Goff et al. (2014), presented in their paper "The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children," shows that Black youth are often dehumanized or not thought of as children. In this study Goff et al. (2014) found that police officers who dehumanized Blacks (compared Blacks to animals) were more likely to have used force against a Black child in custody than officers who did not dehumanize Blacks. In the same study, 264 mostly White, female undergraduate students labeled Black children around the age of 10 as less innocent that their White counterparts or any other children around the same age. "This evidence shows that perceptions of the essential nature of children can be affected by race, and for Black children, this can mean they lose the protection afforded by assumed childhood innocence well before they become adults," said co-author Matthew Jackson in a press release by the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2014). More research on the lives and experiences of Black children, and I argue those of poor minority children in general, that gets their voices and experiences out to the larger world can hopefully change the views that exist about them in society. While James (2007) says that

simply having their voices and perspectives in research is not enough, I believe that for children of color in particular this is imperative to humanizing and valuing their lives and acknowledging their experiences, even though this certainly should not be necessary.

The lives of these children are often misunderstood or not known beyond the statistics that frame their lives in poverty. Though it was clear that Ms. Washington cared deeply for her students, she knew little about their lives outside of school. The lives of minority children need to be made more visible even to those closest to them. I don't think people fully appreciate all of the emotional experiences that children bring into the classroom. Outside of class children are dealing with persistent violence, poverty and crime, missing their fathers or challenges in their home life that they bring to school every day, and while teachers "know" these things because they know the conditions of Camden, they don't fully understand their children's lives because there is no time in the day or they are discouraged from having those types of interactions with students. Ms. Washington indicated it was through my engagement in the class with the students by using African-American children's literature that she came to better understand how their lives outside of the classroom influenced their lives inside the classroom. She knew that violence existed around them and that poverty impacted their lives, but she did not know how many of the children had lost close family members to violence, that mothers and fathers had been shot, sometimes fatally. She knew that some of the children didn't live with their fathers, but not that almost half of the class had a father or stepfather incarcerated. "We don't talk about those things," she would say, for fear that parents would think she was being nosey or she that would learn about some tragedy that she did not know how to handle, such as when Tammy broke down and sobbed in class one day

thinking about her father who was shot in the face and killed during the school year. Using African-American children's literature in the classroom as a way of getting students to talk about their lives provided me an unobtrusive research methodology, but it also provided Ms. Washington with a more nuanced understanding of the lives of her students.

It was clear that African-American children's literature resonated with the lives of the students. They could see their lives and experiences represented both visually and textually and could use the text as a jumping off point for discussing their thoughts and opinions about the city, their lives in general and the larger world around them. This was true for both the African-American and Latino students in the class. With books like *DeShawn Days* (2001) and *Something Beautiful* (2002), it was the experience of life "in the 'hood" that resonated with the students and spoke to their lives in Camden. With *Visiting Day*, they could all share their hurts and emotions about their fathers' incarceration, or, with *In Daddy's Arms I am Tall* (1997), how they missed having their fathers in their lives. These books allowed me to ease into conversations with the students, build trust and provide context about a topic before simply asking them questions. The reader response research that has been done using African-American children's literature has focused on students' general comprehension, interpretations and literary pleasure. Limited research has been done on how to use these books as a way of engaging children in larger conversations about their opinions of the world that surrounds them or their daily life experiences. There has been some work done in the field of narrative theory (Rogers and Soter, 1997) but this work focuses solely on the disjuncture between teaching literature in schools for the purposes of comprehension versus how

literature can be used in schools to help students see their lives through text and how texts can be used as a way of understanding the lives (p. 63). I agree there should be some broadening of the school curriculum to include these approaches, in addition to adding a critical perspective, but more than that I believe that using children's literature in this way as a qualitative research tool may be a promising new approach. While there has been some debate as to whether there should be new research methods developed to be used with children or to simply adapt methods currently used in research in ways that are developmentally appropriate, using literature that is developed for children may be a uniquely child-focused research tool. Based on the findings of my dissertation, I believe this is an area worth further exploration.

Through my dissertation, I seek to contribute to the field of childhood studies by expanding the field to include more voices and experiences of American children of color, using a critical race framework that makes visible the role that race and inequality plays in their lives. All of the experiences discussed by the Walt Whitman students are framed by how race has created inequality in their lives; the crime, violence and poverty in their neighborhoods, the lack of their fathers in their lives (due to incarceration, unemployment) and how they understand and make meaning of race. My desire is not simply to call attention to these things, but to actively think about how children are taught about the inequities that exist in their lives and to help them see what role they can play in becoming agents of change.

In her book *Inner-City Kids: Adolescents Confront Life and Violence in an Urban Community*, Alice McIntrye (2000) works on a participatory action research project with a group of 12- and 13-year-olds in Philadelphia centered around violence in their

neighborhoods. She first began by engaging the children in conversations about the role that violence played in their lives and in their communities, then led them in discussions about why they think violence happens, all in the effort to move them toward developing strategies to promote nonviolent behaviors (p. 80). She contends that this is hard work, but that she wanted to move the students beyond thinking about and talking about concerns to formulating ideas and learning how to take responsibility for what they wanted to see happen in their community. As an example, in addition to violence, students were concerned about the trash and littering in their neighborhoods. McIntyre (2000) led students through a process of thinking through what they wanted to do about the trash in their communities. The students decided they wanted to develop skits and performances to inform their student body that littering was wrong and how trash on the ground impacts their community; they organized community clean ups; they wrote their elected officials and eventually had the opportunity to present their concerns and recommendations for creating a cleaner community to city council.

McIntyre (2000) says that while the write-up of the project may make it seem as if it was orderly and well-organized, that the students were fully engaged and committed and that the projects were implemented without a great deal of resistance and confusion, this was certainly not the case (p. 175). McIntyre (2000) points to all of the challenges of getting students to stay committed, the bureaucracy of the school where the project was taking place, dealing with the general teenage angst of the students and keeping students focused when challenges occurred, but she states that the payoff outweighed the challenges. The students did eventually pull off all of these projects successfully and in the process learned about how to become engaged citizens in their community. They

learned about collaboration and teamwork and how to make informed decisions; they learned how to research, write and present; they learned about politics and navigating systems and institutions; and that even though one tries one's hardest sometimes things don't work out. But overall they learned that their voices and opinions mattered and that they were capable of making change. This is the type of work I would eventually like to do within the field of childhood studies. It is this type of work that critical race theory requires of its scholars, a commitment to social justice and to using research to empower subordinated minority groups, and it is this type of work that childhood studies demands, that of going beyond simply presenting children's voices to have children recognized as social actors in their own lives.

Appendix A

Response studies using African-American children's literature with elementary school age children.

**Focused on picturebooks

****Focused solely on African-American children

Altieri, J. (1993). African American stories and literary response: Does a child's ethnicity affect the focus of a response? *Reading Horizons, 33*, 237-244.

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Appendix B

Books used with Walt Whitman students.

Name of book	Year	Author	Illustrator
Goin' Someplace Special	2008	Patricia McKissack	Jerry Pinkney
Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale	1987	John Steptoe	John Steptoe
Quinnie Blue	2000	Dinah Johnson	James Ransome
Something Beautiful	2002	Sharon Dennise Wyeth	Chris Soentpiet
In Daddy's Arms I am Tall: African Americans Celebrating Fathers	1997	Javaka Steptoe	Javaka Steptoe
The Other Side	2001	Jacqueline Woodson	E.B. Lewis
Our Aunt Gracie	2007	Jacqueline Woodson	Jon J. Muth
Visiting Day	2002	Jacqueline Woodson	James Ransome
Hewitt Anderson's Great Big Life	2005	Jerdine Nolen	Kadir Nelson
The Black Snowman	2005	Phil Mendez	Carole M. Byard
Sit-in: How Four Friend Stood Up by Sitting Down	2010	Andrea Davis-Pinkney	Bryan Pinkney
Tar Beach	1996	Faith Riggold	Faith Riggold
Wings	2000	Christopher Myers	Christopher Myers
Creativity	2003	John Steptoe	E.B. Lewis
Beautiful Blackbird	2003	Ashley Bryan	Ashley Bryan
DeShawn Days	2003	Tony Medina	R. Gregory Christie
Each Kindness	2012	Jacqueline Woodson	E.B. Lewis

Appendix C

Books in Ms. Washington's classroom library

Book Name	Author	Illustrator
Never Smile at a Monkey: And 17 Other Important Things to Remember	Steve Jenkins	Steve Jenkins
Mother to Tigers	George Ella Lyon	Pater Catalanotto
Extreme Animals: The Toughest Creatures on Earth	Nicola Davis	
We're Going on a Lion Hunt	David Axtell	David Axtell
Happy Birthday	Gail Gibbons	
Fire Boat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey	Maria Kalman	Maria Kalman
Author: A True Story	Helen Lester	
Big Words	Jamie Lee Curtis	Laura Comell
Blue Chicken	Deborah Freedman	
Rosie's Walk	Pat Hatchins	
Something Beautiful	Sharon Denise Wyeth	Sharon Denise Wyeth
Shopping with Dad	Matt Harvey	Miriam Latimer
Diego	Jonah Winter	Jeannette Winter
Help me, Mr. Mutt	Janet Stevens	Susan Stevens
In the Land of Words: New and Selected Poems	Eloise Greenfield	Jan Spivey Gilchrist
Falling for Rapunzel	Leah Wilcox	Lydia Monks
Lost Boy: The Story of the Man who Created Peter Pan	Jane Yoken	Steve Adams
A Birthday Basket for Tia	Pat Mora	Cecily Lang
All the way to America: The Story of a Big Italian Family and a Little Shovel	Dan Yaccarino	
Lily Brown's Paintings	Angela Johnson	E.B. Lewis
How I Became a Pirate	Melinda Long	David Shannon
Leon and the Place Between	Angela McAllister	Grahame Baker-Smith
Diary of a Fly	Doreen Cronin	Harry Bliss
Me, Frida	Amy Novesky	David Diaz
Chester's Way	Kevin Henkes	Kevin Henkes
Hooray for Amanda and Her Alligator	Mo Williems	Mo Williems
Abe's Honest Words: The Life of	Doreen Rappaport	Kadir Nelson

Abraham Lincoln		
Eleanor Quiet No More: The Life of Eleanor Roosevelt	Doreen Rappaport	Gary Kelley
She Loved Baseball: The Etta Manley Story	Audrey Vernick	Don Tate
My First Kwanzaa	Karen Katz	Karen Katz
Imagine a Place	Sarah Thomson	Rob Gonsalves
Insect Lopedia: Poems and Paintings	Douglas Florian	
Me…Jane	Patrick McDonnell	
Albert	Donna Jo Napoli	Jim LaMarche
Ruby's School Walk	Kathryn White	Miriam Latimer
My Little Sister Ate One Hare	Bill Grossman	
Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Story from China	Ed Young	
Strawberry Thanksgiving	Paulla Jennings	
Jazz On a Saturday Night	Leo and Diane Dillon	Leo and Diane Dillon
The House in the Night Sky	Susan Swanson	Beth Kroomes
Plants that Never Ever Bloom	Ruth Heller	
The Great Frog Race and Other Poems	Kristine O'Connell George	Kate Kiesler
Doodle Dandies: Poems that Take Shape	J. Patrick Lewis	Lisa Desimini
Fireflies at Midnight	Marilyn Singer	Ken Robbins
Butterfly Eyes and Other Secrets	Joyce Sidman	Beth Kroomes
Song of the Water Boatman and Other Pond Poems	Joyce Sidman	Beckie Prange
Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night	Joyce Sidman	Rick Allen
For Love of the Game: Michael Jordan and Me	Eloise Greenfield	Jan Spivey Gilchrist
Night on Neighborhood Street	Eloise Greenfield	Jan Spivey Gilchrist
The Other Side	Jacqueline Woodson	E.B. Lewis
Cinder Edna	Ellen Jackson	
Rosa	Nikki Giovanni	Bryan Collier
Argus	Michelle Knudsen	Andrea Wessom
Why Do Leaves Change Color	Besey Maestro	Loretta Krupinski
Magnus Maximus, A Marvelous	Kathleen Peller	S.D. Schindler

Measurer

Ox-Cart Man	Donald Hall	Barbara Cooney
My Somebody Special	Sarah Weeks	
Around the World: Who's Been Here	Lindsay Barrett George	
The Very Hungry Caterpillar	Eric Carte	

Table 1. How students responded to DeShawn Days

Student	Three things you love about your block	Three things you want to change about your block	What I see in my hood
Carlos	"I like my block because its so silent. I like my block because no one complains. I like my block because its so warm"	DID NOT WRITE ANYTHING	"I see lots of kids in my neighborhood. Also I see lot of dogs. I do lots of things in my neighborhood. I climb trees. I jump on my friends trampoline. I smell trees. I also smell scrumptious food. I love neighborhood"
Jose	"It has nice peple, beautiful grass and street"	People die, they shot (shoot), and make too much noise"	I play football n the hood. I see robins, and cats. I hear noices like noooo and bang! I feel bad when something happens to some body. I be In my house playing video games and I here noises that scare me."
Ahmad	"I dislike my block because they shoot. I	"I don't want to change my block because	"I see a lot of trees. I smell dog doo doo. I

	hate my block because people jump people"	I am moving"	hear hummingbirds. I stay in my house all day. I see hobos that look dirty. I also hear little kids near the sewer. I feel like I'm going to die or get kidnapped, but I'm not scared because I have a tazer to protect myself"
Akeem	"I love all the kids playing outside and I get to play with them"	"I don't want to change anything about my block"	"I see lots of Black people in my neighborhood. I smell cigars and hear people ran and hear gun shots. I don't feel comfortable in the summer. I see pools and sprinklers out, in the winter I stay in and watch cartoons"
Juan	"I like my block because it is big and I like to ride my bike and I can play"	"no litter and no killing"	DID NOT WRITE ANYTHING
Imani	"fun bc we always have	"stop shooting , stop selling	"in my hood we play fight

	bbqs and we go to the park"	drugs, stop, stop fighting"	but it will get big 10 minutes later. I see old people, crazy people and nice people. I hear dirt bikes, guns and more. I smell food. I feel comfortable. My hood reminds me of the movie Friday"
Maria	"it's quiet, kids play with me around my block	"how people die around my block, kids get kidnapped and raped"	"I see homeless people smelling like stinking garbage. I hear gun shots outside my window sometimes. Some times I want to leave my neighborhood just because of what happens and it makes me scared. One day someone stole my heater"
Malani	DIDN'T TURN HANDOUT IN	DIDN'T TURN HANDOUT IN	"In my neighborhood you can smell rotting garbage. I see larges trees. Andi hear gun

			shots. I feel scared living in my neighborhood. I never liked living in my neighborhood"
Diana	"I love my block because mostly all of my friend be outside and I go outside too"	"I want to change my block shooting, smoking and cursing"	"I hear in my hood guns, hollering, cursing, killing. I feel about my neighborhood sad because I think people should stop and not have bad habits but good habits. I see cats and I smell smoke. I run home when it's dark because I don't want to get killed or hurt. But my mom said its okay because we are moving to Cherry Hill"
Indiya	"What I like about my block is it's quiet because it have all old people on my block"	"I want my block to have all kids so I can have friends"	" the things I see on my block is clean things, planted flowers and old people. The people I see on my block is nice people. My block

			smells fresh. I don't hear nothing on my block. I feel safe in my neighborhood. And sometimes I hear gunshots around the corner"
Tammy	"there are trees and children and there are stores"	"Nothing because my block is good the way it is	"I see trees and plants. I hear birds. I smell food…I feel happy. I am on a roof and have friends and family. Life like in my neighborhood is fun. Play with friends, go to the store and mostly stay in the house"
Ebony	"I don't like my block because it is loud"	"I don't want to change anything"	"I stay in the house and watch tv. I see homeless people. I hear people yelling. I see homeless people on the street. I smell fresh stuff. I feel safe because I am with my family"
Deanna	"I love riding my block. I	"I would change a lot of	"I ride my bike. I go to

	love playing with my friends. I like going to the park. I like these things because it is fun"	people to be friends. I want people to be friends so the can do things together"	the. I go to the church and play with my friends. And I go to the store and go across the street to go to church with Imani. I see white people and black people and Chinese people. I hear birds. I smell chicken and I hear people. And I smell rice. I feel suprice (?). That is why I like my neighborhood"
Laila	"I like playing with my friends, we have bikes so when we ride around fast. Play hide and go seek and past (pass) the park"	"I would change no shooting"	"in my neighborhood it is like kids playing and people cooking. Think it is like all the other hoods. I play games at home at night. I smell people smoking. I feel good and nice and safe. This is why I love my hood
Khadijah	"I love my neighbors	"I don't want to change	"what I do in my

	because they are nice and pleasant"	anything about my block"	neighborhood is I go to my grandmom's house. Go shopping and go to my mom's friends house. I also go to my uncle's house. I see stranger, homeless people, stray animals. I see people with bats and knifes. I hear people cussing and laughing at people also making fun of people
Erika	"I love my block because it is funny"	"I would change the shouting but nothing else"	"Life is boring in my neighborhood. I see birds. I smell chicken. I play in the playground. I watch High School Musical. I see all types of people. I feel good"
Shaneka	"I love my block because the beautiful land, the trees, and it's a good place to track	"I would change nothing about my block"	"in my neighborhood I watch tv or I play my guitar or I play with my dad or I watch High

	ghost"		School Musical…I also see trees and trains"

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